

Closing a Synagogue

NOTE: This legacy Code of Practice for Closing a Synagogue was originally written for the Survey of the Jewish Built Heritage and was subsequently posted on the Jewish Heritage UK website. It is now hosted on this website as a public service to the Jewish Community.

Our synagogue buildings are physical witness to the Jewish presence in Britain. Sadly, population shifts, urban renewal programmes and economic realities sometimes mean that the future of synagogues, particularly in inner city areas and small provincial communities, is increasingly in doubt. When a synagogue is about to close, it is important, both out of respect for its history and for the sake of future generations whose heritage it will be, to make a record of its existence. The co-operation is required of synagogue bodies, boards of management and individual congregants in carrying out this task. The publication of this *Code of Practice* is for the benefit of us all.

LISTED SYNAGOGUES

Some 40 synagogues nationwide are designated as Listed Buildings on the Statutory Lists. To check if yours is one of them please refer to the [Listings](#) pages of this website. Listing indicates that these synagogues are regarded by the Department of Culture as being of architectural or historical importance. Others are situated in neighbourhoods declared Conservation Areas. Some other Jewish building types including, for example, soup kitchens and schools and cemetery memorials, are also Listed or, in the case of some Jewish plots in public cemeteries, are Registered Historic Parks & Gardens. In such cases, certain legal restrictions apply. *Changes proposed to Listed buildings requires Listed Building Consent*. For further information on Listed Buildings see the [Historic England](#) website. Other Legislation (1992) imposed stricter controls over alterations to the interiors of Listed churches. Synagogues, however, remain outside the operation of the so-called 'ecclesiastical exemption' and must apply for Listed Building and Planning Consents under the normal secular processes.

Listing offers the possibility of *public grant aid* for restoration work on major buildings.

Over the years, the number of synagogues on the Statutory Lists has increased, given that Jewish places of worship have been under-represented in this area, compared with the Christian denominations. Since the 1990s a number of historic synagogues have been upgraded from the basic Grade II to Grade II* or even, in two cases nationally, to Grade I, which is the highest form of protection that an historic building can enjoy. There are currently four synagogues that are Listed at the highest level, including Gamethill Synagogue in Glasgow, which is Scottish A Listed.

If confronted with the prospect of a redundant Listed synagogue, please turn to the relevant Region of Historic England, Historic Scotland, CADW in Wales or the Department of the Environment in Northern Ireland (Belfast), all of which provide expert advice to the Department for Culture, Media & Sport in London on protecting historic buildings. *Please alert them at the earliest opportunity - failure to comply with statutory law can result in prosecution.*

NON-LISTED SYNAGOGUES

Your soon-to-be-closed synagogue may not be Listed. However, if it dates from before the Second World War (1939) it will have been recorded by the national Survey of the Jewish Built Heritage in the UK and Ireland [SJBH]. This pioneering project photographed and documented some 350 synagogues, cemeteries and other Jewish sites all over England, Wales, Scotland, Ireland (North and South), the Isle of Man and the Channel Islands, mainly between 1998 and 2002. It was supported by, amongst other donors, the Heritage Lottery Fund, English Heritage, the Royal Institute of British Architects and the Arts & Humanities Research Council through the University of Manchester. SJBH was later extended to cover some post-Second World War Synagogues, on a selective basis (such as in specific towns, e.g. Brighton and Leeds, or threatened buildings). The Survey database holds over 530 records and, together with the paper and photographic archive, will be available to researchers to consult at Historic England Archives in Swindon.

The Survey resulted in a number of new Listings and the publication of *Jewish Heritage in England: An Architectural Guide* by English Heritage in 2006. A second, expanded and updated edition retitled *Jewish Heritage in Britain and Ireland* appeared in 2015. *The Synagogues of Britain and Ireland: An Architectural and Social History* (Yale University Press 2011) was also a product of the original Survey. Both books were written by Dr Sharman Kadish, the Director of the Survey.

Today, synagogues dating from the 1950s, 1960s and even 1970s and 1980s are closing down, as new ones are being built in more populous Jewish neighbourhoods. Three post-war synagogues are now Listed buildings (Grade II): the former synagogue at Carmel College, Oxfordshire, London's Marble Arch Synagogue and Belfast's Somerton Road Synagogue. Your post-war synagogue may not be of outstanding architectural interest, but, if it is likely to be closing, it is certainly worth recording for posterity.

RECORDING CHECKLIST

Here is a simple checklist of self-help procedures for the guidance of congregations. You require no specialist expertise to play a part in preserving our unique Anglo-Jewish heritage!

When a synagogue is about to close:

- ▶ **Photograph the building**, both exterior and interior. Snapshots are adequate, even on a good quality smartphone, but professional photography using dedicated lighting and other equipment is far preferable. General conservation agencies, such as Historic England, and Amenity Societies, like the Twentieth Century Society, may be able to provide photographic staff or skilled volunteers to help.
- ▶ **Record the address and exact location** of the synagogue. If possible, record also the name of the architect and builder, and the date of construction. This information is sometimes to be found on the foundation stone of the synagogue.
- ▶ **Draw a simple sketch ground plan of the site** of the synagogue, showing the location of any adjacent buildings such as rabbi's house, schoolroom, communal hall and *mikveh*. Ideally, a local architect or architectural student may be willing to do a scale ground plan and even a full measured survey of the existing buildings. Historic England can advise on recording techniques to ensure that the drawings, whether by hand and/or digital, are compatible with national guidelines for publication purposes etc.
- ▶ **Locate any original architects' plans** of the synagogue which may have survived, as well as old title and trust deeds. These may give some information about the history of the building, which may have undergone alterations over time.
- ▶ **Draw up an inventory of the contents** of the synagogue, giving a brief description of each item. These will include both movable objects and fixtures and fittings.

CONTENTS, FIXTURES AND FITTINGS

These may include:

- ▶ **Sifrei Torah** ['Scrolls of the Law']
- ▶ **Ritual Silver:** breastplates, *Rimonim* [finials and crowns], *Yadim* [pointers], *Havdalah* [spice] boxes, *Kiddush* cups, candlesticks, *Menorot/Hanukiot* [multi-branched candelabra]
- ▶ **Furniture:** Ark, *Bimah/Tevah* [reading platform], *Shtender/Amud* [lectern], pulpit, pews, chairs, tables, cupboards, *Sandek*/Elijah/bridal chairs
- ▶ **Hung plaques:** Memorial/donor/Roll of Honour/Royal Family Prayer/*Shiviti* boards, paintings, photographs, certificates, Omer calendars, clocks
- ▶ **Textiles:** Torah mantles, wimples, *Huppot* [wedding canopies], *Parokhot* [Ark curtains], pulpit falls, *Tallitot (Talesim)* [prayer shawls], carpets
- ▶ **Manuscript and Printed material:** Scrolls e.g. *Megillot Esther*, *Tephillin*, *Mezuzot*, *Seforim* (religious books including *siddurim* and *chumashim*)
- ▶ **Stained or Coloured Glass**
- ▶ **Metal and Brasswork:** Chandeliers, lamp standards, bookrests, circumcision instruments
- ▶ **Congregational Records:** *Pinkasim* [congregational record books], minute books, burial registers, title deeds/leases, correspondence files, etc.

Take steps to ensure that items removed from the premises are properly stored to prevent theft or deterioration.

RECOMMENDED REPOSITORIES

These include:

- ▶ **Sifrei Torah, Ritual silver:** Secure bank vault or (for London synagogues only) with parent synagogue organisation in London. Rare pieces may be loaned or donated to the Jewish Museums in London or Manchester. Paintings, rare *Seforim* [religious books], textiles, *Shiviti* boards: with parent synagogue organisation in London or Jewish Museums.
- ▶ **Memorial Tablets, Roll of Honour Boards:** Removal and re consecration at local Jewish cemetery, usually inside the *Ohel*. N.B. Memorials cemented to the walls, foundation stones, any fixed furnishings and light fittings may *NOT* be removed from Listed Buildings without permission (Listed Building Consent, LBC) (see note above on "Listed Synagogues").
- ▶ **Stained Glass:** Removal to the London Stained Glass Repository or equivalent outside the capital to prevent vandalism, which often affects unused ecclesiastical buildings. N.B. Stained glass may *NOT* be removed from Listed buildings without LBC (see note above on "Listed Synagogues").
- ▶ **Archives and old photographs:** Place in a public repository, where they may be stored in safe and secure conditions, professionally catalogued and made available for inspection by *bona fide* researchers on written application. Judaica collections of national importance are held at the London Metropolitan Archives (London material only) and at Anglo-Jewish Archives at the Hartley Library, University of Southampton. Local city and County Record Offices are usually keen to acquire material relating to minority communities in their area. Deposit on a loan basis and guaranteed access for the depositing body can generally be arranged. The Jewish Museum London, the Manchester Jewish Museum and the Scottish Jewish Archives Centre in Glasgow collect material, photographs and all kinds of memorabilia and artefacts other than documents.
- ▶ **Marriage Registers** of defunct congregations *MUST* be handed over to the Board of Deputies in London for return to the Registrar General's Office and must at all times be kept in a damp-proof and fireproof safe. *These are statutory requirements.*
- ▶ **Original Architects' plans:** Ideally, deposit with the Library of the Royal Institute of British Architects in London (RIBA) or the local Record Office. Where deposit is either not desired or not possible, photographic or digital copies should be made. SJBH Archive at Historic England's Archives in Swindon will accept both originals and good copies.
- ▶ **Religious books and manuscripts etc.:** Remove all *Tallitot/Talesim*, *Tefillin*, *Mezuzot*, prayer books and other *Seforim* on vacation of the building. Any such items which are in poor condition should be deposited in a *Genizah* or buried in the cemetery as *Shemot*. If you suspect that a particular item may be rare or valuable, contact a reputable Museum or Auction House expert for an identification and valuation, rather than just letting a book dealer 'take it off your hands'! In the majority of normal cases, your *Hevrah Kadisha* [burial society] or *Bet Din* [rabbinical court] can advise. Label books in good condition ready for reuse, to identify the synagogue which they came from, as a sign of continuity with its former congregation.

CATALOGUING, PROVENANCE AND RECYCLING

At a later date, items in store may be recycled in a new synagogue building. When this happens, it is important to have an accurate record of where they came from originally (their provenance). The creation of a central inventory of Jewish artefacts, both those that are of monetary value and those that are purely of heritage value, would be ideal. In the meantime, all congregations are urged to catalogue and photograph their most valuable items for insurance purposes. Remember to keep your inventory in a secure place.

If objects are being dispersed, please make a record of exactly when and where each piece is going. Obtain the name and address of the recipients, whether an individual (often a descendant of the original donor) or another congregation.

A broader inventory of the items enumerated in the previous section would be a considerable aid to art historians of the future.

You are invited to send copies of the information that you have amassed, your inventory and photographs, to Historic England Archives at Swindon for deposit in the SJBH Archive, for use by *bona fide* researchers on written application to the Chief Archivist.

SITE SECURITY

Closed synagogues standing empty and unused for any length of time should, if at all possible, be avoided. It is far better to find sustainable and sympathetic alternative uses for 'redundant' synagogues as quickly as possible. However, it is often the case that a building is unoccupied for a while when it is being sold and changes hands. When you vacate the building, *it is essential* that you ensure that it is secure against fire, flooding, theft and vandalism:

- ▶ **Doors and windows** should be locked.
 - ▶ **Heating systems** should be in good working order, even if they are turned off. In any old building, it is preferable to keep the heating on continually at a low, even level, rather than to heat up a cold interior, say, once a week only when it is in use. Attention should also be paid to ventilation in order to avoid condensation and damp problems. On this issue, see Historic England's advice on [Heating Historic Places of Worship](#).
 - ▶ **Alarms, CCTV and external lighting** should be fully functioning and set.
 - ▶ **Boundary walls and gates** should be in good repair and locked.
 - ▶ **Gardens and forecourts** should be kept tidy.
 - ▶ **Windows, especially stained glass**, should be protected by external grilles and CST approved security glass. *Do not* board them up!
 - ▶ **Access to high levels** should be restricted to prevent metal and roofing theft (such as slates and leadwork). Don't leave ladders lying around!
- And finally:**
- ▶ *Keep up your Buildings Insurance payments until you are legally no longer responsible for the building!*

More practical information on security is available from other sources including the [Community Security Trust \(CST\)](#). Several church organisations have much relevant advice on offer drawn from long experience:

[SPAB Faith in Maintenance](#)
[Ecclesiastical Insurance Company](#)
[ChurchCare](#)
[National Churchwatch](#)

HERITAGE PLAQUES

Consider affixing a plaque to the exterior wall of the vacated building, indicating that it was formerly a synagogue. Historic England and its equivalent bodies in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland as well as Local Authorities, Amenity Societies such as the Victorian Society, and local Civic Societies, can help here. The [English Heritage Blue Plaque scheme](#), however, is reserved for commemorating prominent individuals associated with a particular historic building.