

# END COLUMN

## Christopher Howse

Sacred mysteries



# Our splendid but unseen synagogues

FAR less widely known than the churches of Britain are its splendid synagogues, from the 19th century and before. Just as people feel shy about going into a church to have a look, lest they do something unintentionally offensive, so even more people (since the Jewish community has never exceeded half a million) are worried about doing the wrong thing in a synagogue. It is a pity, because they are missing a lot.

A taste of the architectural delights of the synagogues of England (Wales and Scotland not amounting to all that much) is given by *Jewish Heritage in England: An Architectural Guide* by Sharmun Kadish, published by English Heritage in association with Jewish Heritage UK (£16.99).

Like many churches, synagogues in areas from which people have moved, especially inner cities, have been threatened by dilapidation and conversion to secular use. The Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue in Cheetham Hill, Manchester, only escaped the demolition that in 1986 befell its Ashkenazi neighbour, the Manchester Great Synagogue (despite its Grade II listing), because a group of enthusiasts turned it into the Manchester Jewish Museum.

I don't much care for places of worship being turned into museums, but it's better than being knocked down. A nice detail at Cheetham Hill is the round stained-glass window (pictured) above the Ark, with the words of Psalm 67 written in the form of a seven-branched candelstick.

Even the most astonishing of 19th-century grand synagogues, Princes Road, Liverpool, almost closed in the 1990s. It was built in 1874 by the brothers William and George Audsley, who had just completed the neighbouring Welsh Presbyterian church (now derelict). Its interior is a riot of Victorian polychrome, with galleries carried on octagonal painted columns, with a sort of Gothic clerestory above and two large wheel-windows in the East and West walls.

Those unused to English synagogues may find the presence of Moorish or Islamic motifs even more surprising than the architectural cannibalism of

medieval European elements. The architects of Princes Road intended to give it "enough of the Eastern feeling to make it suggestive", with horseshoe arches and an "Assyrian" Ark. At Bradford, the Ark in the Reform Synagogue (1880) is topped by an extraordinary hexagonal domed kiosk reminiscent of Mughal India, and the grille-work of its front is known as *moshabiqs* in its more ordinary setting in Egyptian mosques.

Far more sober is the interior of England's oldest synagogue, at Bevis Marks in the City of London, which was finished in 1701. Despite its discreet site it is quite well known, both because of its fame and because it is lucky enough to be able to keep its doors open several days a week.

Here you might be in an old Dissenting chapel,

except for the ornate *Ehal* (the Sephardic term for the structure that incorporates the Ark containing the scrolls of the Law). This, with the gilt capitals of its Corinthian

columns, might be an altarpiece by Wren. In Wren's day, Church of England churches had a table or plaque on the East wall with the Ten Commandments.

At Bevis Marks, above the Ark cupboards, are the two tables of the *Luhot*, inscribed with Hebrew letters of gold abbreviating Moses' tablets of the Law.

Even more charming in its way, and unknown to me before, is the Plymouth Synagogue, the oldest Ashkenazi synagogue in the English-speaking world, built in 1793. From the outside it looks like a dull Nonconformist chapel. Inside, the eye is caught by the blue, white and gold Ark in neo-Classical style, which has been compared to baroque Arks in Venetian synagogues.

As for that fear of being disrespectful, Sharmun Kadish has provided brief advice on how to behave: men cover your heads; no shorts; no eating and drinking; do not step on a grave in a cemetery, etc.

It is the least that lovers of architecture should do, out of respect for the beliefs that caused these buildings to be constructed.

I wish visitors to Westminster Abbey would abide by such rules.

