CHAPTER 10

Progressive Jewish Libraries and Archives in the UK

An Overview

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In 1956, the Jewish world was still adjusting to the post-war realities and a new normal. The Holocaust had wiped out, or nearly extinguished, whole communities across many parts of Europe in the 1940s. The creation of Israel as an independent state by the United Nations in 1947 and the declaration in May 1948 led to war with many neighbouring states. In the early 1950s many more Jewish communities were on the move; it was described by Esther Meir-Glitzenstein as "the mass emigration of about one million Jews from ancient communities that had existed in the Middle East and North Africa for two thousand years or more" (Meir-Glitzenstein 2024). Thus the 1940s had been a time of huge upheaval for Jews worldwide; naturally the Jews in the United Kingdom were affected. There had been an influx of Jews during the 1930s and 1940s as continental Europe became much more dangerous for them. By the 1950s, many of the Jews and their rabbis who had escaped to the UK had returned to mainland Europe, to rebuild what

remained of their shattered communities, or had gone to Israel or the United States. American rabbis were offered to the UK to help fill the gaps, but these were gently declined (Izbicki 1966, 167).

The immediate post-war years saw the emergence of many new Liberal congregations, and each of them sought a lay leader or minister to help them grow. The services could be taken by anyone with sufficient knowledge, with Hebrew language skills and understanding of the liturgy. A rabbi would also provide teaching, offer pastoral care and reach out to new and existing members to help them form and maintain religious communities, in accordance with "*minhag Anglia*", the established customs and practices of Jews in England, and across the United Kingdom (Apple 2018).

There was one exception within the Progressive movement. Some of the refugees who had arrived in Britain during the war brought with them their own customs and traditions and persisted in following them rather than adapting to *minhag Anglia*. Therefore, they set up a community according to the continental Liberal or *liberale* movement, called the New Liberal Congregation. They were initially part of what was then the Union of Liberal and Progressive Synagogues, but became fully independent in 1989. It remains an independent Progressive community in Belsize Square, in North London, with a fine synagogue, library and a thriving congregation. Further information is available on their website (Belsize Square Synagogue 2015). For many years, they were celebrated as an example of the diversity which was possible within the Liberal movement.

Liberals and Books

One distinctive characteristic of Liberal synagogues is that each congregation has its own practices and ways of worship and this is seen as a strength by all concerned. There are prayer books produced for the whole movement, but Rabbis and individual congregations are free to create their own prayer books and service sheets and often do, especially for Jewish festivals or special occasions. Some of these materials have been made available for wider use through a central resource bank, which includes transliterations of the Hebrew into Roman script, music, and short sermons (Liberal Judaism, n.d.-b). "Two Jews, three opinions" is a long-standing phrase to express the diversity of Jewish practice.

Literacy and lifelong learning have long been core strengths of Judaism, so of course, books and libraries have been highly valued across the tradition. As an example, Leo Baeck College has an online Lehrhaus which attracted over 600 students in 2024 (Leo Baeck College, n.d.-c).

Many Liberal congregations have substantial libraries and archives, and even smaller ones are likely to have some books. Clergy typically have their personal libraries, and many Jews have collections of their own, whether they are synagogue members or not. Many Jews consider themselves secular Jews by birth, culture or upbringing. They may well not join religious services, nor find a synagogue that suits them, nor be concerned to find one, but they may still appreciate and own Jewish books in their private libraries. Subjects may include theology and philosophy, literature, history, geography and cookery books, which connect individuals with Jewish roots, leading into new ways to be Jewish in the future.

Most Jews enjoy discussion and debate, and for many years, Jewish Book Week in London brought us together for talks and socialising. It is particularly valued by Jewish library staff as an excellent opportunity to hear new authors, learn about and buy new books for themselves and their libraries. It has been organised since 1952 by the Jewish Book Council, taking place each year in London, though from the 1980s onwards, some events have taken place across the country. The organisers put it on a professional basis in 2005 when the first Director was appointed. It has since evolved to the Jewish Literary Foundation (JLF), and now offers the JLF Player, an online platform giving access to over 1,000 hours of recorded content from the last 17 years (JLF 2025).

Leo Baeck College

This love of prayer and learning for its own sake has been enhanced by Leo Baeck College, which trains rabbis and Jewish educators, and also runs various courses for lay people (Leo Baeck College, n.d.-e). It has been particularly influential in shaping Progressive Jewish life through education and library provision, so I will examine it in detail before turning to a selection of the Liberal congregations and their libraries.

The development of Progressive Judaism in the United Kingdom and Ireland took a huge step forward in November 1955, when the Assembly of Synagogues saw the urgent need for a theological seminary

in England. Rabbi Van der Zyl was asked to consider the matter through a small committee. They were prompt to respond and in late January 1956, they recommended that a room be set aside for teaching, a Director of Studies appointed and lecturers sought (Littmann 1973, 166).

By September 1956, the Jewish Theological College had begun in London with Rabbi Van der Zyl as the first Director of Studies, who was originally from Berlin and had been leading a congregation in London. Another very eminent German Rabbi, Rabbi Dr. Leo Baeck, was also expected to be a lecturer. Unfortunately, Rabbi Baeck fell ill and died in November 1956. The college was promptly renamed in his honour as the Leo Baeck College for the study of Judaism and the training of Rabbis, ministers and teachers (Littman 1973, 169).

In 1964, the college was jointly sponsored by the Reform and Liberal movements in Great Britain and remains so in 2025. It continues to train teachers as well as Rabbis and offers many shorter courses on a variety of subjects for lay people as well as clergy (Leo Baeck College, n.d.-e).

The library has always been an integral part of the College's provision, similarly taking many of its early works from Germany, along with the first librarian. The initial library stock included three collections that had survived the Holocaust. Today, the catalogue is online and features special collections from eminent individuals as well as rare books, educational materials, prayer books, pamphlets, theses and music (Leo Baeck College, n.d.-a).

Additionally, the library holds archival and digital collections of sermons, seminars and lectures from rabbis and teachers such as Rabbi John Rayner. These add richness and depth to the main collection, which supports today's students, alumni, and any individuals who choose to become personal members of the library. The stock policy includes material from across the religious spectrum, around the world, and throughout Jewish history.

From the start, Professor Leon Roth said that the task of the college was to "interpret Judaism to our time and place . . . . Throw your doors open as wide as you can. Have teachers and students of all colours and ideas. And do not be afraid of heretics and heresies. If you have not got any, they should be specially imported" (Littmann 1973, 168). This ideological broadness has continued to be a feature of Progressive Judaism, although the seminary was restricted to men until 1967 (Leo Baeck College, n.d.-d).

In 1975, Rabbi Jackie Tabick became the first woman to be ordained in Europe since Regina Jonas, who was privately ordained in Germany in 1935. In 2025, there was a campaign looking back over 50 years of

women finding their places within the College and the wider movement (Leo Baeck College n.d.-b). Rabbi Pauline Bebe, the first French woman to become a rabbi, wrote about her time at Leo Baeck College by describing first her memories of the library:

> When I think about Leo Baeck College, I can still smell the fragrance of the old books when I was studying, sitting on the library's floor. It was like being in a dream, entering its library, late at night; with no time limit, no one around, and enveloped by the atmosphere of the night's calm. It was like having a quiet discussion with all these past giants who were sharing some of the secrets of their souls. (Bebe 2025)

This is a beautiful way of expressing the value of the place and its contents to the students, past and present.

The College librarian has generally been active as a scholar as well as a librarian, and from the start women and men have taken this role (Dorfler 1966, 170). The library itself began in a windowless basement at the West London Synagogue, with a collection of books but no study space. A major improvement came in 1965. The West London Synagogue Annexe was consecrated, with three lecture rooms for the College, a lounge, and at last, there was a modern library with room for students to work (Boeckler 2008, 9).

The first collections were given by the Society of Jewish Study, and consisted of many books stamped "Archival Depot Offenbach/ Main." This was the gathering place at the end of the war for books and Judaica that had been looted by the Nazis from European Jews and institutions, including synagogues, *Seminarin Breslau* and the *Berlin Hochschule* (Littman 1973, 177). The first librarian, Jenny Dorfler, was also from the *Hochschule* (Boeckler 2008, 7), and one of the earliest donations was the library of the late Rabbi Dr. Leo Baeck, given by his daughter, Ruth Berlak (Boeckler 2008, 8-9).

Another early benefactor was Dr. Leonard Montefiore, who gave a cheque for the purchase of journals when he found the library had no budget for these. He was always keen to see books in German from the 17th and 18th centuries, and is remembered for spending hours poring over *Chronicles of Frankfurt a/m* from 1706, marking instances of antisemitism with little slips of paper (Dorfler 1966, 171).

The connection with Germany continues. In recent years, the library has been part of and hosted provenance workshops for the Library of Lost Books, which seeks to find volumes from the last Berlin Progressive seminary. This institution was founded as the Higher

Institute for Jewish Studies in 1872, and later known as the Berlin Hochschule (Schwartz 2023). From the early days, the institute had ethics and philosophy at its heart, rather than Jewish law or history. Professor Dr. Daniel Schwartz defined it as different from other institutions in its enquiries as to "what Judaism has to say about universal ethics, universal philosophy (Schwartz 2023).

The Nazis had begun to loot Jewish libraries systematically in 1938, both public and private, aiming to create their own library, the *Reichsinstitut für Geschichte des neuen Deutschland*, which would be used to write their own distorted version of history. After they lost the war, the looted books were scattered all over the world and have turned up in flea markets, as well as academic libraries, public libraries, and in private hands (Schwartz 2023). They have still not all been found, so this is a large-scale, ongoing citizen science project to look for them.

In the 1960s, there was still no money to buy books or journals, so a lot of the stock was donated, including a substantial acquisition from the library of the late Chief Rabbi Israel Brodie, thanks to a donor, Ralph Yablon (Boeckler 2008, 9). The first full-time librarian was Dr. Hyam Maccoby in 1975. In 1982, he planned the move of the library to its current location, the Sternberg Centre for Judaism in North London. Under his guidance, it started to become one of Europe's greatest libraries of modern Judaica, alongside its historical collections, which go back 500 years (Boeckler 2008, 10).

A later librarian described that Dr. Maccoby managed the library in the classical style of 19th-century academic libraries, in that he knew every book and therefore saw no need for a catalogue. Anyone wanting a book would ask him and he would advise them. He retired in 1994 and was followed by Dr. Piet van Boxel who understood the need for a catalogue and that it should be on the computer. Being unable to afford an OPAC, his friend Joop van Klink wrote a specialised computerised cataloguing program, Sefer Search. This remarkable program was able to handle entries in Hebrew, Cyrillic and Greek as well as Roman script, without the need for transliteration. It was completed in 2000, when the entire library collection was catalogued.

The classification system is also a specialised one for libraries of Judaica, devised by David H. Elazar and Daniel J. Elazar (Boeckler 2008, 13). Today, the library has a lively OPAC using the open-source software Koha as the library management system. There is a detailed account of the library staff and significant holdings and donations in an article by the scholar librarian, Dr. Annette Boeckler (Boeckler

2008). She was the scholar librarian and lecturer for Bible and Jewish Liturgy at Leo Baeck College.

The current librarian is Cassy Sachar, who is proud to be able to expand the library from its current rooms in the basement of Leo Baeck College to create a reading room on the ground floor (Sachar, pers. comm. February 25, 2025). It will be the first time the library can offer step-free access and this new facility, offering a welcoming and inspiring environment, is sure to be much appreciated. Library staff will continue to provide books from the basement to the ground floor as required by users, and the extra space will allow for its development as a community resource for the wider Jewish public.

Plans for the future include broadening the stock to take in more material from the Sephardi world, which means communities from Spain and Portugal, as well as other diverse Jewish communities worldwide (Sachar, pers. comm. February 25, 2025). In common with much of Anglo-Jewry, the College library has been predominantly the stories of Jews from the communities of Germany, Poland and Eastern Europe, who are known as Ashkenazi Jews. One proof of this is the languages of the texts found in the library: English, Hebrew, German, Yiddish, French and Russian (Leo Baeck College, n.d.-a).

Another proposal is to take library stock to individual synagogues; some are close enough to visit the library, but a travelling collection would allow congregations outside North London to access the holdings (Sachar, pers. comm. February 25, 2025).

Digital access will, of course, assist with attracting more users outside North London. One current project is to digitise lectures and sermons which are still only on audio cassette tape, and now considered fragile and likely to disintegrate very soon. Volunteers have been digitising one or two tapes a week to assist library staff. This will enable the lectures and sermons will be accessible to a much wider audience (Sachar, pers. comm. February 25, 2025). I know from my own experience that researchers presented with an audio cassette tape are reluctant to listen to it, even when provided with a Sony Walkman. In my case, they opted to read the transcript instead.

A further concern is that the last generation of Holocaust survivors is passing away (Turner 2025). The library is committed to preserve the works they cared about and studied, maintaining a tangible link to that era in Jewish history and many others for the next generation.

The library stands on the shoulders of past giants of Liberal Judaism, such as Lily Montagu, who was one of the founders of Liberal Judaism; many of the library's copies of her books are inscribed in her own

hand. Among other notable past students was Rabbi Sheila Shulman, who was one of the first lesbians ordained at Leo Baeck College and went on to be an influential teacher there. One of the treasures of the library is her daily prayer book, presented by the Reform Synagogues of Great Britain on the occasion of her joining the College in 1984. The volume is annotated with her notes and marks, thus it offers a rare insight into her concerns and theological development (Assembly 1977).

Her way of dealing with the difficulty of finding a congregation that would accept her was, like the German refugees before her, to found a new congregation. In 1990, together with a group of lesbian friends, she founded *Beit Klal Yisrael* (BKY, 2025), the first synagogue to be a home for LGBT Jews in Britain, though open to anyone. Through her work at Leo Baeck College, she inspired a generation of rabbis. The class of 2017, which might have been the last year group she taught, could almost be described as her disciples! They now serve many Liberal and Reform congregations in the United Kingdom and the wider world, carrying with them her passion for learning and enquiry (BKY 2014).

By coincidence, Elizabeth Sarah was another lesbian who joined Leo Baeck College at the same time as Sheila Shulman, and she has written about her experience (Sarah 2012). She says of her colleague:

> Ordained in 1989, Sheila brought all of who she was as a lesbian, a radical feminist, a teacher and a writer to her rabbinate in every context . . . . [She] was a beloved teacher at Leo Baeck College, where she taught Jewish thought. One of Sheila's greatest accomplishments as a rabbi was to mentor many individuals on their journeys into the rabbinate, inspiring several people to become rabbis over the years. (Sarah 2016)

As an archivist, I am delighted to see that one of Rabbi Sheila's sermons is preserved online (Shulman 2000) so future generations can get a taste of her words.

The library continues to welcome new generations of students and hopes to continue being a springboard for their creativity. The College has attracted many students from around the world, some of whom return to their own countries to found new Progressive congregations; the library stock reflects this diversity both geographically and historically. It is enriched by donations from alumni who value the support it gave them as students and return regularly for rabbinic in-service training and get-togethers of many sorts.

The librarian was honoured to be chosen by recent ordinands to speak at their ordination ceremony, recognising how crucial the library

and its staff have been to their studies. The Dean and Director of Jewish Studies at Leo Baeck College itself, Rabbi Dr. Charles Middleburgh, is now proud to say that some 90% of Rabbis serving UK Progressive congregations have received semicha (rabbinical training leading to ordination) from Leo Baeck College and many other ordinands have gone on to found and lead congregations throughout Europe. It is very gratifying to see the success of this college and its centrality to Progressive Judaism has been enhanced by its library, information and archives services.

Liberal Jewish Synagogue

Turning from the college to the synagogues themselves, I begin with the Liberal Jewish Synagogue (LJS) in St John's Wood in North London. This was the first Liberal synagogue in the UK, hence its name. It was founded in 1911, with an American becoming its first Rabbi, Israel Mattuck. He was one of the Three M's considered the founders of Liberal Judaism, along with Lily Montagu and Claude Montefiore (Liberal Judaism, n.d.-b). Of these, Claude was an Oxford-educated Anglo-Jewish scholar, coming under the influence of Jowett and T. H. Green, who had intended to become a Reform rabbi but found himself out of sympathy with their thinking and turned to scholarship instead (Alderman 2004a).

Lily Montagu came from an Orthodox family, and she worked as a social worker among London's poor, first in the East End and then across London (Alderman 2004b). For many years, Miss Lily, as she was widely known, ran the Jewish Religious Union (JRU) and the LJS from the same premises, and did much of the work from her home nearby, assisted by her sisters, Marian and Henrietta (Alderman 2004b). The JRU was the forerunner of Liberal Judaism, formed because of declining attendances at Orthodox services, leading Lily Montagu to propose a new form of worship with a greater spirituality and more English used in services (Alderman 2004b). It became clear that the changes could not be accepted by Orthodox Rabbis and so with her supporters, they approached a Reform congregation, the West London Synagogue. However, there were disagreements with them over such matters as mixed seating for men and women (Alderman 2004b) and it was clear that a new Synagogue was needed.

The library at LJS is named after Israel Abrahams, who studied under Claude Montefiore, and was also a progressive scholar (Diamond

2010). It houses around 6,000 books, many of which were donated by members from the early twentieth century, both founders and activists (Liberal Jewish Synagogue n.d.-a). Thus, it indicates subjects of interest at the time, to which Sally Van Noorden, the honorary librarian, seeks to add modern-day texts.

Much of the older material, such as Jowett's sermons, has heritage value, though they are not widely read in recent times. The library now works with the Archives of the LJS under a Heritage committee, which replaced the former library committee a few years ago. This means that both services can work together to create exhibitions and events to celebrate milestones in Liberal Judaism and educate and interest synagogue members and visitors on the history of the synagogue, along with changes over the years and decades. As an archivist of Liberal Judaism, I have worked with both the archivist and librarian of LJS to research suitable topics and have provided items from the central Archives for exhibitions at LJS.

The LJS library uses its own classification system, devised in the 1960s, with records going back to that time, though some of the stock is clearly much older. As is common, much of the stock has been donated by past and present members. The primary criterion of inclusion is that a book should be of Jewish interest, although the librarian does accept books written by members on all sorts of topics.

The main classification subjects are archaeology, Bible and Biblical studies, Rabbinic and other commentaries, apocrypha and pseudepigrapha, literature, philosophy, Judaism, history, sociology, inter-faith studies, Israel, Hebrew and liturgy. The synagogue has a thriving religion school, adult education and a scholar in residence. Teachers will let the library staff know which books they are recommending and the librarian will also try to have books mentioned in sermons and addresses. She has a bias towards adding liturgy, Bible studies, thought and history rather than fiction, which is available elsewhere. There are also CDs and DVDs, though new ones are not bought, now that they are less in demand. Periodicals are also not bought, though some are donated, along with pamphlets, which might go to the archives rather than the library.

The library is open whenever the building is open, with LJS members trusted to borrow and return stock themselves. The catalogue is available online (Liberal Union of Liberal and Progressive Synagogues Jewish Synagogue n.d.-a). There used to be a team of congregants trained by specialists to conserve some of the books, but now the archivist arranges to have books repaired or rebound. The librarian is

a member of the Hebraica Libraries Group and has done presentations for them on the library stock, how it is classified and how the library is run. These are available from her on request.

Expansion of Liberal Congregations

Following the creation of the LJS, new synagogues were established across London in north, south and central areas, followed by Liverpool, Birmingham, Brighton and Hove, Dublin and Leicester. In the 1960s, these had been joined by Bristol and West Progressive Jewish Congregation, Nottingham, Bedfordshire and Kingston (Liberal Judaism n.d.-a).

By 1968, led by rabbis such as John Rayner, Sidney Brichto and Bernard Hooker, Liberal Jewish congregations had been founded across the south of England and the Midlands. These were joined by synagogues in the Thames Valley, Peterborough, East Anglia, Buckinghamshire, Herefordshire, Kent, Lincolnshire and Eastbourne by the time of the centenary of the Union of Liberal and Progressive Synagogues (ULPS) in 2002, and the list has expanded to nearly 40 congregations by 2025. Most of these are in England, though Dublin was an early exception; subsequently, Edinburgh joined ULPS along with further outposts of Or Chadash Liberal Jewish Community in Luxembourg and Shir Hatzafon in Copenhagen (Path to Progressive Judaism. n.d).

Some of the expansion is due to Jews becoming more geographically mobile, moving out from their once-thriving communities in North London to the outskirts of London, and further afield. I moved from North London myself and am now a member of the Three Counties Liberal Jewish Community, which consists of Herefordshire, Gloucestershire and Worcestershire. This community began in Herefordshire, led by Rabbi Bernard Hooker, who thought he had retired to the area but was astonished to find a new congregation – many of whom had thought they were the only Jew in the area (Liberal Judaism 2019).

It used to be thought that most modern Progressive Jews were urban and preferred to live in cities, but rural Progressive Jewish life is enhanced by being part of a Jewish community. Some parts of Progressive Judaism can be practised individually, but many of the rituals and prayers are to be said only in community.

Libraries and books continue to be central to Judaism for those of us living outside the major concentrations of British Jews in London

and Manchester. There are substantial Progressive Jewish libraries in the Birmingham and Bristol congregations, and a large amount of mostly older material at the Anglo-Jewish Archives at the University of Southampton (Kushner and Robson 2024).

Bristol and West Progressive Jewish Congregation

I have to admit a bias here: I used to be a member of this congregation, and when I joined, I was impressed by the fine library. It was funded by a bequest and named after the donor. It has a bespoke catalogue system devised by Jo Schapiro, one of the members at the time (Bristol 2025). Like many synagogue libraries, it is run by volunteers. The classification scheme is similar to one I have seen used in many small Jewish organisations, using a mixture of letters and numbers.

The subjects covered start with the Bible, Rabbinic literature and Kabbalah, mysticism and folklore. These are followed by general texts on Judaism, philosophy, Progressive Judaism, festivals, prayer books, Israel, Jews worldwide, education, literature, reference books, Hebrew, Yiddish and finally the dreaded miscellaneous, itself subdivided into other faiths, art, music, food, and other subjects. I have listed these because this seems to me fairly typical of the subjects covered by a synagogue library. It is arranged so that synagogue members can self-issue books and return them to a shelf for later reshelving.

There are comfortable armchairs and a sofa, which are popular with the religious school pupils, teachers and parents of pupils. The children have their own, much smaller library in one of the classrooms. The adult library provides a pleasant reading room, and books can be taken into a nearby classroom for serious study at tables and upright chairs. The children also have puzzles and games in their library for those not tempted by books.

The library is open before, during and after services and education classes for adults and children. The volunteers do not have any professional support, but they have links with other synagogues in Bristol and Leicester, as well as specialist booksellers. This allows them to weed the library stock for unwanted duplicates and works that are too scholarly or otherwise little used and pass them on to a more appropriate synagogue library.

As a provincial congregation, Bristol is quite sizable, so it has been fortunate to have a substantial library, which continues to attract donations of stock and volunteers to run it.

Archives

I have been London-based during my professional life, and worked closely with The London Archives, formerly known as the London Metropolitan Archives (LMA), in Farringdon. When the second oldest Liberal synagogue, North London Progressive Synagogue, founded in 1921, closed its doors some 80 years later, the archives were passed to the LMA, as it was then, in consultation with their staff. This was an addition to their existing holdings of Liberal Jewish material from the Liberal Jewish Synagogue and from many other Jewish bodies.

When I came to look at what Reform congregations and their parent body had done, I found that they had moved in a different direction, as outlined by Tony Kushner and Karen Robson (2024). The Anglo-Jewish Archives, a special collection housed at the University of Southampton, contains records of the West London Synagogue of British Jews (1836–2000), as well as from the Reform Synagogues of Great Britain (1942–2008). Leo Baeck College records (1956–1997) are also there, along with some of the personal collections of papers of Rabbi Bernard Hooker and Rabbi Israel Mattuck and one of South London Liberal's founders, Samuel Rich (1904–1949).

The Rich family now has five generations of Liberal Jews, an answer to those who were concerned that Progressive Judaism would not be as rigorous as Orthodox Judaism, and would be an easier option for people, who would then assimilate more fully and cease to identify as Jews at all. This has been a constant concern among Anglo-Jewry, and my position as an archivist means I have seen this argument in print many times over the decades. An example from the Archives is *Fallacies and facts about Liberal Judaism* by Rev. Bernard Hooker, published by the ULPS in 1961 (Hooker, 1961).

Conclusion and Future Plans

I have given an overview of the development of Progressive Jewish libraries and archives in the United Kingdom in the past 70 years, with a look back to the turbulent 1940s and early 1950s, leading to the formation of Leo Baeck College in London in 1956, from its origins in Germany. The College library has been an integral part of its offering and its collection of material on Progressive Judaism is one of its many strengths. I outlined the importance of reading, books and lifelong

learning to Progressive Jews, both through the College and events such as Jewish Book Week.

From there, I discussed the Liberal Jewish Synagogue, the oldest and one of the biggest congregations, with a library to match, rich in history and continuing to serve its community today. I then traced this with an indication of how widely Progressive Judaism has spread throughout England, with a few congregations elsewhere, such as in Edinburgh, Dublin and Copenhagen. The Bristol and West Progressive Jewish Congregation is an example of a smaller, provincial community, attracting people from Wales as well as the West of England. Its library is a good example of how one legacy can stimulate a community's growth, providing historical grounding in Liberal and Progressive Judaism, as a springboard for today's Jewish concerns and a resource for both children and adults.

I finished with a look at Jewish archives in general and where Liberal Judaism and the Movement for Reform Judaism have taken different paths, with material from their earliest synagogues and their own records.

Progressive Judaism is undergoing another major change to be completed in 2026. Historically, there have been two major strands of Progressive Judaism in the UK. My own experience lies with the newer one, Liberal Judaism, which was founded in 1902 in London, with the first synagogue, the Liberal Jewish Synagogue, established in 1911 (Liberal Jewish Synagogue n.d.-a).

The other one is the Movement for Reform Judaism, which began in 1840, with the first synagogue, the West London Synagogue, which was consecrated in 1842. However, unlike Liberal Judaism, in Reform congregations, the unification under a parent body came much later. It was not until 1942 that the various Reform synagogues joined together to form the Associated British Synagogues, which was largely educational in purpose. Later on, they expanded their areas of cooperation and took the name ASGB (Association of Synagogues of Great Britain), which was changed to RSGB (Reform Synagogues of Great Britain) and then ultimately to the Movement for Reform Judaism (Kershen 1995).

In April 2023, both Liberal Judaism (LJ) and the Movement for Reform Judaism (MRJ) announced their intention to co-create one Progressive movement in the UK, to replace both Reform and Liberal movements. As an archivist, I note that this is not the first attempt to bring the two movements in line with the rest of the world, where typically only one Progressive movement exists in each country (Meyer 1995).

Theologically and practically, the differences that existed between the two movements have diminished. Both movements were headed by a rabbi; Liberal Judaism by Rabbi Charley Baginsky and the Movement for Reform Judaism by Rabbi Josh Levy, who trained together at Leo Baeck College. Each Movement had around forty congregations, so together as co-leads, the two Rabbis undertook a long process of consultation and development with all eighty of them, in person and online. This was followed by all congregations and clergy voting on the change and will culminate in the co-creation of the new organisation, to be called the Movement for Progressive Judaism, expected to be active from early 2026.

A website, Path to Progressive Judaism (2025), was set up to keep people informed about the process. There will be a new website for the new Movement for Progressive Judaism in due course. There is not going to be any attempt to impose uniformity of belief or worship across Progressive Judaism. All congregations will be free to keep the names they already have, along with their prayer books and customs, although some have already started working closely with nearby congregations.

Since this historic change has only recently been agreed upon at the time of writing, the library, information and archive policy of the new organisation is not yet defined. Liberal Jewish archives began with the manuscripts by Lily Montagu, who was then only 19 years old, writing in the 1890s. That became a published article in 1902, which started a debate and then a movement and a synagogue, which became Liberal Judaism.

Over time, the archives progressed through meeting minutes written by hand to typescript and carbon copies of letters, and then to digital archives. It will be fascinating to see how the library and archive policy of the Movement for Progressive Judaism will develop over the years and decades to come, building on what has gone before. This has always been the essence of Progressive Judaism: to take the best of tradition and incorporate modernity, current social concerns and theological thinking alike.

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