

MIDDLE STREET SYNAGOGUE

The first known Jewish inhabitant of Brighton was Israel Samuels who was recorded as a resident in 1766/7. The community was established with the arrival in 1782 of Emanuel Hyam Cohen, a Rhienlander who married a local woman Hannah Benjamin and with her raised ten children. Brighton's first Jewish house of worship was a rather humble meeting place in Jew Street (c.1792). Around 1800 the community moved to Pounces Court (now demolished) off West Street. In 1825 a new Synagogue was built in Devonshire Place. The façade remains and the words 'Jews Synagogue' can still just be seen below the pediment. (The building is now an apartment development) As a result of the community's growth and the need for more central facilities the present site was bought in 1874 and the new building consecrated in 1875. The project had been put out to tender, the work going to Thomas Lainson, surveyor of Hove's Wick Estate. Lainson was not Jewish - this was not unusual as many High Victorian (and even earlier) synagogue builders were Gentiles.

When the synagogue was built the interior walls were plain (maybe even undecorated) and the only coloured glass (as far as we know) amber panels above the Ark. Gradually all the windows were replaced by the beautiful abstract patterns we see today. Many were donated by the Sassoon family - major benefactors to the community. Two notable exceptions are those dedicated to Hannah (nee Rothschild, 1851-90), wife of Archibald Primrose, Earl of Rosebery (Prime Minister 1894/5). The decor benefited from Sassoon generosity in other ways (see plaques in the foyer). Importantly, the family's interest in the then new science of electricity almost certainly resulted in the installation of electric lighting here. Middle Street was the first first Synagogue to be so equipped (1892).

Although Middle Street preserves many design features found in synagogues since antiquity, its basilican shape gives it an Italian Romanesque quality - an example of Victorian affinity for the past. The balanced interaction between calm classicism and the later rich decorative scheme is remarkable and makes Middle Street one of the finest small European synagogues of any era. The Synagogue has a Grade II★ listing for its interior which is officially described as "*an extremely sumptuous example of late 19th century craftsmanship*"

The twenty-four capitals of the central columns are decorated with unique representations in gilt metal of floral and botanical specimens from Israel and its environs. There are a further 80 stone window column capitals to the upper and lower levels that have individually carved botanical designs also with no two exactly alike. The railings to both galleries and the central *bimah* are cast and wrought ironwork. These have been enhanced with brass floral and botanical additions. The railings to the wardens box and Ark enclosure are brass versions of the regular railings elsewhere. The extremely elaborate Ark gates (dating from 1915) are an exceptional example of the art of metalworking and are fully gilded. They replaced the earlier brass set which are still to be seen re-sited over the inner entrance door. The brass floral additions to the railings together with the Ark gate gilding and that on the lower-level column capitals were overpainted (well-intentioned at the time no doubt!) with gold paint in later decades which is how it presently appears. The electroliers are all original late Victorian wrought-ironwork with their style bordering the later Arts & Crafts and early Art Nouveau movements. The WWI & WWII Servicemen Lobby War Memorials were added after the respective periods that each commemorates.

PHOTOGRAPHY

We encourage photography. The hall has energy-efficient bulbs giving a different colour rendition to normal tungsten light. You may wish to adjust camera settings. Using a slow exposure without a flash will give better photographs especially with regard to the stained glass windows.

MAIN FEATURES OF THE SYNAGOGUE

The word *synagogue* means a 'meeting place' indicating its dual function as a House of Prayer and a social and educational centre for the community. Synagogue styles of decoration and architecture are very diverse - there is no standard form. These elements are usually determined by the fashions of time and place. The main constant is an East-West interior orientation although this can occasionally vary.

The **Ark** (Hebrew : *Aron HaKodesh*) is the main focal point and is located in the eastern wall (the farthest as you enter), This is where the **Scrolls** (*Sephorim*) are kept. Using Hebrew consonants only and written on parchment with a quill pen, each contains the biblical Five Books of Moses. The **Bells** (*Rimmonim*) and **Shield or Breastplate** which decorate each scroll recall biblical Temple times and symbolise part of the biblical High Priest's vestments. The embroidered cover protects the scrolls. The **Pointer** (*Yad*) enables the reader to indicate the place - avoiding the need to touch the parchment. The **Everlasting Light** (*Ner Tamid*) hangs above the Ark and remains lit at all times. It recalls the light which burned continuously in the Temple. This beautiful example is one of several features here which reflect Byzantine design. The **Lectern** or **Pulpit**, from which the weekly sermon is preached, was presented (1887) by Sir Albert Sassoon to mark his son Edward's marriage to Aline de Rothschild of Paris.

The **Seven branched candelabrum** (*Menorah*) again symbolises Temple-era furnishings. The two examples here (one either side of the Ark) were bought with donations, totalling £65, from Juliana, Baroness Mayer de Rothschild (1831-77) and her already mentioned daughter, Hannah.

Above the Ark is an arch with a Talmudic quotation which translated means "*Know Before Whom You Stand*". There are also windows representing the two stone tablets of the Ten Commandments - this motif is repeated on the **Ark Curtain** (*Parochet*). The individual box pews either side of the Ark are for the Rabbi (right) and distinguished visitors (left).

The **Reader's Desk** (*Almemmar* or *Bimah*) is the large raised area in the centre where the services are mainly conducted. Torah readings also take place here - the Scroll (or Scrolls) having been brought in procession from the Ark.

Fronting the *bimah* is the **Warden's Box** - reserved for the congregation elders . Facing this is an **Eight branched candelabrum** (*Chanukiah*) with eight large branches and one small one, used each December for the eight day *Chanukah* festival. This fine example given by the first Jewish Town Commissioner of Brighton (elected 1822) Hyam Lewis and dates from around 1845. It is the only artifact remaining from Devonshire Place in the main hall

Wooden wall boards on either side of the entrance give details of the weekly Torah reading and other information relevant to the time of year. The marble plaques (in English and Hebrew) display the regularly read Prayer for the Royal Family. These give the pre-1935 version although the King and Queen referred to are George VI and the late Queen Mother.

For reasons of modesty men and women sit separately in Orthodox synagogues - following Temple practice - men sit downstairs and women in the Gallery above. The thrice daily services (not in this building) are, except for very small sections, said in Biblical Hebrew. They may be conducted by the **Rabbi**, a salaried **Cantor** (*Chazan*) or any suitable Jewish male. These statutory services require a quorum of 10 men aged 13 or over.

VICTORIAN ART & ARCHITECTURE AT MIDDLE STREET

The Victorian era is today characterized by its somewhat eclectic revival and re-interpretation of historic styles and the introduction of cross-cultural influences from the Middle East and Asia in furniture, fittings and interior decoration. Following the Great Exhibition of 1851 it became very clear to British designers how cluttered and meaningless much of the work being produced in this country indeed was. A new school of designers formed as a reaction to the eclectic revival and the soulless machine-made production the Industrial Revolution had precipitated. This desire to create an authentic and meaningful style for the 19th century became the basis for the Arts and Crafts movement.

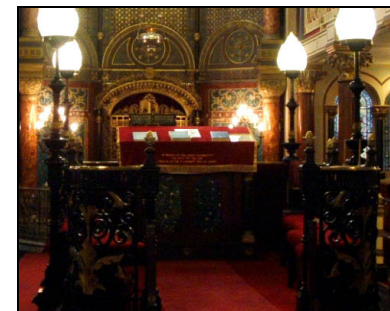
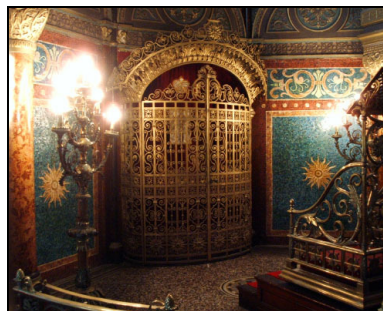
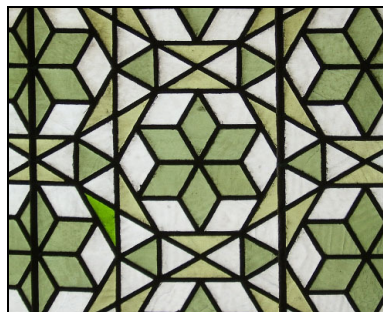
Middle Street was designed at the time when the influences of this new school of design, the Arts and Crafts Movement, were entering the mainstream in full flood. Arts and Crafts designers considered the machine to be the root cause of all repetitive and mundane evils with some of the protagonists entirely eschewing the use of machines in favour of handicraft, which tended to concentrate their productions in the hands of sensitive but well-heeled patrons. Their work and influence surrounds and overwhelms you as you enter Middle Street. There are William Morris design influences in the zodiac window, the windows high above the Ark and in the ornate metalwork railings surrounding the steps to the Ark enclosure. The botanical and floral columns are all unique handcrafted metalwork. The botanical stone columns that border the walls are all hand-crafted. Look closely again at the mosaic walls with their blazing gold mirrored glass embedded into the design. There is much more here than meets the eye at first glance. Surely there can be very few places where one can discover so much historic Victorian design from this period under one roof still in situ in its original context.

We hope you enjoy your visit! Please tell all you friends about us and encourage them to come and experience this wonderful historic building for themselves. We are happy to give private tours to groups, schools, art schools, religious groups etc upon request.



We desperately need to raise substantial funds to ensure the secure future of this fine building for future generations of people from all communities. Your kind donation is very much appreciated.
Please also sign our visitors book in the lobby!

The Middle Street Synagogue Brighton



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