ENGLISH HERITAGE

SPEAKING WITH SHADOWS

Transcript of Episode 3: The Medieval Massacre of the Jews of York

Josie: Thanks for downloading this episode of Speaking with Shadows. This podcast tells the stories that are hidden from the official version of history, and sometimes that means we touch on some difficult subjects. This episode contains some graphic descriptions which some people may find upsetting and for that reason it's not suitable for younger listeners.

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Welcome to Speaking with Shadows. I'm Josie Long. All of the stories that I've been uncovering in this series have been inspiring and thought-provoking in different ways. They've also been hard to hear at points, which is exactly why they're worth telling.

Today I've come to York and I love York. It's a great city, I love coming to do gigs here. You can really feel the depth of its history when you walk around the city, like, you can see the different layers stretching back as far as you can think. And I feel like that's one of the reasons why a really tragic event in the city's history gets sidelined in the tour schedule. But then if you come to Clifford's Tower, it's one of the city's most imposing sites. It's on a high mound and there's been a tower on top of the mound here since William the Conqueror. He built two castles in York in 1068. But it's since been built and rebuilt to serve different purposes through the centuries. Today the way it looks is it's a stone structure with four rounded corners and you reach it by a straight staircase.

But this story isn't about the tower that we can see today. It's about the terrible events that took place on a former timber structure here in 1190. This was the site of an appalling massacre where around 150 Jewish people, 20 to 40 families, were persecuted to their death by the people of the city, some taking their own lives and others murdered.

Although no first-hand eyewitness accounts are known, the history was written by William of Newburgh, who was an Augustinian canon in Yorkshire. His writing tells us a lot about the political sentiment and anti-Semitic culture that led up to this horrible event and the expulsion of Jewish people from England a hundred years later. Today I'm going to find out what happened here and ask why hundreds of years of Jewish persecution in the Middle Ages isn't a part of our everyday conversation about religious and cultural democracy.

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I've just climbed up the steep steps and I'm just at the entrance to Clifford's Tower, and as you look around you get a really broad view of the city and the river, and it's a really busy day. There's buses, there's geese, there's schoolchildren. It couldn't be more incongruous with what we're about to talk about. I'm here to meet Jeremy Ashbee.

Jeremy: Hi Josie. Great to meet you.

Josie: Yeah you too. What's your work at English Heritage?

Jeremy: I'm called the Head Properties Curator, which means that I and my team look after the standing buildings and the ruins and the physical remains of the 420 monuments that we look after. Clifford's Tower is a really intriguing building. It's very hard to get a sense of it, but this is the biggest surviving bit of one of the greatest castles in England that's almost entirely lost. What we're now standing on top of, we are on the top of an earth mound. We're about 50 feet above the level of the pavement and this is entirely a man-made mound.

Josie: But this tower wasn't here in 1190.

Jeremy: No, that's a very important thing to realise. This tower was built in the 1240s and, as far as we know, the people that built this tower may not even have known the story that we're going to be talking about today – about 1190. That happened in a predecessor of this building that would have looked totally different. We don't know that much about it because it's got a stone tower on the top now and no traces of it have survived, but it is described in a lot of writings incidentally, and one thing we're pretty certain about is that it wasn't built of stone, it was built of timber.

Josie: And what happened here in 1190?

Jeremy: Well the story is sometimes known as the 'Massacre of Clifford's Tower' and there's even a Hebrew term, the 'Massacre of Shabbat Hagadol', which is an event on the 15th and 16th of March 1190, when the Jewish community of the city of York had taken refuge in here. Events got out of control and led from one thing to another and ended in the members of the community feeling that the only thing that they were able to do was to take their own lives in an act of mass suicide, followed by the massacre, by a mob, of any survivors of that event.

Josie: How did that come to be? It's such an extreme and brutal thing.

Jeremy: There is a context to it: that in 1190, it was just after there had been a change in king. King Henry II had died, his son Richard the Lionheart, Richard I, had become king, and he'd said that he was going to go off on a crusade to the Holy Land to recapture the holy places from the Muslims that had taken them on. And the build-up to the crusades and the coronation seem to have led to an outbreak, in many parts of the country simultaneously, of race rioting – of people looking for foreigners and particularly Jewish communities, and looting their houses, beating them up, and even murdering them.

The citizens of York I think had seen what was happening – that members of their community had already been attacked in other places – and when rioting started in York, the members of the community that could, did the only thing that was available to them, to turn to the officers of the king and say: you are actually in charge of us, give us your protection in the safest place that you can, take us into the royal castle. And that was agreed. So they were brought in, in an act of protective custody.

Josie: So why weren't they safe?

Jeremy: That is still actually something of a mystery. How was it that the Jewish people inside this tower suddenly lost confidence that the people charged with their protection would deliver what they were supposed to do? Because very clearly – and certainly one of the chroniclers, William of Newburgh, describes this in some detail – they shut the royal officers out of the castle so only Jewish people were inside. And that's a turning point in these events because suddenly these people that should be protecting the Jews from the mob, were on

the same side as the mob. The numbers of the mob increased; they also now had real soldiers with real siege engines and were gearing up for an actual attack, like a siege, to capture the castle back. And that seems to have marked the point at which the community inside realised that there was no way out for them any more. The only course that's available to them would be to take their own lives. It's a terrible event that's very hard for us to understand.

A rabbi among the Jews besieged inside the tower, he advises that what should happen is that all the heads of the household should cut the throats of their own dependants, and then kill each other, and then the last members of the community left there should set fire to the tower, which is what happens. It's a very upsetting story to think about even now.

But it actually gets even worse, if it's possible to imagine that, because, certainly according to a couple of the chroniclers including William of Newburgh, a monk from near here, some members of the community refuse to do this. They said, we will take our chances with the mob. And William of Newburgh suggests that some of the members of the mob promised an amnesty to anyone coming out of the tower on the condition that they converted to Christianity. They come out of the tower and are butchered at the base of the mound by the mob, who then run through the city to York Minster where the priests of York Minster had been charged by members of the Jewish community to look after some of their documents and valuables, and they burn them.

Josie: I mean, maybe I'm putting, sort of, too kind of a modern context on it, but when I think of nationalism and racism in a present day context, you do see that when people begin to scapegoat and begin to dehumanise one community, it reflects on everyone who's, you know, in a marginal community. And you can see that, that attitude of like, okay, we're doing the crusades, if people back here were behind that and were being kind of, stoked up in that way, you can see why then they would turn on other people, just on anyone who wasn't in the kind of mainstream community.

Jeremy: I think that's absolutely right. I think the modern parallels are very telling.

Josie: So much of racist discourse is actually about people exploiting power in order to distract and do harm, and to give people somebody to scapegoat and blame.

Jeremy: Jewish people, even in the relatively short time that they'd been in England – they've been here since the 11th century, they were brought over by William the Conqueror, and they'd only been in York for about 20 years – but in that time, suddenly this small group had become quite prominent, quite rich, and people thought that's not a fair deal, something bad is going on here, this is a conspiracy. And so it's quite easy to whip up that kind of unpopularity. To go: this is where we even the score.

Josie: And were there other similar events around that time?

Jeremy: Yeah, there were similar events around this time. Actually the York massacre, which happens in the middle of March, wasn't the first by any means. It started in the previous year with a riot, actually at the coronation of Richard the Lionheart, when leaders of the Jewish community from all over England, despite actually being asked not to go, turned up at the door of Westminster Hall and said: we want to actually give our gifts and pay our homage to our master – the King of England.

Josie: It's like, trying to integrate –

Jeremy: Yeah I think so, that's right. But unfortunately a riot broke out at the door of Westminster Hall involving the beating up and the deaths of others, and then it sort of seems to have ignited the tinderbox across, maybe not the whole of the country, but certainly up and down the eastern seaboard. So you hear of riots taking place at Norwich, and King's Lynn, and Stamford, and Dunstable, and Lincoln, and a number of other places.

And interestingly, in some other places what was supposed to happen here, works. So at Norwich the authorities in Norwich, in the royal castle, took the Jewish community and their chattels inside for their protection, and as far as we can tell, it sort of worked.

Some facts are worth knowing. The people who were in charge in the city of York weren't actually the top dogs. One of the most important officials, Ranulf de Glanville, who had been the sheriff of York, had gone. He'd gone off on the crusades, so he wasn't here. Another person who would be important normally in York is the Archbishop of York, who obviously – he's a Christian priest, but he's a figure of great political power. The archbishopric had been vacant for ten years. And so what seems to be the case, is that there was a power vacuum – that the people who were doing those jobs, maybe they just weren't up to it. They certainly didn't have the political clout and power.

Josie: So do you think with the crusades that that existed in a kind of wider sense too? If all of the people who are, you know, have the money, have the power, are just going off to fight a foreign war, there's no good governance, and so people are kind of … it does lead to civil unrest.

Jeremy: Yeah, it does, and in other contexts.

Josie: So how do you feel like King Richard would have responded to this? Does that mean that they didn't really care about these things?

Jeremy: Well, it's very interesting you should say that, because what I think, is not confirmed by all of the chroniclers, that some people among the mob doubtless felt that they were doing not only what the Christian Church wanted, in attacking the enemies of Christ, but also what Richard would have wanted. Richard himself does have different views about this. He is said to have been furious and disgusted by it, possibly not actually out of any fellow feeling for Jewish people, but because actually an attack on the Jews was an attack on him. The Jews were under his personal protection and are deemed to be actually, in the most bald sense, royal property. And Richard takes revenge against the people who did it. He sends officials to come up to York to restore order, and he imposes heavy fines on the most important people of the city of York – not necessarily the people who'd actually been the ringleaders of the attack, but –

Josie: So people aren't actually caught and brought to justice in that respect?

Jeremy: No, the people who are normally identified as the ringleaders, these gentry figures like Richard Mallebisse, promptly ran away. I think some of them ran away to Scotland where the authority of the King of England couldn't touch them.

Josie: It's really depressing to hear, like, well, the people at the very top were profiting financially from these people and so had their own interests, the people in the middle were deciding to settle their own disputes, and the people at the bottom suffered.

Jeremy: Yes. Cynically, I might suggest that this is not a unique instance and not only restricted to the Middle Ages, but it does seem to be the pattern here.

Josie: So afterwards some order was restored and then what happened for Jewish people in York?

Jeremy: Well, there was resettlement of Jewish people within York from within a few years of the events, and they stay here the rest of the 12th and the whole of the 13th century. It became the royal policy of successive Kings of England, to tax Jewish communities more heavily than they had been before. That happens towards the end of the reign of King Henry III, and particularly towards the end of the 13th century under Henry's son, Edward I. And it ends horribly under Edward I's reign, first of all with some accusations that Jewish communities were actually corrupting the coinage.

Josie: Basically set up a conspiracy theory, meaning that then they can victimise people.

Jeremy: Yes, large numbers of them were locked up in castles such as the castle of York, transferred to the Tower of London, as we may hear later, and subjected to mass executions. And it ends in 1290, ironically exactly a century after the events at Clifford's Tower, when Edward I orders that all the surviving members of the Jewish community henceforth must leave England and go off into perpetual exile.

Josie: Do you feel like there's any parallels between the way that Jewish people were treated in the Middle Ages and in the 20th century and the Holocaust? Do you feel like there's any way that these two events can be talked about comparatively?

Jeremy: It's a question that has to be asked, and I feel deeply difficult about answering it, not least as a non-Jewish person. But there are definitely parallels and the Nazis were playing on hostile stereotypes that are depressingly similar to what you read about in the 12th century.

Josie: So I think finding out about this story is really helpful when you think about the modern day and about how these tactics don't change. You know, how pernicious it is, how false it is, how the consequences of it are real.

Jeremy: Yes. I think this has powerful lessons for the present.

Josie: How is it commemorated today? What happens?

Jeremy: Until 1978, I don't think there was anything in the way that the site was presented, and probably very few people knew the story. Then in 1978 an important thing happened: A plaque at the base of the mound, that's at the pavement level so thousands of people go past it every day, was dedicated in a ceremony, very importantly, by the Chief Rabbi of England in those days and by the Archbishop of York. And it is now marked every year on the anniversary of the events. And there's wildflowers growing on the mound – you can't really see, but if you were to come here earlier in the spring, you'd see daffodils growing on the mound. And they were planted in 1990 – so the centenary of the massacre – as an idea by an Israeli installation artist called Gyora Novak, who hit on the idea that they should plant six-pointed daffodils, the species called February gold, whose shape looks superficially like the Jewish Star of David symbol. They should plant them, forming a ring of gold around the mound on which Clifford's Tower stands, and the species should bloom around about the time of the events in commemoration every year.

Josie: I see there's another school group arriving now to come and find out about the tower, so I think it's a good time for us to go inside.

Jeremy: Yeah, great idea Josie. Let's just go in through the door behind us into the interior of the tower.

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Josie: I really want to understand how and why this tragedy took place, and I don't think I can do that without knowing a bit more about what was happening in the minds of English people in the Middle Ages. So next I'm meeting Sally Dixon-Smith. I've come into the chapel of the tower and to set the scene, it is a uniquely disorienting room, like the, kind of, Middle Age structure of it is warped somewhat.

Sally: Hello.

Josie: It's nice to meet you.

Sally: You too.

Josie: What's your work that you do?

Sally: I work at the Tower of London. I'm collections curator there, and the reason I'm here today is York Castle, rather like the Tower of London, is founded by William the Conqueror, and it's part of this network of castles by William the Conqueror and his successors that have this key role, or at least a promise of a role, of protection to the Jewish community – a role which obviously was not fulfilled here for the events that Jeremy's already been discussing.

Josie: I'd really love to understand a bit more of the background and the context of what led up to this period of such extreme tension.

Sally: In effect, although it's very likely there were Jewish people in England before this point, the first time we know about people actually living here is after William the Conqueror invites Jewish people over from Normandy – he himself had just come over from Normandy – and brings part of the Jewish community from Rouen, the capital of Normandy, to London. And so the first serious Jewish community we know about is in London. So if you're Jewish and you've come to this country shortly after 1066, you're there at the invitation of the king, you're there under the protection of the king, but you're quite a visible minority, both in the way you dress and also the language you speak, because you will also be speaking Anglo-Norman French. So you're part of this new foreign power structure that's coming in.

Josie: But you're not the actual king and the nobles, so you can see even there, how people would scapegoat them as 'other' and as part of the ruling force, but without that same kind of power.

Sally: Precisely, and then you also have some sort of privileges in that, as a Jewish person, you can have direct access to royal justice. So for instance in London, if you're Jewish and you're mugged, you don't go to the city authorities, you go straight to the royal courts, and things like this. The events in 1190 here in York come hard on the heels of horrible events following the coronation of Richard I at Westminster Abbey and violence that spread into London. There's this emphasis that royal castles, not just the Tower of London, but royal castles, must make sure to take their duty as part of the deal between the Crown – between the king and the Jewish

community – much more seriously. And so for instance, you get in London the week before a coronation, if you like, the doors of the castle are opened and you can come in and stay for a week, ten days or whatever, and be protected.

It makes a big difference, huge difference, to your life prospects whether you're born Christian or Jewish in this period, but it also makes a big difference to your legal status, and your taxation status. So the Jewish community are taxed separately to the Christian community.

Josie: Why is that?

Sally: It's to do with this, sort of, protective deal with the monarchy, and this idea that the Jewish community are actually the possessions of the King of England, or in fact – this is just common across Western Europe – belong, in some sense, to the ruler wherever they live.

And so, whereas in the 1100s often kings had borrowed money from Jewish financiers much like other people, as you come into the 13th century kings are increasingly taxing and, very harshly, and it's framed as, drawing on their own assets. So it's protection from the mob but it's exploitation by the Crown. And you also get the development, before the events in York, of some really revolting accusations against the Jewish community. As I say, there's already this thing of difference in dress, difference in language, the fact that the Jewish community, unlike most normal Christians, is literate and can write but they're writing in Hebrew, which looks strange. And there develops this thing that's referred to as the blood libel – supposedly Jewish communities from across Europe get together once a year and pick a town where they're going to kill a child – Christian child. This is a story, an accusation which actually develops in this country. In England the first accusation of this kind is in 1144, and then it spreads.

Josie: It's just mind-boggling to think of how these kind of hateful things originate, and how they managed to sort of, haunt the world.

Sally: You differentiate people, you say that they're different, and then you start to dehumanise them, and then you start to say, we can do what we want with them. And so all these kind of accusations build into that as well, the idea that Jewish people aren't fully human. And even one of the Popes at the time says, I know enough about Judaism that going around drinking other people's blood is not high on the agenda!

Josie: Also, it's so funny that you have the highest authority of the church being like, stop this bullshit.

Sally: Yeah.

Josie: Why don't we talk about this period of English history more, like, especially this period of anti-Semitism and racism?

Sally: I think one thing is there is a tradition of concentrating particularly on kings and queens and not really looking at what is termed 'history from below'– the history of the people rather than the monarchy. There's not huge amounts of documentation.

Josie: Thanks Sally.

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Josie: For some years English Heritage has been working to make the story of Clifford's Tower better known to visitors. But how does the modern-day Jewish community in York feel about it? I'm joined by Ben Rich and Shannon Kirshner from the York Liberal Jewish Community.

Ben and Shannon, it's really nice to meet you. Tell me a little bit about the work that your group does in York.

Shannon: Okay, so the York Liberal Jewish Community is a newish – we've just turned five – vibrant, Jewish community that meets once a month in York at the Quaker meeting house. And basically we wanted to re-establish a Jewish community in York because there hadn't been a formal Jewish organisation community meeting in York since 1978.

Ben: We have a central monthly service, but lots of other things going on. So not just religion school, but opportunities for adult education, to learn Hebrew, to mark particular festivals, to work with other faith communities around York. Everybody who lives in York, every Jew who lives in York, comes with a story: maybe they've moved here for the university; to work in the teaching hospital; they maybe have married somebody who's not Jewish; they may be simply Jewish but never have been religiously so; and what we try and be is an opportunity to find a connection.

Josie: What does it mean to both of you?

Shannon: Ben is our founding member, I'd like to say. He helped set it up initially. My husband and I moved to York about a year later and we didn't really think that there would be a Jewish community in York. My husband moved here for work at the university and my husband just assumed that well, we'll go to Leeds for Passover Seder, and I said well, no, just Google it, you never know. I mean this is, you know, it's a different world, and sure enough 'Jews in York' popped up.

And so Ben was very welcoming, you know with like less than 24 hours' notice, he let us go to the Seder and we just found the community really warm and friendly and welcoming. And we quickly became members and then we quickly got involved with all of the behind-the-scenes work that it takes to run a functioning synagogue.

Josie: That's really cool.

Ben: I have to say it's the most exciting and rewarding thing I think I've ever done in my life. Over those last five years we've had at least a dozen people who've formally chosen to be Jews by choice. We've had marriages, we've had baby blessings, we've had bar/bat mitzvahs. We've had the world's first, as we discovered, b'nei mitzvah – a gender-neutral bar or bat mitzvah.

Josie: So cool!

Ben: And those are people able to identify. And at the other end, you know, sadly we've buried our first member, but we've got a recognised burial ground that is marked as a Jewish plot, and that's the first time that that's happened in York since medieval times.

Josie: Wow. So it's that community in the fullest sense – it's every part.

Shannon: It is. It really is.

Josie: It's sort of a strange thing to then come to this site because what does this site mean to you personally? How do you feel about it?

Ben: I had lots of Jewish friends who said: As a Jew, you know, how can you move to York, given its history? And actually I'd always answer: As a Jew, why would I choose not to move to York?! You know, there's a beautiful city, two gorgeous rivers, the best and cheapest beer, the beautiful historical scenery, wonderful art scene.

Shannon: The schools are good.

Ben: Great schools! So, you know, we come here, this is part of the history of the city, but it in no way defines the nature of our community because our community is forward-looking, and we're much more excited by our baby blessings and our bar mitzvahs, then what happened 850 years ago.

Shannon: It's important for us to have the annual commemoration of Clifford's Tower and recite the Mourner's Kaddish for the people who died here, but we don't want to be defined by it as well, and you know, Judaism is a religion that celebrates life, and life must go on and we're building a new community here.

Ben: For me, the responsibility that we have is to draw lessons from the past and to ensure that what happened here, nearly a millennium ago, is not forgotten and is something that one can learn from. Anti-Semitism isn't something which is dead and the consequences of anti-Semitism can be told by coming to a place like this, but also understanding that that is actually an example of the ultimate outcome of discrimination and of prejudice.

Josie: Do you connect the events at Clifford's Tower in 1190 and kind of the wider persecution of Jewish people in the Middle Ages, with events in the 20th century as well, like with the Holocaust?

Shannon: Well, I mean, absolutely. I do think we would connect the events of Clifford's Tower with more recent persecution of Jews because basically Jewish people are still, you know, suffering from, you know, a similar set of rumours and myths that are very dangerous and completely unfounded. You know, the myth that Jews control financial institutions and that there's some sort of conspiracy amongst the Jews, and those are completely unfounded. The Jewish people are a convenient scapegoat.

Ben: It's very important not to see this as something that happened in the past. So we see it today in Britain in the desire to blame immigrants, or people who look different, or behave differently, or have different gender orientation – whatever it might be – to look for somebody else to blame. Understanding the basis of what happened here is something which is relevant in helping us not get trapped into that idea that it's somebody else to blame, whether it's Jews, whether it's Muslims, whether it's foreigners, whether it's anybody who looks and feels a bit different to us.

Josie: Yes, it's always relevant and it's always important.

Ben: When we gather as Jews to mark the Passover meal, the Exodus from Egypt, we are using words and prayers that would have been used in 1190 by that same community.

Shannon: The exact same words, and the exact same prayers.

Ben. When we gather for Yom Kippur, when we gather to celebrate the New Year, we are part of that continuing tradition, and that, if you like, is the connection that we bring rather than a morbidity about something which happened 850 years ago.

Josie: Thank you so much for talking to me.

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Josie: It was a real shock to find out just how savage the events that took place here were. What's also kind of upsetting, when you think about this, is how much you can see a continuum of religious persecution, of the persecution of Jewish people, of the scapegoating of religious minorities and other minorities. When you think about it in kind of modern day terms, you know, you see similar things happening around the world, you see similar kind of rhetoric being used here and abroad, and it's chilling.

I think what's been interesting for me today, talking to the historians and thinking about this story, is it's not just about learning and being shocked by the ruthlessness of people in power and people in power's willingness to exploit mob mentality at the expense of vulnerable minorities and society. It's also really important to see the fact that the things that we have that are precious, you know, like safety, caring for one another, maintaining a society that is civil and humane – those things are always in need of reinforcing, remembering, like, fighting for! It's really important to know what you're trying to protect from happening, and why.

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Thanks for listening to this episode of Speaking with Shadows from English Heritage. If you've got a question or just want to give us your thoughts, you can tweet us using the hashtag #SpeakingWithShadows. You can find out more about this story at english-heritage.org.uk/speakingwithshadows.

Next time, I'm heading to Richmond Castle and finding out what happened to the people who didn't agree with fighting in the First World War and who instead fought to uphold a different set of values.

> [Clip] They continued to disobey orders. They were court-martialled. Then there was a rather dramatic moment where their sentences were read out.

Josie: I'm Josie Long. See you next time.