

Graves in Bath's Jewish Cemetery

Absence of evidence is not evidence of absence

Dr Malcolm Aylett

This charming, haunting and evocative site lies at Combe Down, a mile and a half outside the city (see Figure 1). Established in the 1820s, it has 48 tombstones, taking us up to the early 20th Century, and many are inscribed in Hebrew and English. Behind high walls and a locked gate, it has had the minimum of maintenance during the last century and, indeed, many local residents hardly know of its existence.

The Combe Down Heritage Society, in whose patch the Cemetery lies, recognises its value as a heritage site and foresees its potential as an educational resource. It formed the 'Friends of Bath Jewish Burial Ground' in collaboration with the local Jewish community and has set about the somewhat arduous and complex task of restoring the dilapidated prayer house, stabilising the surfaces and inscription of tombstones, many of which are falling away, and carrying out the minimum of landscaping to enable access for visitors.

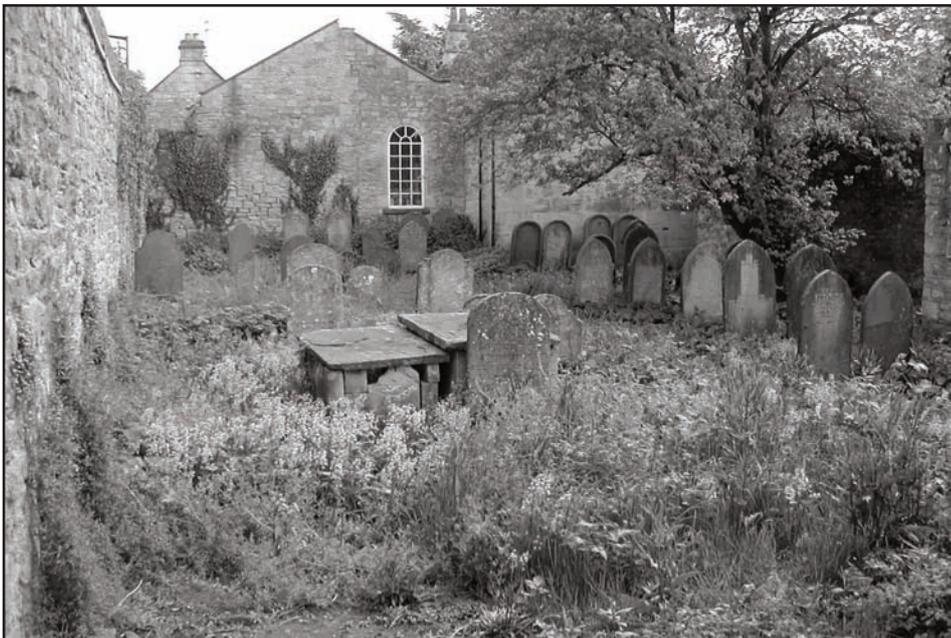
As you enter the Cemetery there is a grassy area some 15m by 10m and there is local rumour, perhaps amounting to 'oral evidence', that one or more interments took place here later in the 20th Century (see Figure 2). Jewish rites are understandably strict about disturbing graves and it was therefore incumbent upon the 'Friends' to leave 'not a stone unturned' to ensure that our landscaping would not encroach on unmarked burials. What to do was obvious – call in the Bath and Camerton Archaeological Society.

Resistivity - we did the resistance survey at twice the normal data density to get a more detailed picture (see Figure 3).

Magnetometry - we used Magnetic Susceptibility rather than ordinary magnetometry, which would have been impossible with all the bits of iron around and a busy road just outside. We covered the area in which we knew that there were several graves and their presence was confirmed. It also confirmed what we suspected, that the Prayer House originally extended northwards to the Bradford Road wall.

Probing - a nice old fashioned technique, was able to delineate some of the paths and boundaries.

Ground Penetrating Radar - is an option which for the moment has not been considered.



Though it could be argued that absence of evidence is not evidence of absence, these results enable the 'Friends' to go ahead with the restoration with reasonable confidence that no burial will be disturbed.

Acknowledgements

The 'Friends of Bath Jewish Burial Ground' are grateful to BACAS, to John Oswin in particular of course, for carrying out this work.



Figure 1 above
The location of the Jewish Cemetery, ringed, and the marked outline of the surveyed area
Figure 2 below left
A view of the Jewish Cemetery as seen from the gate
Figure 3 below
The results of the resistivity survey

