

From Brick Lane to Bevis Marks

'Jewish London' is a delight for nostalgia buffs as well as an education for visitors of all ages

• YEHUDIT COLLINS

When I fortuitously received a copy of *Jewish London: A Comprehensive Guidebook for Visitors and Londoners* just before I left for a trip to the UK, I pounced on it with delight. While meant for reference and dipping into, I read it avidly from cover to cover and as the names of places surfaced from the depths of my memories, I could have sworn that the smell of heimish pickled cucumbers wafted up from the pages. Brick Lane, Petticoat Lane, Spitalfields Market – the names made me start humming an old English song, “Lonely I wandered through scenes of my childhood.”

Armed with a copy of the book, which incidentally was the biggest seller after Jonathan Safran Foer's *New American Haggadah* at this year's Jewish Book Week in London, I set off on one of the three self-guided tours, the Old Jewish East End Walk, accompanied by my husband and my cousin, who, although a few years younger than I, also has memories of her parents' and grandparents' tales of the old East End. The other two walks in the area are the Angels and Radicals Walk and the Jewish Whitechapel Walk.

The maps and directions are clear and easy to follow and the text is lavishly well illustrated, and any small errors and discrepancies that have crept in are not the fault of the authors but due to unforeseen changes. For instance, we found the restaurant at Bevis Marks Synagogue closed, although we were told it would be reopening in September 2012.

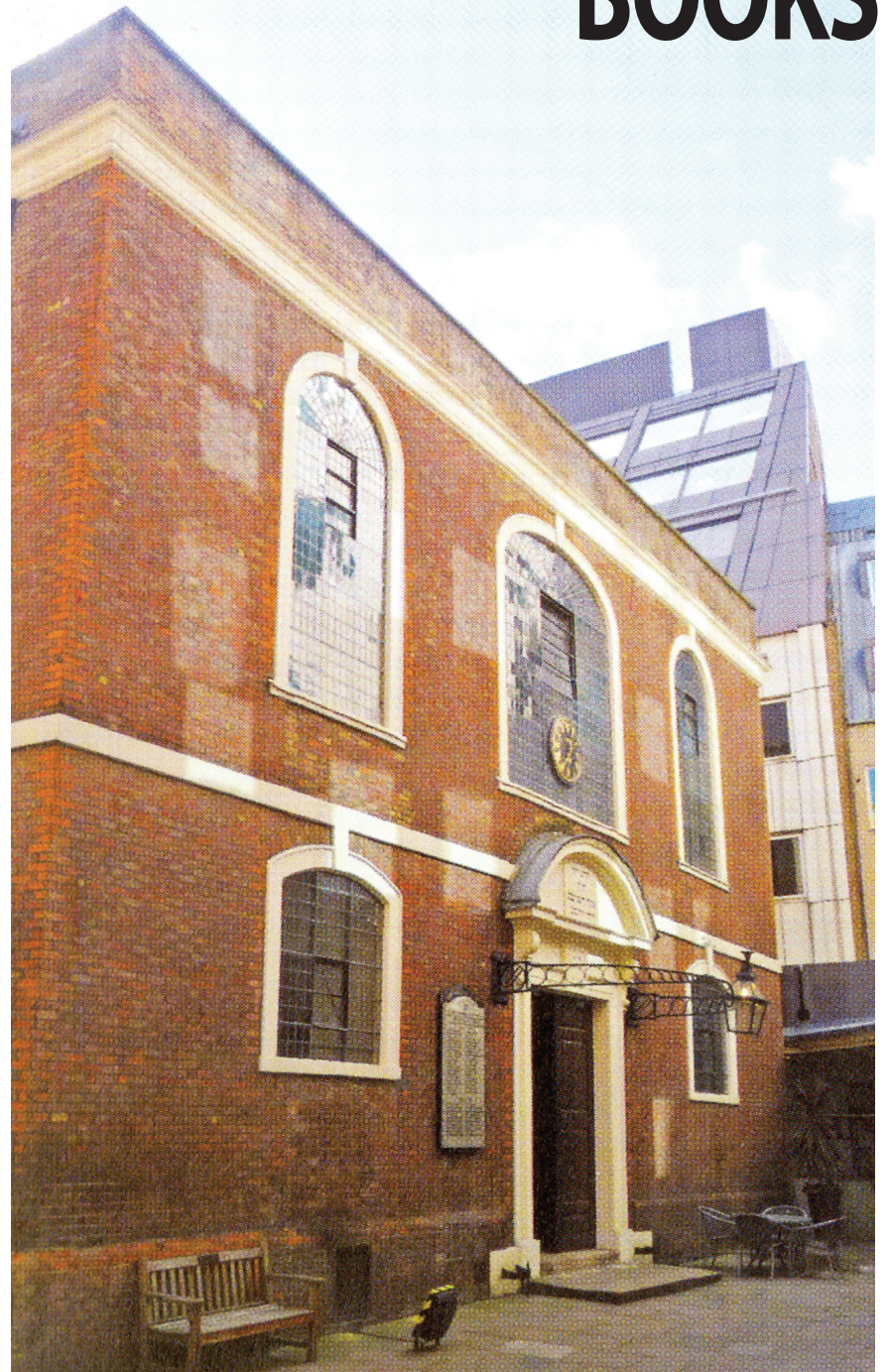
Bevis Marks Synagogue, which is still in use, was one of the high points of our tour. The names of all the wardens through the years are engraved on plaques that line the walls; the lighting still comes from hundreds of candles in ornate chandeliers, which we were told take over an hour to light. As I sat in the front center seat of the ladies' gallery, which looks directly down onto the bima, giving the mother of a bar mitzva boy a clear view, I could feel the emotions of those proud and ornately

dressed matrons seeping up through the benches.

Although we were prepared for the demographic changes and knew that the area might prove a disappointment, we were still taken aback to find street signs in English and Arabic and signs saying “Bangla City,” referring to the predominantly Bangladeshi population, successors to previous waves of immigrants to the UK. Petticoat Lane is no longer redolent with the smell of pickles and herring but of hot oil and onions, although we did see a fish-and-chip shop that had made a credible attempt at mimicking the original by serving fish 'n' chips in specially printed faux newspaper cones. Although we had been warned by the book, it still felt strange to see that the old Machzikei Hadass ve Shomrei Shabbat Synagogue is now a mosque.

The book, which I shall treasure, is a delight for nostalgia buffs as well as an education for the younger generation and visitors of all ages who have no memories of old Jewish London. Indeed, even for an East End girl, there were plenty of “I never knew that” moments reading it. However, neither my cousin nor I could find any of the atmosphere of old Jewish London. While we knew that there had been vast changes – some would say improvements – we were still disappointed that very little remained to bring back and to complete the song, “fond memories of happy days gone by.” Also, perhaps at our rather advanced age it was a little ambitious to embark on a walking tour of one to one and a half hours.

Apart from the self-guided tours, the book also provides a great deal of information for visitors on where to eat, where to shop and where to stay, as well as synagogues and cemeteries, and would be invaluable to visitors with London roots but little knowledge. Even habitual visitors to London will find useful information on, for instance, kosher restaurants, B&Bs and hotels, all marked with symbols showing the range that one would be expected to pay for a meal or accommodation. And for anyone tracing graves of long-deceased relatives, the informa-



BEVIS MARKS SYNAGOGUE

(Rachel Kolsky)

tion and phone numbers provided may save a fruitless visit to a cemetery that is open only certain hours or by appointment.

For those with the time and inclination to explore, there is also a section on day trips from London to places of Jewish interest.

Prize-winning London Blue Badge guide Rachel Kolsky, who has led tours of the city for 10 years, and lawyer Roslyn Rawson have combined their knowledge and writing skills to create a well-researched, informative and readable introduction to Jewish presence and heritage in the British capital, which was in the world spotlight this summer for the Olympics and Paralympic games.

My advice to those of an age to remember Jewish London is to read the book and happily recall the place names that surface (“Ooh, I remember when Auntie lived there”). To those young in mind and body, I recommend buying the book and walking the walks. With no preconceptions of how it used to look and feel, the book will invoke pale ghosts from old Jewish London.



Jewish London
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