



Jewish Britain captured in new film archive

The British Film Institute has launched a remarkable archive depicting Jewish life in Britain over the last century. Curator **Simon McCallum** talks us through the collection's highlights

Almost a million films and TV programmes are preserved in the BFI National Archive, telling stories of life in the UK since the dawn of cinema in the 1890s. As part of the Britain on Film project, which is digitising 10,000 new titles, the BFI has launched a new collection called Jewish Britain on Film, which is available online on BFI Player. With almost 100 documentaries, home movies, fiction features and shorts, it's a real slice of Jewish life across a century. But as well as celebrating films shot for and by the community, I wanted to offer some sense of the evolving representation of Jews in British cinema, once an important reflector of social attitudes – and a powerful source of misinformation about minority groups.

As a starting point for the collection it was impossible to avoid the unpleasant fact that the earliest surviving depictions of Jews reflect the hostility, rather than the sanctuary, of Edwardian Britain. The arrival from the 1880s onwards of tens of thousands of Jews fleeing Russian pogroms and settling for the most part in the East End of London, combined with rising unemployment, saw Jews scapegoated. There was little sympathy from the new moving pictures. A trio of early skits – *The Robber and the Jew* (1908), *A Bad Day for Levinsky* (1909) and *The Antique Vase* (1913) – to varying degrees exploit crude

antisemitic stereotypes of the avaricious Jew. An earlier film, *The Aliens' Invasion* (1905), referenced the 1905 Aliens Act which curbed immigration – the unspoken target being Jewish refugees from Eastern Europe. Twenty-first century echoes abound.

As prejudices softened, antisemitism began to be addressed. In the aftermath of World War I a spate of films reflected the immense impact the war had left on British society. The hero of *General Post* (1920) is a tailor named Edward Smith, whose (unspoken) Jewishness as much as his class prevents him from marrying his sweetheart, a wealthy gentile. But that all changes when his wartime heroism enables him to transcend such barriers. Smith's brother, meanwhile, is a miserable Jewish caricature as of old. The Jewish family in wartime drama *Motherland* (1927), of which only the first reel survives, is somewhat crudely drawn too, although it's important to note that this film was the work of producer/director GB Samuelson, one of many leading Jewish figures working in the British film industry. The 1930s saw two epics on Jewish themes. The first, *The Wandering Jew* (1933), starred the German actor Conrad Veidt, and was the second film adaptation of E Temple Thurston's

“Joyously, some of the earliest films feature Jewish weddings”



play. The other was Lothar Mendes's adaptation of Lion Feuchtwanger's *Jew Suss* (1934) – not to be confused with the 1940 Nazi propaganda version – which also has Conrad Veidt in the lead. While neither character is entirely sympathetic, here was a more nuanced representation at last.

An astonishing discovery was the amateur fiction film *The Wicked One – What Does He Say* (1934), its title drawn from the Passover Haggadah. In the film, a rabbi recalls the shocking violence of the pogroms in his home country and struggles with the hardships of his new life in the UK. Felix Aylmer plays a kindly British Jew in the equally extraordinary *Mr Emmanuel* (1944). Based on a 1938 novel by Louis Golding, it was one of the first features to address the Nazi oppression: Emmanuel, believing his British passport will protect him from evil, embarks on an ill-advised quest to track down the mother of a young Jewish refugee.

Post-war films offered more intimate insights: Jack Clayton's Oscar-winning ghost story *The Bespoke Overcoat* (1955) is a Gogol fable relocated to the East End, and *The Barber of Stamford Hill* (1962) is a big-screen version of Ronald Harwood's 1960

TV play. Few depictions of Jewish life in non-fiction film exist before the 1920s and even then they are scarce. Joyously, some of the earliest capture Jewish weddings, such as the 1923 *Marriage of Miss Rossalyn Weinbaum to Mr A Goide* at the Central Synagogue, Great Portland Street, or the *Marriage of Miss Rose Carmel and Mr Solly Gerschowitz* (1925). In the latter, we follow the happy couple from the family ironmongers in Brick Lane to a garden party where guests in natty '20s threads are



Clockwise from top left: *Two Worlds*; *British Union of Fascists march, 3 October 1937*; *Barber of Stamford Hill*; *Some of My Best Friends*; *Mr Emmanuel*; *Marriage of Rose Carmel*; Below: *Vanishing Street*

entertained by the San Diego Dance Band. Filmed professionally on 35mm film, at considerable cost, here is a forerunner of today's home movies.

The contribution of amateur filmmakers becomes important from the 1930s onwards: Leeds grocer Jack Goldberg, who ran Roundhay's Modern Food Store; socialist-minded Lewis Rosenberg, born in London to Polish parents, captured holidays to Catalonia, Cornwall and Guernsey – and rare footage of the Battle of Cable Street – on his 9.5mm cine camera.

Newcastle and the North East are well represented with sporting and social activities from the 1930s to the 1960s, some organised through the Maccabi Association. Regional archives such as the North East Film Archive, North West Film Archive, Screen Archive South East and the Yorkshire Film Archive have contributed some of these valuable personal insights.

The earliest home movies required expensive equipment; they were a popular toy of the rich and burgeoning middle classes; working-class life is all but absent, at least until the 1950s. Joseph Eisner left Romania in 1938 and filmed his family's new life in the Derby suburb of Allestree. The mass murder of Romania's Jews after 1940 lends an additional layer of meaning to the snapshots of English suburban life – larking about in the garden of their modest home and enjoying day trips to Chatsworth House and Anne Hathaway's Cottage.

Newsreels captured the rise of fascism in Britain (see *The British Fascisti*, 1924). Chilling footage of a provocative British Union of Fascists march in 1937, held exactly a year after Cable Street, shows disturbing



scenes of men, women and children performing the fascist salute against a backdrop of Union flags. Previously unseen footage from British Paramount News captures the anti-fascist demonstrations in the wake of Cable Street, and later the welcome given to Jewish children rescued from the horrors of Bergen-Belsen in 1945.

As social change swept Britain and Europe in the 1960s, the nature of Jewish identity itself began to be addressed on screen.

Britain's Jews (1965), from ITV's *This Week* strand, and the documentary *Some of My Best Friends* (1969), offer young Jews a voice and challenge popular perceptions; the latter also offers gentiles an opportunity to perpetuate the odd stereotype. Zionism is either brushed over or rejected. Links with Israel are explored in *The Challenge* (1967), a film for the Youth & Hechalutz Department of the Jewish Agency, which features a youth centre in Leeds honoured with a visit from Israel's Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion, and British teenagers' adventures on a kibbutz, interrupted by the outbreak of the Six-Day War.

Film and TV have proved valuable in



documenting smaller communities around the UK. Rushes for a 1966 documentary on the declining Belfast community, preserved in the Ulster Television archive, are included as part of the Northern Ireland Screen Digital Film Archive initiative. The changing face of the East End, as Jews moved out to be replaced by other communities, was depicted by Robert Vas in his classic BFI-funded *The Vanishing*

Street (1962), and the ATV drama *Just One Kid* (1974).

In recent years cameras have turned towards the Charedim (the Orthodox). In Julia Dover's short *Simcha* (2000), a formidable chasidic mother and daughter affirm the nurturing role of women in their community. David Leon's *Orthodox* (2016)

follows a bare-knuckle boxer estranged from his extended north London family.

If there is a common thread running through the collection, it is the role of charity: from grainy footage of the Soup Kitchen for the Jewish Poor in 1934 to appeals to help Holocaust survivors (Chief Rabbi's Emergency Council, 1947) and the elderly (*Cast Us Not Out*, 1969). The values of care and relief were more important than ever across a turbulent century.

I hope Jewish Britain on Film is a useful resource for the community, but also that it might help foster a wider understanding of the complex histories and rich contribution of UK Jewry to life in these ever more-conflicted Isles. ■

Jewish Britain on Film is available on BFI Player and most titles can be viewed for free in the UK: player.bfi.org.uk/free/collection/jewish-britain-on-film. Highlights of the collection can be viewed internationally on the BFI's YouTube channel.

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