

MERTHYR TYDFIL SYNAGOGUE PROJECT
LANDSCAPE STRATEGY STATEMENT
by
BRONWEN THOMAS LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT
for
FOUNDATION FOR JEWISH HERITAGE

FINAL: August 2025



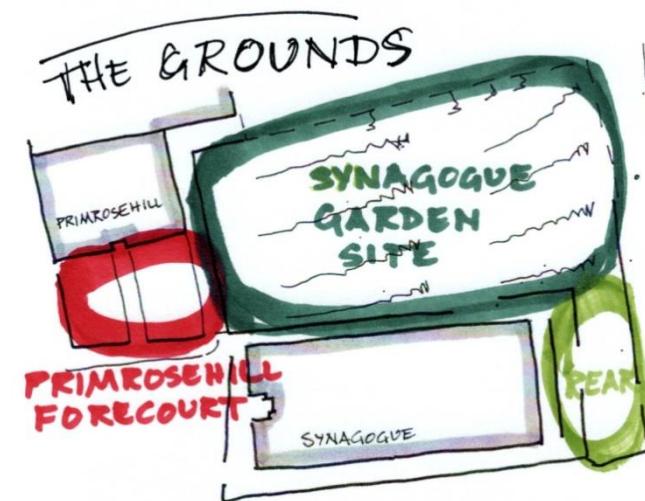
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INTRODUCTION

This statement outlines the principles developed for the design of the garden and other outdoor areas related to the Synagogue and Primrose Hill, collectively referred to here as 'the grounds'. It has been prepared by Bronwen Thomas Landscape Architect, a local landscape consultant and member of the design team, familiar with Merthyr Tydfil for many years and experienced in design and restoration within historic landscapes. This report has been written following site visits and discussions with other members of the design team and local residents in 2024/5.

The grounds are taken to be the undeveloped parts of the overall Synagogue and Primrose Hill site, namely:

- the focus of the designed landscape will be on the rectangular plot of land immediately north of the Synagogue. This plot links with the smaller area to the east (rear) of the Synagogue, currently occupied by derelict steps and which will primarily be taken up with new outbuildings. Together these are referred to in this statement as the **Synagogue garden site**;
- the rectangular front garden, or forecourt, of Primrosehill House, lying between the house and Church Street to the south, and which adjoins the Synagogue garden site to the east. This is referred to in this statement as **Primrose Hill forecourt**.



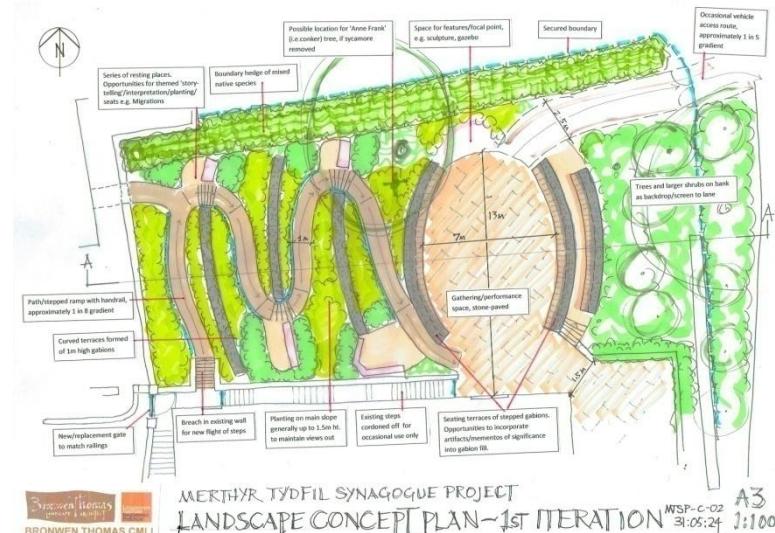
VISION

The Synagogue garden and Primrose Hill forecourt are to be integral parts of the visitor experience of the Welsh Jewish Heritage Centre, complementing and contrasting with the buildings and their content and usage. They will provide opportunities for outdoor events and gathering, further interpretation, understanding and learning, quiet contemplation and enjoyment, and for local community engagement.

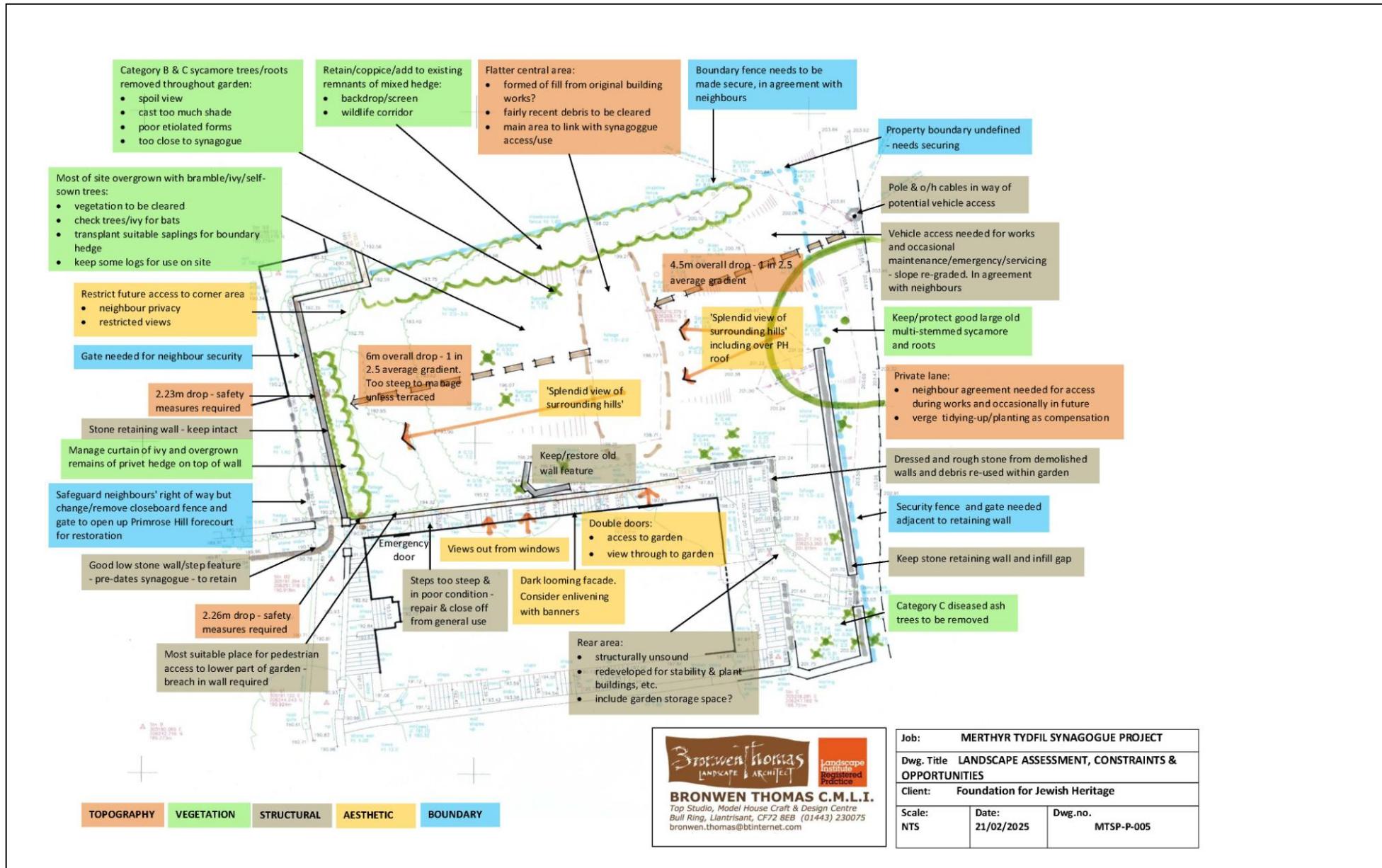
Whilst conserving the limited on-ground historic features and respecting the heritage value of the whole site, the buildings and locale, the grounds will be of their time, adopting sustainable design principles and a contemporary aesthetic.

The Synagogue garden will make the most of the dramatic steep slope with extensive views across the valley. It will be terraced with a snaking path down to a new entrance near the Synagogue's main entrance. There will be a central paved small arena, with a new door directly from the first floor of the Synagogue, ensuring that it is accessible within the constraints of the steep site and limited access opportunities. Primrose Hill forecourt will function primarily as a visitor gathering area on arrival and departure. Together they will provide appropriate and attractive setting for the cultural centre, with physical and visual links between the Synagogue and Primrose Hill and a safe secure environment for visitors.

Biodiversity enhancement and the sustainability of functions, materials and processes are at the core of the development of the design for the grounds and their future management.



Early sketch proposals - Landscape Concept



LOCATION/HISTORY/HERITAGE VALUE - CURRENT SITUATION

The whole site is on the steep west-facing slopes on the east side of the Taff valley, overlooking Merthyr Tydfil town. There is large private garden to the north and a private lane to the east, the Synagogue lies immediately to the south and to the west there is Primrose Hill House, separated from the Synagogue garden area by a high retaining wall.

The whole site lies within the Thomastown Conservation Area, and the grounds are within the curtilages of the Synagogue and Primrose Hill, both of which are Listed Buildings. This part of the Conservation Area is described as 'dominated by detached and semi-detached houses in spacious and wooded surroundings.' The site lies on the edge of this area with its gardens and small wooded areas linking up the slope to Thomastown Park and beyond forming a well-tree'd backdrop and setting for site, especially when viewed from approaches from the west, up from the town centre.

The early OS maps show Primrose Hill House (built early-to-mid 19th century) with a walled front garden, separated from the path leading to the house behind. There is a single tree in the south west corner and a central straight path from its front door to Church Street, much the same as it is now. The site of the Synagogue and its garden is shown as an open area with no trees marked which may have been allotment gardens, with a series of flights of steps up from Church Street.

The Synagogue was opened in 1877. A newspaper report at the time of the laying of the cornerstone notes that 'The contours of the ground was most awkward, necessitating a great deal of excavation and the erection of sustaining walls before the foundations could be got in.' It is likely,

therefore, that the current landform includes material dug out for these foundations and added to the natural slope, necessitating the retaining walls to Primrose Hill House and to the steps running up the north side of the synagogue. The complex arrangement of steps and stone walls up to the lane from the rear of the Synagogue were also part of the original building development and served to retain the hillside above. These walls are constructed of roughly coursed Pennant stone and are the main built features relating to the Synagogue and Primrose Hill within the grounds.

The area of the **Synagogue garden** was originally set aside for building the reader's house and for a playground for the children who attended the school in the Synagogue. No development, however, took place and no evidence has come to light of the site having been put to any positive use by the Synagogue. Neither has any evidence been found on the ground or in historic records of garden elements or planting within the site.

Early twentieth century photographs show trees developing on the Synagogue garden site and privet hedges along Primrose Hill frontage and atop the retaining wall to the Synagogue garden site, both of which remain more or less intact.

Primrose Hill House retains its side and front boundary stone wall and gateways and its pathway leading to the front door, intact. The distinctive red and black chequered tiles of the path are likely to date from the late nineteenth century or later.

Refer to the Heritage Assessment and its Appendices for further information.

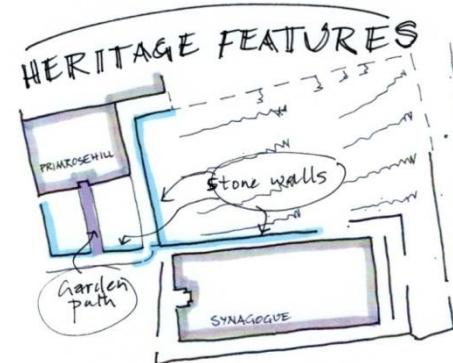
LOCATION/HISTORY/HERITAGE VALUE - LANDSCAPE STRATEGY

The primary heritage value of the Synagogue garden site relates to its proximity to both the Synagogue and Primrose Hill House. There appears to be little integral heritage value in the fabric of the site itself. The main part of the Synagogue garden site therefore presents an almost 'blank canvas' as far as heritage value is concerned and there is scope to create a new garden that is unrestricted by historic precedence and restoration requirements.

The integrity of the built features, primarily retaining walls, relating to the Synagogue and Primrose Hill will be retained and incorporated into the design of the garden, and any alterations and repairs will be constructed to match.

When clearances are taking place, evidence of past artifacts, structures and activities within the Synagogue garden may come to light. If encountered, these will be evaluated and taken into account within the design and construction as it develops.

The simple formal layout of Primrose Hill forecourt is appropriate for the building style and for the proposed uses. Therefore it will be retained, with its stone boundary walls, hedge and tiled path.



LANDFORM/DRAINAGE/ACCESS - CURRENT SITUATION

The land of the **Synagogue garden site** falls approximately 10m in its 30m length from east to west. There is a relatively level area across the mid slopes, generally aligned with the proposed door from the first floor of the Synagogue. This makes for an approximately 1 in 2.5 gradient in the upper and lower parts of the Synagogue garden site. There is a 2.25m drop to Primrose Hill forecourt and varying height drop to the steps alongside the Synagogue. The private lane to the east of the site is at a higher level, supported by a 1m high retaining wall at the boundary at the edge of the verge. To the rear of the Synagogue the high stone walls are structurally unsound. There is also a bank down to the north boundary with the neighbours' garden.

As noted previously, the landform is likely to be the result of tipping of excavated material on the existing slope at the time of the construction of the Synagogue. More recent debris, including from within the building, has been tipped especially on the central flatter area. This includes a considerable number of re-usable stone blocks.

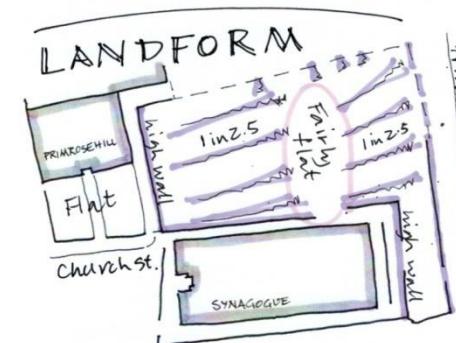
Due to its overgrown state, soil depths and structure have not yet been investigated. However, it is reasonable to conjecture that there is adequate sub-soil and top-soil for re-use as a garden, once it has been cleared of debris and unwanted vegetation.

The land naturally drains down the slope and appears to drain well into the underlying strata. There is no evidence of water built-up behind retaining walls or puddling on the surface. Surface water drainage from the building is embedded under the steps adjacent to the building.

Due to the steep gradients and high retaining walls, both vehicle and pedestrian access is limited to the Synagogue garden site. There is no direct access from Primrose Hill or Church Street to this area. The main pedestrian access is from the Synagogue door on the first floor. The steps alongside the Synagogue are too steep and narrow for general use, and are in poor condition.

The **Primrose Hill forecourt** is flat and has long been part of the frontage of the house. Access is via the pedestrian entrance gateway from the street.

The house immediately behind Primrosehill House has its access, pedestrian only, alongside the retaining wall that forms the eastern boundary of Primrose Hill forecourt. This right of way has its own gate and gateway and is separated from the rest of the forecourt by a close-board fence.



LANDFORM/DRAINAGE/ACCESS/- LANDSCAPE STRATEGY

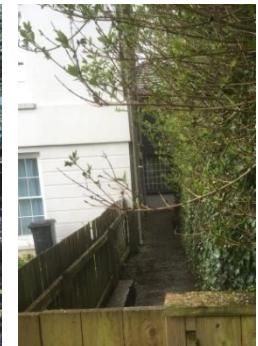
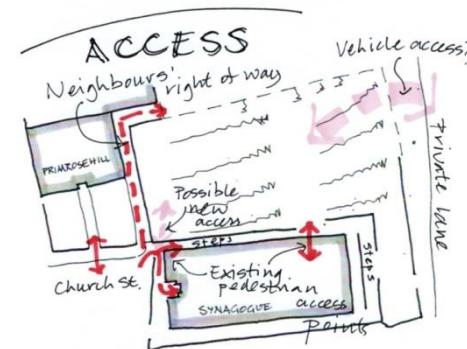
The options for access requirements for development works for the Synagogue building are given in the Conservation Management Plan (para.4.1.8). This states that there will be problems accessing all parts of the site during development works, including the Synagogue building and proposed additional stabilising works to the rear. All these options are likely to have considerable effects on the fabric of the Synagogue garden area, necessitating clearance of vegetation and the removal of trees, earthworks to make temporary vehicle routes, and requiring the protection of soils and vegetation to be kept. It is likely that the most feasible vehicle access, both during development and for future use of the garden, would be from the private lane to the east of the site. This would be very steep and require neighbour consent and remedial works to the lane itself. However, it would also allow for emergency vehicle access to the Synagogue in the longer term.

It is proposed that the main slope is terraced using stone-filled gabions to provide stability whilst allowing free drainage through and giving opportunities for plants to colonise and soften them. There will be a ramped path with steps zig-zagging down the terraces to near the main entrance to the Synagogue, requiring a breach in the side retaining wall. This will open up an alternative outdoor route between Primrose Hill and the upper floors of the Synagogue and the garden.

The entrance to Primrose Hill forecourt (and therefore to the House) via the pedestrian gateway from Church Street is unlikely to pose much problem for access for scaffolding, and small plant, machinery and fittings to Primrose Hill House during the works or for pedestrian and disabled access when functioning as part of the Heritage Centre.

The removal of the closeboard fence is proposed, further opening up the forecourt. The neighbours' path alongside Primrose Hill House will be gated.

Along with the opening up of new access points comes the need for securing the grounds. 2.4m high weldmesh fences and vehicle gate are proposed along the boundary with the private lane to the east and to the neighbours' garden to the north.



BIODIVERSITY/VEGETATION/HABITATS/CLIMATE CHANGE - CURRENT SITUATION

The main habitat on **Synagogue garden site** is semi-natural native mixed woodland which has developed since the Synagogue was built. This is comprised mainly of self-sown sycamore trees and ash trees, with bramble as the main component of the understorey, and ivy being the main species in the ground layer and climbing many of the trees and walls. Both the main tree species are common and the ash are all suffering from ash dieback disease which will eventually kill them. The Tree Report evaluates only four of the sycamore trees as Category B (Moderate) - desirable for retention, and the remainder as either Category C (Low) - optional for retention, or Category U (Poor) - unsuitable for retention. Many of the trees are in close proximity to the Synagogue and to retaining walls, potentially causing damp ingress and root damage. Apart from a larger, older multi-stemmed sycamore of the eastern boundary, all of the trees on the site are etiolated - grown tall and narrow due to overcrowding and lack of light. There are several other species of self-sown native and ornamental shrubs, saplings and small trees, including the aforementioned privet hedge.

This habitat has been evaluated as being of local ecological importance. Bat surveys show that several species of bats use the Synagogue for roosting and hibernation, and are likely to forage amongst the ivy-clad trees and shrubs of the site and further afield. Likewise a variety of birds and small mammals are likely to use this habitat for feeding, roosting and nesting.

Primrose Hill forecourt has privet hedges along its frontage and small lawns on either side of the central path.

The closest Site of Special Scientific Interest is more than 1km away, and the closest Site of importance for Nature Conservation - the River Taff - is nearly half a kilometre away. Therefore no impacts on these areas is anticipated with the developments on site.

The whole site lies within the context of large mature gardens with trees and small areas of woodland as well as Thomastown Park. Together these form a network of habitats and linkages for wildlife.



BIODIVERSITY/VEGETATION/HABITATS/CLIMATE CHANGE/PLANTING - LANDSCAPE STRATEGY

Biodiversity enhancement is a key factor in the design of the Synagogue garden and the whole site. The step-wise approach to biodiversity enhancement - avoid, minimise, mitigate/restore, compensate - is being taken. Further detail is given in the Green Infrastructure Statement.

Avoid: Some trees and other vegetation on the garden site will be retained where they are in a healthy condition and form important screening and linkages, especially on the northern side where there is a variety of native trees and shrubs (e.g. hawthorn, willow, holly, yew). The mature privet hedges relating to Primrose Hill and the lower edge of the garden will be retained. However, in order to develop the Heritage Centre and its integral grounds much modification to the existing vegetation elsewhere will be unavoidable. Several of the trees need to be removed to enable the building works to the Synagogue and to protect the building in the future. Trees effected by ash dieback and other poor specimens will be felled, as will those that obstruct important views, prevent circulation and reduce planting opportunities.

Minimise: The clearance works and use of both the Synagogue garden area and Primrose hill forecourt will be carefully managed by adhering to method statements covering, for instance:

- timing of clearances and felling to avoid undue disturbance to bats and be outside the bird nesting season. This may involve phased removal of trees;
- ground level tree assessment for bats prior to any tree removal;

- coppicing of smaller trees and native shrubs that can be retained to develop into denser hedge backdrop;
- transplanting of native saplings and small shrubs to bulk up screening;
- protection of roots and canopies of retained trees;
- removal of invasive non-native species e.g. laurel;
- protection/conservation/re-cycling of existing soils;
- use on site of logs, timber and brushwood from fellings;
- disposal of cleared vegetative material and debris;
- construction routes, compounds and storage areas.

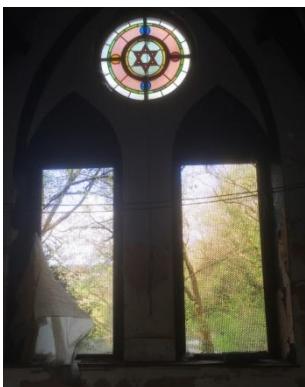
Mitigate/restore: Planning Policy Wales states that 'Replacement planting shall be at a ratio equivalent to the quality, environmental and ecological importance of the trees lost.' (para.6.4.42). A realistic approach is being taken which follows good design principles. New trees, mainly native species, will be planted where they will provide shelter and screening to the north side of the site, and to the eastern border. Effectively this will create a new woodland belt or large hedge, along with the coppiced and translocated trees.

Compensate: The loss of amenity and biodiversity value of the removed trees will be more than compensated. Detailed proposals will be developed that will provide more varied and diverse habitats, including for mammals, reptiles and amphibians, with an emphasis on planting that provides for pollinators and birds, being resilient to climate change and being relevant to Welsh Jewish heritage, as well as being pleasing to the eye and nose. Future maintenance (by volunteers) and management will be monitored and the design will allow for flexibility of requirements.

AESTHETIC QUALITIES/USE OF MATERIALS - CURRENT SITUATION

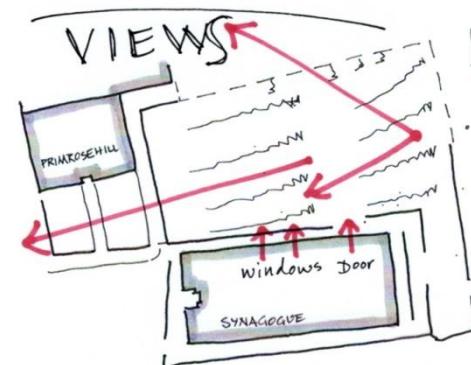
Currently the **Synagogue garden** site has a sombre character, overshadowed by the imposing north side facade of the Synagogue. Dense tree and scrub cover on and immediately adjacent to the site add to the dark cold atmosphere. The view westward from the Synagogue across the Taff valley was described in an 1876 news report as 'a splendid view of surrounding hills'. These similar views from the Synagogue garden site are now partially obscured by the trees and other vegetation. They are best seen from the upper part of the site where currently views can be glimpsed over the roof of Primrose Hill house to the open skyline to the west and north west.

From within the Synagogue there are views from windows both on the first and second floors, as well as potentially through the proposed first floor door. Approaching up Church Street and from other approaches the Synagogue is a formidable structure almost enveloped within its wooded site, giving an uninviting 'gothic' character to the site.



The facades of the Synagogue are of roughly coursed Pennant stone with dressed stone cornices, window surrounds and other details. There is also some similar stonework in the retaining walls, and numerous stone blocks deposited on the site.

Primrose Hill forecourt forms a contrast to the Synagogue garden site by being a simple level lawned rectangle, enclosed by stone walls and privet hedges, and bisected by the distinctive tiled path, complementing the classic facade of the house.



AESTHETIC QUALITIES/USE OF MATERIALS/INTERPRETATION - LANDSCAPE STRATEGY

Removal of most of the larger trees will open up the 'splendid' views and allow light into the Synagogue garden site and the building, thus reducing its gloomy character and allowing more variety of vegetation to thrive. There will be several places, with seating, within the garden where these views can be appreciated, and consideration is being given to how the garden and beyond is viewed from within the Synagogue, through windows and the door from the first floor. There will be an emphasis of taller and denser planting on the north side where shelter and screening is required, and to the east to give privacy to the lane above and to blend in with the mature trees within the hillside gardens beyond.

Hard landscape materials will primarily be natural, local and re-cycled, including the re-use of stone, logs and found materials from the site. Pennant stone will be used for paving, gabions and edgings and timber for seats.

Opportunities for interpretation in the garden have been outlined in the Interpretation Plan. These will be further explored during the design development to ensure that interpretation and relevance to the ethos of the Welsh Jewish Heritage Centre is embedded in the fabric of the garden. A key tree will be the horse chestnut which is a sapling from the original tree that Anne Frank mentions in her diary. This will be located towards the northern boundary where it will be seen when entering the garden from the Synagogue and where there will be space for it to eventually develop into a large specimen. There may be opportunities to bring more colour to the garden and north facade of the Synagogue

with the use of banners and other such temporary or removable fixtures.



DRAFT LANDSCAPE PROPOSALS

