

NORWICH SCENES

The Jew's house



In accordance with the prophecy of Moses, "the LORD shall scatter thee among all people, from the one end of the earth even unto the other" (Deut. 28:64), Jews were to be found all over Europe in the Middle Ages. They arrived in England with William the Conqueror in 1066, and, by the mid-twelfth century, Norwich had the second biggest Jewish community in England, about 200 in all. They settled in the area between the newly built castle and the market place, mainly so they could be directly protected by the king's soldiers in the castle against the persecution that was always liable to break out. Not being allowed to become part of any of the craft guilds, they became moneylenders and merchants. They had their own synagogue, school and cemetery and flourished for some years. It is thought that loans from Jewish moneylenders helped to pay for the construction of the cathedral.

The Jewish quarter was not, however, a ghetto, and Jews were free to live elsewhere if they wished. A wealthy Jewish family of the name Jurnet established themselves some distance away, in King Street, where they built a house backing onto the river, no doubt to facilitate trade. The undercroft (vaulted cellars) of their house still exists today in the house known as the Music House, the white building in the centre of the picture. Today this is incorporated into an adult education centre, and the undercroft of the house is a bar known as Jurnet's, in commemoration of the wealthy Jewish merchant who once stored his goods there. However, in accordance with the further prophecy of Moses, "among these nations shalt thou find no ease, neither shall the sole of thy foot have rest" (v. 65), the Jews were not permitted to remain in their ease and prosperity. The pope issued a decree forbidding usury, and in 1290 King Edward I expelled all Jews from England, a popular move because it wiped out the debts of those who owed them money.—*Tony Benson*