From the *Transactions of the Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society*  

**Jacob's Well, Bristol, Britain's only known medieval Jewish Ritual Bath (Mikveh)**  

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1994, Vol. 112, 73-86  

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Jacob's Well, Bristol, Britain's only known medieval Jewish Ritual Bath (*Mikveh*)

By R.R. EMANUEL AND M.W. PONSFORD

*Introduction*

The site discussed here lies on the north side of Jacob's Wells Road, Bristol, in an area noted for its supply of water to the medieval town; the Abbot of St. Augustine's, now the Cathedral, took a supply from here in pipes via Jacob's Wells Road and Anchor Road. The building with which we are concerned in this interim account lies at the junction of Jacob's Wells Road with Constitution Hill; it is built against a cliff composed of Upper Cromhall Sandstone below Hotwells Limestone of the Carboniferous Limestone Series (Geol. Survey, Sheet 264); it is about 35 m above O.D. at NGR ST 57697287 (Figs. 1–2). The spring used by medieval Bristol
Fig. 2  (By courtesy of Bristol & Region Archaeological Service.)
Jewry was rediscovered in 1987 by the Temple Local History Group, opposite the later but still pre-Expulsion cemetery known as 'Jews Acre' of which a drawing made in the 1840s names a plot beneath the grand new building of Queen Elizabeth's Hospital. The Group used the opportunity of the rebuilding of the former Hotwells Police Station bicycle-shed (at one time a fire-engine house) as a furniture restoration workshop, to discover whether here was the source of the spring water presented by Edward III to the City in 1373, and subsequently known as Jacob's Well. As a result of lowering the ground during these alterations, a small opening was found, containing sludge and old batteries from bicycle-lamps. After partial excavation, a chamber entered by descending steps was revealed, which filled with clear water issuing from a fissure in the rock, at a constant 53°F, and left from another opening feeding the presumed conduit. There was also a higher exit-hole beneath the top step. After confirmation that this must indeed be Jacob's Well, the opening was covered by a retaining-wall built to support the hillside into which the chamber was cut.

**The Structure**

The site was surveyed in late 1988. The opening and the cave behind, some 2.5 m deep from the massive lintel described below, have been only partly recorded so far, because of the difficulties of surveying such a structure in artificial light and in water, and of difficulties of access since 1987. It is uncertain when recording can be resumed. The plan, however, shows that the cave extends only 1.9 m north of the outer edge of the outer lintel, which forms the limit of the doorway. The curve at the end emphasizes the natural conformation of the cave; at present there is no reason to think that it had been artificially enlarged, no tool-marks having been noted on the reddish sandstone surface. The depth of water was about 1.4 m, extending to the rear, where it was still 1 m. The outlet in the step is a later feature, to feed the conduit, but the overflow above it is significant, in that it would have allowed the water to flow, which as we shall see, is an important matter (Fig. 3).

Within the original structure there were three Pennant Sandstone steps. The jambs commence at the inner step, where the rock drops sharply, and the water was able to overflow below that step (although not shown in Fig. 3). The outer lintel on the south-west is largely obscured by a modern one at an angle, and this upper lintel sits upon the massive inscribed original lintel, which is 70 cm deep, and in turn rests on a corbel, angled away from the entrance. One of the workmen employed on the building-work noticed that there were some 'hieroglyphics' on the front of the massive lintel (as shown on Fig. 3), and it was decided to cut through the newly-built concrete retaining-wall in order to investigate. Robert Vaughan, the member of the Temple Local History Group who was monitoring the alterations, thought the inscription might be Hebrew. There is one word, much hacked about in order to provide a key for the later plaster rendering which still survives on the upper half of the lintel (Fig. 4); it reads **Sochalim** ('flowing'); its original form is, despite the damage, reconstructible (Fig. 5), and in modern script it is written so: מַחְלִים The remaining plaster may well cover the word **Mayim** ('water'); the term **Mayim Sochalim** is used in the Mishnah to describe a Mikveh, or ritual bath, of running water which is regarded as superior to a rainwater Mikveh, and has wider uses. We return to this point below.

Below the corbel, a large vertical slab runs back into the cave, forming the jamb of the doorway. The stone is 1 m high by 60 cm wide and 20 cm thick, and further stones continue north-west, but against the cave-wall. The jamb is rendered almost down to the level of the inner step, but a block of stone with four perforations is incorporated in it at this level (Fig. 3). Below, the jamb continues as a depth of laid horizontal slabs down to rock-level.
Fig. 3 Plan and elevation of Jacob’s Well Mikveh, including later masonry, and the ‘hieroglyphic’ inscription in its damaged state (By courtesy of Bristol & Region Archaeological Service).
Fig. 4  The lintel inscription in its damaged state.

Fig. 5  The original incisions of מִנְיָלְנָי Sochalim ('flowing'), as identified and filled with powdered chalk (by R. Emanuel).
The rendering is in an off-white plaster bearing several scratched letters; some appear to be 18th-century to judge from the form of W and H. Externally, the jamb is hidden behind modern walling which may incorporate original but obscured work. The other jamb has not been recorded, but is composed of similar stonework. There are more graffiti in the rendering adherent to the inscribed lintel, and any further removal of the plaster should be done with care.

The more modern structure includes two more steps up to floor-level (Fig. 3, plan) and the reconstruction of the cliff revetment.

*An historical and archaeological context for the 'Well'*

The context of this ritual bath can be established by reference to the historical background and the character of its construction. Given the authenticity of the inscription, the construction of the doorway should relate to the earlier period (before 1290) of Jewish settlement in Bristol. The history of Bristol’s Jews was adequately assembled by Michael Adler, and more recently but briefly by one of the present authors (Adler 1931; Emanuel 1988).

Unlike Germany and France, where Jews arrived in Roman times and were well established by the 9th century, there is no record of Jews living in Britain until the Norman Conquest. However, there seems to have been extensive Jewish rural settlement in Normandy, with a major community in Rouen having a magnificent Romanesque college; and William the Conqueror encouraged their migration to England. This policy was reinforced by William Rufus (1087–1100), and it was during his reign that a community is said to have been established in Bristol. As a *Domus Conversorum* (a house for converted Jews) was established by 1147, a sizeable, though never large, community must have existed by then (this *Domus* was the earliest established, with others following in London and Oxford). By encouraging Jewish settlement, the English kings, like their continental counterparts, secured control of the important source of finance which Jews were able to supply, as money-lenders and, in a way, bankers. Jews were also regarded as the king’s chattels and could be taxed at will; in Bristol these activities were controlled by the king’s local representative, the Constable of the castle, and some information has come from the Constable’s accounts (Sharp 1982, *passim*).

The Bristol Jewry, in common with many of those on the Continent, lay outside the city walls, along the Frome, on Nelson and Quay Streets, which were once known as Jewry Lane; William Wyrcestre, writing in 1483, states that the ‘*Templum Judeorum* [the Synagogue] was situated in ancient vaults directly under the church of St. Giles’, a building long gone even in his day (Dallaway 1834, 137–8). St. Giles’s stood at the corner of Small and Quay Streets, and like the existing St. John’s was built actually on the line of the city wall; there was a St. Giles’s Gate. The site was long occupied by Arrowsmith the printers, and now by St. Giles’s House. In medieval times, the cohabitation upon the same site must have been unique, and in sharp contrast with what was to happen in London where the sound of Hebrew prayer offending Christian ears was made the excuse for confiscating first one, then all but one of the synagogues and turning them into churches.

The Norman-French of many of Bristol’s medieval Jewish men’s names and practically all women’s names indicated the language they spoke and their possible Norman origins. There were a number of scholars of international fame who formed part of the English community. Ibn Ezra, who visited Britain in 1158, discussing in his commentary on the Book of Exodus, declares that after his sojourn in ‘the Isles’ he could understand the ‘plague of total darkness’ of three days’ duration! Bristol shared in this intellectual life: the earliest known of its rabbis,
Moses of Bristol, was one of the York Martyrs of 1190, together with his son Yom-Tov, the author of a grammatical treatise. Another Bristol grammatical scholar was Rabbi Shemuel Ha-Nackdan, known also in translation as Samuel le Pointur, the name derived from his specialization; he is said to have written the first known book on Hebrew grammar in Bristol, in 1194. Another Bristol Jew who gained fame in a very different way was the merchant Abraham: in 1210, when King John levied another tallage on the Jews to finance his Irish campaign, Abraham refused to contribute, and was imprisoned in Bristol Castle where his teeth were extracted, one each day, to make him change his mind. He capitulated when he was down to the last of his eight teeth, and parted with 10,000 marks, a vast fortune.

There were two sackings of the Jewry, one in 1266 during the Barons’ War when two Jews were killed and the Archa with the records of debt was destroyed, and another in 1275 in which there was much destruction of property. It was after the sack of 1266 that the Jewry seems to have moved: there was a convenient gap between the Castle and the city wall, therefore outside the bounds of the city, yet convenient to the Castle as a place of refuge (as at York) in times of trouble. Here is Church or Chequer Lane, between Wine (Winch) Street and St. Peter’s Church. However, the Expulsion documents refer to buildings mainly, if not all, in Wine Street (Sharp, op.cit.). The notion that the Domus Conversorum was housed in the Chequer Inn in Wine Street, as suggested by Adler, is unlikely because Chequer Lane was not constructed until well after 1300: the city wall had been demolished in 1305 or so before the lane was laid out. Nevertheless, a deed of the 1240s refers to a great stone house or schola near St. Peter’s Church (information from F. Neale). This would appear to be the building mentioned after 1290 as ‘the old school opposite St. Peter’s’ and the ‘synagogue or scholae Judaearum’ in Wynchstret’ (Veale 1933, 75).

According to Sharp, seven male and two female Jews were named at the Expulsion. There were six houses, four in Wine Street, one belonging to Jose of Caerleon (with which Usk port there was a flourishing trading connexion), near the Castle, and another unlocated. There were four vacant plots: two next to the synagogue in Wine Street belonged to Isaac le Prestre, chirurgeon or writer of bonds, who was already dead. Moses of Kent and Cresse also had plots. The Jew Miparty had houses on the Frome side of Wine Street in 1282–4, for a rent of 5s. Four owners had been hanged by 1290. No plots or houses are mentioned in Quay Street, which may have been abandoned in preference to both sides of Wine Street. According to Sharp (1982), the synagogue was in a rented house, let by Margaret Toley from 1280 for 3s. a year; this arrangement may have been made as a result of the destruction of the earlier building in 1275. A building against the city wall, found in 1970, may have been the school for the conversion of the Jews (once wrongly described as the ‘barbican’), and although it is difficult to be precise about what features identify a Jewish house, some of the structures excavated in Peter Street (Wilson and Moorhouse 1971; Boore 1982) were almost certainly part of the pre-1290 Jewry, the site having been abandoned about the period of the Expulsion as described in the documentary sources.

The first documented period of Jewish settlement in Bristol thus came to an abrupt and precise end in 1290. Although there are records of Jews in Bristol in the 16th century, they did not return in numbers until the 1740s. Stylistically it is impossible to accept that the workmanship at the Mikveh can have the smallest resemblance to what would have been erected in either of those later periods. The only dressed stones appear to be the lintels, which are simply done without rebates, suggesting that there was never a door. It is necessary to note here that Jews could not practise crafts except within their own community, and it is likely that where the settlement was small, labour would have been hired to build the doorway (Emanuel 1988, 15).
The source of the stone has not yet been identified, but it is likely to have come from the Dundry quarries, owned from 1142 by St. Augustine's Abbey. A recent excavation of the foundations of the demolished church of St. Augustine the Less (a site now occupied by the new Swallow Royal Hotel) shows that simple doorways of this type, though with rebates to seat woodwork, were normal in 12th-century churches (Boore 1985); simple, uncarved stonework of the 12th and 13th centuries is otherwise difficult to find.

All the more striking, therefore, is the parallel to be seen in the doorway of the Mikveh at Speyer in the Rhineland, c. 1200, which has a similar megalithic lintel-structure (Fig. 6); it is possible that the Bristol Jews, in employing local craftsmen to construct the doorway, formed the design on a Rhenish prototype. In favour of this notion, we may turn to the inscription, which is the only pre-Expulsion, in situ Hebrew epigraph yet found in England. It is stylistically quite unlike those of the Romanesque college at Rouen (p. 78), but on the contrary partakes of the typical square Ashkenazi script of contemporary Rhenish tombstones, such as one from the cemetery at Mainz, dating from 1082 (Fig. 7). Many of the leading city Jews, such as Rabbi Moses of Bristol, had Rhenish connexions: he was descended from Rabbi Simon the Great of Mainz. It is worth adding that the only other surviving medieval Hebrew inscription known from England is a fragment of a tombstone in Northampton, which is also of Franco-German Ashkenazic character and is dated to c. 1259–90 (Roberts 1992).
So far, we have been able to show that the context of the Jacob's Well Mikveh lies before 1290 and perhaps considerably before. There remains one important consideration. The 'Jews Acre' cemetery on Brandon Hill, on ground now occupied by Queen Elizabeth's Hospital School, cannot have existed before 1172, for at an earlier period all provincial Jewish dead had to be buried in London. It is a thousand pities that when the site was being cleared for the erection of the school in 1843, gravestones were discovered, only to be re-used in the foundations, giving rise to the quip that 'the boys will always have a good Hebrew foundation'. Now the establishment of a Mikveh is considered to be the first commitment of a congregation, taking precedence over the building of a synagogue. We shall not go far wrong, therefore, in assigning Jacob's Well to the very earliest years of Jewry in Bristol. As such it would appear to be the oldest known in western Europe, but as will be shown below, it fits very much into the pattern of early ritual baths (Mikvaot being the plural) which survive in the well-established key communities of the Rhineland. That at Worms dates from 1186; Speyer, with its massive lintel as in Bristol, from 1200. In 1956, during excavations beneath the medieval Town Hall in Cologne, a Mikveh dating from 1170 was discovered, until the rediscovery of Jacob's Well the oldest known; there the Mikveh had to be abandoned when a Ghetto in which the Jews were forced to live was established in another part of the city, and the Town Hall built on its site (Seiler 1980).

Mikvaot: types and uses

The word Mikveh means 'a gathering together (of water)'. During the period of the Temple in Jerusalem, strict laws of purity were applied not only to the priests performing the services, who had to immerse daily, and also before eating heave-offerings (Leviticus vii: 12–14), but to all those, even gentiles, who entered it. The Mikveh was also used for the purposes for which it is still employed today: these are to fulfil the laws of Purity. Married women immerse after their menstrual cycle, men before the Sabbath and Festivals, even daily, and proselytes as part of the conversion-process. Men and women use the Mikveh at separate times, women after nightfall, men before. All new metal and glass utensils have to be immersed before being used for the preparation of food. There are two surviving medieval illustrations of the use of a Mikveh: one in a German illustrated manuscript of c. 1428 showing a woman dipping with arms outstretched in order that all of her body is in contact with the water (though her hair, shown loose, would have been tied up); and one from a Spanish manuscript of the first half of the 14th century, which depicts the dipping of vessels (Fig. 8). An important point is that a Mikveh is not a common bath; people and articles dipped have to be totally clean without anything adhering to them. Very often in the past and usually today there are separate pools for these two purposes.

Ideally, immersion would take place in the sea, or in a river, as for the curing of Naaman of leprosy (II Kings v:8–14). But this was usually impractical, especially in urban areas, and in Leviticus xi:36 it is stated that ‘a spring or cistern in which water is collected, shall be clean’. The earliest surviving such cistern Mikvaot date from the Second Temple Period, 516 B.C.–A.D. 70. They already conform to the regulations laid down in the Mishnah, completed roughly A.D. 200, and even to those laid down later. They must, therefore, have followed a well-established tradition. In these, water flowing from a spring or rainwater collected from the roof flows unaided into a cistern dug into the ground: the water must not be drawn and carried in vessels. Rain in Israel falls only in the rainy season, and the water in an immersion pool has to be changed frequently. Immersion therefore takes place in an adjacent pool, the two connected by a 2 in. aperture; this allows the water in the immersion pool to be indeed 'drawn water' which may be changed more frequently than that of the storage pool.
Fig. 8  Spanish Jews dipping new vessels in a *Mikveh*. From a MS of the first half of the 14th century (after Metzger).
Minimum capacity is laid down, 500 gallons in both pools to allow of total immersion; minimum size is also specified, 1 cubit by 1 cubit by 3 cubits high (the cubit, 18–22 in.). A minimum height of 47 in. is permitted. There must be no outlet, the water being changed manually; there must be no leakage, and metal pipes were not allowed unless embedded in the foundations. All the pools excavated in Israel conform to these regulations and exceed the minimum requirements.

The Mikveh excavated at Gezer, which dates from c. 140 B.C., is of this type (although R.A.L. Macalister did not recognize what he had unearthed). Immersion pools always have a flight of steps down into them, and this was the first thing noticeable at Jacob's Well. The largest concentration of ritual baths so far discovered is in Jericho, where there are some 20, and where the Hasmonean Dynasty (164–37 B.C., when Herod usurped the throne) had their winter palace. The Palace Mikveh is supplied by water flowing from an aqueduct into two separate pools, one being superfluous but no doubt intended to be turned into a static double Mikveh of

![Plan and elevation of the Palace Mikveh, Jericho (after Netzer).](image)

Fig. 9 Plan and elevation of the Palace Mikveh, Jericho (after Netzer).
the type described above, when the flow of the aqueduct was interrupted (Fig. 9). Another Mikveh forms one part of a complex where there is also a cold bath (frigidarium), hot water pool (calidarium) and a room with a bath-tub, the latter two served by a furnace; this additional accommodation obviously demonstrates that a Mikveh was never an ordinary bath. Others of the same period have been excavated beneath the present Jewish quarter of the Old City of Jerusalem, as well as adjacent to the Temple itself. Slightly later ones have been found in Herod’s palaces at Jericho, Masada and at the Herodion, all of the double-chamber type. Herod also provided ritual baths in the newly-founded town of Tiberias, to encourage people to move there. Modern Mikvaot more or less conform to this type.

The leading French and German rabbis of the 11th century advocated the use of Mikvaot of Living Waters, and as we have seen Mayim Sochalim is used in the Mishnah to describe a Mikveh of running water, superior to one dependent on rainwater. In tractate Ṭabarot (‘Purity’) x:8 it is stated ‘preferable are sunken waters which render clean such times as they are flowing waters, more excellent than they are living (spring) waters’—which, of course, Jacob’s Well is—‘for they

Fig. 10  Cologne, Mikveh. Plan, with heights in metres. At the top, a forehall; at bottom left (marked U), a dressing-room (after Seiler).
serve for the immersion of them that have a flux [Leviticus xv] and for the sprinkling of lepers.' A rainwater Mikveh would be insufficient for these latter purposes. Only one pool is necessary as it is a continuously replenished natural spring. The length to which congregations went to provide Mikvaot of Living Waters can be seen in Friedburg, where the Well Mikveh of 1260 descends 18 m or 60 ft. below ground level. The Cologne example (Figs. 10–11) is also deep.

There are two outlets at the front of the pool at Jacob's Well. One is part-way up and keyhole-shaped, and feeds the conduit the pool now supplies; it must date from the time it became a common water-supply. It reduces the level of the water in the pool to such a low level that one could not totally immerse in it; so that it is very significant that there is a surviving overflow below the top step from which water must have escaped when the pool was in use as a Mikveh. The inscription so providentially preserved, even in its sadly damaged state, on the lintel was no doubt placed there to inform the user of the nature of the pool. It may be added that there is also an unexcavated second chamber alongside the pool, with an arch now hidden behind the concrete retaining-wall at a lower level than the lintel, which may have given access to the Mikveh for dipping vessels. No remains of medieval metal or glass articles, however, were found when the pool was excavated.

At the Expulsion of the Jews from England in 1290, all Jewish property passed to the Crown, enabling Edward III to present the spring to the city in 1373, and it was to remain in the ownership of the Corporation for exactly 600 years. One may wonder when the name 'Jacob's Well' was first used; it is possible that it dates from before 1290; but when Edward III presented the spring in 1373, it was referred to as the Woodwell. Woodwell Lane indeed survived as the name for Jacob's Wells Road as late as 1896, when we find it on Arrowsmith's maps of Bristol.
Acknowledgements

The authors wish to thank John Bryant and Ann Linge of Bristol and Region Archaeology Service for the survey and illustrations of the Mikveh respectively, and Bruce Williams as Manager for allowing them to be used here. We also wish to thank Robert Vaughan for his enthusiasm and for informing us of the find, and Mr. Martelett for allowing access.

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