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Jews and crypto-Jews in sixteenth and seventeenth century England

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Abstract or Description

There are many narratives, some old, some relatively recent, covering the presence of crypto-Jews and Jews in England during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. I have tried, specifically with non-specialists and general readers in mind, to give an overview of that story here. Given this essay's origin as a public lecture commemorating the 350th anniversary of the tacit readmission of Jews to England in 1656, my account has a particular focus on developments during the English Revolution of 1641–60, though it is also positioned within a more ambitious grand narrative recounting the Jewish, crypto-Jewish and Jewish apostate experience in England from the Norman Conquest to the Restoration.

While I have drawn on my own research – notably on Judaizing, readers familiar with the material will see that this text is also greatly indebted to a number of important scholars in the field of Anglo-Jewish history; some are acknowledged in the endnotes. Indeed, there is another story to tell, namely how from the mid-nineteenth century onwards scholars of Anglo-Jewry, desiring acceptance within British society and the legitimization of their distinctiveness, collectively constructed a narrative of gradual social assimilation and communal unity. But that these histories were themselves written against a background of religious and racial prejudice, exclusion, marginalisation and conflict, as well as the disturbing continuity of antisemitic tropes, is itself revealing. Intended as a companion piece to this article, my discussion of the evolution of Anglo-Jewish historiography will appear elsewhere.

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