

# The Liberal Jewish Synagogue:

## A guide to the building

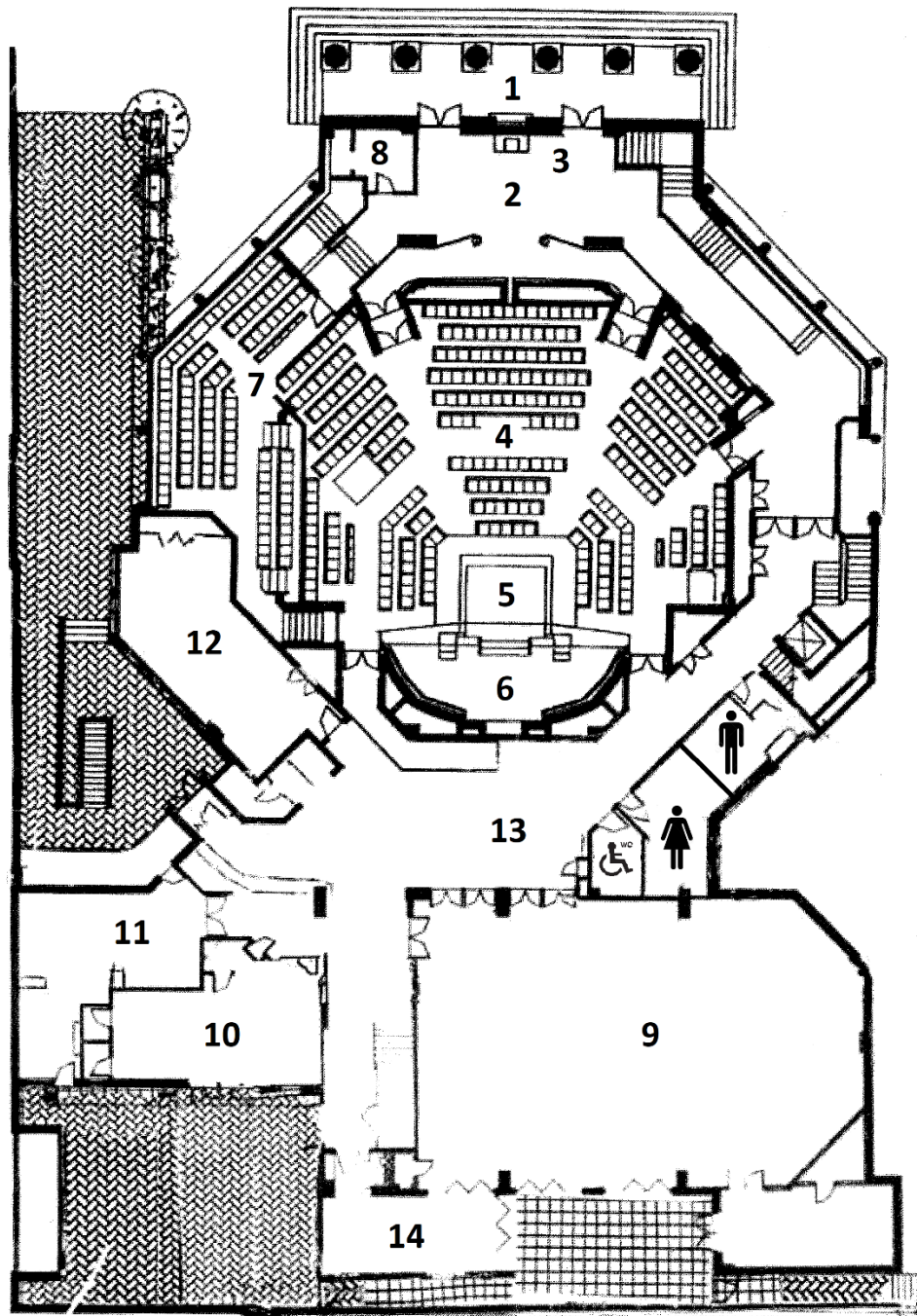
**Rebuilt 1988-1991**

*This edition of the guide was updated and revised in February 2020*

**Price £5.00**



The Liberal Jewish Synagogue  
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#### LEGEND

- 1. Portico
- 2. Main Entrance/Front foyer
- 3. Sho'ah Memorial
- 4. Sanctuary

- 5. Bimah
- 6. Ark
- 7. Extended Sanctuary
- 8. Bride's Room
- 9. Montefiore Hall

- 10. Nursery
- 11. Kitchen
- 12. Israel Abrahams Library
- 13. Rear Foyer
- 14. JDR Room & Sukkah

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# About our Synagogue

At The Liberal Jewish Synagogue (The LJS), we combine respect for our Jewish heritage with positive acceptance of modern knowledge and an emphasis on leading ethical lives.

Members of both sexes play full and equal roles in every aspect of the congregation's religious, social and educational organisation. The LJS abides by the Affirmations of Liberal Judaism and is the founding member of Liberal Judaism (formerly The Union of Liberal and Progressive Synagogues).

## Historical Introduction

The Liberal Jewish Synagogue moved from a converted chapel in Hill Street, NW1, to the present site in 1925. The building (architect Ernest Joseph), seating 1,400 people, was dedicated on 13th September 1925; its frontage with portico is shown in the adjacent 1925 drawing. Synagogues have been built with porticos (see also page 2) since 1820 in Budapest and the Greek revival style spread and remains popular in the United States where the buildings are commonly called 'temples'.



In November 1940 the building sustained bomb damage; it was restored in 1950. But in 1984 the discovery of serious structural defects made it necessary either to repair or to rebuild. The decision was taken to redevelop the site, selling part of a long lease on some of the land for flats, to help finance the rebuilding.

The project was put out to competition. The Fitzroy Robinson Partnership, in association with Preston Rubin, was chosen to design the shell. A firm of Israeli architects, Kantor Schwartz, working closely with their London associates, Koski Solomon, was commissioned to design the Sanctuary. Abbey National Homes purchased the right to build the flats above, and by the beginning of 1988 all the necessary contracts had been signed with them and the main builders, John Mowlem plc.

The farewell service was held on 30th April 1988, after which the congregation moved to temporary premises in Loudoun Road. The new building opened with a service of dedication on 13th January 1991. A new room was added in 2012, see page 13.



# The LJS Building Today

## Courtyard

In front of the portico [1 on plan\*], the brick-paved courtyard allows parking for vehicles and bicycles and has several original trees. In 2017 a living wall of shrubs was added to the front along with a security kiosk.

## Front Elevation



The portico [1] is built of Portland stone and was presented in 1924 to the LJS for the original building by Bernhard Baron in memory of his wife. The six Ionic columns are surmounted by a heavy entablature with a coffered ceiling (see photo on the cover); the rear wall is of ashlar (hewn stone) with an engaged pilaster at each end. In 1988 the portico was taken down and stored for three years in Docklands while the new synagogue was being built. In 1990 it was cleaned and reinstated 1.2 metres from its original position.

Between the two main entrance doors and below the window is the foundation stone of the new building, laid on 24 September 1989. A second stone to the right of the doors commemorates the opening of the LJS on 13 January 1991 by the then President, Maxwell Stern. A third date is marked without explanation, to the left of the foundation stone on the lowest course, between the window and the left hand door. This marks the place where a time canister was placed on 14th November 1989. A list of the contents can be found in the Appendix on page 14.

The front facade replicates the original facade of the 1925 building; the apparent windows are dummies to appear as in the original building, to comply with planning requirements. The main doors are of oak with mahogany inlay from a sustainable source.

\*The inside front cover features the Synagogue ground floor plan; numbers in square brackets in the text refers to locations on this plan.

## Main Entrance

Once through the doors into the front foyer [2 *on plan*] one sees the archway of Jerusalem stone in a wall of deep red marmarina, a material processed from crushed marble. This wall has a central slit allowing a view of the Sanctuary; the slit is on axis with the *ner tamid* (everlasting light) and the Ark [6], providing a glimpse but not a window. It was the architect's intention that the move from secular to sacred should be accomplished by a downward movement. Bronze handrails indicate the way down into the Sanctuary. There is no central door; everyone entering does so from a radial direction, emphasising the non-hierarchical character of Liberal Judaism.

The wall between the two entrance doors holds the memorial to the six million Jews who perished in the *Sho'ah* (Holocaust) [3]. The stone, a three-ton Kilkenny limestone, is the work of the eminent sculptor Anish Kapoor (born in Bombay of a Jewish mother in 1954, he has practiced in London since the 1970s) and was worked on for several months. It was dedicated on 10th November 1996, the 58th anniversary of *Kristallnacht* (Night of the Broken Glass). The sculpture is located on an axis with the Ark and *ner tamid*; the polished black of the void at the stone's centre reflects one's own inverted image as well as the light from the slot in the Sanctuary wall. The Hebrew inscription on the floor reads: 'We have vowed to remember', from a poem "Neder" by the Israeli poet Avraham Shlonsky (1900-1973). A postcard picture of the memorial can be purchased.



The front foyer provides a protected meeting place; the sense of space derives in part from the cool marble floor, which picks up the pinkish tones of the Jerusalem stone. A plaque records the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2003 of Rabbi Rayner's ordination. On the right of the main entrance is a small Bride's Room.



To the left stands a heavy *Chanukkah* (*menorah*) made by Frank Meisler. Pewter, it shows the Lions of Judah (silver plated) guarding the tree of life (gilt); the Hebrew refers to the Festival of Light. The *chanukkah* remains in the foyer except when used for the eight-day festival of *Chanukkah*. Meisler (1929-2018) was born in Danzig and came to England on the *Kindertransport*. He worked in Israel from 1960 and created the *Kindertransport* sculpture at Liverpool Street Station. He died in 2018.

## The Sanctuary [4]

Inside the Sanctuary the space, conceived as octagonal, is divided into four zones: the central 90 seats surround the oak *bimah* (raised platform) which extends into that space as an apron, seen in the photo. The design brief was to provide a welcoming atmosphere even when there are only a few people present; this was achieved by the seating plan, variable lighting and extended *bimah*.



This inner area is enclosed by the *hakafot* aisle (processional, allowing a scroll to be carried around). There are a further 300 seats behind that aisle. An extension [7] to the right of the *bimah* is closed off with panels for most of the year (when the regular seating downstairs is usually adequate), but can seat a further 100 when used at High Holy Days and other major occasions. At the festival of *Simchat Torah* the apron is retracted to give space for dancing with the scrolls. At *Sukkot* the front of the *bimah* is decorated with fruit and vegetables.

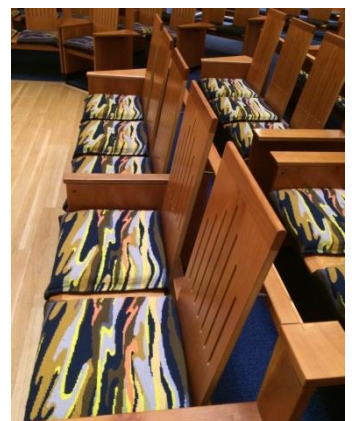
Upstairs the fourth and largest zone, the gallery, seats 500 when needed. From the gallery the sight-lines reach only to the upper *bimah* and so when the gallery is in use, the apron of the extended *bimah* is retracted and the service conducted more formally from the upper level. This retraction coincidentally provides space for 30 additional seats downstairs.

The lighting control has several preset programmes and can provide bright normal intensity or softer lighting for reflective occasions; the small central area around the *bimah* can be lit in a way which separates it from the rest of the Sanctuary on occasions when only a few people are present. Low-energy light bulbs are now installed throughout and above the central seating area is a broad lantern slatted with American cherry wood, admitting natural light.

### Seating

A prototype chair was developed in American cherry wood for the LJS by the designer Bob Pulley; his intention was to avoid the harsh lateral transverse lines of traditional pews and to give the Sanctuary a peopled look even when empty.

Acoustically the Sanctuary is at its best with the ground floor filled and as little absorbent matter as possible upstairs. The cushions on the front seats are hand-stitched and match the *bimah* chairs.





During services the choir sits next to the organ in the main body of the Sanctuary, so that they are part of the service with the congregation. The loft above the ark was designed as an alternative choir location but it now serves as the music office.

The electronic organ was designed by Copeman Hart for the new sanctuary and particularly for the strong nineteenth century tradition of Jewish liturgical music. It uses the Bradford system of digital synthesis and has four manuals (keyboards). The bass speakers are concealed beneath the *bimah*.

## The Bimah [5]

The *bimah* itself is made of oak as are the three lecterns (removable when not required). The retractable apron is manually controlled and locked into place when in use. The *bimah* is enclosed by a high curved wall of Jerusalem stone, which continues into the body of the Sanctuary and is picked up again in the arch in the front foyer (page 3).

The stone was quarried from Hebron by a family whose employees had traditional skills of tooling the stone. The wall was hand-finished in London by a team of Israelis. The finish is coarse at ground level, becoming finer as it rises. The pink tone is known as *ya'ta* and was chosen by LJS members from a wall of samples sent over from Israel in the early stages of the rebuilding.

The Ark [6] was designed as the focus of the wall; the doors are a mesh of metals set in frames of bronze. The design and inset of the doors were carried out in Israel by sculptor Amit Schur, while the bronze frame and closing mechanism were manufactured under her direction in Sheffield. Schur's intention was to allow glimpses of the scrolls without detracting from the service while the doors remained closed; there was to be a suggestion of the core element of Torah whilst retaining the full effect for when the doors were opened at the height of the service. The ark doors are set above a cabinet of figured oak.

Above the doors the inscription reads:

עבדו את יהוה בשמחה,

**Serve the Eternal One with Joy**

*(Psalm 100 v.2)*

This photo shows the Ark with doors fully or partly open, the *ner tamid* above and the *rimonim* stand and two of the *bimah* chairs.



Five Torah scrolls rest securely in the Ark except when one (two on *Simchat Torah*) is taken out to be read. Four of these have been acquired by purchase or donation over the years; the most recent was presented by an LJS member, in memory of his mother, on the occasion of our 75th Anniversary in 1986. All are between 100 and 150 years old. One of the two large scrolls is *Sephardi*, probably from Iraq and written on leather rather than the usual parchment. The fifth, on permanent loan from the Czech Scrolls Memorial Trust, numbered 944, is one of the 1564 scrolls brought to this country from Prague in 1964; sadly, nothing is known of its provenance. Another Czech scroll, Number 172, from Moravske Budejovice, is kept in the Children's Ark in the Assembly Hall (page 11).



The *ner tamid* (eternal light) above the ark was made, to a wishbone design by Amit Schur, by Box Products, complementing the curved wall of the *bimah*. Its live flame, fed by lamp oil, was lit at the first service in the new building on 13th January 1991 and replenished and used ever since.

Two LJS members collaborated in the design and making of a new set of *rimonim* (scroll regalia). The *rimonim* themselves and the *Yad* (pointer) were then donated by their respective parents. A stand for the regalia was designed in bronze by the architect Les Koski so as to intrude as little as possible on the line of the curved wall.



The previous scroll covers were of blue velvet with gilt embroidery, however new covers were designed by British textile artist and lecturer Diana Springhall in 1997. The silk ground of grey and pink provides a link with the panels of the ark doors whilst the stripe, used in an oblique direction, underlines the connection using the same geometric shape.

Copper, gold and silver fabrics were chosen to achieve a reflecting focal point and to be strong enough to complement the bronze doors. A matching loose piece of fabric covers the scroll on the desk before it is read. On High Holy Days the scroll covers are replaced by white covers with embroidered motifs.

The *bimah* chairs are based on the design of the seats in the body of the Sanctuary, to emphasise that those taking the service are also part of the congregation. The *bimah* chairs are upholstered in tapestry embroidered by over LJS 100 members during 1990-92. The design was the original work of Jane Finestone; each seat back embodies a motif indicating its theme from *selichah* (forgiveness) for *Yom Kippur* to *cherut* (freedom) for *Pesach*. The



wool for the tapestry was donated by the Royal Wilton factory, which also made the carpet throughout the building to an original design. Two extra lower-back chairs were constructed and donated in 2010.



For weddings a *chuppah* (canopy) is raised over the extended *bimah*: usually this is a fine white *tallit* (prayer shawl) which is suspended by thin cords over those taking part in the ceremony. A more conventional *chuppah* of poles and canopy has been retained as an option.

A video camera is focused on the *bimah* from the gallery and used for “streaming” services. The sound system can also be used to record services digitally. The excellent acoustics of the Sanctuary allow it to be used for occasional concerts.

The rear Sanctuary wall is coloured with maramarina as in the foyer. On the wooden lintels inside the two entrance doors are separately engraved the two halves of a blessing:

ברוך אתה בבאך וברוך אתה בצאתך

**Blessed shall you be when you come in and Blessed shall you be when you go out.**  
(Deuteronomy 28 v.6)

These blessings were incorporated after Rabbi John Rayner saw them similarly inscribed in the 17<sup>th</sup> century synagogue in Dubrovnik. The incised wording was in-filled with gilding in 2010 to make it more visible.

The Sanctuary and Montefiore Hall are fitted with induction loops for the benefit of those with hearing aids. Grills above the front doors and below the gallery admit heated air.

## Side entrance

This is the everyday entrance to the building; it is ramped outside for wheelchair access. From the side entrance there are stairs down to the underground car park in which the LJS has spaces for the rabbis, administrative staff and occasional use by members. The side entrance is the most commonly used, in preference to the formal front entrance. Here a kiosk displays Judaica for sale and a range of information leaflets, as well as the current LJS and LJ newsletters. On either side of this entrance are the library, professional grade kitchen and nursery: books, food and children, all key elements in every Jewish community.

A custom-made display cabinet with LED lights, for archive material, now used for publications, was installed in November 2012 near the Hall.

## Rear Foyer [13]

As you stand in the rear foyer the eye is drawn in several directions, and there is often an atmosphere of activity. Facing is the large communal Montefiore Hall [9] with a view straight out into the *Sukkah* courtyard and John Rayner Room [14].

The hall's relatively low ceiling provides air conditioning and also has acoustic baffling; its height was the result of a decision to add valuable meeting rooms above on the first floor. On Saturday mornings the hall is used to serve coffee before the service and *kiddush* is held there afterwards. The space provides reception space for up to 150 dining, 300 theatre style or 250 for a standing buffet and has a full-size removable stage.



The Montefiore Hall is also used to hold the Family Service for the High Holy Days with an Ark designed by Barry Feldman donated in 2002. It has wooden doors with an open wave pattern.



In the rear foyer [13], there are three chairs presented in 1993 with tapestry embroidered by LJS members with a design based on a 13<sup>th</sup> century Hebrew manuscript, in the style of the *bimah* chairs, and a mural, (in the left of the photo) of the three pilgrimage festivals, *Pesach*, *Shavuot* and *Sukkot*. The mural follows the curves of the Sanctuary wall and was painted for the Hall of the original building in 1981, by US artist William Utermohlen (1933 – 2007) who

worked in London from 1962 and also painted a mural for the Royal Free Hospital. The mural was donated by the family of LJS member, Jonas Sellar, and was reinstated under the artist's direction in 1993.

A copy portrait of Claude Montefiore in doctoral dress, by Christopher Williams, hangs outside the Montefiore Hall.

Access to the Sanctuary is from each corner; the front entrances are described on page 3. From the rear foyer there are two other entrances; a ramp enables wheelchair users to enter near the *bimah* where two spaces on floor level are left permanently free. Seats can be removed if more wheelchair users are expected.



The Israel Abrahams Library [12] is an excellent resource for research as well as a popular lending library for the congregation. It is a bright and pleasant room with a small sitting area and a large table for study. The Library houses nearly five thousand books covering a wide spectrum of writing including archaeology, biblical study, biography, fiction, history, philosophy and poetry.

Periodicals and newsletters from other congregations are displayed. A photograph and plaque hang in the Library to commemorate the work of Rabbi Dr David Goldstein, a minister at the LJS in 1964-75. A pastel portrait of Dr. Israel Abrahams by Israel Cohen (Australian, 1884 – 1951) (pictured right) hangs on the foyer wall at the entrance to the Library.



The kitchen [11] is a full professional grade catering kitchen with ample preparation space, store cupboards and equipment. Lunch and refreshments are prepared here for the *kiddush* after the Sabbath service, and for other in-house activities. Outside caterers also use the kitchen for all types of receptions and events.

The LJS Nursery [10] is equipped with small-scale furniture and toilets and has direct access to the courtyard. It is used during the week by the Nursery School which is based here, and is near enough to the Sanctuary for parents to be comfortable leaving children there during services.

### **Corridor to Rear Foyer**

From the front entrance the rear foyer [13] is reached by a curving corridor which follows the line of the Sanctuary [1], so that one is always aware of what lies inside the dividing wall. On one side are the two stairs to the gallery, on the other display cases set into recesses of Jerusalem stone. Here are changing exhibits such as archival material, as used for a Centenary exhibition, now for pictures of Rabbi Israel Mattuck.

The lift in the corridor is large enough to take a wheelchair and attendant; the adjacent stairs lead to the offices above, and the lower ground floor (nursery studio). Notice-boards display current information about the congregation and the community. Adjoining toilets include facilities for wheelchair users and a baby changing area.



## Upper level

To reach the upper floor visitors use the broad staircase off the rear foyer. This is hung with portraits: of Claude Goldschmidt Montefiore (first President) by Sir Oswald Birley RA in 1925, Rabbi Leslie Edgar (see photo right), Rabbi David Goldberg (full length, by Jane Bond RP) and Presidents Bob Kirk, Willie Kessler, Sir Peter Lazarus (who led the rebuilding programme), Maxwell Stern and Colonel Sir Louis Gluckstein.



Immediately to the right on leaving the stairs is the Assembly Hall, a multi-purpose space which can seat up to 60 people, theatre-style. It houses a portable ark with scroll used by the *Rimon* Religion School, and a portrait of Rabbi John Rayner (below left) by June Mendoza OBE.

A door connects this hall with the Mattuck Room so that they can be used together as a suite of rooms. Hung inside this room are portraits of Rabbi Israel Mattuck painted by Professor Arthur Pan, Hungarian (he also painted Churchill). This room also includes a painting of the Hon. Lily Montagu (bottom right), and a donated painting “The Rainbow” by Jacques Kupfermann (Austrian). A large interactive board is mounted on an end wall. This room also contains a large bronze plaque dedicated to Rabbi Mattuck’s memory (below centre). This plaque was taken from the Mattuck Room in the old synagogue building. These rooms are used as classrooms and for LJS Council and committee meetings. They are also hired out to individuals and organisations.

In the corridor there is a painting of the interior of the old sanctuary by Charlotte Halliday with *chuppah*, and a drawing made by E B Lyons in 1947 during repairs to the war-damaged old synagogue.



In addition to a number of notice boards, there are two large paintings on the foyer walls: “Holy Goat” by Ricky Romain (right) and “Abraham, Sarah and the Heavenly Messengers” by Hans Feibusch (1898 – 1998), both donated in 1991. Eleven classrooms are also housed on the first floor. These provide space for the LJS Nursery (ages 2-5) as well as the *Rimon* Religion School (ages 3½ - 15). The classrooms were designed for the range of children, young adults, and older students who attend. Some of the nursery classrooms also contain their own toilet facilities. The first floor also houses an art room, storage space, counselling and meeting rooms as well as offices.



From the lobby there are entrances to the upper gallery level of the Sanctuary. The original choir loft (see page 5), now used as the office of the Director of Music and to store our large collection of Jewish liturgical sheet music, is also accessed from here.

At the far end of the upper floor are the administration offices which accommodate the other rabbis, the Executive Director, financial and administrative support team.

## Lower ground floor

The lower floor is reached by staircase and lift. The Nursery School uses this room for its second year students and it has adjacent toilets and a shower. It is also used for youth activities, and occasional adult education sessions. The lower ground floor also houses the main plant equipment for the building. There is also secure basement storage for the synagogue's archives and other records.

## Rear courtyard and John Rayner room

The LJS Nursery has direct access on to one courtyard area partially paved with a soft surface and with equipment where children can play in safety (pictured). Another adult area runs next to the Montefiore Hall [to the right of number 14 on the plan] repaved in 2012, planters are installed on the rear wall, as seen on the following page.





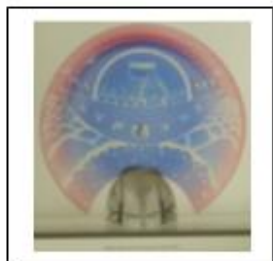
A pergola above provides a framework for a *sukkah* which extends outwards from the Montefiore Hall so that people can participate while still in the hall or outside in the courtyard. The overhead framework is open to the sky according to tradition, and has hooks from which are hung fruit and vegetables during the festival of *Sukkot*, when foliage is placed in the trellises fixed against the rear wall.

The latest addition to the LJS, the John Rayner Room [14] was built in 2012 in the courtyard as a meeting, prayer and study room -- or *Beit Ha-Midrash* -- in memory of the synagogue's distinguished late rabbi, with funds from the John D. Rayner Appeal, launched in the 2011 centenary year. It is accessed by the western French doors of the Hall and from the main staircase hall, via a coffee-making area, which also has shelving for books.



The west wall has a projection screen which can be lowered from the ceiling. An ark with a glass panel suggestive of the Burning Bush in a wooden door has been designed by Miranda Salmon to hold one scroll and was installed in the south-west corner of the room in 2014.

On the inner wall is a tapestry “Earth Sea and Sky” by Diana Springall donated in 2015.



The room opens eastwards by a folding glass wall to the courtyard and *sukkah*. Displayed in a case in the south wall of the room is a 1991 gift, a modern Noah's Ark in glass by the eminent glass engraver Peter Dreiser MBE (1936 – 2006).

In 2019 a stained glass window designed by artist Ruth Kersley was dedicated in memory of Rabbi John Rayner. Lev Taylor (pictured with the window), Rabbi Rayner's grandson who is studying to be a rabbi at Leo Baeck College, gave the sermon that day as part of the installation service.





# **An inclusive, sustainable space**

In 2017 The Liberal Jewish Synagogue embarked on a major programme of renovations for the building. After almost 30 years of continuous use, it is not surprising that the infrastructure now requires updating. This work began in 2017 with the replacement of the original kitchen with a new professional grade catering kitchen. In 2019-20 all of the toilets will be upgraded as well as work begun on a new heating system. At the same time the technical infrastructure is also being modernised to meet increased demand and changing needs of our members, visitors and staff.

## **Access for disabled people**

The building offers access to visitors with disabilities whether wheelchair users or not. In 1997 the LJS received an award from Jewish Care to 'acknowledge an outstanding contribution towards the improvement for people with disabilities' (see the certificate in lobby near the side entrance). Some features already mentioned include:

- hearing loop in the Sanctuary and the Montefiore Hall
- large print prayer books
- wheelchair spaces in the Sanctuary
- lift and toilet facilities for wheelchair users
- ramped entrance to the building and the Sanctuary.

The Liberal Jewish Synagogue welcomes visitors. If you would like to attend a service or arrange a conducted tour for your school or group, please contact us. We also hire our classrooms, meeting rooms, Montefiore Hall and sanctuary for meetings, receptions and other occasions. Please contact the administration office by telephone: 0207 286 5181 or email: [ljs@ljs.org](mailto:ljs@ljs.org)

## **APPENDIX: The LJS Time Capsule (see page 3)**

On 14 November 1989 Janet Suzman and a group of LJS members placed a time capsule under one of the stones in the portico wall. That stone is to the left of the Foundation Stone and is marked simply with the date: 14-11-89.

The contents of the capsule were wrapped in acid-free archival tissue. Silica gel crystals were packed in to ensure dryness and the capsule itself was sealed with a viton closure.

The items included were selected from suggestions made by LJS members and the children of the Religion School. The choice was made by Rabbi John D Rayner and Mrs. Brenda Nathanson (Chairman, Education Committee).

1. Photos of the original LJS, Loudoun Road and social activities.
2. Original 1902 membership list (photocopy).
3. Current membership list.
4. Last service at 28 St John's Wood Road.
5. Service sheet from Foundation Stone dedication.
6. Annual Report 1988.
7. Appeal Brochure.
8. *LJS Newsletter*.
9. *ULPS News*.
10. Pamphlets on history of Progressive Judaism.
11. *Service of the Heart & Passover Haggadah*.
12. *Gate of Repentance*.
13. *Judaism for Today* by Rabbi John D Rayner & Rabbi Bernard Hooker.
14. *The Jewish People: their history and their religion* by Rabbi David J Goldberg & Rabbi John D Rayner.
15. Sermons by Rabbi John D Rayner and Rabbi Alexandra Wright.
16. Message to finder from Rabbi David J Goldberg.
17. Message to finder from Richard Moross on behalf of the children of the Religion School.

The Capsule also contained a miniature *Kiddush* cup and *Kiddush* wine.