

The Unorthodox Beginnings of Hampstead Synagogue



Hampstead Synagogue's history is fascinating and unique. The archives of the shul are currently in the safe hands of the London Metropolitan Archive, being restored to their former glory. This has been done with the intention to preserve as well as display the history of our synagogue.

A revival



✧ Begun by a small and idealistic band of unconventional Jews, the movement to establish the Hampstead Synagogue became a focus for those who wished to tread the line between United and Reform tradition. These men were defined by their religious restlessness. They set out not only to create a building for the increasing Jewish community in the surrounding area, but within it a movement which would fulfil what they felt was lacking in nineteenth century Anglo-Jewry. Increasingly impatient with the red tape of Judaism, the original founders hoped that the creation of Hampstead would bring about a revival of Jewish influences.



Oaklands, West End Lane in 1880

The Wanderers



✧ The 1880s saw many notable Jewish figures in the field of art and culture living in and around West Hampstead. These men and their open-minded approach to Judaism played an important part in the establishment of the synagogue and the ideology that would support it. Many of these men were part of a group known as “The Wanderers” who were led by Rabbi Soloman Schechter. Their main aim was to make Judaism a “living force”.



Herbert Bentwich

A lawyer, who lived in Abbey Road and attended St John's Wood Synagogue. He was an authority on copyright law, and owner/editor of the Law Journal for many years. He was a leading member of the English Hovevei Zion and one of the first followers of Theodor Herzl in England. Bentwich was a founder of the British Zionist Federation in 1899 and for some time served as its vice-chairman. He was a legal adviser for the Jewish Colonial Trust. From 1916 to 1918 he served on the Zionist political advisory committee under Chaim Weizmann.

Bentwich was a regular visitor to Palestine after 1921 and settled in Jerusalem in late 1929.



Soloman Schechter

Solomon Schechter was a Moldavian-born Romanian rabbi, academic scholar and educator, most famous for his roles as founder and president of the United Synagogue of America, president of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, and architect of the American Conservative Jewish movement.



Israel Zangwill

Zangwill was born in London on 21 January 1864, in a family of Jewish immigrants from Czarist Russia. His father, Moses Zangwill, was from what is now Latvia, and his mother, Ellen Hannah Marks Zangwill, was from what is now Poland. He dedicated his life to championing the cause of the oppressed. Jewish emancipation, women's suffrage, assimilationism, territorialism and Zionism were all fertile fields for his pen. He was nicknamed "Dickens of the Ghetto".



Lucien Wolf

Lucien Wolf was a popular journalist, historian, and advocate of Jewish rights who wrote under the pseudonym "Diplomaticus". Wolf was opposed to political Zionism, although he was one of the first people to formally propose that the British government incorporated an aspiration for a Jewish home in Palestine into its war aims during the First World War. Wolf was part of the Anglo-Jewish delegation to the 1919 Paris Peace Conference. He helped draft the minority treaties, which guaranteed rights for the ethnic, religious, and linguistic minority populations.



Soloman J. Soloman

Solomon Joseph Solomon was a painter, a founding member of the New English Art Club and member of the Royal Academy. He exhibited his first works as early as 1881, and showed at the Royal Academy, the New Gallery, and the Society of British Artists. In 1896, he became an associate of the Royal Academy, with full membership following in 1906, one of the few Jewish painters to do so. He joined, and became president of, the Royal Society of British Artists in 1919. He was also married to a suffragette.

Increased Migration



At the time of the shul's formation in the 1890s, most of the original members lived in Kilburn, St John's Wood and West Hampstead, although some came from further afield in other districts of North West London. Many Jewish families lived in large numbers in the immediate vicinity of the shul, particularly in the streets off West End Lane. Increased Jewish migration to West Hampstead, paired with considerable agitation seeking a more progressive approach to worship, motivated this group of influential men to set about creating the Hampstead Synagogue.



This street scene shows the front of the Black Lion Public House in 1885, situated on West End Lane. At this point, West Hampstead was the home of many Jewish families.

A letter to the Jewish Chronicle



✧ It all began with a letter to the Jewish Chronicle in May 1889 written by Herbert Bentwich, a lawyer who lived in Abbey Road and attended St John's Wood shul. In his letter he invited support for the "Hampstead Movement" and made clear his intention to establish a new community. Soon a meeting was held in West Hampstead Town Hall in Broadhurst Gardens and a provisional committee was formed. Their main aim was;

“to launch a movement which would be somewhere between Orthodoxy and Reform”.

THE JEWISH CHRONICLE.

ONDENCE.

IN ASSOCIATION.

IN "JEWISH CHRONICLE."

might well be the exclamation of the Anglo-Jew, after a perusal of the Secretary's letter.

My inquiry for information regarding the said is met with the answer, that it "is of Jewish children in Eastern countries."

Mying from the governing body of the Society, that I ventured to trespass on your space the point which I now wish to argue, or to this letter.

is liabilities, so the Rev. A. Löwy tells us, grants to Eastern Schools. And yet, while and, which "is intended to be applied to the countries," and which should, therefore, be to the whole, of the existing liabilities, the letter, have resolved that "before this fund 10,000 must be secured by subscription." I of the proceedings at the last meeting of the

The delegates, who arrived here in a destitute wretched lot of the families whom they confirmed by documentary evidence, our exert ourselves and hasten to the assistance the condition of the Jerusalem poor is abject on our society are very numerous, we cannot brethren is flowing like water in the land either by sending them back to their native some of their families to settle in certain send one of our coreligionists to Cyprus, in view.

We now entreat you to give this important us with all your might so that we may persons from utter destruction, a task that you to arouse the hearts of our English people the afflicted, for every moment's delay increases by which they are menaced.

Yours obediently,

The Heads of the

Asher I. Myers was a member of "The Wanderers" and also editor of the Jewish Chronicle. He was a prolific journalist who helped bring the Hampstead Movement publicity.

Controversial Changes



- ✧ They made a list of changes to customs and services including reading a small part of the service in English, no repetition of the Amidah, 10 Commandments to be read every Shabbat and for two services to be held on Shabbat, with one at 8.30am and one at 11am. The list of changes expanded and contracted over much heated debate, culminating in a vote on 17th July 1889 over whether to unite with the Reform Synagogue. The committee conclusively decided against doing so, with nine voting against and only five members for. Therefore, the synagogue was placed under the supervision of the Chief Rabbi, and the Jewish Chronicle at the time reported that:
“The programme [of the Hampstead Synagogue] partakes of the character of a declaration of orthodoxy and a protest against reform.”



Chief Rabbi Adler, 1890

Rabbi Nathan Marcus Adler was the Orthodox Chief Rabbi of the British Empire from 1845 until his death in 1890.

Committee Split



- ❧ The Chief Rabbi, unsurprisingly, refused to agree to the drastic proposed changes to the Shabbat services. In protest half the committee walked out. Before a brick had been laid, Hampstead Synagogue's future was in dire jeopardy. The resolutely radical of the committee set up their own services in West Hampstead Town Hall from 1890 and then Kilburn Town Hall until 1893. Meanwhile, the conservative members of the original committee made peace with the Chief Rabbi, compromised over their demands and started seeking out a site for the new building...



Kilburn Town Hall, 1890s

This is where the alternative services were held for those who felt that the Hampstead Movement was not radical enough.

Building the dream

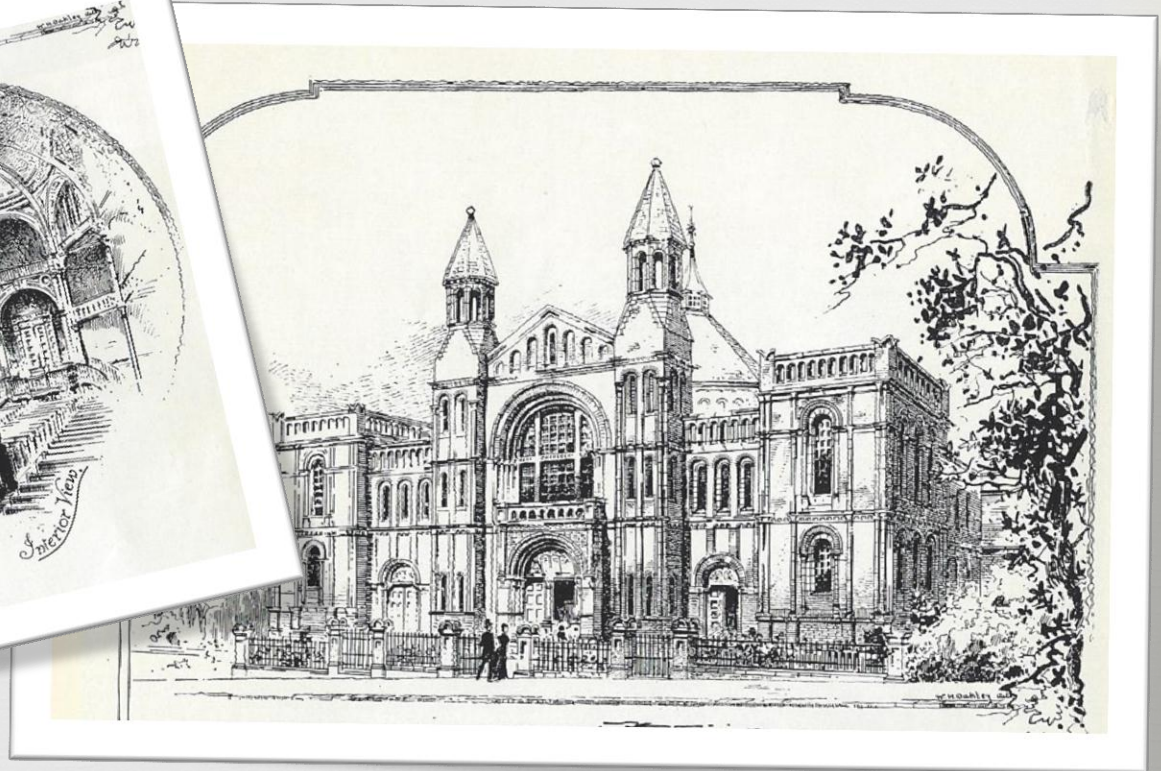


- ❧ Before the site at Dennington Park road was found, Hilltop Road was considered, but dismissed after protests from St John's Wood shul, who were worried about its close proximity. Delissa Joseph (Bentwich's brother-in-law) was commissioned as architect and a proposal for a building came before the United Synagogue in July 1890 and was approved.
- ❧ In 1892, on 13th March the foundation stone was laid by Benjamin Cohen in front of 1900 people.



Laying the Foundation Stone

This photograph was taken in 1897 at the foundation stone laying for board rooms and classrooms. This photograph shows (from left to right) L.J Greenberg, the Rev. S. Manne, Frank I. Lyons, Samuel Moses, Herbert Bentwich, the Rev A. Green and Alexander Jacob.



Original Architect's Sketches

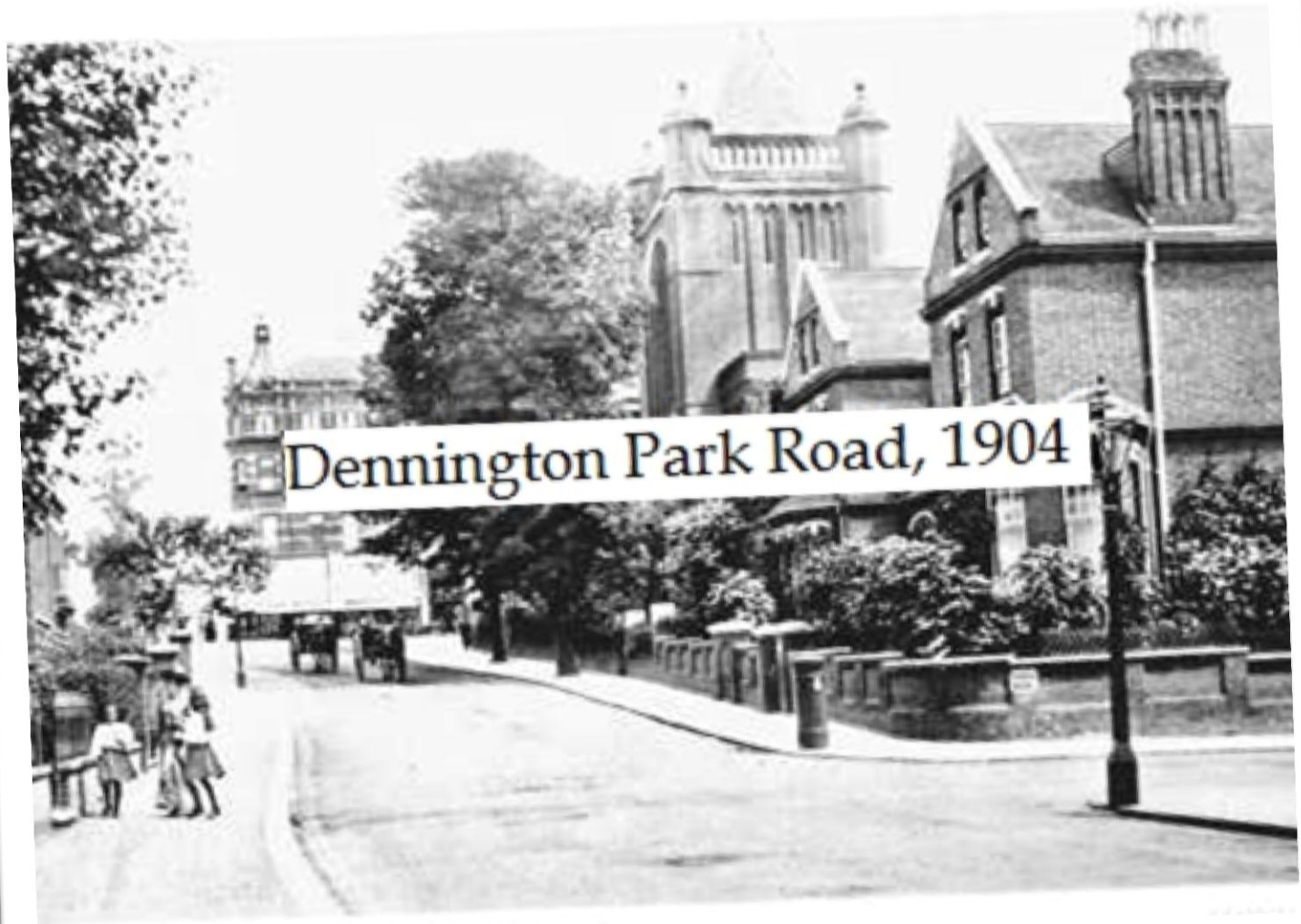
These sketches were drawn by Delissa Joseph, intended to show an approximation of the appearance of the Hampstead Synagogue. The sketch of the outside shows the shul's first intended position on West End lane instead of Dennington Park Road.



Mill Lane, 1925

West Hantsford - Mill Lane

© 1925



Dennington Park Road, 1904

Dennington Park Road, 1904

1904

Hampstead's Musical Tradition



- ❧ The Founders of the synagogue were determined that the musical quality of the services should be distinctive.
- ❧ Algernon Lindo was the first choirmaster, followed by Louis Freeman until 1915. Although voluntary at first, paid choristers were used in the mixed choir to ensure a high standard. Choristers were paid a salary varying between £15 to £30 a year.
- ❧ The Hallelujah Chorus from Handel's Messiah was sung at the ceremony for opening the shul after extension work in 1901.



The Hampstead Synagogue Choir, 1900

The Hampstead choir was governed by a committee, a strict set of rules and fines imposed if a chorister was absent from a rehearsal or service. The rules stated that "Every chorister whilst on duty is actually engaged in the service of G-d; he must therefore do his best to render the singing as efficient as possible, and also by orderly conduct to make himself worthy of the position he holds".

The Search for a Chazzan



- ❧ The Rev S. Manné was the first chazzan of the shul and was said to have a “voice to bewitch”. He moved to Johannesburg in 1899 and whilst the search for a permanent chazzan continued the Rev. Wolf Stoloff was engaged as temporary reader.
- ❧ A large number of applications were received from all over the world, but in 1902 Stoloff was given the permanent appointment. He was also an unwilling secretary for some years until 1910 when B.M.Woolf was appointed as secretary.



The Rev. Wolf Stoloff

Stoloff had an excellent musical knowledge. He was in favour of the traditional reading of Scriptures and published a book on the subject, as well as an edition of the Friday evening service with musical notations.

Stained Glass Windows



- ❧ The original windows were designed by the artist Solomon J Solomon. He designed a set of stained glass windows depicting the creation. The windows were installed at different periods, for example, the windows depicting the twelve tribes of Israel on the ground floor were presented by the Rev A.A. Green who was the original minister from 1892 until 1930.
- ❧ Other windows were designed by D. Hillman and dated 1938. The Mount Zion window and others originally designed by Solomon J Solomon were damaged during the Second World War and were replaced and designed by B. Sochachewsky.



The Mount Zion Window



The Tree of Life Window



The Creation Window



In the Garden of Eden Window

A beadle for the new Synagogue



- ✧ A few weeks after laying the foundation stone, the Committee proceeded to appoint officials. The position of beadle went to Charles Abrahams, whose wife, Clara, was to act as gallery attendant. Like many other beadles of the time, Abrahams was of Dutch-Jewish origin.
- ✧ He was given a detailed account of what was expected of him, and was informed that
“the Committee would act as judges of any disrespect he might show to any member of the congregation”.



Charles and Clara Abrahams, 1930

As well as their duties as beadle and gallery attendant, Charles and Clara attended to the dead and dying in the community. They served the congregation from 1892 to 1930, and their descendants are still involved with the synagogue today.



Claude Montefiore

In 1892 Claude Montefiore published "The Origin and Growth of Religion as Illustrated by the Religion of Ancient Hebrews". He presented a non-literal view of the Bible which was revolutionary to the Anglo-Jewish Community of the 1890s. His ideas were discussed at length among the founders of the Hampstead Synagogue, and often caused significant disagreement.

Radicalism, or lack thereof at Hampstead

- ❧ Many felt that the synagogue was not radical enough. In 1895 whilst Montefiore's ideas were being discussed, 113 voted in favour of and 67 against having an organ played in Shabbat services, although this was never put into effect.
- ❧ Indeed, by 1915, Herbert Bentwich, the original proponent of the Hampstead Movement, declared "Alas for our ideals!" and left the synagogue, moving to Kent. He complained that he was deeply unsatisfied with the synagogue as it didn't represent the initial ideals on which it was founded.