

Guide to Visiting a Synagogue

Never visited a synagogue before?

Visit the *Pevsner Architectural Guides* [Looking At Buildings](#) website for background on this building type and how it functions as the Jewish place of worship. The text for the 'Synagogue' pages (posted in 2009) was written by Sharman Kadish and the images that she chose to accompany it were reproduced courtesy of the then English Heritage.

ACCESS

Historic synagogues may not generally be open to the public, although [Bevis Marks](#) in the City of London, Britain's oldest synagogue, does have regular opening times, as does the former Spanish & Portuguese Synagogue in Manchester, now the city's Jewish Museum ([Manchester Jewish Museum](#)). Other historic synagogues open at least occasionally, for example on Heritage Open Days in September. Most synagogues, like churches, are not normally kept open (other than for services) for security reasons.

The second edition of the authoritative national guidebook *Jewish Heritage in Britain and Ireland: An Architectural Guide* by Sharman Kadish (Historic England 2015) provides reliable access telephone numbers for all working historic synagogues (dating from before 1939) in England, Wales, Scotland and Ireland, as well as contact details for some outlying communities. Inevitably, over time, some contact details change, so, these days, it is worth checking details online too. Many synagogues now have their own websites and the [Jewish Small Communities Network](#) is a very useful umbrella source.

Jewish visitors are always welcome to attend synagogue services, especially in small communities that struggle to raise a *Minyan* [quorum of ten men for public prayer]. You will first need to check days and times of services with the congregation. Small communities may only manage to hold services on *Shabbat* [the Jewish Sabbath], often just on Saturday morning. Historic synagogues in particular welcome tourists who telephone first to make an appointment to view the building. A call is much more effective than email, texting or social media, to establish that there is someone there. Note: Do not 'phone on Friday afternoon or Saturday (*Shabbat*) or on Jewish Holydays, as you will only reach an answering machine!

GETTING THERE

Detailed practical information on routes, transport or opening hours is available from many online sources. Jewish communal and tourist information websites now proliferate and in many cases are frequently updated. Digital sources have now completely superseded the annual *Anglo-Jewish Year Book* and *Jewish Travel Guide*, that were published for very many years. Do bear in mind that like their printed counterparts, online information sources can quickly get out of date. So pay attention to the age of the website that you are looking at and whether it is still active. Always double or triple check several sources.

FOOD & ACCOMMODATION

Internet sources are also best consulted for essential information on food and hotels. Jewish visitors are often concerned to locate kosher food suppliers. A word of warning: there are few kosher outlets in England, once you get outside London. Even in London such facilities are largely confined to specific neighbourhoods: mainly Stamford Hill in north London and at points "up the North West Passage", Golders Green, Hendon and Edgware. Beyond the Underground, they are increasingly to be found in South Hertfordshire, such as Borehamwood and Bushey. There is a dearth of supervised kosher eateries in central London.

In general, it pays to telephone restaurants ahead to check opening hours, book tables and even to find out if they are still in business, before making your invariably hungry journey there! In the regions, make for Manchester. However, even in England's second Jewish city there are no kosher restaurants in the city centre; these are mainly concentrated in the northern suburbs. Even relatively large Jewish communities don't necessarily support a kosher deli, let alone a butcher or baker.

Kosher hotels are few, confined to Golders Green and Stamford Hill in London. At time of writing, there is one kosher hotel in Manchester and one in Bournemouth. Many that once proliferated in seaside towns popular with Jewish holidaymakers, such as Bournemouth, Blackpool and Southend, have closed down. These days, observant Jewish families (especially large ones) prefer self-catering holidays when holidaying in the UK - and find it cheaper than staying in hotels.

CONDUCT WHEN VISITING A SYNAGOGUE

Most of the sites listed on this website are sacred places and, as such, should be treated with appropriate respect in matters relating to behaviour and dress. Please be kind enough to dress modestly when visiting a synagogue. Less Orthodox congregations, and those belonging to the Reform and Liberal movements, may take a more relaxed attitude, but it is always best to err on the side of caution!

Men: Please wear a head covering inside the building; long sleeves and no shorts.

Women: Married women should cover their heads; long sleeves and skirts below the knee. Please note: trousers and jeans are not considered suitable attire for synagogue visits.

It is forbidden to eat, drink or smoke in the synagogue proper. Please do not bring food or drink onto synagogue premises. Always go out for refreshments. However, you may by all means accept the hospitality of the synagogue secretary or other official for tea or coffee in the office.

OTHER POINTS TO NOTE

The Torah Ark (*Aron HaKodesh*) in a synagogue: this is the focal point of the synagogue because it houses the *Sifrei Torah* (the "Scrolls of the Law"), which are the most sacred objects in the possession of the congregation. Usually, the Ark is kept locked when not in use, for security. Never try to open the Ark, nor attempt to remove a Torah scroll from the Ark. If you wish to take photographs, ask for permission. Photography is forbidden on *Shabbat* (the Jewish Sabbath) and Jewish Holydays.

Thank you for your co-operation.