A Margate building's journey from synagogue to art



ARK is bringing life back into the former synagogue. Credit: Nathan Jones.

Jan Ryan, Director of ARK Cliftonville, shares how the cultural space, based in a former place of worship, is getting the balance right between preserving and celebrating the building's Jewish cultural heritage and adapting it for new uses.

Saving the building

Cliftonville, in the Kent seaside town of Margate, was once home to dozens of kosher boarding houses and hotels, attracting Jewish holidaymakers from across the UK.

The Margate synagogue, built in 1928, was at the centre of the community. It provided a place for locals and visitors alike to come together, worship and celebrate.

But as the number of tourists visiting the area fell towards the end of the 20th century, so did the number of people using the synagogue.

In 2018, it was closed and the building fell silent.

Jan says: “It's an important part of Cliftonville's past. It might not be needed as a synagogue now, but we didn’t want to see it pulled down and for that heritage to vanish.”



The synagogue was lying empty before ARK took over the building. Credit: Nathan Jones.

In 2020, together with other local residents, Jan launched a successful campaign to buy the building and give it renewed life as an arts and culture hub.

> It's not so much about saying this was a synagogue and now we're an art centre. It's about taking that heritage into a new chapter of its life.
>
> *Jan Ryan, Director, ARK*

Now, our £249,000 grant is supporting ARK to honour the space's Jewish heritage and welcome the diverse communities that make up Margate.

How heritage is shaping the programme

ARK delivers a wide-ranging programme, from shared dinners and storytelling experiences to an annual refugee festival.

Jan says: "Cliftonville has always been an area of transition. We're home to a number of people seeking asylum and we have a large Roma community. People here have come from all over the world.

"So, our ethos from the beginning was to make a space that's for everybody – somewhere that really brings people together."

And for Jan, ARK's roots in a Jewish place of worship play an important role in shaping this approach.

“We’re using the Jewish experience of diaspora and migration in the way that we empathise with others. My grandparents, for example, came here in the late 1800s. And that shared experience informs how we work with all the communities around us.

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Since reopening, the building has hosted events including a performance of Nick Cassenbaum and Tash Hyman's Macholket. Credit: Nathan Jones.

Recent events have included a Klezmer concert with Frank London, from New York band The Klezmatics. Another highlight was a performance of Machloket, a co-production with London’s Royal Court Theatre. Created by writers Nick Cassenbaum and Tash Hyman, the production draws on stories of Jewish life across the UK, from Egyptian refugees to queer Talmudic scholars.

The project has also involved ARK running workshops in primary schools, linking Passover with themes of migration and how communities move around. And it’s partnering with Christ Church University in Canterbury to develop a new Jewish heritage website and host events as part of Jewish Culture Month 2026.

Caring for a historic space

As for the physical building, our funding has supported the restoration of original features including the wood block parquet floor, marble steps and oak-clad pillars. A new heating system, improved kitchen and accessible toilet facilities have made the space fit for purpose.

Jan says: “I think if you change the use of a building and give it additional life then that's an amazing thing to do. It's not so much about saying this was a synagogue and now we're an art centre. It's about taking that heritage into a new chapter of its life.

“Buildings are on a kind of journey and we're part of this building's journey. There’s something special about the space – a kind of warmth and inclusivity in it architecturally. And we feel privileged to be the guardians of it as it goes into its next phase.”

Repurposing old buildings can help breathe new life into local areas and prevent heritage from falling into disrepair. Planning your own re-use project? Find out how to apply for funding.



The Leicester Hebrew Congregation Synagogue. Photo: Hollis Photography UK.



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Welcoming people aboard the Hastings fishing fleet. Credit: Euan Baker.



stings’ fishing heritage alive



The Tabernacle chapel in Morriston, Swansea.

Transforming Tabernacle for community and culture