

The Situation, Preservation and Care of Jewish Cemeteries in the United Kingdom

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Some background

A mere twenty miles of the English Channel separated Jews on the British Mainland from the fate of their families and friends during the European Holocaust. Britain was spared the wholesale destruction of synagogues and Jewish cemeteries that occurred on the Continent. Ironically, our cemeteries testify to the continuity of Jewish life in Britain. The chief enemies of Anglo-Jewry's funerary heritage have not



Fig. 1 Map of the United Kingdom, drawn by Barbara Bowman for Sharman Kadish, *Jewish Heritage in England. An Architectural Guide*, English Heritage, 2006

so much been anti-Semitism (although racist attacks are not unknown and have been on the increase), but criminal vandalism, development pressures and sheer neglect. Jewish memorials and structures are exposed to the same threats from the environment: climate, erosion, unchecked vegetation and poor drainage, in common with other burial grounds. Above all, Jewish cemeteries in Britain are threatened by the steep demographic decline of the Jewish community since the Second World War. The population of Brit-

ish Jewry has fallen from an estimated peak of 450,000 in the 1950s to 267,000 according to the 2001 national census that included for the very first time optional questions about religious affiliation and ethnicity. It will be interesting to compare the results of the census ten years ago with those of the 2011 census that was carried out in March 2011. Overall, we expect to see a continued decline in Jewish population despite the increase in the *Haredi* strictly Orthodox sector in highly localized urban centres: North London, North Manchester and Gateshead in North East England.

The Survey of the Jewish Built Heritage, which I directed, was the first-ever systematic survey of synagogues and cemeteries in Britain and Ireland. Since the construction of a purpose-built synagogue is not an essential precondition for Jewish worship, the existence of the cemetery is often the most reliable evidence for both dating and plotting the development of viable Jewish communities around the country. The Survey identified a total of 155 Jewish burial sites in England, Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland, the Channel Islands and the Isle of Man (Fig. 1). Dating from between 1656 and 1939, they are all inventoried in my guidebook *Jewish Heritage in England* that was published by English Heritage in 2006.¹

1656 was the date of the so-called 'Resettlement' – when Jews officially returned to England over 350 years ago and were free to practice their religion openly – during the brief period when the country was a Republic under the Lord Protector Oliver Cromwell. It should not however be forgotten that England claims infamy for being the setting of the first recorded blood libel case (Norwich 1144) and for being the first country in Europe to expel its Jews, by King Edward I in 1290. Jews had first come to Britain from Rouen in Normandy with William the Conqueror after 1066. Whilst the location of a number of Jewish burial grounds from the medieval period is known from documentary sources, few physical remains have been identified. Large-scale excavations have only been carried out at York in the North and Winchester in the South of England. However, in neither case has the Jewish identity of the site been established beyond dispute. Very little archaeological evidence of medieval Jewish cemeteries has yet come to light in Britain.

Modern, post-Resettlement Anglo-Jewry experienced its biggest growth after 1881 with mass immigration from Eastern Europe, mainly from Tsarist Russia, that doubled the size of the community to about 300,000 by 1914. The growth of the Jewish community in the 19th century is reflected in the fact that the greatest number of Jewish burial grounds (71) date from the Victorian period (1837–1901) and are clustered on what were originally the outskirts of

big cities, especially London, but also in the Midlands and North. Immigration and industrialisation brought Jews to Birmingham, Manchester and Leeds, the port cities of Hull and Liverpool and Glasgow in Scotland. Manchester became Britain's second Jewish city with an estimated current Jewish population of 35,000, the only community in the country enjoying net growth. Manchester boasts 12 surviving Jewish cemeteries established before 1900.

From the *Halakhic* point of view, Jewish burial grounds are preferably owned freehold by the Jewish community although freehold possession of land was generally forbidden to Jews in Christian Europe before the 19th century. In England, the legal position was not clear-cut. The Jews of the Resettlement were classed as aliens and therefore forbidden to own freehold land for any purpose. However, there was no law against English-born or naturalised Jews owning land. The community acted with discretion and later on, sons and grandsons secured the freehold of early leasehold synagogues and burial plots.

Today, Jewish burial grounds in Britain are generally privately owned by individual synagogues, especially in provincial towns with small Jewish communities. In larger towns and cities responsibility for upkeep and maintenance is often shared by several congregations or by the *Hevrah Kadishah* or burial society, a cross-communal organisation. In London, umbrella synagogue organisations, the Spanish & Portuguese Jews' Congregation, the United Synagogue, the Federation of Synagogues, the Union of Orthodox Hebrew Congregations, the Reform Synagogues of Great Britain and the Union of Liberal & Progressive Synagogues, each maintain their own burial grounds, often quite large – although not on the scale of Berlin's Weißensee Cemetery – and sometimes sharing contiguous sites. From the early 20th century cremation began to be practiced amongst Reform Jews. Columbaria are encountered in a number of Reform and Liberal Jewish burial grounds.

The state of preservation of Jewish cemeteries

Britain has a rich heritage of Jewish burial grounds. London, the earliest centre of Jewish settlement and consistently home to about two-thirds of Anglo-Jewry in the modern period, has the largest number of Jewish cemeteries. The oldest Sephardi and Ashkenazi grounds in the country, dating from 1657 and 1696/7 respectively, are located, along with three more early Jewish cemeteries, in the East End, the historic heartland of British Jewry. The oldest Jewish burial ground outside London dates from 1718 at Ballybough in Dublin, today the capital of the Irish Republic, but historically the Jewries of Britain and Ireland have been closely linked.

The oldest fully-documented Jewish burial ground in the English provinces is in the south coast naval town of Portsmouth. Located at the aptly-named Jews' Lane, the land for this cemetery was acquired in 1749 (Fig. 2). After London, the West Country has the richest selection of Georgian Jewish burial grounds in the country: Exeter's Bull Meadow (1757), Devon; Falmouth (c. 1789–90) and Penzance (1791)



Fig. 2 Georgian tombstones at the Jews' Lane Burial Ground, Fawcett Road, Southsea, Portsmouth (1749) (Photo: Michael Hesketh-Roberts © English Heritage)



Fig. 3 Penzance Jewish Cemetery, Lestinnick Terrace (c. 1790), detail of the tombstone of Jacob James Hart, 'Late Her Britannic Majesty's Consul for the Kingdom of Saxony', dated 1846 (Photo: James O'Davies © English Heritage)

in Cornwall (Fig. 3), and elsewhere at Bristol (before 1759), Bath (1812) and Cheltenham (1824).

Victorian Britain was the great age of the public cemetery and, from an early date, Jews took advantage of the facilities on offer. The earliest example of a Jewish plot planned and landscaped as part of the overall design of a municipal cemetery is The Jews' Enclosure at the Glasgow Necropolis. The

Glasgow Necropolis was laid out in 1829–33 on the model of the prestigious Père Lachaise cemetery in Paris. The Glasgow Jewish community made an approach for provision in what was one of the first public cemeteries in Britain. In fact, the earliest burial in the entire cemetery was that of Joseph Levi, aged 62, quill merchant, who was interred on 12 September 1832 in the Jewish plot. Levi had died of cholera, an epidemic raging in the city at the time. His coffin was filled with lime and water either to prevent the spread of infection or as protection against grave robbers.

From the 1850s Jewish plots appeared in English municipal cemeteries with increasing frequency, starting with Southampton, where the first Jewish burial took place in 1854, eight years after the opening of the Common Cemetery. In many cases, especially in East Anglia and the North East, the Jewish plots date back to the opening of their respective cemeteries. Many boasted Gothic style *Ohalim* (Fig. 4) designed by municipal architects who also put up the chapels used by Christian denominations, Anglicans, Catholics and Dissenters. Large *Ohel* complexes, sometimes with one or more separate chapels, were built by metropolitan synagogue organisations only in private cemeteries in London. Some of these were in Gothic style, notably at Willesden (1873) by leading synagogue architect Nathan Solomon Joseph. Gothic Revival was a style largely absent from British synagogue architecture in the Victorian period, a subject that I have discussed at length elsewhere.²



Fig. 4 Southern Cemetery, Manchester, entrance gates and Gothic Revival *Ohel* in the Jewish section (Photo: Tony Perry © English Heritage)

In Britain in the 19th century a few wealthy Jewish notables adopted the concept of the mausoleum, which actually has ancient roots in Judaism. However, in Britain this was more immediately inspired by English aristocratic practices. The best-known example is the Montefiore Mausoleum in Ramsgate (Fig. 5) built by Sir Moses Montefiore in 1862 next door to his private synagogue, designed by his cousin David Mocatta, ‘the first Anglo-Jewish architect’, in 1831–3. The mausoleum is essentially a replica of the Biblical matriarch Rachel’s Tomb on the way to Bethlehem and was commissioned by Sir Moses as an appropriate memorial to

his childless wife Judith. The copy in Ramsgate was built of brick, stuccoed and rusticated unlike the stone prototype. The German-Jewish refugee art historian Helen Rosenau praised the Ramsgate Mausoleum as “an outstanding example of applied oriental historicism to Victorian architecture”.

The same could be said of the Sassoon Mausoleum in Brighton (1896), built by the Indian merchant prince Sir Albert Sassoon with a distinctive trumpet-shaped dome that rivals in exoticism John Nash’s famous Brighton Pavilion. In Britain, Orientalism influenced synagogue architecture in the second half of the 19th century, but it had little impact on funerary architecture; the Montefiore and Sassoon Mausolea are exceptional.

The care of Jewish cemeteries

The Problems

Burial grounds are not a profitable enterprise. Income generated by the sale of plots comes to a natural end, whilst the cost of maintenance increases. The shrinking size of Anglo-Jewry means that small and ageing congregations around the country are increasingly needing outside assistance with the upkeep of historic synagogues and disused cemeteries. The number of disused Jewish burial grounds is on the rise. The neglect of *Ohalim* is common, making this building type, often having no architectural pretensions, extremely vulnerable. Whilst in theory Jewish communities have a religious obligation to maintain the last resting places of their ancestors, in practice some communities (including large ones) are unwilling to spend money on closed burial grounds that belonged to synagogues that have ceased to function. There are instances where money originally earmarked for cemetery maintenance has been subsumed into current synagogue accounts. The growing countrywide problem of redundant Victorian cemeteries does not leave Anglo-Jewry untouched.

Despite the *Halakhic* imperative to leave the dead undisturbed, in Britain, there are recorded cases of disused burial grounds being cleared and remains re-interred elsewhere, in the 19th century often as a result of railway development, especially in the Midlands and North. The two predecessors of the Bath (Betholom) Row (1823) burial ground in Birmingham both fell victim to railway development. Bath Row was itself saved from a similar fate in 1881 by virtue of a vigorous defence campaign organised locally and supported by the Chief Rabbi. The case against the Midland Railway Company was successfully fought right up to the House of Lords. Today, this badly neglected site is once again in danger of extinction.

Even in the 20th century several Georgian Jewish burial grounds were exhumed, usually, but not always, with the sanction of the Jewish religious authorities, for example at Gloucester in 1938, Hoxton, East London in 1960, and, most controversially, from the older part of the Sephardi Nuevo ground (1733) at Mile End in 1972, whilst attempts by the West London Synagogue (Reform) to treat similarly their historic ground at Dalston (1844) were foiled in 1996.

Many British Jewish cemeteries, particularly those owned by cross-communal synagogue organisations, have a rather desolate air, with hardly a blade of grass to relieve the ser-

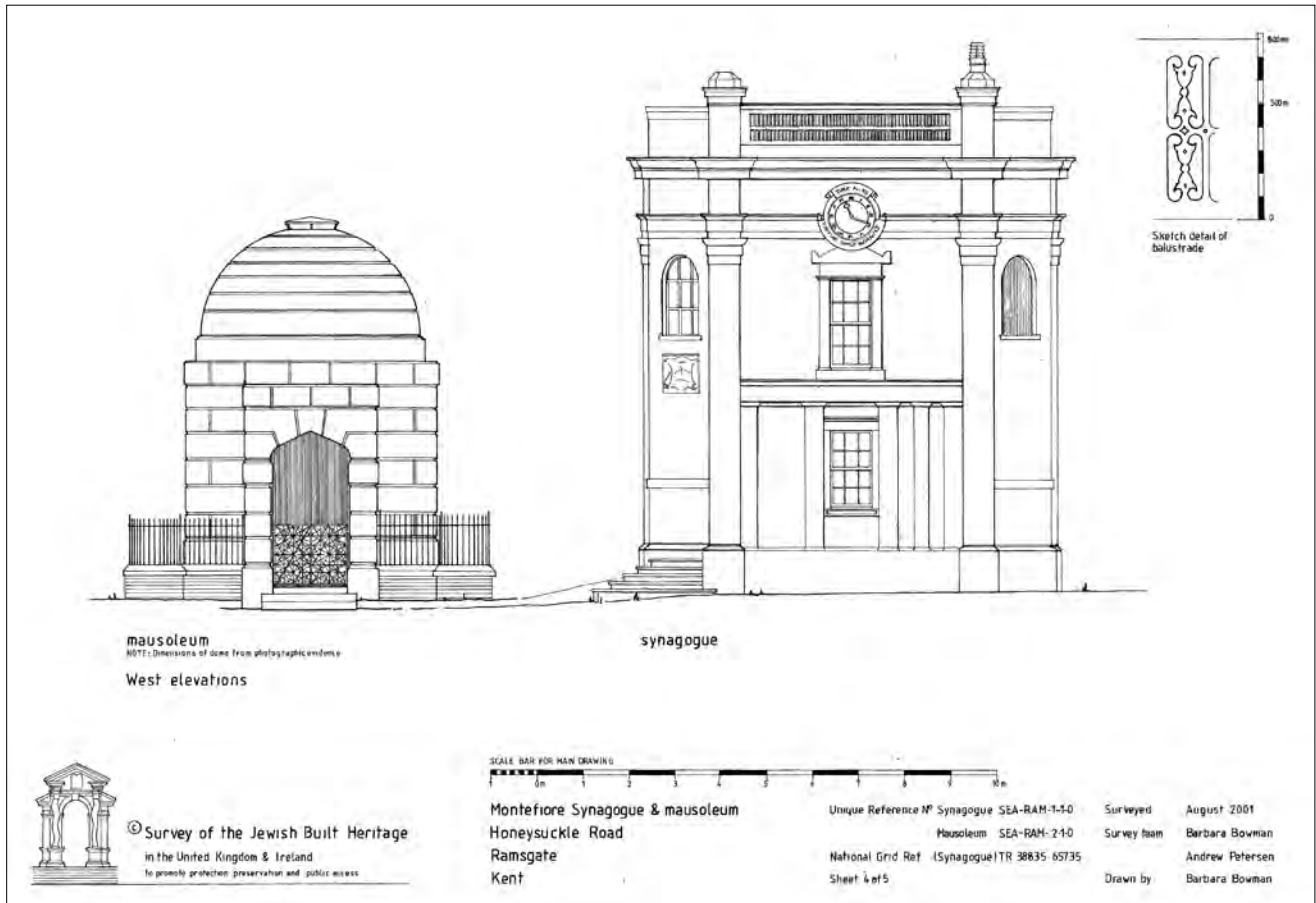


Fig. 5 The Montefiore Mausoleum, Ramsgate of 1862 with the Montefiore Synagogue behind, David Mocatta 1831–33 (© Barbara Bowman for the Survey of the Jewish Built Heritage)

ried ranks of gravestones. Overuse of chemical weed-killers rather than regular gardening has been the cause of this and it is a difficult job trying to change management policy on the point (Fig. 6). Financial considerations as well as certain cultural attitudes are the problem. Letters frequently appear in the Jewish press complaining about the poor (i.e. overgrown) state of some cemeteries found on annual visits to the graves of close relatives. Concrete paths and gravel are regarded as infinitely more acceptable than muddy feet on wet grass! It is against Jewish law to allow animals to graze in burial grounds, overhanging trees cause problems for *Cohanim* and the idea of treating a graveyard as a nature reserve or Garden of Rest is unknown. In fact, landscaping and flowerbeds are sadly rare in Jewish burial grounds, being most likely to be found in the municipal plots managed by local authorities.

Some Solutions

The role of Jewish Heritage UK

Jewish Heritage, a registered charity, is the only organisation in Anglo-Jewry dedicated to caring for the historic buildings and sites of Britain's Jewish community. On cemeteries we maintain a 'Sites At Risk' List which flags up cemeteries in danger, available on our website. We have drawn up a *Code of Practice for Good Cemetery Maintenance* and are

campaigning for the creation of a central Jewish Community Conservation Fund to tackle the issue of abandoned cemeteries on a national scale.

Designation as National Monuments by the State

Thanks largely to the efforts of Jewish Heritage UK, the Survey Guidebook and an internal report written by us for the Government conservation body English Heritage in 2003 on 'Jewish Burial Grounds and Funerary Architecture', the number of Jewish burial grounds enjoying Statutory Protection has grown in recent years. There are currently 27 Jewish burial grounds, parts of grounds, boundary walls, screens and gates, buildings, monuments and mausolea which are protected, in England and Scotland. The lists are updated on our website and in the current *Jewish Year Book*. Designation by Listing and Scheduling can help protect sites of most architectural or historical significance, whilst others, particularly Jewish plots located within municipal cemeteries, may fall within designated Parks & Gardens or Conservation Areas. However, Statutory Protection does not necessarily guarantee physical survival, although it can assist with fund-raising. We should remember that many burial grounds simply do not qualify. Nevertheless, they may possess unrecognised significance for the local community, because they provide a sense of place and of belonging and because they contribute to the character of a given neighbourhood. In



Fig. 6 Urmston Jewish Cemetery, Manchester; characteristic gravestones of the Sephardic section, c. 1878 (Photo: Bob Skingle © English Heritage)

smaller provincial towns, the survival of the “Jews’ Burying Ground” may be the only reminder of the former presence of a minority community, long since disappeared.

State Funding

The Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF), which distributes monies raised from the British Lotto to heritage causes, has occa-

Fig. 7 Sunderland, restoration in progress, December 2010 (Photos: Courtesy Stephen Levey)



sionally helped restore Jewish cemeteries. In Canterbury, the historic importance of the Georgian Jewish Cemetery in Whitstable Road (1760) was recognised in 1997 through a Heritage Lottery Fund grant of £42,000 to Canterbury City Council. Most recently, Liverpool’s Deane Road (1836), which boasts a fine Grade II Listed Greek Revival screen wall, received £494,000 from the HLF in December 2010. In other cases, the local council has itself secured some regeneration grants to restore a disused Jewish cemetery, such as recently at Wolverhampton’s Victorian ground (Cockshutts Lane, 1851, Grade II), or has been successfully brought in to assist with tidying, day-to-day maintenance, management and security. Even the probation service has provided manpower by prisoners and voluntary environmental groups have lent a hand.

The Role of the Board of Deputies of British Jews

The Board of Deputies of British Jews, the main representative body of Anglo-Jewry founded in 1760, has historically acted as trustee for a number of abandoned cemeteries whose communities have disappeared, currently standing at 13. In 2009 the Board set up Board of Deputies Heritage Ltd which is working closely with Jewish Heritage UK to regularise Trusteeship of these cemeteries and of other cases as the need arises, especially in the Midlands and North. Even in Britain, the loss of vital records, including title deeds, burial registers and plot plans has, in some cases, made it impossible to establish precise dating, legal title and the exact boundaries of old Jewish burial grounds. Where documentation is absent, the Land Registry is content with a statutory declaration that the site in question was in use as a cemetery and request that a consecration service be held to confirm Board of Deputies ownership.

Committee for the Preservation of Jewish Cemeteries in Europe

The partial excavation of possible medieval Jewish burial grounds at York and Winchester aroused vocal opposition within the *Haredi* Jewish community despite the fact that the identity of these sites has not been properly authenticated. Protests have been spearheaded by the London-Stamford Hill based Committee, founded in the 1990s. The Committee is more high profile in Europe than in the UK, and tends to operate independently, negotiating directly with Government departments without recourse to the Board of Deputies or Jewish Heritage.

Cemetery Friends Groups

The recent big grant in Liverpool was largely due to the efforts of the local Cemetery Friends Group set up by Saul Marks in 2002. Several other Friends Groups have sprung up in the past ten years, for example at Glasgow, Sandymount (1908) and Bath (1812) set up in 2004 and 2005 respectively. Membership is made up of a combination of Gentile locals and Jews, no longer resident, with roots in the respective towns. In Manchester, the Rainsough Charitable Trust was set up in 2002 as the first step towards a citywide effort to restore and maintain Jewish cemeteries, but so far has concentrated on cemeteries still in use rather than the closed, historic grounds.

Our most recent success story has been in the North East former shipbuilding port of Sunderland. The aptly-named Ballast Hill Cemetery at Ayres Quay (c. 1780) – the oldest city cemetery outside London – has been on the Jewish Heritage ‘Sites At Risk’ List for over ten years. It was situated on a steep slope in industrial wasteland between a slag-heap and a factory. The boundary walls and most of the memorials were broken down, including the obelisk to David Jonasohn, Jewish mining entrepreneur and communal leader. This is a case, not unique, where research by our Survey drew attention to an abandoned old cemetery, long forgotten – or put out of the minds – of a local Jewish community which was fast disappearing. The sale of the defunct synagogue in 2010 provided an opportunity for us to seek funding from the vendors, a *Haredi* Jewish property company, for the restoration of the cemetery. With the timely intervention of archaeologist Jon Walsh, based in nearby Newcastle and of lawyer Stephen Levey, who has family roots in Sunderland, funds were raised also from Sunderland City Council; the Board of Deputies is to take over Trusteeship. Restoration work on site began in November 2010 (Fig. 7) under the aegis of the newly formed Ayres Quay Cemetery Restoration Assignment (TAQCRA). Nearby Gateshead Jewry has been co-opted to provide *Halakhic* guidance through the Gateshead Hebrew Burial Society, with the backing of the Gateshead Rov, Rabbi S. F. Zimmerman, and with a view to future maintenance of the cemetery locally.

Public Access

For the wider public, cemeteries are a valuable resource. School visits to Jewish cemeteries can be a way of educating young people about the cultural diversity of British society. Cemeteries are also of great interest for genealogical research, which is now very popular. The Jewish Genealogical Society of Great Britain has some members who, although not Jewish themselves, have discovered that they had Jewish ancestors.

At Plymouth and Great Yarmouth, the Georgian burial grounds have been incorporated into the Town Trail. In London, tours of Willesden Jewish cemetery, instituted on the annual European Day of Jewish Culture (since 2000), have been overwhelmed with participants. This cemetery contains some outstanding memorials to the “Great and the Good” of Victorian Anglo-Jewry.

However, simply opening Jewish burial grounds to the public is neither possible nor desirable. Access needs to be carefully managed and security concerns remain serious. Sensitivity must be shown to the sacred nature of these sites and proper respect shown, by covering of heads, mod-

est dress, no eating and drinking nor stepping on graves. Therefore it would not be appropriate to turn a Jewish burial ground into a park or play area. Such reservations aside, it nevertheless remains a truism that visiting a cemetery is the best way of demonstrating that you care.

Zusammenfassung

Situation, Erhalt und Pflege jüdischer Friedhöfe in Großbritannien

Nur 20 Meilen des Ärmelkanals haben die Juden auf der Britischen Insel vor dem Schicksal ihrer Freunde und Familien während des Europäischen Holocaust bewahrt. Im Vereinigten Königreich blieben Synagogen und jüdische Friedhöfe erhalten, im Gegensatz zu deren kompletter Zerstörung auf dem Festland. Paradoxerweise zeugen unsere Friedhöfe vom Fortbestand jüdischer Lebensweise in Großbritannien. Zu den Hauptfeinden anglo-jüdischer Sepulkralkultur zählen weniger Antisemitismus (obwohl rassistische Attacken nicht unbekannt und auch in der Anzahl steigend sind) als vielmehr krimineller Vandalismus, Entwicklungsdruck und pure Vernachlässigung. Jüdische Denkmäler und Bauten sind zudem den gleichen natürlichen Bedrohungen, wie Klima, Erosion, Vegetation und Wasserstau, ausgesetzt wie andere Bestattungsplätze auch. Besonders die jüdischen Friedhöfe in Großbritannien sind durch den starken demographischen Wandel der jüdischen Gemeinschaft seit dem Zweiten Weltkrieg bedroht. Die jüdische Bevölkerung ist in Großbritannien nach einem Höhepunkt von rund 450 000 im Jahr 1950 bis auf 267 000 laut einer Volkszählung im Jahr 2001 gesunken. Zum ersten Mal beinhaltete eine Volkszählung freiwillige Fragen zum Thema Religion und Volkszugehörigkeit.

Dieses Referat beschreibt kurz das reiche Erbe der jüdischen Friedhöfe in Großbritannien, die Herausforderungen diese zu erhalten und einige Maßnahmen, die unternommen werden, um sie auch in der Zukunft zu pflegen.

Wir untersuchen:

- die Rolle des jüdischen Erbes in Großbritannien,
- die Ausweisung als nationale Monumente mit staatlicher Förderung,
- die Rolle des Vorstands der britischen Juden,
- der Ausschuss für den Erhalt von jüdischen Friedhöfen in Europa,
- Förderkreise von Friedhöfen,
- Zugänglichkeit für die Öffentlichkeit.

¹ S. KADISH, *Jewish Heritage in England: An Architectural Guide*, Swindon, English Heritage, 2006. For historical and statistical background on Jewish cemeteries in the UK see S. KADISH, “Bet Hayim: An Introduction to Jewish Funerary Art and Architecture in Britain”, in: *Transactions of the Ancient Monuments Society* 49 (2005), pp. 31–58

and S. KADISH, “Jewish funerary architecture in Britain and Ireland since 1656”, in: *Jewish Historical Studies [JHSE]* 43 (2011), pp. 59–88 and sources cited there.

² S. KADISH, *The Synagogues of Britain and Ireland: An Architectural and Social History*, New Haven and London 2011.