

FAMILY TREASURE TROVE

Jonathan Fishburn explores London's remarkable Rothschild Archive

Before I became a bookdealer, I was a lowly minion in the computer department at Midland Bank in the heart of London's financial district. Every day, I alighted at Bank Underground station and walked past St Swithin's Lane. Naturally I had no inkling that, several years later, I would be entering one of its impressive buildings to explore the treasures of a very different sort of bank – NM Rothschild & Sons.

Fortunately, the Rothschild Archive discovered me when Vic Gray, the Director, stumbled across my first catalogue and requested to see a couple of books I was offering for sale. When I went to visit him I was overwhelmed by the breadth of the collection – a testimony to the diverse activities of the Rothschild

family and a reflection of interests that spanned the arts, economics, social welfare and Jewish communal life.

The Rothschild Archive was established in 1978 to preserve and arrange the records of this extraordinary family business. While material from the London firm, NM Rothschild & Sons, forms the core of the collection, its one and a quarter million letters also reveal the activities of the other banks through the volume of correspondence and accounts that circulated between them. The family's other interests are reflected in the growing collections of personal papers that the Archive has been fortunate enough to attract. There are even boxes of original receipts that record charitable donations to a wide range of Jewish institutions.

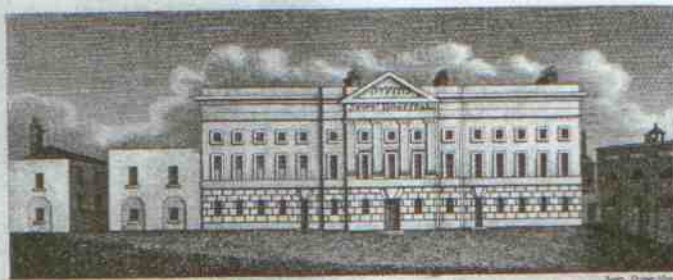


All images reproduced with the permission of the Rothschild Archive

Receipt for a year's subscription to the Bread, Meat & Coal Society, 1816

N^o 1815

*Books & Shoes made
for the Wholesale Trade
& for Exportation on the
lowest terms.*



F^o 8

*Orders for Chairs &
Needle work most thankfully
received & punctually executed
in the best manner.*

FOR THE SUPPORT OF AGED & FOR THE EDUCATION & EMPLOYMENT OF YOUTH.

*Received of a V. M. Rothschild Esq. the Sum of
Three Guineas being a Subscription for one Year in advance
to the Jews' Hospital &c. Mile End, to Wills. A. M. 5520 (1820)*

L. S. S.
L. Salmon { *Secretary*
 { *& Collector*

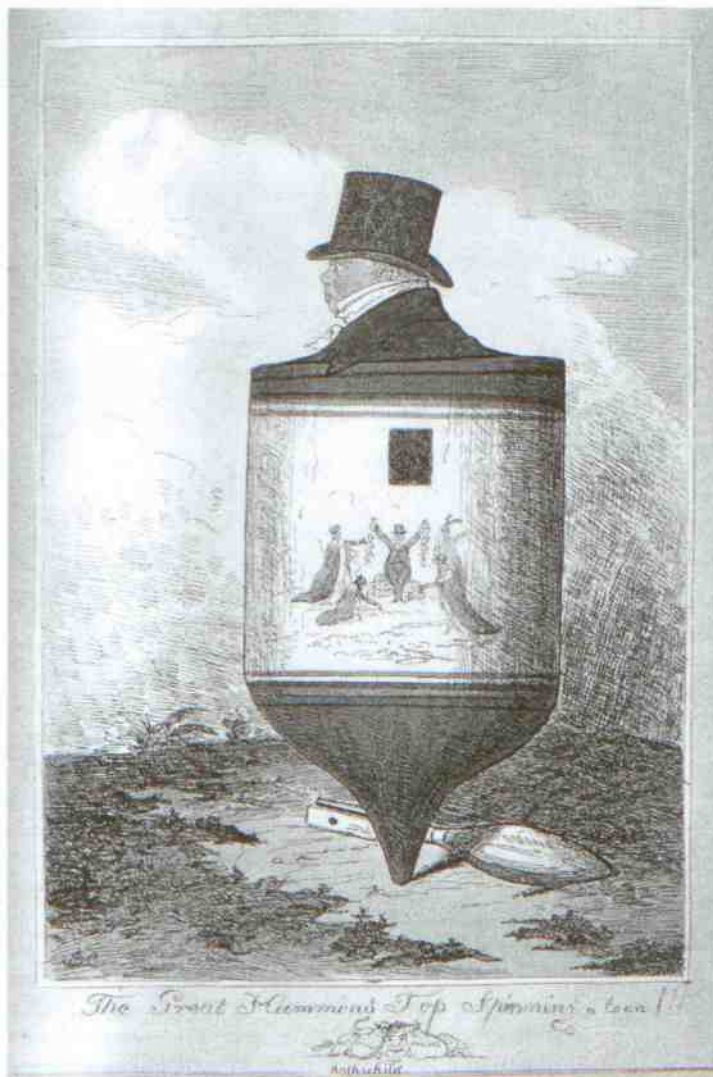
M. A. Gelsmid
Treasurer.

Above (and overleaf): receipts for annual subscriptions to the Jews' Hospital, Mile End, 1820 and 1815. Below: 'A. C.', 'The great humming top spinning a loan' (1829), showing Nathan Rothschild within a top decorated with an image of him distributing money to four figures, three of them crowned and robed – a common motif in Rothschild iconography

The Archive has an international flavour, with material culled from Europe, Russia, and North and South America. Of particular significance are two deposits of papers relating to the family in France, dating from the late nineteenth century to the 1930s. These record the involvement of family members in areas such as the theatre, philanthropy, the development of Jewish colonies in Palestine and the management of estates and art collections.

In 1999, the ownership of the Archive was transferred to the Rothschild Archive Trust, an independent body of family members and advisers committed to securing the future of the collection and to developing its use by the academic community. It is no surprise that this dynamic, innovative family has launched a project that harnesses the technology of the digital age. For example, the Rothschild Research Forum is a new, web-based facility providing on-line access to increasingly detailed and extensive resources: original documents in transcript or digital form; images; virtual exhibitions; guides to family properties; inventories of collections; articles by curators, archivists and researchers; lists of new publications; and opportunities to communicate directly with fellow researchers via the Research Directory and the Message Board.

Despite – or because of – their financial success, the Rothschild family maintained a strong sense of social responsibility and never shirked their charitable duties. For two centuries all the different branches have involved themselves in activities for the improvement of



The Great Humming Top Spinning a loan
Rothschild

N^o 335

צדקה



נוה

שְׂמֹחַ מִשֶּׁפֶט וְעָשׂוּ צְדָקָה כִּי קְרוּבָה יִשׁוּעָתָּהּ

Received of *V. M. Rothschild Esq* the Sum of
Three Guineas being a Subscription for one Year,
in advance to the Jews Hospital, &c. Mile End, from. *Mids. A. M. 5575*

£3:3:0

J. G. Bond Secretary.

Avon Joseph Treasurer.

Below: one of the boxes used by the Russian Central State Archives to store Fond 637, the Austrian Rothschild papers, now transferred to the Rothschild Archive in London

social and educational conditions and opportunities. This work has touched upon an enormous range of social affairs, from deprived and orphaned children, through biological research and the provision of medical facilities, to education through schools and libraries, relief and housing of the poor, and support for cultural and artistic initiatives and a range of Jewish causes. The Archive holds copies of testimonials from organizations that the Rothschilds have helped to establish and sustain.

Interestingly, the Rothschild Archive has just launched a new project to examine the scale and impact of Jewish philanthropy and charitable activity across Europe between 1800 and 1940. Funded by the Hanadiv Foundation and supported by the Rothschild Archive (London) and the Parkes Centre for the Study of Jewish/non-Jewish Relations (University of Southampton), the research is being led Dr Klaus Weber, a Research Fellow at Southampton. The concentration of dense source material on the charitable activities of a single family spread across five European countries – the Rothschilds – provides an ideal focus for looking at many broader aspects of modern philanthropy.

It is hoped that the work will encourage other similar studies and increase awareness of a facet of Jewish history that has arguably not received the attention it deserves. A preliminary analysis of the charitable engagements of the Rothschilds, and their variations across time and place, will help set the context for further study of the family's activities and ongoing legacy. This project is one way that the Archive demonstrates that it is not just a repository of dusty materials from a bygone era, but a

dynamic conduit for a wider conversation about the inner workings of the contemporary Jewish community.

Jonathan Fishburn is an antiquarian bookdealer specializing in Hebraica and Judaica. He can be contacted at fishburnbooks@yahoo.co.uk



The Archive encourages research into every aspect of Rothschild history and will be pleased to hear from new researchers. Contact the archivist, Melanie Aspey, on +44 (020) 7280 5874 or consult their website for further information: www.rothschildarchive.org