



Above: the entrance to the Ladies' Gallery (below)



A jewel of the New World

On a recent visit to Barbados with a friend, Hilary Halter was fascinated to find an unexpected treasure in the capital, Bridgetown



It is a truth universally acknowledged, that two ladies of European appearance and in possession of a set of car keys must be in want of a taxi. At least that is the view of the taxi drivers of Bridgetown. They stand at virtually every street corner touting for trade and they do not take no for an answer. "You have a car? No matter! Leave it where it is, have a good driver." Bridgetown is a bustling port, the local population augmented daily as cruise ships disgorge their passengers on to the streets and into the shops and waterfront bars.

Step off the main shopping street into the side roads and, just off Roebuck Lane, you find Synagogue Lane. Turn in through the gates (which are never shut) and there is the Nidhe Israel Synagogue, complete with cemetery and museum. Built in 1654 by Jews escaping the Inquisition in Portuguese-ruled Brazil, it is among the oldest synagogues in the western hemisphere, predating London. A group of about 300 Jews from the port of Recife which had been under Dutch rule from 1630 to 1654 when it was retaken by the Portuguese, had taken refuge in Holland. Upon hearing that Oliver Cromwell had opened British domains to Jews, they had applied for, and secured, permission to settle in Barbados.

Skilled in the sugar industry, they quickly introduced the sugar cane crop and passed on their skills in cultivation and production to the Barbados landowners. With their help, Barbados went on to become one of the world's major sugar producers and one of the richest European territories in the West Indies.

It was not, however, all plain sailing. While the British government considered Jews to be good businessmen and tradesmen, British merchants did not like them and they were accused of carrying out illegal business transactions. Jews were accused of trading more frequently with the Dutch than the British merchants. In 1661, three Jewish traders in Barbados requested to establish trade routes between Barbados and Suriname which was still a British colony. Through this enterprise the Jews gained much wealth, but created more irritation among many British merchants.

On 23 October 1668, the Jews of Barbados were forbidden to engage in foreign or local retail trade, they were forbidden from purchasing slaves and were forced to reside in a Jewish Ghetto in Barbados. By 1802, all the discriminatory laws had been removed by the colonial government and, in 1820, the British Parliament also confirmed the repeal of discrimination laws against the Jews.

The community thrived until 1831 when a massive hurricane hit the island, ruining all the towns and destroying most of the original synagogue. The present building was constructed at a cost of £4000 – the moving spirit behind the rebuilding was



Dr Hart-Lyon, a jeweller together with 90 other influential community members who raised the necessary finance. The following appeared in the Barbados Globe of 1 April 1833:

"About three of the clock on a bright and sunny afternoon in the month of March 1833, the people of the Hebrew Nation in Bridgetown, Barbados commenced to assemble in the courts and avenues of their synagogue and in the course of an hour they were joined by a number of the most respectable inhabitants, the ladies of grace, fashion and beauty (admitted to the galleries) to witness the interesting and impressive ceremony before them. It was the day that would ever stand eminently distinguished in the annals of the Hebrew

Community of the town."

A fall in sugar prices led to emigration of most of the Jewish community and, by 1900, only seventeen individuals remained. In 1925, with only one Jew remaining, the synagogue was sold by private treaty, although an attempt was made by a non-Jewish Barbadian lawyer, Mr Eustace M Shilstone, to buy it for preservation as a national memorial to the Jews of Barbados because of its historical and antiquarian connections. The building was converted into offices and most of the artefacts were removed and found their way into private collectors and museums. The cemetery was covered over with rubble and became a rubbish dump and car park.

In the early 1930s, there was a new influx of Jews fleeing Nazi persecution in Poland. The first member of the current congregation, Moses Altman, arrived in 1931. The re-acquisition of the building was not contemplated until 1980 and then, in 1983, the Barbados government made known its plan to acquire the synagogue building and graveyard by compulsory acquisition and destroy it in order to make way for a new Supreme Court building. Henry Altman, grandson of Moses and his son, Paul Altman, stepped in and gained approval for the restoration of the building from the then prime minister, Tom Adams. Overseas organisations lent support, mainly the Commonwealth Jewish Trust and the American Jewish Congress. The Synagogue, now Conservative, is there for the use of local residents and tourists. The cemetery has been restored, although the many broken stones bear witness to the years of dereliction.

In 2008, an American architect, Michael Stoner and his assistants were trying to uncover what was thought to be the foundations of the rabbi's house. As they were digging, at first a marble landing and then steps, also covered with marble, leading to the landing were unearthed. This led to other steps and another landing, then another two steps and the discovery of mud. When the mud was finally removed it was discovered that the entire bottom of was, in fact, paved with marble. More surprising was the high volume of fresh spring water that flowed constantly from between the carefully packed stones around all of the sides. When finally cleaned, there were several suggestions from various people as to the possible use of the excavated site until, one day, while Michael Stoner was taking measurements, two Israeli tourists happened to pass by and uttered the word 'mikvah'. Indeed, after three weeks' excavation, a 17th century mikvah was unearthed.

On 25 January 2008, the Nidhe Israel Museum, telling the story of the Synagogue and of the Jews, who settled in Barbados from as early as 1628, was also opened on the site.

One cannot help but be struck by the fact that this is a popular tourist site and yet there is no security whatsoever. The doors of the Shul and the museum are open throughout the day and one is free to wander in and out of the Shul. There is a small admission fee to view the museum which is used to assist in the upkeep of the building and to ensure that this small but very important piece of Jewish heritage continues to exist so that future generations of Barbadians and visitors alike will understand the important contribution the early Jewish settlers made to the development of Barbados.

The curator, Celso Brewster, told us the history and showed us round the museum – I am indebted to him for his help in preparing this article and for his photographs of this truly fascinating place.

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The Mikvah, the water is constantly pumped out

The cemetery shows the signs of many years' use as a rubbish dump and car park

