



BETH HAIM: FOUR CENTURIES OF HISTORY

The oldest Jewish cemetery in Holland has a new lease of life, says Simon Stephens



Above: visitors watch a short film about the cemetery in the pavilion

Top and right: the new pavilion at Beth Haim, near Amsterdam

Beth Haim, not far from Amsterdam, is one of the oldest Sephardic cemeteries in the world and the oldest Jewish cemetery in the Netherlands. It has recently been revamped to make the story of more than four centuries of history accessible to visitors. The project, which was launched in 2014 on the 400th anniversary of its foundation, was completed in December last year.

The cemetery is home to the graves of more than 28,000 members of the Portuguese Jewish community of Amsterdam. But by 1923, Beth Haim neared full capacity because Jewish law forbids the exhumation of the dead, so an old part of the site was covered with earth to create more space. At the time it was thought this area would last the community until 1963 but because so many Jewish people were murdered during the Nazi occupation in the second world war, it still has enough space for the next 80 years. So while the oldest graves date from the 17th century, new ones are still added today.

The site has been revamped and interpreted by Dutch exhibition design firm Kossmanndejong and Loerakker Olsson Architects.

Paths have been mowed through the landscape and new benches have been placed at

resting spots. Stairs and bridges have also made the formerly cut-off parts of the historic cemetery more accessible.

The cemetery also has a free-to-download app developed by digital outfit Studio YiPP that brings to life the stories about the most significant tombs.

The whole experience is tied together with a new pavilion. This features an introductory film and 3D models that explain more about the cemetery, such as how many graves have sunk into the ground over the years.

“For us it is a very special project because it is a beautiful place and it is a cemetery that has lots of stories to tell,” says

Herman Kossmann, one of the founders of Kossmanndejong. “There is the history of the graveyard, but also the history of the Sephardic people, who have spread all over Europe and especially to Amsterdam.

“For people who don’t know about Jewish culture, there is an introductory film in the pavilion, so it has the feel of a really small open-air museum. Everything is connected – the storytelling, the pavilion building, the film and the 3D models.”

The cemetery is free to access from sunrise to sunset, Sunday to Friday.

bethhaim.nl/english

