

THE EDICT OF EXPULSION 1290 AD

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We cannot say for certain whether the charismatic, smiling carving above the majestic archway of the Chapter House. represents a Jewish Man, but he does seem to have rather Jewish features. Neither can we be sure when the head was carved However, aspects of the known history of the time might give us some clues as to the age of the carving.

Anti-semitism had escalated during the 200 years leading up to 1290, culminating in Edward 1st's Edict of Expulsion whereby all Jews were expelled from the Kingdom. To understand why Edward acted in this way we have to go back in history.

In the years following the Norman Conquest Jews were an important part of English society. English nobles were constantly in need of finance and as a result, they borrowed heavily from Jewish lenders. Recognising their importance William 1st, offered them special protection under the Law. Jews were declared to be direct subjects of the king, rather than their feudal Lord. As such the King could levy taxes against them without Parliamentary approval. Whenever the need for money arose the King could simply tax the Jews. This system worked as long as the Jews were allowed to accumulate money. But, that was about to change. The wealthy nobles and landowners became resentful of their Jewish 'bankers' and religious persecution became more evident with outbreaks of mob violence. For example, in York in 1190 when hundreds of Jews were killed, and later in 1255 when Hugh of Lincoln, the legendary child martyr, was said to have been murdered by members of the local Jewish Community for ritual purposes.

Furthermore, the Church itself was not immune to Jewish intolerance, after all, lending money and charging interest, a practice known as usury, had long been forbidden by the Catholic Church. By 1285, the Statute of Jewry banned all usury and gave the Jews fifteen years to end their practice. Given the prevailing attitudes towards Jews in trade, together with the emergence of the Italian system of banking, few avenues of livelihood were open to them.

Matters came to a head in 1287 when Edward 1st seized all Jewish property and transferred all of their debts into his name. Three years later, in 1290, Edward issued his Edict of Expulsion giving all Jews four months to leave the country. Any who remained were liable to be seized and executed. Consequently, some 3,000 Jews were expelled, taking nothing with them. They did not return until 1656 on the invitation of Oliver Cromwell.

With such history as this it would seem unlikely that this intriguing head carving in the Chapter House originated any time prior to the mid 17th century, perhaps even much later.