

London's Jewish Museum reopens after major facelift

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Enlarge By Lefteris Pitarakis, AP

The Jewish Museum in London has tripled its floor space after a \$15 million expansion.

By Jill Lawless, Associated Press Writer

LONDON — They are icons of Britain: a Victorian-era statesman, a World War I soldier-poet, fish and chips.

They're also Jewish — evidence of the 1,000-year history of Jews in Britain, whose story is told in a museum reopening this week after a 10 million pound (\$15 million) expansion.

"Fish and chips, which everyone thinks of as very English, is in fact Sephardic Jewish," said celebrity chef Nigella Lawson, who helped relaunch the London Jewish Museum on Tuesday after a two-year closure. Many believe that Britain's national dish has its origins in

fried fish introduced to the country by Spanish and Portuguese Jews.

Food and the nature of Britishness both play a significant part in the museum, which has expanded from a Victorian house in London's Camden Town to a former piano factory next door, tripling its floorspace. Among the interactive displays is a chance to smell chicken soup cooking in a recreated East End immigrant's kitchen.

There also is a cavalcade of historical figures, both famous and obscure, including 19th-century Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli; war poet Isaac Rosenberg, killed on the Western Front; and Daniel Mendoza, an 18th-century boxing champion of England.

Their stories sit alongside those of humbler figures — laborers, seamstresses, trade unionists, entertainers.

"We're telling the story of the Jewish community in London, but we're also telling the story of London," said Sarah Jillings, the museum's exhibition project director.

Britain's 300,000-strong Jewish community stretches back to 1066, when the first Jews arrived with William the Conqueror's invading Norman army.

The museum attests to a thriving medieval community. One of its star displays is a 13th-century mikvah, or ritual bath, uncovered in what is now the heart of London's financial district.

England's entire Jewish population was expelled by King Edward I in 1290 after years of anti-Semitic violence, and Jews were only readmitted in 1656 under Oliver Cromwell, who had overthrown the monarchy.

From there, the museum tells an evocative tale — common to many immigrant communities — of dislocation and hard work, prejudice and resistance, and the gradual move from inner-city tenements to greater prosperity in the suburbs.

"There are many Jewish museums, Holocaust museums — extraordinary places — around the world," said Alan Yentob, creative director of the BBC and a patron of the museum. "But this is one that tells the story of an immigrant culture, and therefore chimes with many people around the world today."

One gallery is devoted to the Holocaust, focusing on the experience of one British survivor of Auschwitz, while another holds a large display of Jewish ceremonial art.

The venue calls itself the only museum in London dedicated to a minority group.

Its curators acknowledge that the history of Britain's Jews is also the history of anti-Semitism. For centuries Jews were barred from many professions, including serving in Parliament — Disraeli was allowed because he had converted to Christianity as a teenager. A century ago, the press ran sensationalist headlines about "alien" newcomers as tens of thousands of Jews fleeing persecution in Eastern Europe settled in Britain.

In recent years Jewish community leaders have reported a rise in anti-Semitic incidents, attributed in part to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the dwindling number of people with memories of the Holocaust.

The museum sees its role as helping to build social cohesion. It predicts that a majority of the 65,000 visitors expected this year will not be Jewish, and will include many groups of schoolchildren.

Lawson said the history of the Jewish community is "deeply interwoven with the fabric of this country" — and is primarily a positive story.

"The history of the Jews is very much told in terms of persecution," she said. "It's interesting to question that."

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