

Anti-Jewish riot, 1917

The evenings of June 3rd and 4th 1917 saw major disturbances in the predominantly Jewish area of the Leylands (bordered by North Street and Regent Street); during the Jewish influx of the 1890s and later, most immigrants (especially the poorer ones) had settled here and the district was colloquially referred to as the “Leeds Jewish ghetto”.

On both evenings, trouble flared after gangs (mostly young and male) gathered at the borders of the area and started smashing windows, with whole streets of shop frontages being wrecked; there were also instances of looting. After the first night’s trouble, affairs escalated and events on the second night involved rather more people active over a wider territory, up into Mabgate. On the evening of the 5th June a very heavy police presence prevented any recurrence and there was no further report of incident.

The cause of the only recorded anti-Jewish riot in the city is not wholly clear from the reports. During the trial of some of those arrested, Supt. Blakey of the Leeds police was asked what lay behind it, and replied “It is difficult to say ... I don’t think I should attribute the blame to anyone”. The *Yorkshire Evening News* reported that the culprits were predominantly young (14-20 years old) and suggested that events were a form of retaliation for the behaviour of gangs of “Jewish lads” in Briggate. The *Mercury* alluded to long running bitterness between gangs of “English” and Jewish youths, with the former claiming provocative behaviour by the latter; it was also suggested that feelings were running against Jews because of an alleged reluctance to sign up for military service (vehemently denied by the Elders of the Leylands). The *Mercury* went so far as to report the events of 5th June as a “racial feud”.

In court, magistrates fulminated at length and regretted their inability to sentence miscreants to be birched. The great majority of those arrested were under 20, with scarcely any over 25. When the dust settled, most sentences were relatively minor; the press passed on and the local columns devoted rather more space to those found guilty of hoarding food. Most pages, of course, were devoted to news from the front and the endless columns of names of dead Yorkshiremen – an anti-Jewish riot wasn’t seen as that important.

The Labour *Leeds Weekly Citizen* carried no report at all of the events.