

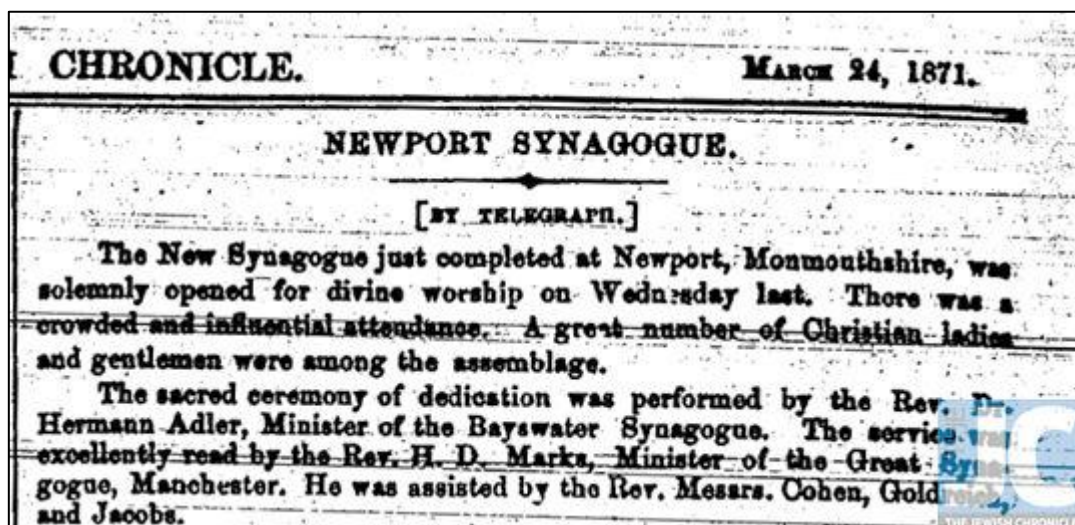
Newport Hebrew Congregation

A talk given by Stanley Soffa at The Newport Museum and Art Gallery, 16 July 2019.

The story of the Newport Mon. Hebrew Congregation follows the pattern of so many migrant Jewish communities from inception by immigrants from Eastern Europe, growth in the late 19th century by immigration and, in the first half of the 20th, by evacuation, and then decline.

The earliest records give 1859 as the date of its foundation when “a few far-sighted, orthodox Jews met in a house in Llanarth Street, then serving as a temporary Synagogue, to draw up 44 resolutions “for governing the Congregation of Newport”.”(1) The congregation referred to itself as the ‘New Synagogue’. That same year, it also acquired land for the purpose of burial ground; the first burial took place in 1861.

On 22 March 1871, a purpose-built synagogue in Francis Street was consecrated by Rabbi Dr Herman Adler, then Chief Rabbi of the British Empire.



Newspaper excerpt reporting on the opening and consecration of the Synagogue in Francis Street in Newport, 24 March 1871.

Image credit: The Jewish Chronicle.

1896 was important because there was set up a Board of Guardians to extend the benevolent activities that had been carried out since the foundation of the congregation. An outstanding member of this Board was Lionel Abrahamson who was a member of Newport Council from 1898 to 1907.

Good relations with other Jewish communities in South Wales and at the turn of the century the Minister, Revd Michaelson was encouraged to make weekly visits to Tredegar and Brynmawr and this contact became closer when Alexander Hyams was appointed Headmaster of the Hebrew School at the synagogue and preacher in 1905. The highest importance was on educating the youth and in 1905 22 boys and 12 girls were in the Religion School and pupils also assembled for a talk after the Sabbath service and later in the afternoon senior pupils and a few older members formed a study and discussion group. In his very first year, he organised “an outing” with children, parents and grandparents sitting in a horse-drawn vehicle singing their way to Saint Brides lighthouse and taking part in a varied programme of games and sporting events.

Not long before there was the introduction of a choir and Hanukah, our festival of lights in December, now was celebrated with well-organised concerts preceded by the distribution of prizes.

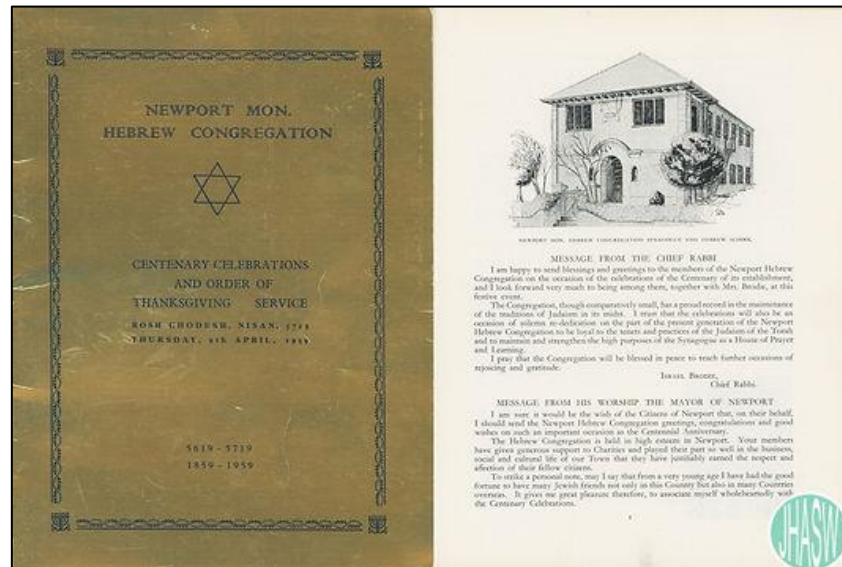
In 1899 the David Phillips Memorial Prize presented in memory of the son of Wolfe Phillips on the first day of Succoth (autumn harvest festival a few days after the Day of Atonement) and the names of the winners entered on a special board later to be found in the Nathan Harris Memorial Hall.



Newport Mon. Hebrew Congregation's David Phillips Memorial Prize Board, Newport, 1904-1975.

Images credits: Newport Mon. Hebrew Congregation (Incorporating Brynmawr Hebrew Congregation).

On 8 May 1910, Rev. Abraham Snadow arrived from Abertillery to take up his appointment as “Shochet, Reader and Mohel and if necessary, assistant teacher”. He was still there when the community celebrated its 100th anniversary, and he marked his Golden Jubilee. It speaks well that Mr Hyams and Rev Snadow worked with uninterrupted harmony and perfect mutual understanding.



Centenary Celebrations and Order of Thanksgiving Service booklet, 1959.

Images credits: Newport Mon. Hebrew Congregation (Incorporating Brynmawr Hebrew Congregation).



Rev. Snadow Golden Jubilee in the Centenary Celebrations and Order of Thanksgiving Service booklet, 1959.

Image credit: Newport Mon. Hebrew Congregation (Incorporating Brynmawr Hebrew Congregation).

The First World War was soon to dominate the scene. It brought to the community tragic losses and glories.



Roll of Honour of the Newport Mon. Hebrew Congregation, Great War, 1914–1919.

Image credit Newport Mon. Hebrew Congregation (Incorporating Brynmawr Hebrew Congregation).

Isaac Solway gained the Military Medal. Future Presidents Arthur Jacobs and Harold Phillips were amongst those who enlisted. Lionel Harris's (Hon. Secretary from 1910 to 1934) three sons, Nathan, Joe and Ben, joined the Monmouthshire Regiment of the Territorial Army at the outbreak of hostilities.



Nathan Harris of the Royal Welch Fusiliers and member of the Newport Hebrew congregation. Nathan died in the World War I.

Image credit: Newport Mon. Hebrew Congregation (Incorporating Brynmawr Hebrew Congregation).

Nathan Harris was commissioned and transferred to the Royal Welch Fusiliers. Awarded the Military Cross in March 1918, he was fatally wounded by a sniper in August. Joe had a commission in the Manchester Regiment and Ben was destined to become Lord Mayor of Leicester.

Belgian refugees were given asylum in Newport and five Jewish families were accommodated in a large house in Oakfield Street, rented by the congregation for that purpose. One of the Belgian children, Lichtenstein, later distinguished himself by winning a Welsh international rugby cap playing against the English junior team in Swansea.

After the war, the number of pupils attending Hebrew classes made the then accommodation in Bridge Street inadequate and due to the hard work of many prominent members plans were drawn up and funds obtained for the erection of a proper Hebrew school with a Social Hall and all amenities on Queens Hill. On 6 February 1922, the Nathan Harris Memorial Hall was consecrated to the memory of Captain Nathan Harris MC. The Mayor and Mayoress and many distinguished visitors from London, Cardiff, Swansea, Bristol and the Monmouthshire Valleys attended.



Plaque erected in memory of Nathan Harris on 28 August 2018. The Newport Hebrew School and Social Hall, which opened on 22 June 1922 on Queen's Hill Crescent, was named after him: 'Nathan Harris Memorial Hall'.

Image credit: Newport Mon. Hebrew Congregation (Incorporating Brynmawr Hebrew Congregation).

Just as the community had the highest hopes of expansion the depression struck, and many members left Newport. In 1927, the congregation's representative on the Board of Deputies of British Jews Bertram Jacobs and his siblings presented a new Cemetery House alongside the original cemetery.

Then Mrs Leslie Jacobs became the first female member of the Jewish congregation in south Wales to be appointed a Justice of the Peace. An indefatigable worker for the congregation as well as for numerous committees she was secretary of the Hebrew Education Committee, chair of the Women's Citizens and the House Committee of Home Nursing in the Queens Nursing Movement.

In the early 1930s, the community faced major financial problems and came to the painful decision that the Francis Street synagogue had to be sacrificed if the community was to survive but the capital derived from its sale was to be used to convert the upper floor of the Nathan Harris Memorial Hall into a Synagogue.



Exterior of the Queen's Hill Crescent Synagogue; photo taken in the 1990s.

Image credit: Newport Mon. Hebrew Congregation (Incorporating Brynmawr Hebrew Congregation).



Interior of Queen's Hill Synagogue; photos taken in the 1990s.

Images credits: Newport Mon. Hebrew Congregation (Incorporating Brynmawr Hebrew Congregation).

This was a happy solution and the leaders received the full support of the community when they appealed for further funds. Even the children helped in the fundraising thanks to the originality and talent of Muriel Harris who wrote and produced plays that gave immense pleasure to performers and audience alike. The work of conversion resulted in the then Chief Rabbi, Dr Hertz, dedicating the new House of Worship on 17 May 1934.

But once more dark clouds were building in Europe and Samuel Jacobs and Harold Phillips represented the community at the World Jewish Congress in Geneva. Then as refugees began arriving many members opened their homes to receive the dazed and helpless victims of Nazi tyranny and a hostel was opened in Chepstow Road for the care of 12 young girls who were thus enabled to live again without fear.

Tragedy struck on 13 September 1940 and the whole community was plunged into mourning with the deaths of Myrtle and Malcolm Phillips, the children of Harold and Marjorie, when an enemy plane crashed into their house. Myrtle, aged 12, was killed immediately and her 15-year-old brother, hoping to affect a possible rescue, came down from the upper floor by an improvised rope, rushed into the house but was enveloped in the flames.



Myrtle and Malcolm Phillips's grave in the Newport Jewish cemetery.

Image credit: JHAW.

In the Newport Museum and Art Gallery is Stanley Lewis's depiction of the plane.



'Home Front'. A painting of Newport's auxiliary war service units, featuring a crashing German Heinkel III bomber. This oil painting on canvas with dimensions of 2740 mm in height and 2130 mm in width, was created by Stanley Cornwell Lewis in 1940. It was never finished as the artist was enlisted and posted to the Royal Artillery in North Wales.

Image credit Newport Museum and Art Gallery.

The community was now smaller than that which endured the First World War, but it was still active under the president Harry Jacklyn. Many younger members joined the services and the names of those who made the supreme sacrifice and those who served in WW2 were engraved on a wooden Memorial Board.



Roll of Honour of Newport Hebrew Congregation, World War Two, 1939-1945.

Image credit Newport Mon. Hebrew Congregation (Incorporating Brynmawr Hebrew Congregation).

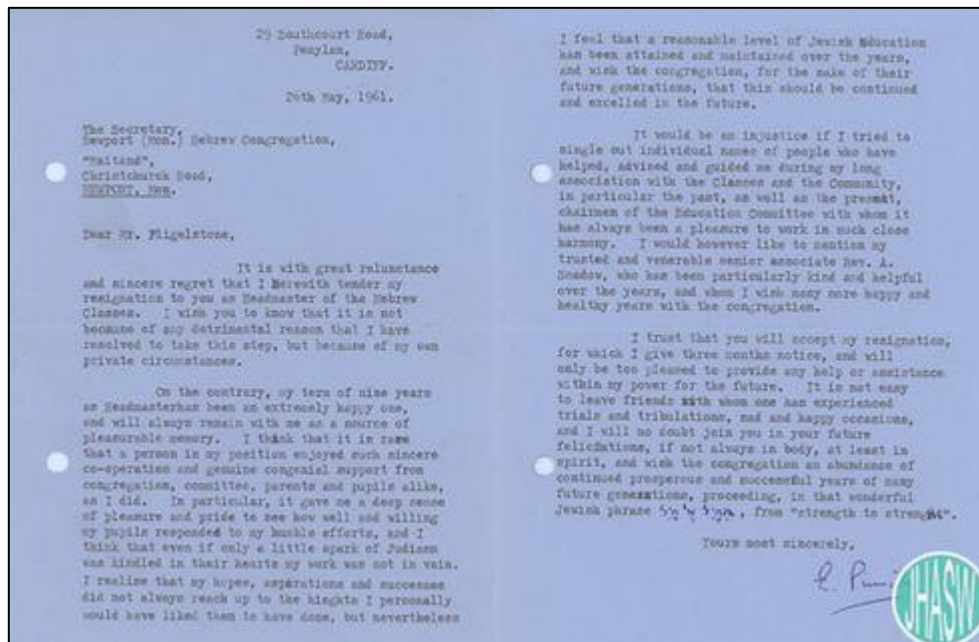
A committee was formed for the entertainment of troops, Jewish and non-Jewish, visits were made to hospitals and gift parcels sent. From 1943 large numbers of American troops stationed in Monmouthshire were hospitably received and 100 Jewish servicemen attended a communal Passover Seder in the Nathan Harris Hall.

After the war, the membership continued to fall and the number of pupils in the religion school reached its lowest ebb. In 1945, after 40 years of faithful service, Alexander Hyams tendered his resignation and moved to Bournemouth. An era had ended.

A thanksgiving service was held when the war ended, and the community tried to set its house in order, but it was an uphill task. Thanks to the sterling efforts of the communal leaders, a 'ways and means' committee was formed, and efforts made to fill the gap left by the departure of Mr Hyams. New names appeared in the community records side by side with the older generation whose untiring service helped maintain the tradition so valuable in times of crisis. Their combined energy under the Presidency of Philip Littlestone proved capable of not only

stabilising the community's affairs but inspiring hitherto inexperienced members to shoulder responsibility.

The loss of Alexander Hyams did not mean that the education of the community's children was neglected; Rev. Snadow and a new headmaster, Mr Pinnick, worked to ensure an increase in the number of children and an expansion of activities.



Resignation letter from Mr Pinnick, the Headmaster of Hebrew classes at Newport Mon. Hebrew congregation, dated 26 May 1961.

Image credit E. Pinnick.

A project to erect a Cemetery House at the new burial site was formulated by the President, Mr Philip Caller, who raised every penny needed and personally supervised the work from the laying of the first stone to its eventual consecration. It was consecrated in June 1954.

The classroom in the Nathan Harris Memorial Hall was renovated and this was paid for by Mr and Mrs Shuerman and became known as the Jacob Shuerman Memorial Room in memory of their only son.

Harry Poloway, master of ceremonies was the Toastmaster at the opening in 1955 of the Empire Games in Cardiff in the presence of the Queen and Prince Philip, the first of many royal engagements presided over by him. He gave the milestone speech when Cardiff was named Wales's capital city in 1955. Before his public speaking career, Harry served in the RAF as an electrical engineer. He joined in 1940 and served in the Battle of Britain, Egypt and Sicily.



Harry Poloway, during World War 2, stationed near Cairo, Egypt.

Image credit: unknown.



Harry Poloway's red dress coat. The coat is adorned with brightly coloured medals and pins. A few featured include: The Institute of Toastmasters of Great Britain, the Kidney Wales Foundation, the Newport Coat of Arms, a World War II commemoration.

Images credits: Newport Museum and Art Gallery.



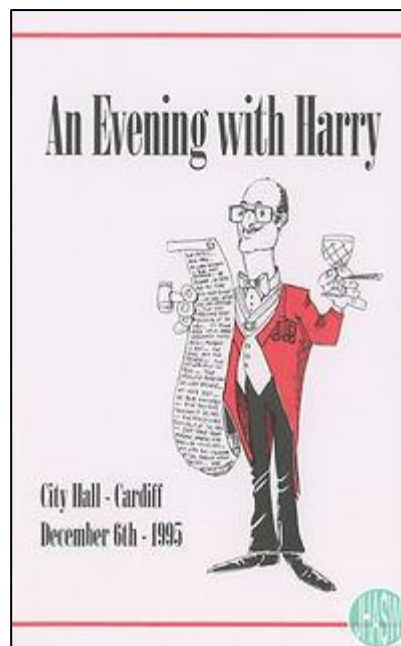
Harry Poloway's wooden gavel, which was presented to him in recognition of 50 years of service.

Image credit: Newport Museum and Art Gallery.



The reopening of Newport Library, Museum and Art Gallery by Princess Margaret on 5 April 1968. Harry Poloway (on the right), the celebrated Welsh Toastmaster announced the arrival of Princess Margaret - she is pictured in the photograph with Mayor Cecil Stone.

Image credit: Newport Museum and Art Gallery.



Programme and menu for 'An Evening with Harry' event on 6 December 1995, celebrating Harry Poloway's 80th Birthday.

Image credit: The Lord Mayor of Cardiff and his Committee.



Harry Poloway with his wife Vicky, celebrating his 100th birthday in December 2015. On this occasion, Harry received recognition for his years of service to the Association of Jewish Ex-Servicemen and Women (AJEX).

Image credit: unknown.

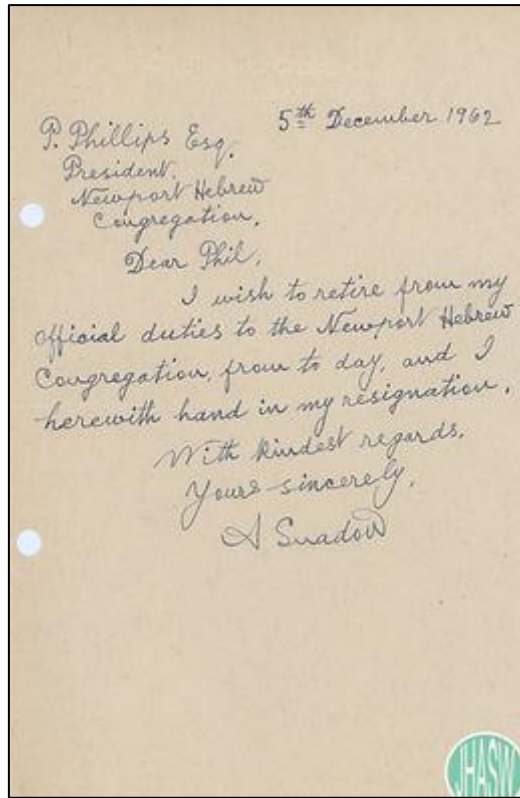
In 1959, the first hundred years of the Newport Hebrew community was celebrated in the appropriate style. The Mayor invited distinguished guests, both local and national, to a reception at the Mansion House and they all attended a Thanksgiving Service at the synagogue; an evening banquet was attended by some 250 guests. The occasion was also marked by the BBC Welsh Home Service with a broadcast on the history of the community and its relationships with town.



Newspaper clipping about the centenary of the Newport Jewish community in 1959.

Image credit: The Jewish Chronicle.

In 1964, Rev. Snadow retired after 54 years of loyal service to the Jews of Newport.



P. Phillips Esq. 5th December 1962
President,
Newport Hebrew
Congregation.
Dear Phil,
I wish to retire from my
official duties to the Newport Hebrew
Congregation, from to day, and I
herewith hand in my resignation.
With kindest regards,
Yours sincerely,
A Snadow

*Letter of resignation from Reverend A. Snadow, Minister-Reader of the
Newport Mon. Hebrew Congregation, dated 5 December 1962.*

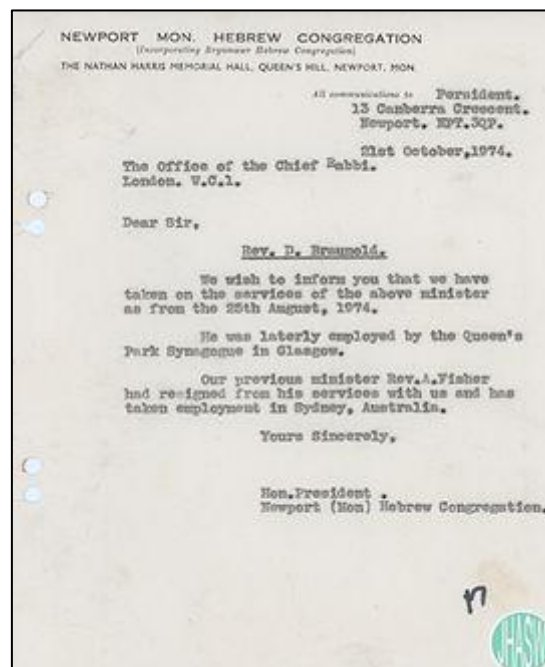
Image credit: A. Snadow.

Rev. Fisher took the pulpit until 1975 and Rev. Braunald from 1975 to 1980; the community, however, was getting smaller.



Order of Service booklet for the retirement of Reverend Abraham Snadow and the induction of Reverend Reuben Fisher to the Newport Hebrew Congregation, 25 October 1964.

Images credit: Newport Mon. Hebrew Congregation (Incorporating Brynmawr Hebrew Congregation).



Letter to the Office of the Chief Rabbi from the Newport Mon. Hebrew Congregation regarding the appointment of Reverend David Braunold as Minister-Reader, 21 October 1974.

Images credit: Newport Mon. Hebrew Congregation (Incorporating Brynmawr Hebrew Congregation).

In 1997, the Queens Hill synagogue was closed, and the congregation moved to the Prayer House by the Jewish Burial Ground on Risca Road.



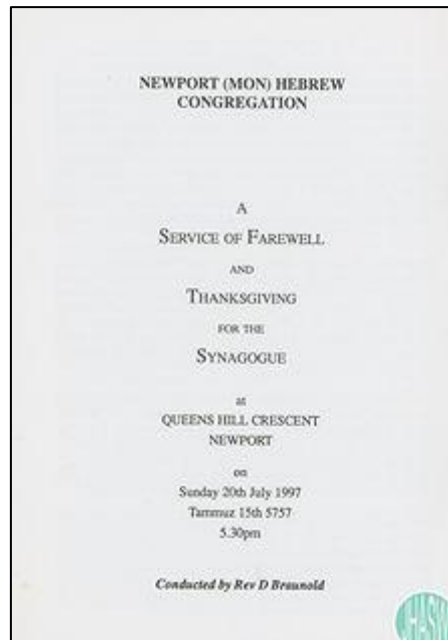
Newspaper article on the decision to sell Queen's Hill Crescent Synagogue, 25 November 1994.

Image credit: David Wilkes, South Wales Argus.



The final service held at Queen's Hill Crescent, Newport, 20 July 1997.

Image credit: Newport Museum and Art Gallery.



Order of Service booklet produced at the closure of Newport's Queen's Hill Crescent Synagogue on 20 July 1997.

Image credit: Newport Mon. Hebrew Congregation (Incorporating Brynmawr Hebrew Congregation).



Newport Synagogue, Risca Road.

Image credit: JHAW.

Within 20 years the congregation had dwindled to a few members able to attend and this too had ceased to hold services.

The future of the Newport Hebrew Congregation is now in the hands of Ronnie Black, Zelda Jacobs and Jeremy Reuben. But all is not lost. There are plans afoot and the last 160 years will hopefully not be simply a memory.

References

(1) 'The First Hundred Years: Foreword', in Newport Mon. Hebrew Congregation: Centenary Celebrations and Order of Thanksgiving Service, 1859-1959 (Newport: Newport Mon. Hebrew Congregation, 1959), pp. 3-5, 8-9 (p. 3).

Sources

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