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The Cambridge Mosque and Muslim Community

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The Cambridge Muslim community has grown rapidly over the course of the past thirty years. It now numbers some 2000 individuals mirroring trends evident nationally. As the community has grown so have their requirements. Initially prayers took place in the City Guildhall, then at a Victorian terraced house on Chesterton Road. Today a former Gospel Hall on Mawson Road has been converted into a mosque. Likewise, a dedicated burial ground appears to have been lacking until recently, then a Muslim burial section in the Newmarket Road Cemetery was established. These processes and the development of the community as a whole are charted.

Introduction

This paper is in part derived from a research project completed for a specific purpose, that of assessing the possible archaeological visibility of the Cambridge Muslim community through their material culture, namely their mosques and burial grounds (see Insoll 1999:54–8). The data gathered during this project has been supplemented and revised as a contribution to this Millennial issue of the *Proceedings of the Cambridge Antiquarian Society* looking at religion in Cambridgeshire. The inclusion of the Cambridge Muslim community within this volume is essential for it now numbers over 2000 individuals, yet a mere thirty years ago it numbered less than one hundred. The Muslim community in Cambridge is now an established part of the cities religious “landscape”, and is rightly being recognised as such.

The Origins of the Cambridge Muslim Community

The Cambridge Muslim community is extremely diverse in ethnic composition and probably always has been so, the reason for this being its location within a University town and its partial growth from roots therein. Today, as stated, over 2000 Muslims live in Cambridge, numbers having grown rapidly from about seventy in 1973 (*Cambridge Evening News* [CEN] 1973). The history of the Muslim community both in the city and the University has not been researched prior to this date, but it is almost certainly correct to state that Muslims, be they even in the single figures, would have been in Cambridge for several hundred

years as students and academics, and thus again due to the presence of the University. These University-Muslim community links are repeatedly reinforced even in considering the history and development of the community over the past couple of decades. The Cambridge Muslim Association was in fact formed from a University based society and these links are perpetuated to this day.

This diversity of the Cambridge Muslim community is a point remarked upon in the *Cambridge Evening News*, “it is a diverse, world community in sharp contrast to Moslems [sic] in, for instance Bradford” (CEN 1990b). In an earlier article in the same paper (CEN 1988), the ethnic origins of community members are cited as Britain, Malaysia, Iran, Nigeria, Turkey, Mauritius, Bangladesh and Pakistan. To these could now be added India, Morocco, East Africa and Saudi Arabia. It is also useful to note that besides the British born non-European Muslims referred to under the heading “Britain”, some twenty converted European families also form part of the community. In addition to the sizeable percentage with University associations, shopkeepers, restaurateurs, engineers and many other occupations are represented (CEN 1990b). However, although it might be convenient for the sake of academic procedure to break the community down into its component parts, it should be noted that the mosque authorities prefer to regard the community as one unit, superseding ethnic identities and thus acting in the true spirit of how the Muslim community should be conceived.

As well as growing in numbers over the past twenty-five years, the community has grown in strength and action, mirroring processes across the whole of Britain, where registered mosques have grown from sixteen in 1966 to 452 in 1990, the latest figures published (Nielsen 1995:45). This figure only accounts for mosques registered with the Charity Commission for tax exemption purposes, and thus the actual number is likely to be somewhat higher, and will have grown again since the figures were collected in 1990. Nielsen (1995:41) records the estimated number of Muslims in Britain as between 1.25–1.5 million in 1991. Thus again, the growth of the Muslim community in Cambridge is mirroring trends evident both elsewhere in the country and throughout Mid-Anglia as well;

with some 500 Muslims cited as living in St Ives for instance at the beginning of the 1990s (CEN 1990b).

Antecedents to the Mawson Road Mosque

The material impact of the Muslim community upon Cambridge has also grown as they have rightly expressed their needs for places to pray and in which to bury the dead. As regards the latter, at a national level it is only recently that local authorities have come to realise that Muslims have certain different requirements to other religious groups. For example, the wish to bury within 24 hours of death, and usually in a shroud rather than a coffin (Nielsen 1995:53, and see Insoll 1999: 168–9). This has caused particular problems, with coffins usually being insisted upon by local authorities, though the process within which burial can take place has frequently been sped up to fulfil Muslim needs. Quite how Cambridge City Council has had to react to such requirements, if indeed they have had to face them, is unclear. The number of Muslim burials in the Cambridge City Cemetery on Newmarket Road is small, though these are placed in a special section spatially separated from the blocks of non-Muslim and, in the majority, Christian graves (the exact date of foundation of this section of the cemetery was not established by the author). The City Council has also allowed the Muslim graves to be aligned in a different way to the remainder, thus facilitating the requirement of Muslim burial that the corpse lies on its right hand side with the face towards Mecca (Insoll 1999:168). Prior to establishment of this section the much smaller Muslim community would presumably have repatriated individuals to their home country or buried them within a non-Muslim cemetery (or specially dedicated section thereof).

The sequence of places of prayer used by the Cambridge Muslim community is somewhat clearer. Originally, the incipient community used a room in the City Guildhall (CEN 1973), obviously not ideal, but it could be adapted, albeit temporarily, as requirements dictated. In 1972 an ordinary late Victorian terraced house was bought as a more permanent place of community and prayer, 175 Chesterton Road, where the two small downstairs rooms were used as a mosque. It was planned to convert the upstairs rooms into a flat, presumably for the Imam or prayer leader, again following the pattern of house to mosque conversions evident nationally.

Unfortunately, the arrangements at 175 Chesterton Road were soon found to be wholly unsatisfactory. The house was built without the direction of Mecca as a primary concern, a fact commented upon by a reporter from the *Cambridge Evening News*, "those praying are in lines at an angle across the room, facing the south-east corner" (CEN 1976), a requirement of prayer being that the worshippers align themselves in rows parallel to the *qiblah*, the wall facing Mecca. Demolition and redevelopment would not have provided a solution either as the whole plot was directionally unsuitable. Allied with this was the fact that it

was unlikely that Cambridge City Council would have allowed rebuilding in the first place. A further problem was that planning permission to use the house as a mosque had also not been obtained and the City Council served an enforcement notice in 1980, which was given a stay of execution whilst another property was sought (CEN 1981a, 1981c).

It is possible to chart the search by the Cambridge Muslim community for further suitable premises for a mosque in some detail in the pages of the *Cambridge Evening News*. Of interest in this context are two points. Firstly that the Muslim community in Cambridge at this time (mid '70s to early '80s) was regarded very much as a curiosity, a fact again reflected in the series of articles which appear in the local paper, exemplified by titles such as "Terraced house is mecca (sic) for city's Islamic faith" (CEN 1976). Interestingly, this tone of coverage disappears over the course of the next ten years as Muslims became more of an everyday feature of life both in Cambridge and in Britain as a whole. Secondly, the pursuit of suitable premises by the Muslim community themselves was very much a reflection of the specific historical context, the oil boom experienced by "certain Muslim states" in the Middle East in the mid 1970s which meant that in Britain, "a number of house purchases were clearly made for conversion to mosque use, where the organisers proceeded in the hope or expectation of receiving such support" (Nielsen 1995:44).

Again the national picture was mirrored in Cambridge where the search for premises suitable for rebuilding was partly guided by hopes for funds from the "oil rich governments of the Persian Gulf" (CEN 1976). This same report once more makes the explicit linkage between University and Muslim community, for to these wealthy benefactors, "Cambridge is an especially attractive project, with scores of the sons and daughters of the new Middle Eastern rich coming annually to city language schools and colleges" (CEN 1976). However, the search was subject to various false starts and failed bids. Sites considered and lost for various reasons included All Saints Church and an otherwise unspecified site near Mill Road Library, whilst an application to convert the church of St Andrew the Great into a mosque was also turned down (CEN 1981b).

The Mawson Road Mosque

The final choice, the third, and current, location for a place of prayer was in Mawson Hall, Mawson Road. Even here the purchase process was not a smooth one with the Cambridge Muslim Welfare Society, the purchasers, managing to overcome a counter proposal from the Royal Naval Association to use the building as a social club (CEN 1981d). Its use as a mosque is the culmination of a varied history of use for Mawson Hall which was originally built as a gospel hall, then became a meeting house of the Plymouth Brethren, and finally a social centre for the Co-Operative Society. It began to be used as a mosque in September



Figure 1. The Mawson Road mosque. Photograph by the author.

1982 (CEN 1982, 1988). Although still not ideal, the new location, which became the Abu Bakr Siddiq Islamic Centre (figure 1), was much more suitable than Chesterton Road, primarily because the orientation is correct and so prayer can be said, by chance, on exactly the right alignment by making use of the original layout of the building, which is also relatively open and spacious. Secondly, the former choir or stalls area upstairs serves as a ready-made area for women to use for prayers, being excluded by custom from the main body of the mosque (see Insoll 1999:29) (Fig. 2). The necessary alterations from hall to mosque have been minimal, as a local reporter again comments, "those who look for minarets or listen for the distant sound of the imam ... will however, be disappointed. The church hall-like building has mundane sloping roofs, while any sounds from the imam would be lost in the roar of nearby traffic" (CEN 1985).

As Figure 3 shows, the interior of the mosque is plain and uncluttered. It is divided into two parts, the former church meeting hall which contains the cloakroom, women's area and one prayer hall where a *minbar* (the short flight of steps used by the Imam to deliver his sermon at Friday prayers) and copies of the Qur'an and other religious texts are stored (Figures 4 and 5). Adjacent to this a second prayer hall has been added in which the Imam stands to lead Friday prayers, directed via a microphone relay throughout the building (Fig. 6). Due east of the *qiblah* wall are the ablutions area and a kitchen. Entrance is



Figure 2. The women's section. Photograph by the author.

via two ways, through the main western doorway, or via a passage which leads into the second prayer hall. Noticeably, a *mihrab*, the niche which indicates the direction of prayer in the *qiblah* wall, is absent. At normal daily prayers between thirty to fifty people are usually present, but for Friday prayers and at festivals these numbers increase dramatically, highlighting the lack of space. In fact ingenuity has had to be exercised in addressing the problems of space during the major festivals, most notably the Eid or *id al-fitr* prayers held at the end of Ramadan, the month of fasting. These have included erecting a marquee on Midsummer Common (CEN 1987), and more recently in the grounds of Jesus College (CEN 1990a), to accommodate all the worshippers.

The primary disadvantages of the mosque which were cited during the course of this research project by members of the mosque congregation were the general lack of space and the inconvenient position of the ablutions area, as well as a preference for a building aligned so more worshippers could be accommodated parallel to the *qiblah* (T Ali pers comm 11/9/96). A programme of rebuilding is planned to solve these difficulties, and ideally the sentiments expressed in 1981 still hold true, to build a mosque, "in the classical style with a gold-decorated dome and a minaret" (CEN 1981c). But finances are unlikely to allow this option, even if the planning authorities are amenable to such a suggestion.

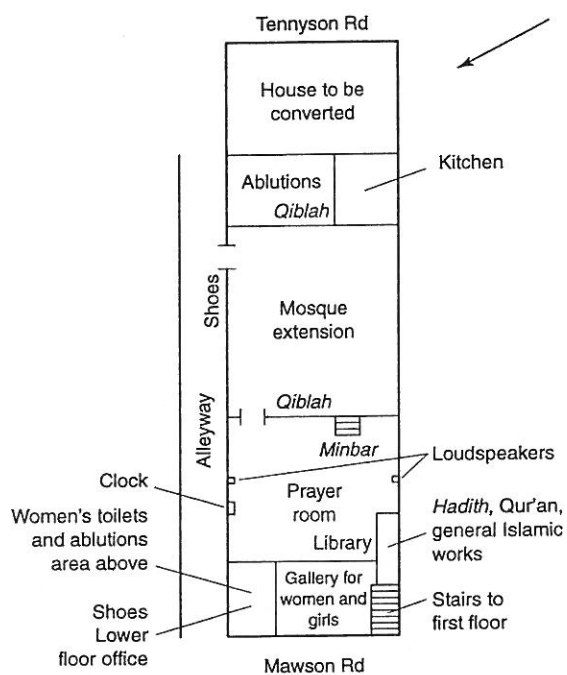


Figure 3. Sketch plan of the mosque interior showing the key features.

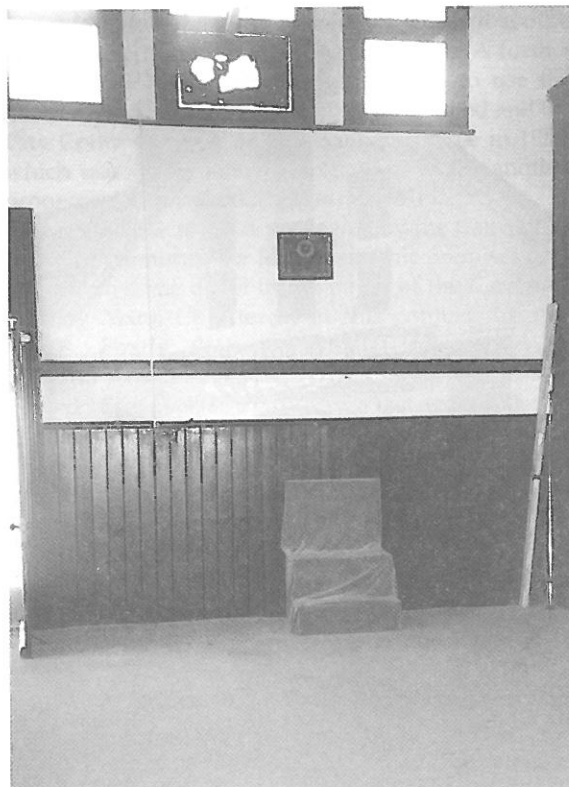


Figure 4. The minbar. Photograph by the author.

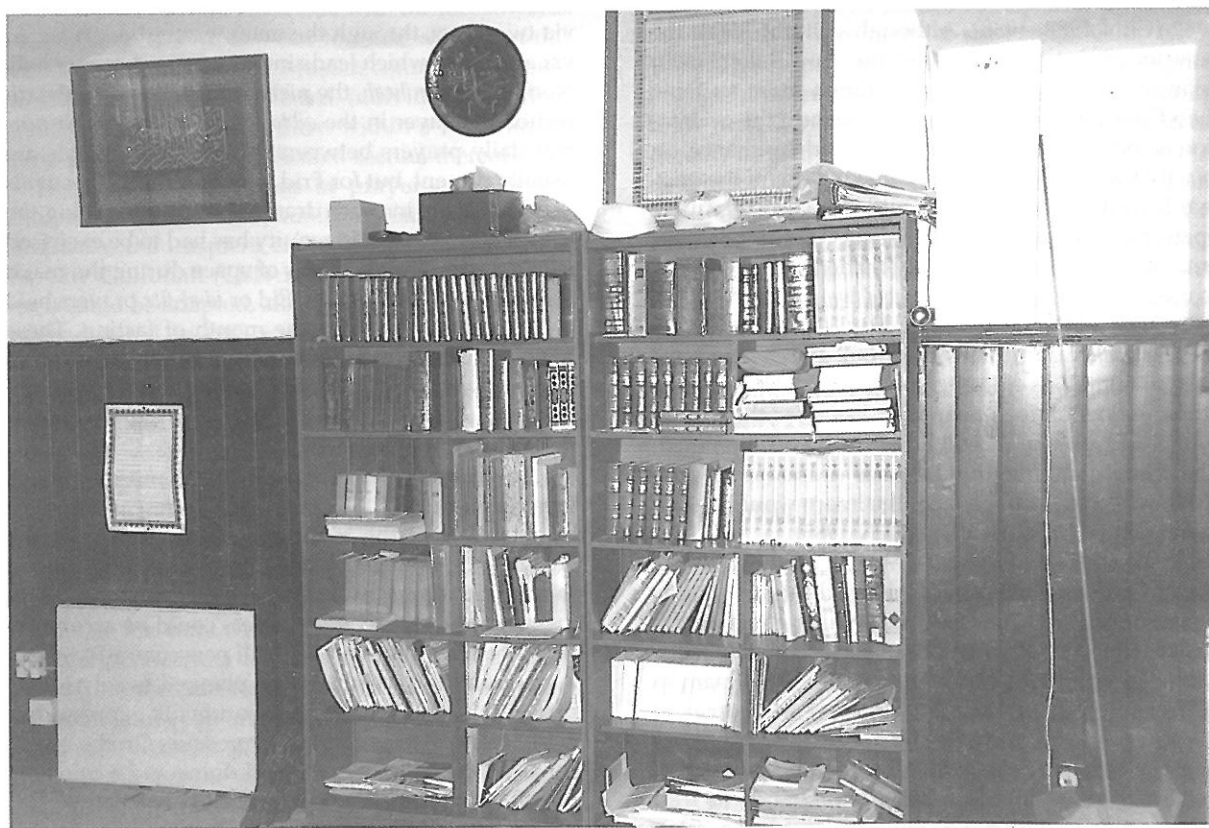


Figure 5. Storage area for Qur'ans and other religious texts. Photograph by the author.

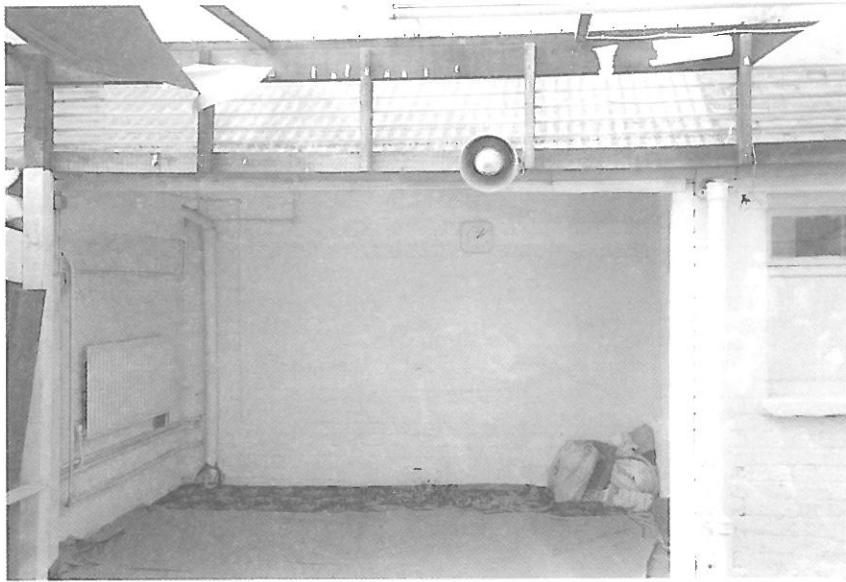


Figure 6. Part of the second (added) prayer hall. Photograph by the author.



Figure 7. Muslims at prayer in the Cambridge mosque. From the Cambridge Evening News, 29.11.1985. By kind permission of the Cambridge Evening News.



Figure 8. The end of Ramadan, celebrated on the lawns of Jesus College. From the *Cambridge Evening News*, 27.4.1990. By kind permission of the *Cambridge Evening News*.

Conclusions

The development of the Cambridge Muslim community over the past twenty five years has been rapid, though deep roots have now been established within the religious landscape of the city. It is without doubt that this community will continue to grow and prosper, again mirroring national trends, and ultimately the ambition of worshipping within a purpose-built mosque, rather than a converted hall might be achieved. The Muslim community in Cambridge both replicates national trends, but is also unique in being so intimately linked from its very beginnings with the University, which has helped to mould its international outlook and composition.

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