

## THE BUILDING OF THE GREAT SYNAGOGUE, SYDNEY

*by O. P. PHILLIPS*

### **Towards a New Sydney Synagogue, 1828-1870**

Communal Jewish worship in Sydney began around 1828, in the house of Phillip Joseph Cohen in George Street. A larger place for worship soon became necessary, and in 1832 a warehouse in Bridge Street was converted for the purpose. Within eight years this building in turn had become too small to house a community now numbering 600 or so. The congregation therefore applied to the Government for a grant of a suitable site on which to build a new synagogue. Despite the Governor's offer of a site in Kent Street, they decided early in 1841 to buy another more acceptable site in York Street. James Hume was appointed architect for the new building, which was completed in 1844 at a cost of three thousand six hundred pounds.

Unfortunately, only a few years later, problems apparently arose within the congregation, which culminated in the secession of some of its most active and observant members. They established the Sydney New Synagogue in 1859, in a former Baptist chapel in Macquarie Street.

The depleted York Street congregation was revitalised in 1862 with the arrival of the Rev. A.B. Davis as minister. The board of management realised that they would soon need a larger synagogue to house a community now numbering over 1000. As a temporary measure, they commissioned Sydney architect Thomas Rowe to renovate the existing building, and to design a gallery to provide some additional seating. The Board meanwhile began the search for a new synagogue site.

Someone remembered that the Governor had offered the congregation a site for a synagogue some twenty years previously, and the secretary was asked to find out what had happened to it. He discovered that the land "had by some mistake been granted to the Roman Catholics." However, the Surveyor-General offered "to appropriate as a site for a Synagogue any vacant allotment of land in the City of Sydney at the disposal of the Government." Several such sites were investigated but found to be unsuitable.

The board then tried unsuccessfully to buy the land next to the York Street Synagogue, presumably with the idea of building a larger synagogue on the combined site. They had no better luck in 1866 with efforts to purchase a block of land in Elizabeth Street, which had to be abandoned because of insufficient funds. Two years later and still unsuccessful, the board decided to approach the government again, this time to ask for money rather than land. Accordingly, the president waited on the Minister for Lands "with a view to obtaining compensation for land in Kent Street granted for the erection of a Synagogue and otherwise appropriated." He suggested an amount of one thousand pounds and was rewarded after nine months with the advice that the Minister "had recommended that the sum of one thousand and seventy eight pounds be placed on the Estimates by way of compensation."

Seven months later, having not yet received the money, the York Street board wrote to ask the Government to hand it over to trustees for investment. The Department of Lands replied that Mr. L.W. Levy, on behalf of the Macquarie Street Synagogue, had asked for part of the compensation money. However, "the Secretary for Lands had decided that only one Synagogue could be provided for", and proposed that joint trustees be nominated from both synagogues to look after the money.

The York Street board reacted indignantly, protesting that the Macquarie Street Synagogue had not existed at the time of the original grant, and could therefore have no right to any money now. But the government refused to take sides. Both congregations were obliged to agree to its conditions if they were to receive the money at all, and consequently in 1870 five trustees were appointed, two from Macquarie Street and three from York Street. This enforced collaboration probably helped to reunite the two congregations, although it appears that a combination of the excellence of the Rev. A.B. Davis, and the magnificence of the new synagogue which the York Street congregation subsequently built, induced many members of the Macquarie Street congregation to rejoin what was obviously the principal community. The Macquarie Street Synagogue eventually closed in February 1877, "in consequence of the Want of Funds and Paucity of Attendance".

### **Purchase of the Site and Initial Fund Raising, 1871-1872**

On 8th February, 1871, the York Street board of management met to consider "the advisability of purchasing land advertised for sale in Elizabeth Street". They resolved to buy it, provided that the trustees of the government grant were willing to hand over the money to help pay the purchase price. A week later, John Solomon bought the land for two thousand pounds on behalf of the board, and a public meeting of the whole Sydney Jewish community was convened in the Masonic Hall, York Street.

The Rev. A.B. Davis addressed the meeting and expressed a wish that the two Sydney congregations might become united. He ended his remarks by proposing "That having regard to the largely increasing number of the Jewish Community of N.S.W., it is desirable that a new and commodious place of worship be erected on the land recently purchased in Elizabeth and Castlereagh Streets, and that subscriptions and donations be at once invited and collected for such purpose." This was unanimously resolved, and a building committee was formed to put the resolution into effect. Its members were Moses Moss (chairman), the Rev. A.B. Davis, David L. Levy, Saul Samuel M.L.A., S.A. Joseph, Maurice Alexander M.L.A., John Isaacs, Louis Phillips, John Solomon, George Myers, Sigmond Hoffnung and Abraham Cohen.

The building committee met a fortnight later and resolved "that Circulars be printed annexing a report of the Meeting at the Masonic Hall, and distributed generally to all members of the Jewish faith, accompanied by a photograph of the Synagogue in Portland Street, London, as the style in which it is proposed to erect the New Synagogue."

The circular began: "The Jewish Community of New South Wales having during the last few years suffered great inconvenience from the insufficient accommodation afforded them for Public Worship have recently purchased an eligible site conveniently situated on Elizabeth Street whereon it is proposed to erect a commodious Synagogue suitable for the requirements of the largely increasing community, and capable of giving sufficient accommodation to members living in the interior who visit the Metropolis at the high festivals.

"In order to carry out these objects a public meeting of the Jews of Sydney was convened on 13 March, 1871 and subscriptions were then collected amounting to two thousand four hundred and sixty pounds and sixteen shillings.

"Having in view the erection of a handsome building filled with all the appliances of

modern Synagogues as now prevailing in Europe and America a sum of from ten thousand pounds to fifteen thousand pounds will be required and your liberal assistance is solicited in aiding the Committee to raise the necessary funds.

“The general desire of the people of the House of Israel to take part in the erection of edifices wherein to worship and adore the God of our Fathers leads the Committee to hope that you will subscribe as largely as is commensurate with the means wherewith you are blessed to raise a structure in our midst that shall be an honour to our name, suitable to the position we occupy in the Colony, and calculated by the architectural beauties to Educate the Eye, and thereby promote reverence, purify the Heart, and elevate the thoughts in solemn communing to the throne of Heaven.”

The rest of 1871 and the first half of 1872 were apparently occupied with the preparation of a parliamentary bill which would enable the congregation to sell all the sites which currently belonged to them, and use the proceeds to build the new synagogue. These sites were a block of land on Church Hill, which had been granted in 1850 for the purpose of erecting a Jewish school (a project which never eventuated); the York Street property itself; and a site in Macquarie Street which had been bequeathed to the Synagogue. Richardson and Wrench later sold the first two properties at auction. They generously refused their customary commission, and the money so saved was recorded as a grant to the building fund in their name.

### **Selection of an Architect and Design, 1872-1873**

Feeling now assured of sufficient finance, the building committee turned to the selection of a design. On 13th October, 1872, they resolved to invite three leading Sydney architects, Thomas Rowe, George Allen Mansfield and Benjamin Backhouse, to prepare plans for the new synagogue. (This provoked an indignant writer in the Melbourne-based journal *The Australian Israelite* to inquire why no Jewish architects had been invited to submit designs.) A week later, the committee held a meeting with all three architects to decide on the particulars and conditions for this limited competition. The meeting agreed to an outline brief for a main building accommodating between 500 and 600 seats on the ground floor, with a separate residence for a “messenger”. The cost of construction was to be limited to ten thousand pounds inclusive of internal decorations and fittings. The architects were given about two months to submit their designs, and the successful architect was to be engaged to complete the job “at the usual commission of 5%” while the unsuccessful competitors would receive twenty five pounds each. These terms seem to indicate that the building committee was more interested in discovering the stylistic approach of each architect than in obtaining fully resolved schemes.

The committee met early in 1873 to inspect the competition designs. Rowe had forwarded three different schemes, and Mansfield and Backhouse had sent one each. Unfortunately, none of these drawings seems to have survived. Rowe had omitted to state the estimated cost of his designs and was asked to do so. The committee met twice more in the next fortnight to attempt to select a design, during which time Mr. John Solomon (a member of the committee who practised, among other things, as a builder) apparently prepared his own design for the interior. Abraham Cohen was in favour of choosing Rowe’s design No. 1, whereas Louis Phillips preferred Mansfield’s exterior combined with John Solomon’s interior design. After much discussion it was decided that none of the designs was “exactly suitable to the requirements of the Congregation”, and the architects were asked to amend them and resubmit them by the end of February.

In early March the committee considered the amended designs, but still found it impossible to agree on an architect. They decided to adjourn for a week “with the understanding that the matter be then finally disposed of.” The following extract from the

minutes of that later meeting provide reassurance that committees are no worse today than they were a century ago. Mr. Hoffnung's proposal that Rowe's design No. 2 be adopted was still before the meeting, but "Mr. S.A. Joseph moved . . . as an amendment that the plans submitted by Mr. G. Allen Mansfield be selected but that such selection shall not imply a literal adherence to such plan but that such alterations and improvements shall be made by the Architect as the Committee may agree upon." (Possibly he too had John Solomon's interior in mind.) "A further amendment was proposed by Mr. G. Myers . . . that Mr. B. Backhouse be selected as the Architect for the preparation of the plans and the superintendence of the erection of the building. Mr. George Myers' amendment . . . was lost in division Ayes 2, Noes 11.

"Mr. Joseph's amendment (favouring Mansfield) was then put and the show of hands resulted in Ayes 6, Noes 6, Mr. George Myers and the Chairman not recording their vote. Upon attention being called to this fact, Mr. George Myers announced that it was intentional on his part, but the Chairman intimated that he would have recorded his vote had he been aware that he was entitled to a vote irrespective of his casting vote. Mr. Hoffnung then objected to the decision being considered final and after discussion it was resolved on a division of 6 Ayes and 6 Noes and the Chairman making the majority with his casting vote for the Ayes that the question be reopened. The right of the Chairman having a vote besides his casting vote was then decided in the affirmative: 6 Ayes, 4 Noes.

"Mr. Joseph's amendment was again put to the meeting and was lost on a division of Ayes 6, Noes 7. The original resolution of Mr. Hoffnung was then carried on a division of Ayes 7, Noes 6.

"Mr. Thos. Rowe was then declared elected as Architect to superintend the erection of the building and preparing the plans of the New Synagogue in Elizabeth Street."

The chosen architect was one of a handful who divided amongst themselves most of the important building work in N.S.W. Rowe had trained as an architect in England, but had begun work here in 1853 as a speculative builder in partnership with his brother Richard. Four years later he had set up on his own as an architect, and shortly afterwards entered into a highly profitable association with the Methodist Church. By 1873 he had completed some twenty churches for the Methodists and other denominations; and for the Jewish community he had already renovated the York Street Synagogue as previously mentioned, and also designed a mortuary building for the Jewish cemetery at Haslem's Creek (now known as Rookwood). His practice extended to Bathurst, Orange, Newcastle and Goulburn, and was one of the largest in N.S.W. Possibly his best known building apart from the Synagogue in Sydney Hospital.

Rowe's design ability has not been rated highly by modern architectural critics, although it was well regarded at the time. From all accounts he seems to have had little idea about the cost of his buildings, and this got him into trouble more than once. Nevertheless, in a city where architects of any description were not plentiful, Rowe's ambition and boundless energy had made him one of the leading architects of his day.

Having secured the commission, Rowe now began work on developing his design. This proved to be no easy task, because the building committee had their own fixed ideas about what the new building should look like. In May, they approved his amended plans and elevations, but with the proviso that "the interior plan of the Portland Street Synagogue be adhered to as nearly as possible." By August, the drawings and full specification had been completed and were presented to the committee for approval. True to form, the committee took the opportunity to make some further design alterations, but despite John Solomon's dissenting vote they resolved to adopt the revised design and directed Rowe "to call for Tenders". He informed them "that the cost of the building should not exceed thirteen thousand pounds." Although this was 30% more than the cost limit originally set by the

committee, they appear to have raised no objection. Presumably Rowe persuaded them that the extra cost was justified.

However, the committee received a rude shock when the tenders arrived. The lowest tender for the masonry alone was eight thousand three hundred and fifty pounds, and tenders for the complete building ranged from just under seventeen thousand pounds to more than twenty five thousand pounds. Although builders had been given only a fortnight to submit tenders, and may therefore have added a certain amount to cover themselves, these prices were greatly in excess of Rowe's estimate. He was consequently obliged to alter his design yet again in an effort to reduce the cost. Apparently he did so mainly by omitting some of the internal decoration originally proposed, which probably had the effect of actually improving the interior design. Rather than employ a single contractor for the whole of the works, the committee decided instead to let separate contracts for each stage of the work, with the architect acting as project supervisor. This was apparently quite a common practice. A sub-committee of three was appointed to deal with the day-to-day running of the job, consisting of Messrs Solomon, Hoffnung and Phillips.

### **Construction, 1874-1877**

By January, 1874, the site had been surveyed and the first contract, for excavation, had been let to John Fay and Robert Barnes, for the sum of fifty three pounds. On 1st February, the sub-committee reported that excavation had been completed, and "that a further contract for one thousand pounds for the foundations to the building had commenced and was proceeding satisfactorily." The contractor was Thomas Moon. By March over half the work on the "foundations" (which apparently refers to building work below ground level) had been completed, as evidenced by progress payments to the contractor.

In August, *The Illustrated Sydney News* was able to report that the building was "already in a very forward condition, the basement contract having been finished some time since and tenders received for the main work of erecting the building." However, it was another three months before Louis Phillips announced "the acceptance of Mr. Aaron Loveridge's tender for the masonry and brickwork of the new building for the sum of six thousand and fifty pounds." This tender covered work up to the top of the second floor, in other words, omitting the external towers and domes fronting Elizabeth Street. The drawings show that Loveridge, one of the founders of the modern firm Loveridge and Hudson, signed the contract on 11th November, 1874.

Three weeks later, for reasons which remain a mystery, the sub-committee reported "that the works were not progressing as favourably as they might in consequence of the inattention of the architect (Mr. Rowe) to his duties in connection thereof." The full committee resolved that they were "of opinion that the duties of Mr. Rowe as Architect to the New Synagogue are neglected to the serious injury of the community and the retardation of the progress of the structure", and they wrote to Rowe "requesting him either to give his attention to the requirements of the building committee or to resign his position as Architect." How Rowe came to provoke this stern rebuke is not known, but it is possible that he was in the interior of N.S.W. attending to various commissions that he received in the Bathurst area about this time, and that his absence prevented Loveridge from starting work straight away.

On 26th January, 1875, the foundation stone of the building (the base stone of the central columns on the Elizabeth Street facade) was laid by the Honourable Saul Samuel, Post Master General of N.S.W. The names of the building committee were recorded on a parchment deposited beneath the stone, and no less than three of them were Members of the Legislative Assembly, indicating the political influence of the Jewish community at that time. The description of the building given by *The Sydney Morning Herald*, in its detailed report of the ceremony the following day, is very similar to the one given by *The Illustrated*

*Sydney News* the previous August, and one suspects that either the architect or the building committee may have drawn up a press release for such occasions. It is interesting to note Saul Samuel's reported statement that "the cost will be nearly twenty thousand pounds". This is considerably more than the last recorded estimate of thirteen thousand pounds approved by the building committee, but may have included the cost of such items as the site. Furthermore, the article in the *Herald* contains apparently the first mention of the name "Great Synagogue"; it does not appear in Louis Phillips' records until July, and in the building committee minutes not for another two years.

Shortly after the foundation ceremony, Rowe had occasion to write to the building committee. His letter dealt mostly with design details, but concluded: "I also think it desirable that in future contracts should be entered into for everything connected with the works. I have been grossly insulted and defamed by Mr. Solomans in the presence of my young men and two Contractors, one of which told me if he tendered for any of the works he should put it on (that is, increase his quote) to meet the interference of Mr. S. In fact I shall not be able to obtain tenders for its completion if it gets abroad that I am interfered with and insulted in the performance of my duty."

This letter, taken with other indications in the documents, suggest that the building committee were taking an active part in building operations themselves. They may well have been sceptical of Rowe's ability to control costs, since he had already shown a tendency to order extra work. It seems likely that John Solomon (presumably Rowe's "Mr. Solomans") was a constant visitor to the site. Being a builder himself, he was probably over-critical of the work done, and may even have given orders to Loveridge's workmen. As a member of the building committee he would have been technically within his rights in doing so, but understandably both architect and builder would have resented his interference, especially as he was apparently not the most tactful of men.

Meanwhile, the New Synagogue Fund was beginning to run low. In August, 1875, the board of the York Street Synagogue made a further donation of seven hundred pounds to the fund, but more was urgently required. The women of the congregation decided to hold a fancy fair to raise money. Under the patronage of the Governor of N.S.W. (Sir Hercules Robinson) the committee of the Hebrew Ladies' Bazaar of Sydney, led by Mrs. A.B. Davis, collected gifts from all parts of the world. The bazaar opened on 14 December on a site in Martin Place now occupied by Challis House. It ran day and night for a week, and raised over four thousand four hundred pounds.

Work on the masonry was presumably proceeding well, as no more is recorded in the accounts than the periodical payments to the contractor. Late in 1875, Loveridge's tender to complete "the third storey of the Towers with the Cupolas at a cost of one thousand five hundred and forty seven pounds" was accepted, "reserving the right of adding the Domes at a further cost of eight hundred pounds". By the end of the year, Loveridge had been paid well over four thousand pounds, indicating that the masonry of the main structure was about three quarters complete.

In January, 1876, apparently heartened by the success of the bazaar, the building committee resolved to carry out Loveridge's contract "in its entirety" (that is, to add the domes completing the Elizabeth Street facade). Evidently about this time, contracts were also entered into with P.N. Russell & Co. for the supply of the cast iron columns, and with William Coleman for building the roof. In March, the committee approved Rowe's revised estimate of eighteen thousand three hundred pounds for the cost of completing the building. It will be recalled that the last approved estimate had been thirteen thousand pounds in 1873. Given that the original cost limit was only ten thousand pounds, it is hard to understand why the committee now expressed no concern at an estimate approaching

double that amount. One can only suppose that they felt that their fund raising activities would enable them to cover the increased cost.

An interim statement of account in August shows that much of the "mosaic flooring" had by then been paid for. These encaustic tiles were bought from Minton, Hollins and Co. of Stoke-on-Trent in England. At this stage, about half of the tender amount for the roof, and most of the masonry contract sum, had also been paid. It seems probable that by the end of the year, the roof had been completed, and the tiles ordered from England had arrived or were well on their way. The iron window frames were probably in place but not yet glazed.

In February, 1877, "Mr. Hoffnung reported that from some misunderstanding between the building committee, the works were likely to be delayed or additional expense occurred (sic) in the completion of the Contract". What the trouble was is not known, but the following day John Solomon resigned from the building committee, so he probably had something to do with it. Along with Mr. Solomon's resignation, the committee accepted Mr. A.A. Marshall's tender for laying on gas pipes, and resolved to ask Mr. Hoffnung to select the gas fittings during his forthcoming visit to America and Europe.

Despite the delay, it was evident that the York Street Synagogue would not be required for much longer, and in March it was sold for six thousand five hundred pounds to the Industrial and Benefit Building Society. Two thousand pounds deposit was paid to the Synagogue at the time of sale, with the balance to follow when the building was handed over in October. The deposit was promptly delivered up to the treasurers of the New Synagogue Fund.

In May, Rowe presented Louis Phillips with a statement of all the contracts currently in progress on the Synagogue site. Without exception, the contract amounts exceeded those Rowe had estimated fourteen months earlier, some by a considerable margin. However, the building committee again seems to have raised no objection, probably (as before) because they felt that the funds at their disposal were sufficient to cover the increased cost. Rowe's statement indicates that the finishing trades were well into their stride at this stage. Most of the firms with which contracts had been placed were leading members of their respective trades at that time: Lewis and Steel were the contractors for plaster work, Lyon and Cottier for ornamental glazing, and Fletcher Bros for cast and wrought iron.

A few days later, tenders for the Ark and seating were received, and again were far in excess of what the committee had been prepared for. It was suggested that the cost might be reduced "by utilising the old seating at present in the York Street Building", but this suggestion was fortunately dropped, and instead the scale of ornamentation in the seating design was reduced.

The committee finally seems to have decided at this point that costs were starting to get out of hand, and that funds were beginning to be exhausted. An attempt was made to obtain the balance of the purchase money for the York Street property before the due date, at interest of 7% (in effect, a loan from the Industrial and Benefit Building Society). The Society, however, declined to lend the money, so an overdraft for the amount (four thousand five hundred pounds) was sought and obtained from the City Bank. It was also plain that the new Synagogue would not be finished by the time the York Street building had to be handed over, and accordingly the secretary of the York Street Synagogue wrote to the trustees of the Macquarie Street Synagogue "asking for the use of that Building for the purpose of holding Divine Service . . . until such time as the new building in Elizabeth Street was ready for occupation."

In September, a letter was received from Sigmond Hoffnung in America, enclosing a tender he had accepted for the gas fittings from Messrs. Cornelius and Co. of Philadelphia, for the sum of \$2,268. (The amount entered in the accounts against this item indicates a current rate of exchange of around US\$4.50 to the Australian pound.) At the end of the

month, the York Street congregation removed the Ark and reading desk from their building and put the rest of the internal fittings up for auction before moving to Macquarie Street.

A month later, a general meeting of "Subscribers to the Fund for the Erection of the Great Synagogue" was held, and the Synagogue's first board of management was elected. At the end of 1877, Louis Phillips, who was now the Great Synagogue's first treasurer, prepared a balance sheet showing that the fund was some one thousand two hundred pounds to the good, despite the cost increases during the year. Nevertheless, he reported "that it would require about one thousand five hundred pounds to complete the building".

### **Completion, 1878**

On 27th January, 1878, just three years after the laying of the foundation stone, the building committee met for the last time before handing over control of the project to the Great Synagogue board of management. They decided to erect a screen separating the board room (originally located over the Elizabeth Street porch) from the Synagogue proper, and called for designs and estimates for a marble pulpit (which was never built). Their last act as a committee was to fix a date for the consecration, and resolve to engage an orchestra and additional choir members for the occasion.

The New Carpet and Furnishing Warehouse was appointed in February to supply fittings for the Ark, president's and treasurer's seats and reading stand, and carpet and other floor coverings throughout the building. These included such items as "Superior Matting", "Reversible Cushions in best Morocco, stuffed with best hair", "best Brussels Carpet" and "handsomely figured brass stair rods".

At long last, on 4th March, 1878, the consecration ceremony was held. It was reported at length in *The Sydney Morning Herald* and also in *The Illustrated Sydney News*. Later that year, the final statement of account for the new building was included in the Great Synagogue's first annual report. Deducting from this the appropriate items, it may be calculated that the total construction cost was twenty three thousand one hundred and twenty four pounds, seven shillings and eight pence, approximately the same as the initial tenders received in September 1873.

The Synagogue as it appears today has been considerably altered since 1878. The main changes have involved the removal of the board room and the central reading desk to provide additional seating in the body of the Synagogue, the gradual disappearance of the light well behind the Ark, the installation of electricity and air conditioning, the construction of an auditorium and other rooms in the basement, and most recently the replacement of the original beadle's house (later offices and classrooms) on Castlereagh Street with a new education centre.

### **Original Construction Methods and Decoration**

The basement work carried out by Thomas Moon involved the construction of foundation walls and column bases in sandstone. The lowest floor of the building was a composition of tar and blue metal laid directly on the levelled ground. Most of the space beneath the building was used as a children's playground, lit through gratings in the front porch and by the substantial open space behind the Ark which served also as a light well for the upper storeys. The ground floor, of timber, was supported by large timber beams which spanned between basement piers and some additional central timber posts. The floor was slightly raked around the outside to give a clear view of the central reading desk. The circular arrangement of seats at the east end shown on the original plan was later altered to a more angular design which allowed seats to be constructed in straight rows, and was probably cheaper to build.



The eastern (Elizabeth Street) facade was constructed of "freestone" (that is, sandstone) which is believed to have come from the so-called "Paradise" quarry at Pyrmont. The stonework was self-supporting (a double wall flanked by two towers). In those days "every stone building was . . . surrounded externally and internally with framed scaffolding carrying travelling beams and a crown carriage. . . . It was . . . erected in tiers as the walls rose, and was constructed with cross-braced framing for the upper tier. On top of the scaffolding ran the traveller formed with a pair of trussed beams with pulley wheels and crank handles worked from a hanging platform by a man at each end for travelling longitudinally, and surmounted by a crown carriage for working transversely, that is by three top men for lifting each stone. The erection of the upper tier of such scaffolding . . . was generally a job for Ships' Carpenters."

All other walls were built of solid brickwork, plastered internally and cement rendered on the western (Castlereagh Street) exterior face. The side walls had ventilation flues built into them to carry away the fumes from the gas lights.

The gallery was supported on cast iron columns, which originally sat on stone piers, and these also supported the clerestory walls which were carried on brick arches. Iron columns were at that time a recent innovation in construction technique. The gallery itself was constructed of timber beams, probably local hardwood, which spanned between the columns, and from columns to walls with a steep rake. The school room and house at the Castlereagh Street end were of standard domestic construction of the period.

The roof structure over the centre was based on heavy timber king-post trusses which spanned between the clerestory walls. Beneath this a semi-vaulted ceiling with a flat central portion was constructed out of timber. Conventional timber roof construction was used elsewhere, and all roofs were covered with slate. On the undersides of roof and floors, the conventional lath-and-plaster ceilings of the time were used, except above the porch where timber lining was preferred. Along the side walls of the interior, large curved cornices with ventilation openings were formed up in timber.

The decoration of the interior was achieved using a combination of elaborate plaster moulding and timber carving, variously painted and gilded. Working within the limits set by Jewish law for Synagogue decoration, Rowe showed great ingenuity in his designs. For example, there were six different, though similar patterns for the column capitals beneath the gallery and clerestory arches. Most of the interior joinery was of polished cedar, including the doors, seats and original stairs; the seats also had infill panels of Huon pine. The gas corona lights, eleven in number, were of brass, supported by cast iron brackets. Additional wall-mounted gas lights were installed at the back of the rear seats on both levels. (All of these original fittings were converted to electricity in 1904.) As well as the ornamental glazing in doors and windows, mention should be made of the unusual semi-dome above the Ark, which contained small circular lights glazed with coloured glass. It will be seen that the original colour scheme was designed to emphasise the mouldings, and in addition, certain flat walls were decorated with the stencilled patterns then in fashion. Some of these have been reproduced in the most recent redecorations.

### **Origins of the Design**

It will be recalled that the Building Committee several times expressed the desire that the new synagogue should, internally at least, closely resemble the New Central Synagogue in Great Portland Street, in the West End of London. This building was designed by N.S. Joseph and completed in 1870. It "had a traditional layout with central reading desk, was Moorish in detail, Gothic in feeling (for it had a soaring vaulted nave), and employed cast iron columns, a form of industrialised construction, to carry the galleries and roof. It cost twenty four thousand pounds and seated 860, . . . and was not without problems of hearing

and vision." Apart from the problems mentioned, which Rowe eliminated in Sydney by using raked floors, these words could well have been written about the Great Synagogue instead of the New Central.

However, this style of design was not unique to Great Portland Street. Numerous parallels for both the exterior and the interior designs may be found in the architecture of Synagogues built in England, France, Germany and America at about the same time. One example which shows a pronounced similarity is the Princes Road Synagogue in Liverpool, of which Louis Phillips had kept photographs. Other examples include the synagogue in the Rue de la Victoire in Paris, built in 1874; the Oranienburger-strasse Synagogue in Berlin, completed in 1866; and the Plum Street Temple in Cincinnati, Ohio, also built in 1866. Each of these buildings has features typical of the period which can also be seen in the architecture of the Great Synagogue.

It is highly unlikely that Rowe would have seen any of the other buildings mentioned, but members of the building committee may well have seen them or others like them, even if only in illustrations. In any case, it seems evident that the basic design of this synagogue did not come from Thomas Rowe, but rather followed the stylistic traditions of buildings in Europe and America. The synagogue architecture there at the time reflected the general state of architecture in the latter half of the 19th century. It lacked any single coherent style of its own, and tended towards a variety loosely based on one or more styles of previous centuries. Gothic revival, the style almost universally used for religious buildings, never really found favour with the Jews probably because of its strong association with Christianity. They tended to prefer the Moorish style, perhaps because of its affinity to the golden age of Spanish Jewry, but nevertheless Gothic and also Romanesque styles had considerable influence on synagogue design. And as may be seen, in architecture as in most other things the Jewish community of Sydney carried on the practices of its parent communities overseas.

The origins of Thomas Rowe's version of the traditional design may however be seen in some of his own earlier works, particularly in the Goulburn Wesleyan Church, which was completed around 1870. This was a departure from traditional church design, having a raked floor, an "amphitheatre" arrangement of pews, and an unusual entrance porch with Romanesque style arches. It is not very surprising that when Rowe was asked three years later to design a building with similar requirements, he would have adapted and improved on his earlier design. Some of his other buildings also show details, mainly of decoration, which can be found repeated in the Synagogue.

More than any of Rowe's buildings, the Great Synagogue seems to have maintained favour with architectural critics. Morton Herman, for example, spoke highly of its detailing and craftsmanship. The design of these details was Rowe's most significant contribution to the architecture, since as has been mentioned the basic design was really adapted from overseas models. However, the Synagogue remains a tribute to all of those people — architect, builders, craftsmen, and even committees — who over a hundred years ago worked to build one of the landmarks of Victorian Sydney.