



Rethink Rebuild Society

A voice of the British Syrian community

Press Release

11/10/2017

Manchester Local of Syrian descent discovers grave of her forefather dating back to 1902 as the first Muslim grave in Manchester

Manchester local of Syrian descent, Zeina El Debs, discovered by chance that her forefather Mohammad Yaseen Hallaby was the first Muslim known to be buried in Manchester in 1902. Zeina has been living in the UK for 26 years. She has four children, all of whom have been raised in Manchester and two of whom were born here.



Mr. Hallaby's grave in Southern Cemetery

Below is the story as revealed by Zeina:

I was visiting my family in Beirut, Lebanon in May 2017. Over lunch, my father mentioned that my great-grandfather's brother, Mohammad Yaseen Hallaby, had a successful textile business in Manchester between the 19th and 20th centuries.

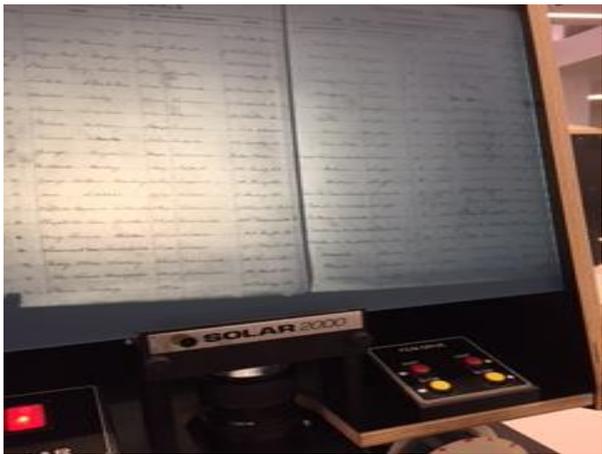
My father suggested that Mr. Hallaby would have arrived in Manchester by 1870, perhaps even earlier. He thought that he would have died by 1920 (although I later found out that this was 1902).

This story inspired me and I resolved to find my forefather's grave in my home city of Manchester. After all, my father mentioned that Mr. Hallaby had had no wife nor children, and thus no immediate descendants. I was worried that his memory would be forgotten and thus resolved to revive his legacy.

My father told me that Mr. Hallaby is buried in Southern Cemetery, Didsbury, Manchester and that there is a sort of Turkish hat (fez) engraved on his grave. That was my starting point.

When I got back to Manchester in June 2017 I started making some phone calls and looked through online archives but kept running into dead ends. As I later discovered, I was both misspelling his name (with an 'i' instead of 'y' and with one instead of two 'l's) and was using 1920 as his year of death instead of 1902.

I was advised to use the microfilms at Manchester Central Library. The staff were very helpful and allowed me to look at the microfilms dated 1901-1920 as well as 1921-1940. I was assuming that Mr. Hallaby's date of death lie somewhere in the middle of these two date ranges, and therefore did not find what I was looking for.



Records of burials on microfilm at Manchester Central Library

Back at home in the evening, I was reminded that there is an office at the Southern cemetery which could help me in my search for the grave's location.

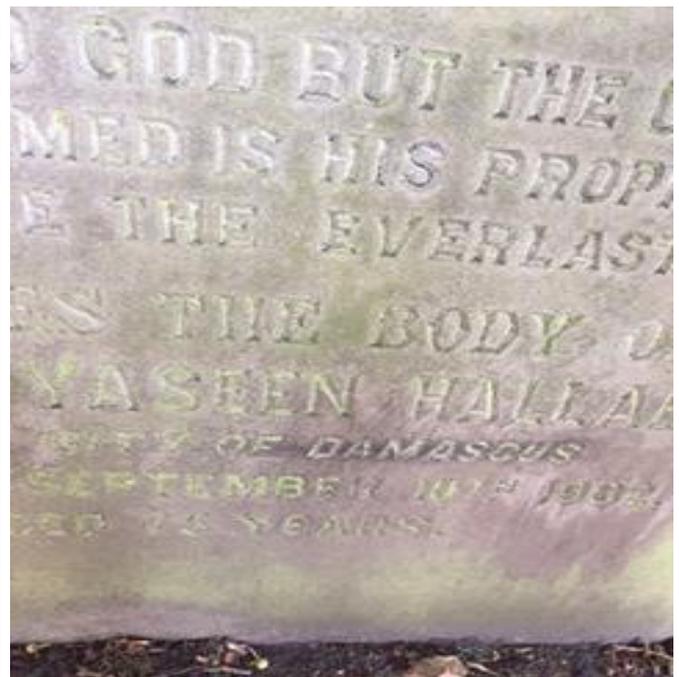
I called the Southern Cemetery the next day and told them that I was looking for a relative who passed away a long time ago. I spelt the name as 'Mohamed Halabi' but Cliff Sheffield, the customer services officer at the Southern cemetery, could not find him in the record of burials. Although I was initially hesitant to do so, I mentioned to him that there was a fez engraving on the grave. This time, his reply was instantaneously positive. The spelling of my forefather's name as it was recorded in the archives was Hallaby instead of Halabi. He was a merchant and in fact he had passed away in 1902, not 1920!

When I asked Mr. Sheffield how he knew this, he said that a reporter had come to the cemetery only two months ago looking for the first Muslim grave in Manchester, and it was his! He later gave me a copy of the [article](#).

Mr. Sheffield welcomed my request to come and visit the grave. I went later that day and he personally took me to the grave. Indeed, there was a Turkish hat engraved in the stone.



The distinguishing Turkish hat engraved into Mr. Hallaby's grave

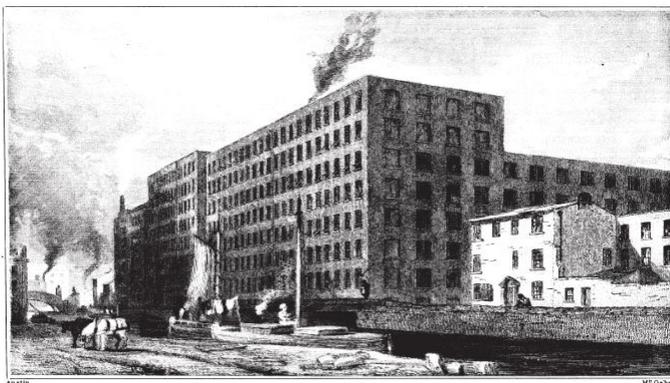


Born in the city of Damascus

I now feel more at peace that I have recovered the grave of my lost forefather. I wish to revive his memory as he had no direct descendants. In his name, I want to raise money for a well in Nigeria for displaced needy refugees. This will be the hundredth well constructed there by the charity FREE (UK Charity No: 1164143). I am accepting donations at the following link: <https://mydonate.bt.com/fundraisers/zeinaeldebs1>

This finding emphasises the historical connection between the UK and Syria, primarily textile merchants, dating back to the 19th century. Before the most recent wave of Syrian arrivals as refugees, therefore, Manchester had an extensive history with Syrian traders and businessmen dating back more than a century and a half.

Author Walter P. Zenner describes in his [book](#) 'Jews among Muslims: Communities in the Precolonial Middle East' the historical connection between English and Syrian businessmen, particularly with respect to Manchester: "At the end of the eighteenth century, Syria conveyed raw materials and finished goods, particularly silk and cotton to Europe... The nineteenth century brought drastic economic changes, as effects of European industrialization came to be felt... The industrial revolution caused a reversal in the flow of trade... Aleppines [from Aleppo, Syria] of all religions, including Muslim shipping merchants, opened offices in Manchester, England, with the object of selling British textiles in the Levant." (p 167)



COTTON FACTORIES, UNION STREET, MANCHESTER.



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For further information and press enquiries, please contact 07769704656, or email: yasmine@rrsoc.org

Rethink Rebuild Society has established itself as a non-profit organisation that acts as an umbrella for the British Syrian community, and endeavours to clarify the Syrian cause to its audience in the UK and the wider public.