

Retracing Highgate's Jewish roots



The Da Costa house, now Cromwell House in Highgate Village. The first house owned by Jews in England after the re-admission by Oliver Cromwell, it contained both a shul and a mikvah.

Dina Rosell

How Jewish is the North London suburb of Highgate? At first glance, hardly at all. Yet local historian Peter Walton, who was born in Highgate and has lived there for 75 years, will unlock aspects of the area's fascinating Jewish history during two Highgate Jewish walks due to take place next month as part of the Highgate Festival.

Highgate has seen two waves of limited Jewish immigration: in 1675 after the readmission of Jews to England by Cromwell and again in 1822 with the founding of the second Jewish school in England at 60, Pond Square.

The family Da Costa, who settled in Highgate, came to England as a result of a business association with Charles II who during the 1650s was exiled in Portugal. The king, who was short of cash, was lent money by one of the Da Costas, a family of Conversos since the Inquisition in Spain and Portugal nearly two hundred years before. Da Costa's son Alvaro was page boy to Catherine of Braganza who married Charles two years after he returned to England during the Restoration of 1660. In 1675 Alvaro, who was doing well as a city merchant and had settled in London's East End close to Bevis Marks, purchased a red brick mansion, now Grade I listed, in Highgate known as Cromwell House.

After three hundred years of living as Conversos in which all their Jewish beliefs and traditions were concealed from those who could do them harm, the Da Costa family began to live openly as Jews. They brought with them a Rabbi and a Shochet to help provide for their religious needs. In his work *A Tour Through the Whole Island Of Great Britain*, Daniel Defoe made particular reference to a settlement of Jewish families in Highgate:

"The Jews have particularly fixed upon this

town for their country retreats and some of them are very wealthy; they live there in good figure and have several trades particularly depending upon them, and especially butchers of their own to supply them with provisions killed their own way; also, I am told, they have a private synagogue here."

Cromwell House, the first in the country to be owned by Jews since 1290 when Edward I banished them from England, is now the Ghanaian High Commission. Signs that it was once occupied by the Da Costas, an Orthodox Jewish family, still remain. The family crest of Alvaro Da Costa can be seen in the stonework over the fireplace. A row of studs two thirds of the way from the front of the floor in the large room on the ground floor that was probably a Shul could well be the remains of a mechitzah. There are indications that the basement housed a mikvah. Access to running water would not have been problematic since the high points of Highgate and Hampstead are replete with springs running down towards the Thames.

The affluence of the Da Costas did not last. Speculation in the South Sea Bubble affair in 1720 cost them their fortune to the point where they vanished from the pages of the Jewish history of Highgate.

In 1822 Chaim Hurwitz, a significant figure in the history of English Jewry who became the first professor of Hebrew at University College London, founded a Jewish boarding school in Highgate for twenty boys. Eventually the school was handed over to Leopold Neumagen but it did not survive in Highgate and in 1843 it moved to Brighton.

In 1929, a small group of immigrant East European Ashkenazim who hailed from the Pale of Settlement, including Peter Walton's grandparents, escaped to the clean air and

hillsides of Highgate from London's overcrowded East End.

"Members of the family lived in three of the houses in my street with landsleit in five other houses," Mr Walton reminisced. "My grandparents were actually on their way to America but my grandmother who experienced a rough crossing of the North Sea did not feel up to facing the Atlantic."

The group rented a property under Archway Bridge that became Highgate Shul until the 1940s when the community moved to a building on Archway Road that was once a Baptist Church for around twenty years. In 2016 the kehilla opened a beautiful new shul in Highgate Village, with Rabbi Liss as its Rav.

Rabbi Dr Solomon Schonfeld, Holocaust hero and founder of Hasmonean Schools, has to be Highgate's most illustrious resident. Mr Walton is looking forward to the day when Rabbi Schonfeld's former house at 73 Shepherd's Hill is awarded the blue plaque it has long deserved. Stories about Rabbi Schonfeld's many challenging and heroic rescues, from the moment when just before the Holocaust he brought out children on the Kindertransport to his rescue of Jewish refugees from camps, children from convents and other places where they were hidden are legion.

On two consecutive Sundays, 16th and 23rd June at 2 pm, Mr Walton will be leading the Highgate Jewish Walk starting outside Cromwell House on Highgate Hill. Tickets are available from Eventbrite under Tour of Jewish Highgate Walk.



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For transport enquiries call Dalia on 07956 561 706

