

GEOGRAPHY GROUP MEETING 7TH JULY 2022 with PROFESSOR DAVID NEWMAN OBE

Professor David Newman (Ben Gurion University, Israel) is an internationally renowned political geographer. On this occasion however he chose to lecture on the history and geography of the Jewish community in Britain. He gave a fascinating and illuminating talk including details of his own family background, and that of his wife's family in nineteenth century Poland. Apparently, many migrants to and from North America travelled overland between Hull and Liverpool, and a number stayed in northern towns such as Manchester and Leeds.

We learnt about the world distribution of the modern Jewish diaspora, with 90% in Israel and North America, and a large community still in France. British Jews today number only 270 to 300,000 after reaching a peak in the 1940s. Most British people think there are rather more Jews in Britain, possibly because of their prominent role in public life. Many of the smaller communities, in Sunderland, Durham, and Middlesbrough for example, have disappeared, and 70% of British Jews are now in south east England, especially in north and north- west London. Surprisingly, Gateshead is the home of one of Europe's largest Ultra- Orthodox communities, and it is growing fast. Canvey Island also has a growing Orthodox community.

The decline of so many communities has left a significant problem of what to do with redundant synagogues. Some have been demolished, and some have been adapted to other uses. In the larger towns and cities "cathedral synagogues" were built with magnificent internal architecture, and these are being protected. Besides the architectural legacy, there is the need to preserve the stories of lost communities. Professor Newman gave a wide-ranging guide to the resources available to scholars for this purpose. The archives of the Jewish Chronicle, the London Metropolitan Archives, the Institute for Jewish Policy Research, and the Parkes Library in Southampton were all noted. Several books about former Jewish communities have been published, and David has collected a number of them.

Gerald Blake