

**RUSSIAN STATE BALLET OF SIBERIA** in Swan Lake, Bridgewater Hall, Manchester (17 and 18 January) • **RED VELVET**, based on the true story of Ira Aldridge, Garrick Theatre, London (previews from 23 January) • **CELEBRATING CHARLOTTE BRONTË 1816-1855**, National Portrait Gallery (from 22 February)

## Vibrant shadows of the past

A house that is now home to the story of a metropolitan melting pot

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**Museum of Immigration and Diversity**  
SPITALFIELDS, EAST LONDON

PHOTO: TOM LINDSEY/19 PRINCELET STREET



**MULTICULTURAL EXPERIENCE:**  
Schoolchildren absorb the rich history

**I**N THE HEART of London's Spitalfields is a house, a comparatively sparse and shuttered place, that seems to have both sucked in the spirit of local history and to have shed its own history into the streets around it. This is the Museum of Immigration and Diversity, where the past is filtered through a structure – but is also observed only by stepping on to the pavement outside.

At 19 Princelet Street – the address “just off Brick Lane” better captures its essence – one enters the hallway of an eighteenth-century Huguenot family's house. However, through where the back wall would have been is a nineteenth-century synagogue, its balconies adorned in gold leaf with the names of past benefactors. Like its surroundings, the building is a palimpsest, reflecting the traditions and livelihoods of the refugee inhabitants.

Brick Lane is now a predominantly Bangladeshi area – testified to by the names, the inhabitants, the neon-lit curry houses, the banks, the newsagents and the Urdu script beneath street signs.

The Bangladeshis came here in the mid-1970s as the Jewish community was rapidly diminishing. They worked in the textile industries, in cramped and unhealthy conditions, as the Jews had been similarly squeezed into small places in the same industries. Before them were the Protestant Huguenot silk weavers, fleeing repressive Catholic France after the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685, also labouring away in attics, while creating their own churches, shops, schools and charities.

Churches, of which the Huguenots built several, became synagogues, of which there were many in Spitalfields, and which, in turn, became mosques. What is now the Jamme Masjid Mosque in Brick Lane was the Great Synagogue, and before that a Methodist Chapel and a Wesleyan Chapel. It began as the LEglise Neuve in 1743 before closing in 1809.

The Huguenot presence still resonates in the residential architecture, street names such as Fournier and Fleur-de-Lis, and most obviously in the nearby Dennis Severs' House museum, which attempts to recreate the sights, sounds and smells of an eighteenth-century French silk weaver's family life.

Meanwhile, at the back of 19 Princelet Street is the second-oldest surviving purpose-built synagogue in London, and the oldest Ashkenazi one, but only nearby Sandys Row Synagogue (another former Huguenot church)

is still open for worship in Spitalfields.

Built in 1719 by Samuel Worrall, Hawksmoor's master carpenter, 19 Princelet Street was originally occupied by Huguenot silk weavers Pierre and Ester Ogier and their eight children. Later occupants included a professor of music, a wholesale pickle and sauce manufacturer, an industrial school, a carver and gilder, and an engineer.

In 1869 a group of Polish Jews took a lease on the house and built a synagogue in the garden, which opened the next year. It closed in 1963, although services continued spasmodically.

A parlour where the Ogier children studied was a century later a school for Jewish boys; while a hundred more years on, Bangladeshi women were attending English classes there.

One problem for Princelet Street stems from what makes it valuable: it belongs to no one and everyone, so would-be funders have less interest in supporting somewhere where the roots are so ethnically and historically entangled than they would have in, say, saving a synagogue, a church or a building with one specific association.

Lack of funds means limited opening ([www.19princeletstreet.org.uk](http://www.19princeletstreet.org.uk)) but there is a £3 million National Lottery bid under consideration, which would allow it to open more often. As it is, it attracts about 6,000 visitors

annually, even when operating only part of the year.

The paint peels, the wood is chipped, there are supports for uneven ceilings, and dust coats the metal chandeliers. There is an ark, the *bimah* is elsewhere in the building, and the pews are at the sides.

The structural fragility means that one of the most intriguing places cannot be visited – the garret at the top of the house (once a weaver's attic workplace) where for most of his life lived David Rodinsky, an autodidact, a scholarly, unpaid synagogue caretaker, who spoke 15 languages, a man of great mystery. He left one day in 1969 never to be seen again and his room was not opened for another decade. (Rachel Lichtenstein's research, detailed in her 1999 book, *Rodinsky's Room*, with Iain Sinclair, revealed the story.)

Spitalfields continues to thrive and change. Many of the handsome weavers' houses have come into the hands of the wealthy and trendy shops now dot the area (one restaurant is jointly owned by a Jew and a Muslim). The City, which once barred foreigners as traders from its boundaries, has intruded with slabs of glass and metal.

The museum has an art installation, *Sanctuary and Suitcases*, which consists of luggage labels, cardboard suitcases, mouldy potatoes (symbolising the Irish potato famine, which brought yet other migrants), diary entries and videos, and poems and statements from nine and 10 year olds at local schools reflecting the immigrant experience.

But what is most important about 19 Princelet Street is what one feels, the experience; to stand where Jews prayed and Huguenots wove. There are now few Jewish shops, no yeshivas, furriers or kosher butchers, and not a word of Yiddish is to be heard, or a Hasidic Jew to be seen, but these presences are felt, as are those of Huguenots and of those Catholics who fled from local chapels torched in the Gordon riots of 1780, preceded by the area's own anti-Catholic riots in 1736. Irish Catholics, Jews and others met in a cellar beneath the house's floor in what may have been the first meeting to oppose Mosley's Black Shirts.

Above the sundial on the Jamme Masjid Mosque is a Latin inscription, *Umbra sumus*, “we are shadows”. A counsel against worldly vanity, it is also a reminder that within 19 Princelet Street and on the streets round about those shadows walk this way.