

Nathan Rothschild's Company¹: Jews, Quakers and Catholics

Melanie Aspey considers Rothschild links with Radicals and Reformers in the 19th century

Lionel de
Rothschild
introduced in
The House of
Commons,
26 July 1858 by
Henry Barraud



“The pictures in the principal rooms [of Gunnersbury House] are chiefly portraits of the family and their friends. In the billiard room there is one painting of historic interest – the introduction of the late Baron Lionel Rothschild into the House of Commons on his first being allowed to take his seat for London in 1858.”²

The picture depicts a scene at the heart of the British nation. Its calm and orderly appearance masks decades of struggle, setbacks and vicious attack. The central figure, Lionel de Rothschild, became the focus of the campaign to claim equal rights for British Jewry, but it was a struggle that had had many supporters, not least among them his father, Nathan Rothschild.

New sources and resources at The Rothschild Archive are helping to flesh out the structure of Rothschild history, especially in hitherto obscure regions, such as the family's social connections and their links to reforming groups. Significant lacunae in the correspondence series in the years of Nathan's death (1836) and the year of the formation of the Alliance Assurance Company (1824) frustrate the search for evidence of reactions to these events. However, small pieces of evidence drawn together can go some way toward making good the loss.

Nathan's early associations with radical figures began with the formation of the Alliance Assurance Company in 1824. The 1820s were the decade in which the struggle for Catholic Emancipation was finally won. In the succeeding decade the Abolitionists won their cause; Nathan played his role by issuing a loan to compensate the slave-owners and thereby hasten the end, at last, of the trade. In the 1840s, after Nathan's death, Lionel de Rothschild began a long campaign for the right to take up his seat in the House of Commons. Many of his supporters were drawn from the ranks of the families with whom Nathan had been engaged in previous decades. They saw him elected first in 1847 and remained steadfast in their support throughout a number of by-elections over the succeeding eleven years. Lionel was repeatedly returned as the City's representative but only in 1858 took his seat after the Lords approved a change of wording in the Oath. In future M.P.s might, on the grounds of conscience, be exempted from the need to swear allegiance to the Crown as a Christian.

The formation of the Alliance Assurance Company is often interpreted as a move towards opening the insurance market to Jews and Quakers, or perhaps (rather more apocryphally) providing employment for a relative of Nathan, who had been turned down for a post at an insurance company on account of his faith. Even more persuasive is the theory that Nathan relished the opportunity to challenge the established system. He was still something of an outsider in British society, in spite of his closeness to government ministers following the commission to supply funds to Wellington's troops in the lead up to Waterloo, and was perhaps more inclined to challenge the status quo. In this case his actions ended the monopoly enjoyed by Lloyd's in marine insurance. However the roll-call of the first presidents, directors and officers of the Alliance suggests that there is an element of truth in all these theories.

There were five presidents: Moses Montefiore, Nathan Rothschild, Samuel Gurney and Francis Baring (all bankers) and John Irving M.P. Moses Montefiore was Nathan's brother-in-law through his marriage to Judith, the sister of Hannah Cohen, Nathan's wife. Moses's brother, Abraham, was married to Nathan's sister, Henriette. The families were neighbours in New Court and at Stamford Hill. In subsequent years their campaign for Jewish emancipation would pick up speed in the wake of Catholic emancipation. The company's actuary, Benjamin Gompertz, was married to Montefiore's sister, Abigail. Samuel Gurney, a partner in the banking firm of Overend and Gurney, was from a prominent Quaker family. One of his sisters, Hannah, married Thomas Fowell Buxton and another was Elizabeth Fry. His daughter, Rachel, married one of Buxton's sons. John Irving, M.P., partner in the banking firm Reid Irving, with whom Nathan Rothschild raised a loan for Austria in 1824, had ship-owning interests. At a general meeting of Shipowners of Great Britain on 13 December 1821, he was called to be Vice-President, with others, of the organisation, which was chaired by Thomas Wilson, M.P.³ The fifth President was Francis Baring, senior partner of Rothschild's major City rival Baring Brothers.

Thomas Fowell Buxton, M.P., one of the auditors, became a partner in the Truman Brewery in the East End of London the following year. He campaigned with Elizabeth Fry for prison reform and founded, with William Wilberforce, the Society for the Mitigation and Gradual Abolition of Slavery in 1823. Two years later, on Wilberforce's retirement, he led the Parliamentary abolitionist campaign which finally succeeded in 1833.

The company's counsel was Lancelot Shadwell, the last Vice-Chancellor of England.⁴ A letter in The Rothschild Archive, now published in the Rothschild Research Forum,⁵ written by Shadwell to Lionel de Rothschild from Westminster Hall on 21 January 1848, demonstrates a keen sympathy with the emancipationists.

“Though I have not the Honour of knowing you and never had as I believe the pleasure of seeing you except once at Sir Joseph Montefiore’s yet I beg you will do me the favour of accepting the accompanying Book - in itself of no value. But when I mention one short fact connected with it you will I trust think it worth preserving. Mr. Goldsmid I understand was the first of your nation that was ever called to the English Bar. The ceremony took place at Lincolns Inn on the 31st January 1833 when I was Treasurer and it was arranged that he should take the then necessary Oaths on a copy of the Law to be supplied by me - accordingly he was sworn on the first Volume. On the fly Leaves at the beginning I on the same day made some short Memoranda. The Book had been in my possession many years. It has acquired a new value in my sight [Hebrew phrase]. For I had long taken the deepest Interest in your remarkable Nation descended from the Illustrious Patriarch Abraham and called by God Himself in the Language of his Prophet. For them I had mingled feelings of admiration Love and Pity. Now when there is a strong probability that they will at last be treated in England with Justice and Humanity and that you will be the first among them to sit in a British Parliament it occurred to me that there was no one in whose custody I could more properly place the Book than yourself. So let me entreat you to accept it as coming from one who in common with all your Brethren fully appreciates those emphatic Words [Hebrew phrase] I venture to suggest that if upon the first Volume you should take your Oaths as a Member of the House of Commons it will thereby acquire a value that very few Books ever had before or will hereafter have. I have the honour to be Sir a Sincere Well wisher to Yourself and your Nation.”

As we now know, Shadwell’s optimism was rather premature. Goldsmid played a major role in the struggle for emancipation, which is acknowledged even in this encomium to Nathan published to commemorate the centenary of his death.

“It was his great desire to lift the burden which oppressed so many of the Jews at that time. It was his work in this connection that paved the way for emancipation of the Jews in England. Through his large financial services that he had rendered to England, apart from the services rendered to the British armies in the Napoleonic Wars, he became acquainted with the Duke of Wellington, and through him, he tried to create an atmosphere favourable to the change in the oath of Allegiance which would permit a Jew to take that Oath. In the history of the Jewish Board of Deputies it is recorded that Nathan Mayer Rothschild and Mr (later Sir) Isaac Lyon Goldsmid, were invited to attend a meeting of that board in April 1829. (They were not members of the Board.) At this meeting Nathan Mayer, now Baron Rothschild, stated that he had consulted the Duke of Wellington who was Chancellor (sic) and other members of the Government. As a result of these consultations it was suggested that a petition should be presented to Parliament appealing for the removal of the disabilities from which Jews suffered. It was suggested that the petition should be signed only by Jews born in England. The Board of Deputies agreed to do this and thanked the gentlemen for their attendance and for their efforts for the emancipation of the Jews. The petition was sent to the House of Lords and to the House of Commons. A Rothschild was among the signatories, not Nathan Mayer, but his son Lionel who was born in England, and so again Nathan Mayer Rothschild led in the struggle for emancipation, for he it was who inspired the Board to the petition.”⁶

Nathan’s commitment to the well-being and advancement of Jewry was not confined to Britain. In 1814 Lord Liverpool responded to his letter about the “state of the Jews in Germany” promising “to forward your representation to Lord Castlereagh in order that every due consideration may be given by his Lordship to the circumstances of their case.”⁷ In 1817, Carl Rothschild was able to remark favourably on the assistance that Nathan had been able to offer the Jews of Corfu.



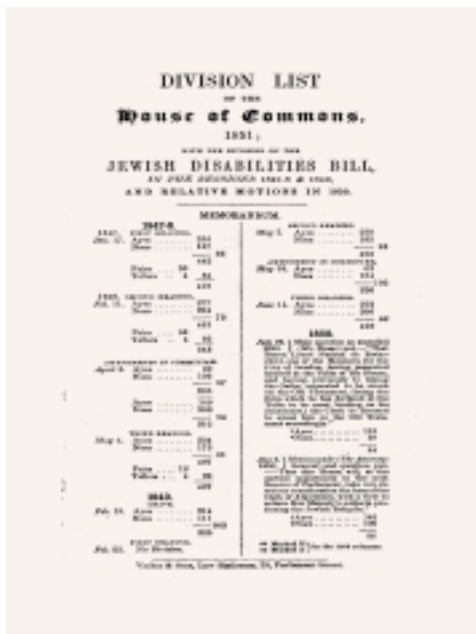
In the 1820s the government ministers to whom Nathan made representations knew him well. Not only Lord Liverpool but also the Duke of Wellington and Lord Bexley, the former Nicholas Vansittart, had reason to listen to someone who had served British interests so well during the Napoleonic Wars. One copy letter in the Archive demonstrates that Nathan’s representations were not just on behalf of the Jewish community but embraced the community whose struggle the Jewish emancipationists followed closely, the Irish.⁸

“It has occurred to me, that in the present state of Ireland, supposing the accounts we read from that quarter are true, even making allowance for some exaggeration of the distress, some easy and direct mode of relief is at the disposal of the Government but the benefit of which might be lost by delay.

I beg to suggest the purchase of American and East India rice (before speculators come into the markets) the price of which is at present low and the stock large and which in case of deficiency of the potatoe (sic) crop, would supply the numerous poor of that country with a wholesome food during the winter. I venture to address this suggestion to your lordship, which in my humble opinion if acted upon might prove beneficial to a suffering community and prevent those mischiefs which a threatened famine might otherwise produce.”⁹

A throwaway line from the diaries of Moses Montefiore reveals something of the fervour with which the Jewish community pursued their equality. Montefiore notes in February 1829 that having discussed with Isaac Lyon Goldsmid a plan for procuring toleration of the Jews, he and his wife went to visit Nathan and Hannah Rothschild. Nathan promised to go to the Lord Chancellor, Lord Bexley,

Examples of literature collected by the Rothschild family on the subject of Jewish emancipation. (See Appendix, p59, for full list)



One of several annotated Division Lists collected during Lionel's parliamentary campaign.

who, in 1814, as Nicholas Vansittart, had commissioned Nathan and his brothers to collect coin with which to pay Wellington's troops. Hannah said if he did not, she would, records Montefiore.¹⁰ This is typical of the way in which Nathan was cast as the figurehead, the front man for appeals and campaigns. He had a talent for seeing the way forward, perhaps because in spite of his closeness to government he was not a part of the establishment and had no position to defend. He had after all turned down the offer of a knighthood by August 1815, preferring to be an English Mr Rothschild rather than an Austrian Baron von Rothschild. In business, Nathan worked out systems that led to the best profits. In Manchester for example he had realised that one merchant could derive three sets of profits from the process, and could therefore sell at a lower profit margin, thus satisfying both merchant and customer. In the wider world Nathan realised that the effectiveness of the welfare activities of the main London synagogues would be increased if the three bodies – the Great, the Hambro' and the New – combined so that the new body

could respond to and cope with the community's needs as immigration movements developed. The record of his "Great Idea", which was expressed to community leaders for the first time at a meeting at New Court, is preserved in the first issue of *The Hebrew Intelligencer*,¹¹ the only one known to survive. Although his plan did not come to fruition in his lifetime his aims were realised in 1870 with the creation of the United Synagogue, of which his son, Anthony, became first President.

Frustratingly, scant information can be found in the Archive about the loan of 1835 that hastened the end of the slave trade by compensating the plantation owners. *The Times* records a series of meetings between Nathan Rothschild, "a number of gentlemen from the City" (including Moses Montefiore), government ministers and the Governor of the Bank of England in July and August, and Montefiore's diaries carry an account of the issue.¹²

Nathan died the following year. One final source links him to the radical figures of the period and indicates how much he was a part of their circle. The memoirs of Thomas Fowell Buxton¹³ contain an account of a dinner on 13 February 1834 at Ham House (the home of Samuel Gurney) at which Nathan was present, regaling unnamed guests with his life story. What was the occasion? Perhaps the 10th anniversary of the foundation of the Alliance. Perhaps simply one of a number of similar meetings.

Nathan Rothschild's eldest son, Lionel, fulfilled his father's mission. As senior partner of N M Rothschild & Sons, he hosted in his room the meeting that led to the formation of the British Relief Association, a group of City merchants and bankers who raised £500,000 for famine relief in Ireland. The following year, together with Baring Brothers, the bank contracted the Irish 3% loan to raise £8 million for the same cause.¹⁴

Lionel de Rothschild commissioned the painting appearing at the beginning of this article from the artist and photographer Barraud. It includes a number of figures who could not possibly have been present at the scene, but to whom Lionel clearly wanted to pay tribute for their role in a shared struggle. Lord John Russell, a supporter of Catholic emancipation and Prime Minister when Lionel was first elected, was one of his sponsors, an echo of the relationship his father had had with Lord

Liverpool. The second was John Abel Smith, a member of the banking firm used by N M Rothschild & Sons for generations and a relative of William Wilberforce. Lionel's expression of gratitude for Russell's support over the eleven years between 1847 and 1858 might well have been addressed to Nathan by any number of those whom he served: "I have taken up much of your valuable time and I have often hesitated before I interrupted you in your more agreeable occupation; but on every occasion I have been most kindly received by you and have always found you the true and sincere friend of the oppressed and warm advocate of just and true liberal measures."¹⁵

Melanie Aspey was appointed as the Archivist of The Rothschild Archive in 1994 and has taken over the post of Director in November 2004. From 1992 to 2002 she was Chairman of the Business Archives Council.



Silver-gilt badge of the office of the Alliance British and Foreign Life and Fire Assurance Co., c.1824

NOTES

- Headline of an article on the centenary of the Alliance Assurance Company in *The Financial News*, 28 June 1934. RAL 000/924.
- Walford's *Greater London*, vol. 1, RAL 000/924. This extract, and many of the newspaper articles with this reference are from documents collected by Anthony de Rothschild, for a proposed publication on the Rothschild family.
- The Times*, 15 December 1821.
- Details of Shadwell's role at the court of Richard Bethell, mentioned elsewhere in this *Review*, can be found in Nash's *Life of Richard, Lord Westbury*.
- <http://www.rothschildarchive.org/ResearchForum:LioneldeRothschild:lettersfromLancelotShadwell>.
- Morris Myer, "The Founder of the House of Rothschild in London and the Pioneer of Jewish Emancipation in England": *Today in History in Jewish Times* 28 July 1936.
- The translation is by an unknown hand. RAL 000/924.
- RAL TWE/1 quoting British Library Add. 38572 f.266, letter from Lord Liverpool to Nathan Rothschild, 12 December 1814.
- See the appendix for material on Catholic emancipation.
- Letter from Nathan Rothschild to Lord Liverpool, 21 August 1826.
- Dr. Louis Loewe, ed., *Diaries of Sir Moses and Lady Montefiore*, facsimile of the 1890 edition (London, 1983).
- The Hebrew Intelligencer*, RAL 000/848.
- The Times*, 30 July 1835, 1 and 4 August, 1835; Dr. Louis Loewe, op. cit., p97.
- Memoirs of Sir Thomas Fowell Buxton, baronet*, with selections from his correspondence, edited by Charles Buxton (London, 1848). Buxton's papers at Rhodes House Library contain no reference to Nathan Rothschild. Lionel is mentioned in letters of Feb 1834, Nov 1837 and Dec 1838, although there are no letters from him. The index to the correspondence of the Anti-Slavery Society, also at Rhodes House, contains reference to the draft of an appeal from a James Long to Baron Rothschild, (n.d.). I am grateful to Lucy McCann of the Library for this information.
- Jules Ayer, *A Century of Finance* (London, 1904). In 1847 the ship Rothschild carried 50 bags of corn provided by the citizens of Apalachicola. The reason for the naming of the ship is not known. *Transactions of the Society of Friends during the famine in Ireland* (1996).
- Letter from Lionel de Rothschild to Lord John Russell, 30 July 1858 in Spencer Walpole, *Life of Lord John Russell*, vol 2, (London, 1889).

Appendix

“Sundry manuscripts and pamphlets dealing with religious disabilities in Great Britain in the cases of Jews, Quakers and Roman Catholics.”
A collection in The Rothschild Archive, 000/573/6.

Manuscripts

1. Copy Opinion on Baron de Rothschild's case “That there is not any existing Law which renders a Jew as such incapable of being elected and returned to Parliament as a member of the House of Commons.”
2. Draft statement as to the rights of Jews to sit in Parliament. (2 copies at various stages)
3. The opinion of Edward Whitchurch upon Baron Rothschild's position as duly elected Member for the City 1853. Letter and enclosed paper. Letter requesting that an enclosed paper be considered in relation to the Jewish Disability question.
4. Letter with statement prepared by W Willis regarding the case for the opinion of the Attorney General concerning the Russo-Dutch Advance 1847.
5. Minutes of an interview in Downing Street on Tuesday 29th August with Lord J Russell on the part of the City Deputation in reference to the removal of Jewish Disabilities.
6. Six sundry letters. One written 10th Feb 1848 concerns a petition being cared for by James Gernon. Another written 5th February 1848 concerns a paper as signed by various names and passed on for further assistance to Lord Montague.
3. An Act for the relief of His Majesty's Roman Catholic subjects 10 George IV Cap VII. 13 April 1829. Also included is a Schedule to which the Act refers.
4. Report from the Select Committee on Quaker's affirmation 11 February 1833. Speaks of one case in which the admissibility of a Quaker to take his seat in Parliament has come before the House and lists the different Acts of Parliament relating to Quakers.
5. Statement of the Civil Disabilities and Privations affecting Jews in England 1829. Discusses why Jews should not be exempt from Parliament and lists history of Jews in England.



Annotated Division list from the 1847 session on Jewish disabilities

Printed Matter

1. “An answer to a pamphlet entitled Considerations on the Bill to permit persons professing the Jewish Religion to be naturalised; Wherein the false reasoning, gross misrepresentation and perversion of scripture are fully laid open and detected” 1753. Hostile to the extension of political privileges or the right of naturalisation to Jews.
2. Pamphlet in support of the “Bill to permit persons to apply for naturalisation professing the Jewish religion. By an Orthodox Member of the Church of England. An earnest address to the freeholders and electors of Great Britain.”
6. An Act for removing doubts as to the Declaration to be made and oaths to be taken by persons appointed to the office of Sheriff of any city or town being a county of itself. 5 & 6 William IV Cap XXVIII 21 August 1835.
7. Draft of a Bill to be entitled “An Act to amend the Law for the registration of persons entitled to vote in the election of members to serve in Parliament 1847.” Recites previous law and goes on to state that under the new law any male of full age of worth ten pounds or more and not subject to any legal incapacity be able to vote.
8. “A few remarks on the social and political condition of British Catholics” 1847, Earl of Arundel and Surrey.



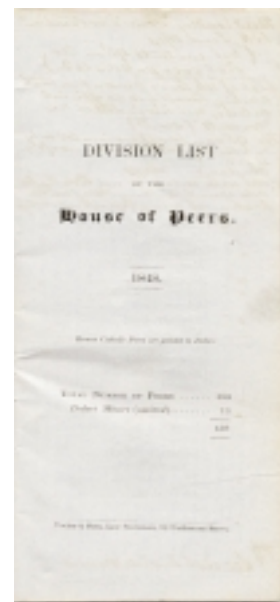
Part of a supportive letter to Lionel de Rothschild from Benjamin Disraeli, 1848

9. "Plain reasons why the Church should acquiesce in the admission of Jews in Parliament" Rev. Harold H. Sherlock A.M. Extracted from the Liverpool Mail 20 November 1847.
10. Public petition for and against the removal of Jewish Disabilities 16-17 December 1847. Split into five categories of Parliament, Ecclesiastical, Colonies, Taxes and Miscellaneous. Also includes the removal of Minister's Money in Ireland, Roman Ambassador, Roman Catholic Charitable Trusts Bill, Roman Catholic Clergy (Ireland), Rajah of Sattara, Transportation, Rating of Tenements, Clerkenwell Improvement, Crime and Outrage (Ireland) Bill, Debtor and Creditor, Health of Towns, Landlord and Tenant (Ireland) and Malmesbury Corporation.
11. Form of Petition for the removal of Jewish Disabilities.
12. Pamphlet in defence of Jewish Emancipation being a reply to an address by the Earl of Winchelsea, 1848, written by "One of the People".
13. Pamphlet and letter, "A free enquiry into the policy of admitting the Jews into Parliament and full participation

in the advantages, honours and privileges of British Denizens viewed as regards religion, justice and expediency" by Francis Higginson 1848; letter 22 January 1848.

14. Tract on the progress of Jewish Emancipation since 1829, 15 January 1848. A short summary of measures introduced into Parliament "for the removal of civil disabilities of English men professing the Jewish religion" as "so much misconception exists as to the nature" of those measures. (3 copies)
15. A speech delivered in the House of Commons on 16 December 1847 by the Right Honourable Lord John Russell in favour of the removal of Jewish Disabilities.
16. "A Bill intituled An Act for abrogating the Oath of Abjuration and the Assurance" 1855.
17. Addresses of the Liberal candidates to the electors of the City of London 1852, J. Russell, Lionel de Rothschild and James Duke each standing again for election.
18. Humble petition of the inhabitants of the borough of Marylebone to the assembled Parliament that Jews may be allowed to sit in Parliament.
19. Division list of the House of Commons on the Jewish Disabilities Bill. Sessions 1847, 1848, 1849 and relative motions in 1850 and 1851.
20. Division list of the House of Lords for the second reading of the Jewish Disabilities Bill 1848.
21. Division list of the House of Lords for the third reading of the Jewish Disabilities Bill 1848.
22. Division list of the House of Commons for the reading of the Jewish Disabilities Bill in 1847. Contains numerous hand written abbreviations and Comments. (2 copies)

23. "Substance of a speech on the motion of Lord John Russell for a committee of the whole house, with a view to the removal of the remaining Jewish Disabilities; delivered in the House of Commons, on Thursday, December 16, 1847. Together with a preface. By The Right Honourable W.E. Gladstone, M.P. for the University of Oxford."
24. Pamphlet "on the proscriptions and persecutions of the Jews with reflections on religious proscriptions by M. Bigon, late member of the chamber of deputies for the department of L'Eure. Translated from the French by a lady with an introductory preface and explanatory notes" 1848. First published in original form in 1821.
25. Draft copy of tract on the progress of Jewish Emancipation since 1829.



An example of a Division list, House of Lords (item 20 left)