Economic History of the Jews in England

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The modern Jewish community in England dates from 1656. In that year a small group of people in London were permitted to establish a synagogue for prayer and a place for the burial of their dead: two essential institutions for their religious life. Since then there has been a continuous history of Jewish life in the British Isles: its economic aspects are the main themes of this book.

This year of 1656 is rightly called the date of 'resettlement' or 'readmission': Jews had been known in England well before the seventeenth century. Some historians have suggested there were very early contacts but it is generally agreed that the medieval settlement began after the Norman Conquest of 1066-71. 'The first Jews of medieval England were Norman imports',¹ who presumably accompanied others from northern France who crossed the Channel in the wake of William.

Very little is known about the earliest pioneers, why they came, who they were and how many they numbered: on such matters the few records are unhelpful. It is most likely that more arrived as a result of the First Crusade of 1096. In Jewish history the march of the Crusaders to the Holy Land was a disaster, the route along the Rhineland marked by massacres of Jewish communities; for although the Crusade was a confrontation with Islam, the nearest infidels were the Jews. Northern France did not experience these physical attacks, except in one place, Rouen,² which became 'the undoubted recruiting ground for the first generations of medieval English Jews'.³ Perhaps, too, the great fire in that town a few years later, which began in the Jewish quarter,⁴ impelled some to move to England. Although later on some Jews came from the Rhineland and even further afield, medieval Anglo-Jewry was essentially French in language and culture, and remained so even after England lost her possessions in France in the early years of the thirteenth century.⁵

If the beginning of Anglo-Jewish settlement is somewhat vague, the end was definite and unequivocal. In 1290 Edward I expelled all professing Jews from the kingdom, thus concluding dramatically just two centuries of the community's existence. Probably about 2,500 to 3,000 Jews were forced to leave the
Notes

Introduction The Earlier Communities

2. Lipman, Norwich, p. 65.
3. Richardson, op. cit., p. 115.
4. Lipman, Norwich, chap. 6, 'The Family of Jurnet'.
8. Richardson, op. cit., chap. 3, 'The King's Borrowings'.

27. Ibid., p. 185.
28. By a similar process of interpretation of texts, some Jews lent to other Jews at interest, despite biblical prohibitions. If the loan was not repaid on time, it was fictitiously re-lent to a non-Jew at interest; A. M. Fuss, 'Inter-Jewish loans in pre-expulsion England', Jew. Quart. Rev., 65, 1975, pp. 229–45.
29. C. N. L. Brooke assisted by G. Keir, London 800–1216: The Shaping of a City, pp. 222–33, analyses the money market for the previous century in terms of: (a) richer Jews of London; (b) Christian usurers; (c) the Knights Templar. Other references to Christian moneylenders are in Richardson, op. cit., pp. 50–60.
33. Ibid., p. 229.
36. Among the many relevant studies on the history of Jewish-Christian relations, one of the most interesting is J. Katz, Exclusiveness and Tolerance: Studies in Jewish-Gentile Relations in Medieval and Modern Times. References to more recent literature are given in Hyams, op. cit.
37. Thus Jews would be affected adversely in periods of social and political turmoil, as is shown in G. A. Williams, Medieval London: From Commune to Capital. See also R. B. Pugh, Imprisonment in Medieval England, for suggestions about the greater likelihood of Jews being imprisoned.
38. Hyams, op. cit., p. 278.
40. Dobson, Jews of Medieval York, p. 48. His study is the fullest account of these events.
43. Chazan, op. cit., pp. 183–84. The newly-arrived English Jews were ordered in 1291 to be expelled from France, but some stayed after that date.
46. Ibid., p. 35, for a list of violent outbursts.
47. Ibid., p. 62; see also P. Wolff, 'The 1391 pogrom in Spain: Social crisis or not?', Past & Present, no. 50, February 1971, p. 4–18.