



Press Release

Fascinating history of Garnethill Synagogue revealed in new online exhibition

A new online exhibition from the Scottish Jewish Heritage Centre reveals how early congregation members helped shape the Victorian city of Glasgow that we know today. The exhibition is based on material from the collections of the Scottish Jewish Archives Centre (SJAC) and includes images and documents made available online for the first time. Among those images is a mystery photograph of a group at the Synagogue in 1903, about which the Heritage and Archives Centres are seeking more information.

The exhibition was developed during lockdown in 2020 by a group of volunteers, including current congregation members, who met regularly on Zoom to discuss and research with SJAC staff. It is the first online exhibition launched by the Heritage Centre, with the aim of extending access and reaching audiences beyond those who can visit in person. It has been funded by The National Lottery Heritage Fund as part of the creation of the Scottish Jewish Heritage Centre.

Garnethill Synagogue opened in Glasgow in 1879, the first purpose-built synagogue in Scotland. Benjamin Simons was chairman of the Building Committee and laid the foundation stone of the synagogue in 1877. He also ran a flourishing wholesale fruit business that was at one time the largest UK importer of fruit and vegetables. His son Michael Simons also worked in the family fruit brokerage. The firm had premises across Glasgow, including a former warehouse at 110 Brunswick Street, which still bears their initials. Michael Simons went on to become a Glasgow Councillor and Baillie, the first Jewish man to hold these positions in the city. A great patron of the arts, he was involved in the Glasgow Exhibitions of 1890, co-founded the Howard & Wyndham Theatre Company and in 1902 he became chairman of the council of the Royal Glasgow Institute of Fine Arts.

The exhibition explores aspects of Jewish community life and some of the groups and activities connected with the synagogue around the late 1800s. The idea for a Glasgow company of the Jewish Lads' Brigade was raised in Garnethill Synagogue Council and,

The Centre is operated by the Scottish Jewish Heritage Centre, a Scottish charitable incorporated organisation (Scottish charity number SC051205), working in partnership with the Scottish Jewish Archives Centre (Scottish charity number SC030542) and Garnethill Synagogue Preservation Trust (Scottish charity number SC043103).

from 1903, took shape in the growing community of the Gorbals, led by Garnethill member John Hershfield and others. Based on the model of the Boys' Brigade, it was aimed at promoting loyalty, citizenship values and discipline.

During research, a mystery photograph came to light, showing a group outside the Synagogue's Succah. It is believed to be the oldest known image of the Garnethill Hebrew Congregation, dating from 1903. Both the occasion and the identity of the people are unknown. It may have been a gathering to mark the dedication of the new Succah – on August 1903, noted in the plaque – which was erected by the Jacobs family. Are these people the Jacobs family and friends? Is this a choir – or is this related to the first use for the Succot festival? Please email info@sjhc.org.uk if you can shed any light on this image!

Volunteers Sam Smart, Sandra Silverdale and Sarah Freeman and Scottish Jewish Archives Centre staff researched and developed the exhibition. Sandra and Sarah are current congregation members. Volunteers Amalya Ashman, Debra Clapham, Nicola McGuigan, Bertha Selby and Chloe Fogelson contributed in the early development of the exhibition.

The exhibition was put on display in Garnethill Synagogue where it can be seen by current visitors and is now online for the first time. To view online: <https://sjhc.org.uk/exhibition/a-new-synagogue/>

Kerry Patterson, Manager of the Scottish Jewish Heritage Centre: “Since the Heritage Centre opened in 2021 we have had visitors from across the world. With our first online exhibition, we are able to showcase some of the fascinating history of our beautiful building to people who cannot visit in person.”

Harvey Kaplan, Director of the Scottish Jewish Archives Centre: “This online exhibition allows us to put the collection in context and it shows the rich variety of objects and information we hold. We are always keen for people to get in touch if they can tell us anything more about the items we hold, or if they have anything to donate that relates to Jewish life in Scotland.”

Sandra Silverdale: “I have been a congregation member all of my life, I went to Chedar here and got married to Maurice, who was also a member of Garnethill. My children were members of Garnethill and my son had his Bar Mitzvah here. During lockdown I got a lot of pleasure from re-living memories of the Synagogue and helping to plan the exhibition.”

PHOTOS AVAILABLE

1. Black and white photograph of group from the congregation outside the Succah, 1903
2. Black and white photograph of Garnethill Sabbath School class seated outside the Succah, 1906 (with names)
3. Benjamin & Michael Simons photos with image of Brunswick Street warehouse
4. Member of the exhibitions group, Sandra Silverdale in the Function Room at Garnethill

For further information, images and interviews, please contact:

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SCOTTISH JEWISH HERITAGE CENTRE (SJHC)

Launched in 2021, the SJHC is based in Garnethill Synagogue and offers a weekly guided tour service and a school visit service. It aims to increase access to Scotland’s Jewish and Holocaust-era history, expand access to the collections of the Scottish Jewish Archives Centre and Garnethill Synagogue and its heritage. The SJHC was created in partnership by The Scottish Jewish Archives Centre (SJAC) and Garnethill Synagogue Preservation Trust (GSPT) working alongside Garnethill Hebrew Congregation, with capital grant funding from The National Lottery Heritage Fund; the Association of Jewish Refugees; The Wolfson Family Charitable Trust; The Consulate General of the Federal Republic of Germany, Edinburgh; The Architectural Heritage Fund- William Grant Foundation; The Community Security Trust. www.sjhc.org.uk

SCOTTISH JEWISH ARCHIVES CENTRE (SJAC)

A charity founded in 1987 that collects historical material relating to the experiences of Jewish people in Scotland dating back over 200 years. SJAC's diverse collections come from current and former Jewish communities in Glasgow, Edinburgh, Tayside/Fife, Aberdeen, Greenock, Inverness, Falkirk, Ayr, Dundee and Dunfermline. Volunteers are at the heart of SJAC, researching, cataloguing, guiding visitors, fundraising, assisting researchers and organising events and activities. www.sjac.org.uk

GARNETHILL SYNAGOGUE and GARNETHILL SYNAGOGUE PRESERVATION TRUST (GSPT)

The synagogue building opened on its hill top site in Garnethill in 1879 - the first purpose-built synagogue in Scotland, and it is still working today. Today it is a Category A listed building and retains its original stained glass windows, furniture and fittings. It is rated as one of the top 10 historic synagogues in the UK - the only one in Scotland. The GSPT took over care and management of the building from the congregation in 2012 www.garnethill.org.uk

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