

SYNAGOGUE

Siena's 18th century Sephardi synagogue

The synagogue is at 14 vicolo delle Scotte, a tiny lane entered through archways from either via Salicotto (which runs down the left side of the Palazzo Pubblico) or via del Porrione, to the right of the façade of San Martino. The synagogue is open Sunday, Monday and Thursday from 10.30 to 17.30 and other days (except Saturdays) by appointment. During the open days, visits are every half hour and are preceded by a short presentation. Ring the bell for entry.



There has been a Jewish community in Siena since at least 1229. The Jews were not particularly well-treated, being considered “Despisers of the Most Glorious Virgin Mary” (Siena’s traditional protectress), but nevertheless flourished as money-lenders and bankers despite the competition from the Monte dei Paschi. Things went particularly badly after the Medici takeover of Siena. In 1571 Grand Duke Cosimo dei Medici ordered that they be confined to a ghetto area below the Campo and imposed various other restrictions.

When the French revolutionary forces entered Siena in 1796, they tore down the gates of the ghetto and ceremoniously burnt them in the Campo. This emancipation of the Jews was not to last long. There was a counter-revolution against the French in 1799, during which members of a fanatical religious association called “Viva Maria”, founded in Arezzo, burst into the synagogue while the congregation was at prayer. In probably the most shameful episode in Siena’s history, a huge bonfire was built in the Campo and thirteen Jews, including six women, were burnt alive, the Church authorities turning a blind eye. After that, confinement of the community to the ghetto lasted another sixty-odd years and the Jews finally attained full citizenship only in 1895.

Construction on the present synagogue began in 1756, on the site of an earlier building. The community employed as their architect a Florentine, Giuseppe del Rosso, who had worked on several churches in Florence. The outside of the synagogue is very plain, more like a private house, as the Jews were not supposed to build new places of worship. The interior, however, is sumptuous in a neo-classical style unusual in Siena at that period. The community employed master woodworkers and there is also excellent marble carving. The marble used for the columns on either side of the Torah Ark is said to come from Jerusalem, although this seems somewhat unlikely (and would be coals to Newcastle).

There are plaques outside the synagogue, commemorating both the 13 people burnt in 1799 and Siena’s Holocaust victims.

There is also a Jewish cemetery, still in use, at 17 Strada Linaiolo, outside the Porta Romana, to which there are periodic guided tours (telephone 0577 49272).