

Set apart by their language as well as their religion

Peter Trudgill



email: newsdesk@archant.co.uk

A long time ago, I was a pupil at St William's Primary School, on St William's Way in Thorpe. Next door to the school was the place where I first became interested in languages, St William's Way Library, with its wonderfully helpful librarian Janet Smith. And opposite the library was the field where my friends and I loved playing football and cricket.

So it's rather sad for me that St William himself is something of an embarrassment. As far as we know, there was nothing particularly saintly about William. He was an unfortunate 12-year-old boy who was murdered in 1144 – his body was found on Mousehold Heath by a Henry de Sprowston.

A chapel dedicated to William was built on Mousehold – the ruined foundations are still visible.

In the old days they were hard to find, but my grandfather knew how to get there and took me to see them. Grandad explained that William had been turned into a revered martyr through anti-Jewish racism.

There was a belief that Jews carried out ritual murders of Christian children – “the blood libel” – and Norwich citizens falsely accused the local Jews of killing



■ The marker stone marking the edge of the site of St William's Chapel at Mousehold Heath.

Picture: DENISE BRADLEY

William. This was the same terrible bigotry which led to the slaughter of Jews in Norwich in 1190, and to the expulsion of the Jews from England by King Edward I in 1290.

William was an English boy who spoke English. The Jews, who had arrived in England with William the Conqueror in 1066, spoke French, like the brutal Norman overlords and King Edward himself.

So they were set apart from the English by their language as well as their religion, which no doubt added to the hostility directed towards them.

The Jews also used Hebrew as their language of religion and literature.

It should be a matter of pride for us that a famous mediaeval Hebrew poet lived in the city, probably in the area by the Haymarket – he is known as Meir ben Elijah of Norwich.

But he was never revered by the citizens, and was expelled with the rest of the Jews in 1290.

Now, though, we have made some atonement: his works have recently been translated and published in Norwich as “Into the Light: The Mediaeval Hebrew Poetry of Meir of Norwich”.

I can't help thinking that it would have been much less embarrassing if my school had been named after Meir rather than the unfortunate “Saint” William.