

THE BUILDING OF A SYNAGOGUE

A BRIEF HISTORY

by

A. S. DIAMOND

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34 Upper Berkeley Street
London W1

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PREFACE

With this Booklet — prepared to mark the Centenary of our Synagogue building — we should like to welcome you to the West London Synagogue and hope that you will enjoy reading Mr. A. S. Diamond's history of our early years.

Since the congregation was founded in 1840 and the consecration of this sanctuary in 1870 there has been a steady growth and development of Reform Judaism in our community at large. Today "Berkeley Street" is one of the twenty-five constituents of the Reform Synagogues of Great Britain and an integral part of the World Union for Progressive Judaism. Our congregations flourish in the metropolitan area of London as well as in the provinces and if you are a visitor in our country you will be sure to receive a cordial welcome at every one of them.

If you are a resident of London we shall be pleased to welcome you to a wide range of congregational activities. Our Religion Classes meet on Sunday mornings and children from the age of five and upward may be enrolled in them. The youth groups — which meet on Sundays and certain weekday evenings — consist of the Junior Youth Group (ages 13 to 16), the Junior Membership (17 to 20) and the Berkeley Group (21 and up). Their programmes — cultural and social — are varied and generally achieve a high standard.

For adults there are a variety of study circles and discussion groups conducted by the rabbis and formal classes are held by the Leo Baeck College — Evening Institute for the study of Hebrew, Jewish history and literature. Details of these and other activities are posted on the notice board at the entrance to the Stern Hall.

This congregation has a vital Women's Guild whose activities cater both for its own membership as well as for groups of aged men and women (The Friendship Club) and for the blind (The Waley Club). The Guild also runs a Judaica shop and its members participate in the many charitable activities and purposes of the congregation.

Although the membership of Berkeley Street is the largest in this country, our concern is for and with individuals: members or visitors, people in their times of joy or in their time of need. After the Service please make yourself known to my colleague Rabbi Michael Goulston or myself and on Shabbat join us at the Kiddush in the Stern Hall.

We shall look forward to seeing you again and trust the memory of your visit will be a happy one.

Shalom,

September, 1970

RABBI HUGO GRYN

THE BUILDING OF A SYNAGOGUE

On the 22nd September, 1870, when the West London Synagogue moved into its present home in Upper Berkeley Street and consecrated what it called the "New Synagogue," the congregation had been in existence for 30 years. To appreciate the occasion it is important to recall what had happened during those years and what sort of a congregation it was in 1870.

Most of the founders (who chiefly consisted of the enormous Mocatta family) came from the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue, Bevis Marks, but there were two or three Ashkenazi founders, mostly of the Goldsmid family. At Bevis Marks there had been pressure for reforms ever since the beginning of the century. For one thing, the leading members no longer lived in the city, but in the West Central District and the new West End, and they did not travel on the Sabbath. They wished, therefore, to open a branch Synagogue nearer their homes, but permission was refused under Aschama (Law) No. 1 which provided, under penalty of excommunication, that no other Synagogue might be established within six miles of Bevis Marks. There were other complaints in plenty. The attendance was poor (partly because of the distance) and conduct in the Synagogue (where there had been a recent influx from the Mediterranean) was deplorable. The religious education of the children was trivial, and most of the instruction, as well as Synagogue announcements and such sermons as were delivered, were still given in Spanish and Portuguese; and there was no choir. The problems in the Ashkenazi Synagogue in Duke's Place were much the same: the Hebrew of the Services was gabbled, and the practice of making money offerings during the Services was an abuse. The Ashkenazi and Sephardi communities remained aloof and hardly inter-married.

The aims of the "West London Synagogue of British Jews" were to establish a place of worship to which the Jews of this country, irrespective of origin, might belong, at some place nearer to their homes, where a revised form of Service would be performed, at hours more suitable to the habits of the day and in a manner more calculated to inspire feelings of devotion, and where the children might have religious instruction from competent teachers. Except on the Day of Atonement, the services were to last no longer than 2½ hours, so that the whole congregation might assemble before the commencement of prayers and remain to the close. A male choir would be provided and Sabbath sermons given in English. A new prayer book would be used, containing the best of the Sephardi and Ashkenazi versions, with additions from old liturgies and poets, and the Sephardi pronunciation, being the more accurate, would be employed. Services would no longer be held on the second days of Festivals, for there was no biblical warrant for them. Daniel Mocatta, President of the Elders at Bevis Marks, became the first President of the Congregation.

On the 27th January, 1842, the first Synagogue of the congregation was consecrated in modest premises in Burton Street, St. Pancras, but a week before that, the congregation had been excommunicated by both the Ashkenazi and Sephardi authorities. The ground given by the Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi was that the congregation rejected the Oral (i.e. Talmudic) Law, but there was no foundation for this statement. A further ground given by the Sephardi Dayanim was breach of Ascama No. 1. The excommunication still remains though branches of the Sephardi congregation have been established in London since 1896.

The reformers were not permitted burial in a Jewish cemetery until, two years later, they acquired their own in Balls Pond Road, Islington. They could not celebrate marriages in their Synagogue under the New Acts of Parliament, because Sir Moses Montefiore, then President of the Board of Deputies, refused "to consider the place of worship in Burton Street to be a Synagogue," although his brother, Horatio, was one of the founders; and when a Bill was introduced into Parliament, containing a clause to enable Jews to be married in the West London Synagogue, he did all he could to persuade the Prime Minister, Lord Palmerston, against it.

But the congregation went its own way unruffled, never troubling to defend itself against the vilification of the other bodies, contributing handsomely to communal charities at their request, and in later years administering most of the worthwhile communal institutions. By 1849 the little Synagogue in Burton Street was too small and they acquired in its stead a building at 50, Margaret Street, Cavendish Square (of which the plans are still to be seen in the library of the Royal Institute of British Architects) and two years later they installed an organ so that instrumental music might again be heard in a Synagogue on the Sabbath, as it was in the Temple.

What sort of a congregation, then, was it in 1870?

The constitution remained unaltered. Apart from the President, there were three Wardens, two Treasurers, and an Honorary Secretary (who did the work) and a Council (still called the "Council of Founders") and general meetings of the members (still called "Meetings of the Founders and Seat Renters"). It was a necessary qualification for election to the Council that the candidate should have made a donation of £25 (in modern terms about £200) to the funds of the Synagogue. Although most of the members were now Ashkenazi, the founding families still controlled the congregation—the Mocattas, the Henriqueses and the Montefiores, with, of course, the Goldsmids. The Services were still rendered wholly in Hebrew, and when, in October, 1867, one Geo. Ellis wrote to the Wardens suggesting that some prayers in English would be welcome to four-fifths of the members, who, like other congregations in this country, had an imperfect knowledge of Hebrew, his petition was rejected out of hand. The Hebrew was read in the pronunciation of Bevis Marks, with all its idiosyncrasies (including the pronunciation of the

ayin as "ng" — a solecism probably imported from Italy in the 18th century). Men and women did not sit together. Until 1865 the choir was wholly male (consisting of four men and eight boys) and the singing was poor and choristers difficult to replace. At the urgent request of Mr. Verrinder, the devoted organist, a lady was engaged in March, 1865, and others later, but their attendance left much to be desired.

There were regular confirmations for boys and girls — an institution first introduced into this country by the congregation in 1842 — and till 1866 there was a kind of catechism of the confirmants before the congregation when they were asked by the Minister whether and why they wished to be confirmed and the state of their religious knowledge, but this cross-examination was abolished in that year. Until 1862, confirmations always took place on the Day of Memorial but this was objected to on the ground that the children had been absent from town for some weeks before, and hurriedly prepared themselves on their return. In 1863 it took place on Shavuoth and in 1864 on a Sabbath, but the objection was made that when it rained the streets were always muddy, and the children had to walk in their best clothes and could not ride. It was then changed to a weekday, but this met with passionate opposition from Countess D'Avigdor and others, who pointed out that confirmation should be a sacred and impressive occasion, taking place before the whole congregation, and in spite of opposition, then and later, they reverted to the Sabbath.

One of the aims of 1842 was to limit offerings in Synagogue to the three Festivals, but they continued to be made on Sabbaths when a member desired it.

By now the familiar pattern of West London orthodoxy was well established, and change was firmly resisted. For example, when the Ministers were asked in December, 1869, to report on the desirability of a triennial cycle in the readings from the Law, they rejected the proposal, suggesting in its place more readings from the prophets, but this suggestion was not adopted.

In February, 1867, the Assistant Minister earnestly recommended the holding of a somewhat shorter Sabbath morning service in Brighton, conducted by one of the Ministers, but not in the Synagogue's name, in October, November and December, when he expected a congregation of forty to fifty persons. This petition was also rejected.

But the resistance of the Synagogue to change is, perhaps best illustrated by an occasion in May, 1866, when a Committee was appointed, at the request of the Ministers, to consider the question of the minor services. It consisted of two Mocattas, a Montefiore and a Henriques (three of them founders of the congregation). It appears there were difficulties in collecting a congregation on some of these occasions, and all the Ministers did not always attend, or attend in full canonicals. The Committee reported that the following services were indispensable — evening, morning and afternoon

Services on Sabbath, the Three Festivals and the Day of Memorial, the mornings of the middle days of Passover and Tabernacles, evening and morning services of New Moon, First day Purim, 9th Ab and Day of Atonement, and the first evening of Chanukah, and the rest might be suspended for the time being. They also recommended that at any service both Ministers should attend in their robes and stay to the end, and "that in all cases whatsoever the services shall be read in an audible tone with due devotion," and they suggested that a "serious, earnest and continuous effort be made to secure the due performance of the various services mentioned above". The Ministers reported in February, 1867, that at the Wardens' request they had tried to get a *minyan* for Sabbath afternoon services, but had failed every time, and they suggested that the Sabbath afternoon service should be suspended. After a conference with the President, a compromise was reached, when the Council agreed to the suspension of the services on Sabbath afternoons, the mornings (not the evenings) of New Moon, the morning of the second day of Purim, the mornings of the middle days of Passover and Tabernacles and the Penitential Days, and the eves of Chanukah except the first.

This was the congregation that had been excommunicated.

In 1865 Daniel Mocatta died, full of honour, at the age of 91, having been President for 25 years, and was succeeded by Sir Francis Goldsmid, Bart., M.P., who had been the first Honorary Secretary.

It was a busy period in the life of the Synagogue. The membership was only about 150 families (as compared with the present 2,500) although it had increased by about a third between 1857 and 1864, and there was no social life, but from 1866 onwards there were three Ministers — there was D. W. Marks, the first Minister of the Congregation, a man of energy and massive Victorian eloquence, often known as Professor Marks, for he was the first occupant of the Chair of Hebrew in the new University College, London of which Sir Isaac Lyon Goldsmid, a member of the Synagogue, was one of the founders; there was the Rev. A. Löwy; and on Sabbath the 15th September, 1866, an Assistant Minister was inducted — Mr. Philip Magnus, later Sir Philip Magnus and a President of the Congregation, who had been trained under the new Ministers' Training Fund, established in 1861.

The Ministers were busy re-editing the prayer-books. In 1859 Charles Salaman, a member of the congregation and a composer, collected music from various sources, and he and Verrinder wrote more. There was a "Musical Committee" which reported sadly in 1862 that they could not get the members to sing.

In May, 1864, the Secretary reported that there was a deficiency of seats — there were only about 350 all told — and the Synagogue having failed to secure the property at the rear of 50 Margaret Street, looked for other premises. After fruitless attempts in various localities they succeeded in obtaining a lease from Lord Portman of premises near the Edgware Road, together with a house in Upper

Berkeley Street and four houses in Adam Street West, at a rent of £550 per annum. The lease was to run from 1872, but they succeeded in purchasing the existing lease of the site up to 1872 for a premium of £1,160, and so were able to obtain possession immediately.

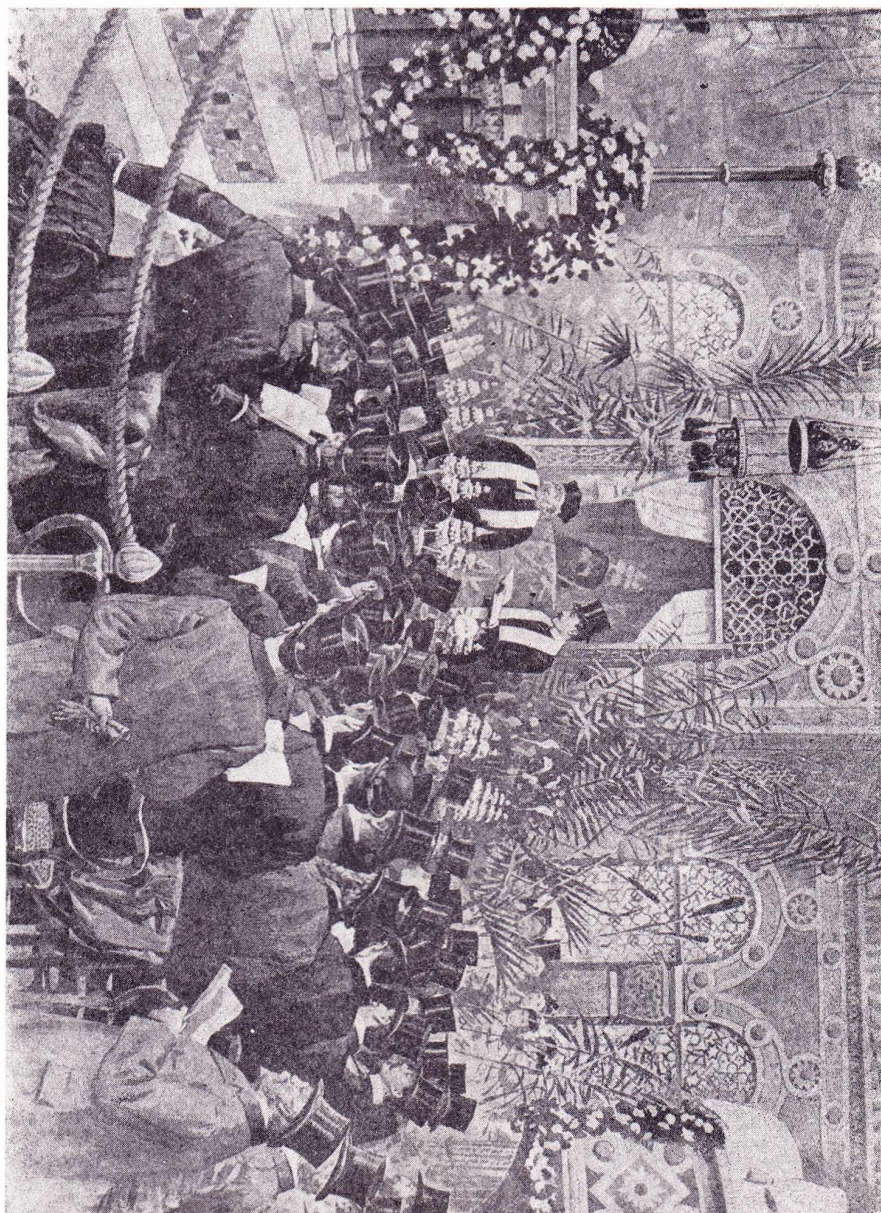
The Council set to work, and in November, 1866, appointed a Building Committee which included David Mocatta (himself an architect of repute and later President) and they sought finance from the members. By January, 1867, they had built up a preliminary list of donations of £8,602 10s. 0d. (in modern terms about £70,000) including £2,000 from the President, Sir Francis Goldsmid, Bart., M.P., £1,000 from Julian Goldsmid, M.P., and £500 from Baron de Stern, toward a total cost of around £18,000.

Messrs. Davis & Emanuel were appointed architects and designed the building, and the work of erecting the Synagogue and organ was put out to tender to a dozen general builders and three organ builders. The lowest tender for the main building was that of G. Myers & Sons (£9,532) and they also erected the entrance (£3,918). Messrs. Gray & Davison whose tender for the organ (£1,000) was one of the two lowest and who had built the organ at Margaret Street, supplied the new organ. The rest of the expenditure was mainly for ventilation and heating, and all the work was to be finished by the 1st September, 1870. The main difference between the Synagogue as it was then built and as it is now, is that the reading desk was in the centre, and was only moved to the east side (thereby spoiling the beautiful sweep of the steps to the Ark) at the end of the century.

The rest of the money was slow in coming in, and it was resolved to raise the required balance of £9,000 by inviting loans from the members of multiples of £100 at 4% interest. When the first cemetery was acquired at Balls Pond Road in 1842, the same method was used, and lenders received debentures on the burial ground. In this way the money was quickly obtained (February, 1870).

They then invited applications for seats. The prices they fixed were a little high by the standards of the time, and there were sundry gentle complaints. For a man's seat the charges varied between 9 and 3 Guineas (in the modern equivalents, between about £75 and £25) and half the price for a son or brother under age; for a seat in the Ladies' Gallery between 6 and 2 Guineas with smaller charges for daughters living at home. A total of about 420 seats were taken (including 23 for Mocattas, 18 for Henriqueses and 14 for Montefiores) — less than half the seats in the Synagogue.

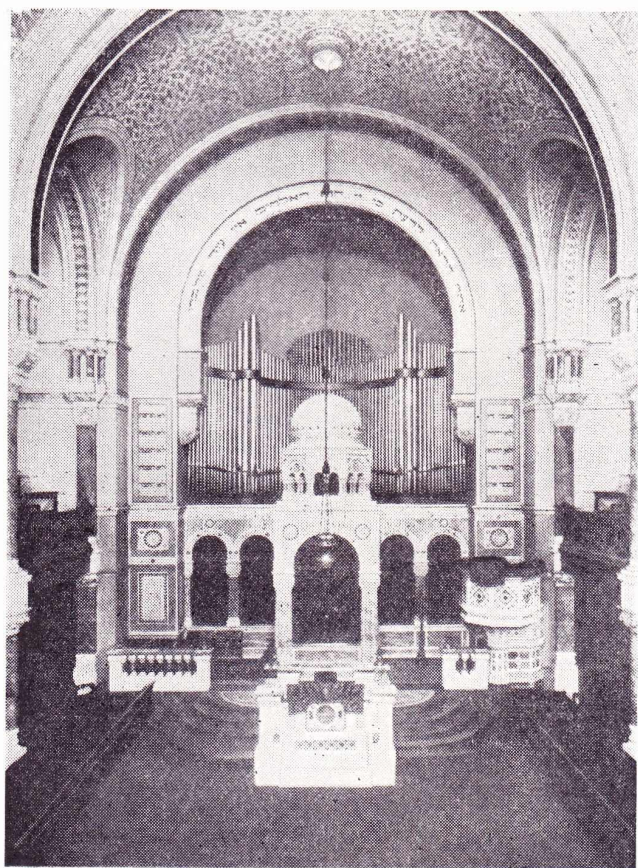
Some of the letters to the Secretary, Jacob Elkin, arouse longings for a lost past. A letter from Grecian Villa, Lower Norwood, reads "Baroness de Stern presents her compliments to Mr. Elkin and begs to say, in answer to his note to the Baron, that he would wish to have his own and the two seats for his sons together **in as**



The Rev. Pro. D. W. MARKS

MR. H. B. LEWIS BARNED

JUBILEE SERVICE AT THE WEST LONDON SYNAGOGUE OF BRITISH JEWS, 1892





REMOVING SCROLLS OF THE LAW FROM THE
ARK, WEST LONDON SYNAGOGUE

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THE GRAPHIC

good a position as possible (the present seats are not at all good. She supposes the second row is the best). Baroness de Stern also begs to say that she would wish to have three front seats (i.e. in the Ladies' Gallery) opposite the pulpit, as she hears it is the best position. Mr. Sackville Davis (a Chancery Barrister) writes from Lincoln's Inn, "My dear Sir, As I hear that the tariff of the seats is altered, will you kindly put my initials for a £7 7s. 0d. seat as I stand a better chance of having more desirable neighbours and a preferable situation." F. D. Mocatta (recently a Warden and subsequently President) writes: "Dear Jacob Elkin — Give me (if you can) a **corner seat**; as I attend more frequently than most people it is of more consequence than to most people. However I shall be content with whatever you can give me. Mary, no doubt, will have something to say as to her seat, so as to avoid draughts, etc."

On the 23rd June, 1870, the Memorial Stone of the New Synagogue was laid, and a parchment scroll was deposited with the following inscription: "This scroll doth bear record that on Thursday, June 23rd, 1870, corresponding with the Jewish reckoning, 24th day of Sivan, 5630, the stone was laid over which is to be erected the Ark of the new Synagogue in Upper Berkeley Street, Edgware Road, London.

"This is the third Temple of Prayer raised by the West London Synagogue of British Jews since the origin of the Congregation in January, 1842."

The consecration service was fixed for Sabbath, the 22nd September, 1870, just before the Day of Memorial and the Wardens wrote to the Ministers and Honorary Officers of all London Synagogues (as well as the Manchester Reform Synagogue) inviting their attendance, but the atmosphere of 1840 still survived to some extent and only about one in ten of the Honorary Officers accepted and practically no Ministers.

It was, however, a great and glittering occasion, and those who remembered the little place rented in Burton Street in 1842 must have felt a glow of pride at the beauty of this, still the finest English Synagogue building.

From the first, however, the acoustics gave dissatisfaction. Mr. Verrinder wrote to the Wardens in October, 1870, urging the view that the choir would be heard better if the screen were covered with zinc or tin. This suggestion was not adopted, but the voices of the choristers continued to give forth a muffled sound.

In the subsequent decades suggestions were made that the screen should be removed, that the choir should sit out in front, or in the gallery. Some 45 years ago, when the organ was rebuilt, the choir loft was largely extended, but all to no effect until the present loud-speaker system was installed in 1959.

The congregation continued to expand. In November, 1870, 58 new members were reported. There had been no changes in the building when, on the 27th January, 1892, a happier day, a Jubilee

Service was held to celebrate the 50th Anniversary of the congregation, and Lord Rothschild, President of the United Synagogue (which also celebrates this year its Centenary) sat next to Sir Julian Goldsmid, M.P., President of Berkeley Street, and Ministers and Wardens of most constituent Synagogues of the United Synagogue and of the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue and other Synagogues and other distinguished guests, Jew and Gentile, were present.

By 1934 the needs of the congregation had outgrown the building, which contained practically no room for administrative offices or children's classes, and the Stern Hall and a new wing were opened in the presence of Dr. Hertz, the Chief Rabbi; in 1964 a further extension was made, mainly to house the Leo Baeck College. The Founders had long passed away, but none of these advances can have warmed the hearts of the members more than the consecration of "The New Synagogue".

A. S. Diamond.

TIMES OF SERVICES

SABBATH SERVICES

Fridays — 6 p.m.

Saturdays — 11 a.m. Followed by Kiddush.

Children's Services — Saturdays — 10 a.m.

DAILY PRAYERS

6.30 p.m. in the Room of Prayer, 33 Seymour Place, W.1.

FESTIVALS

New Year's Eve	.....	.....	.....	.....	6.30 p.m.
New Year's Day	.....	.....	.....	.....	10.30 a.m.
Atonement Eve	.....	.....	.....	.....	7.00 p.m.
Atonement Day	.....	.....	.....	.....	11.00 a.m.

