

# The Paris church visited by royals, lords and ladies - and John Lennon

The 'hidden' church of St Michael's in Paris has been welcoming visitors since 1834, among them ambassadors, members of the British Royal Family and John Lennon. **Joanna York** takes a pew...

FROM the outside, Saint Michael's Church in Paris looks like a bland, concrete office block. It is hidden on a side street off the designer shops and international embassies of rue Saint-Honoré.

You would never guess there was a church inside that has served the international community since the 1800s.

Congregations have included the Queen Mother, King Edward VII, the present Princess Royal, novelist Somerset Maugham, and even John Lennon on a school trip.

The present church building (at the site of the original church) has stood on rue d'Aguesseau in the heart of the capital for almost five decades. It is only a few steps away from the British Embassy, with which it has long historical links.

Chaplain Jonathan Clark says that today the Anglican church can no longer claim to be truly British.

"We're English in the broadest sense of English-speaking but we have a French culture as well because of our situation. It's very international. We have people from all over the world, including French worshippers."

The 150 core members make up a vibrant mixed-age group. Some have attended for decades, others are in Paris for a year or so. "It's a very mixed family," said Mr Clark. "The biggest strength of our church is that family feel. We're a home away from home."

This is the latest incarnation of the church that was established in 1834.

Now concealed within a modern office block, the original church was a beautiful Gothic building, built to accommodate services for the British community in France that had, until then, taken place in the crowded embassy ballroom.

When it was first built, ties between the two institutions were so close that St Michael's chaplains enjoyed diplomatic status and it was more often called the Embassy Church.

Close links to the embassy and the wider British community meant many notable figures have passed through the church doors.

Playwright and novelist Somerset Maugham was baptised in the church in 1874 when his father Robert Ormond Maugham worked as a lawyer at the embassy.

Almost a century later, the church welcomed a group of language exchange students from Liverpool, one of whom was warned by an accompa-

nying teacher that he would never make a living playing guitar. On a return trip, the same teacher told the chaplain that student had been John Lennon - by then a member of the Beatles.

Members of the Royal Family have also attended, including Princess Anne and the Queen Mother, who visited several times.

One of the most remarkable royal visitors was King Edward VII, who came to Paris in 1903 to help smooth relations between the British and the French by beginning preparations to sign the *entente cordiale*.

The king was booed by French crowds, who shouted "long live Joan of Arc!" as he arrived in Paris. On the Sunday morning of his visit, he decided to go for a "little walk" from the embassy, where he was staying, to St Michael's - there are 82 steps between the two - and was cheered by parishioners lining the streets. He appreciat-



**American Joan Minor-Grayson and her husband host a home group, which she says makes for closer relationships among worshippers**

ed the warm welcome so much that he insisted on sitting among the congregation rather than on the balcony, which was usually reserved for nobility.

During World War One, the church played an important role, running a club to look after British soldiers on leave in Paris. In January 1918 alone, 42,000 meals were served to soldiers.

At Christmas, 120 turkeys were roasted. The church also put on balls for the soldiers, attended by nurses and young ladies keen to contribute to the war effort.

The Rev Stanley Blunt, chaplain of St Michael's at that time and father of future Soviet spy Anthony Blunt, was later made a Commander of the Royal Victorian Order for his efforts.

Circumstances changed drastically during World War Two when buildings surrounding the church were filled with German forces, including a Gestapo headquarters on rue des Saussaies. The church building was forced to close and many of the staff and congregation fled to safety.

One parishioner, known as Madame Bidot, narrowly avoided arrest and stayed in Neuilly-sur-Seine through-



**The Rev Jonathan Clark in front of a World War One memorial that was in the previous church building**

**The interior of St Michael's Church as it looks today. Inset: King Edward VII, the Queen Mother, Princess Anne, Somerset Maugham and John Lennon all attended services in the church's previous building**

out. During the four years that the church was closed, she would separate the barbed wire at the entrance to sneak inside to maintain the building under cover of darkness. Sympathisers at the town hall allowed her to collect and return the keys.

Relationships with the embassy have loosened over time, most notably when Lord Soames was ambassador in 1968-72. By this time, the church congregation was starting to outgrow its building, and neighbours were complaining about the noise of Sunday services.

Discussions took place about merging St Michael's with another Anglican church in Paris at the time.

Lord and Lady Soames (Mary Churchill, daughter of Sir Winston) attended a church meeting as parishioners to discuss the subject, during which Lord Soames exercised his status to announce that he was in favour of the merger.

A fellow parishioner rudely disagreed and, when the chaplain at the time did not offer an apology, Lord Soames was offended. Ties with the church were cut and diplomatic status for chaplains removed.

Over time, the relationship with the embassy has improved. Lady Soames later attended a commemoration service for the Battle of Britain in 1972, and Mr Clark said some embassy employees are currently in his congregation and the ambassador does visit.

However, the old church building could not be saved and was eventually replaced with a more spacious, although less beautiful, one. Today, challenges at St Michael's are of a more modern kind. While half of the congregation are long-term members, the other half move through very fast, said Mr Clark. "They come

**A postcard depicting the previous church building**

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**The king was booed by French crowds who shouted 'long live Joan of Arc!'**

with a job contract for two or three years. We've got to be really quick to welcome them and get them involved.”

Food plays an important role in this. A weekly lunch is held on Sundays, either in the church or at a nearby pizzeria after morning services, which Mr Clark believes is one of the main ways to welcome people to the church.

Parishioners who live close together are also encouraged to form "home groups" to eat, pray and spend time together at each other's houses once a week. American Joan Minor-Grayson has been a member of St Michael's for seven years, with her Scottish husband. Together they host a home group, which she said really makes people develop closer relationships in addition to coming to church.

"When we have small group meetings, I feel like that's a sub-family in a family, and I fix a whole dinner for everybody," she said.

During the health crisis, the church has been tasked with transforming from a physical to a virtual community. "It's been difficult, as it has been for everyone," said Mr Clark. "We've had to learn new things." Services began as 100-person Zoom meetings but have evolved into a

pre-recorded "church online", with a service, music, Bible readings and prayers edited together.

"Afterwards, we gather on Zoom for a bit of a chitchat," said Mr Clark. "That way, people still get to know new people."

He has also been using Zoom to offer one-to-one baptism preparation for church members and has found this modern solution has had a very traditional outcome: "[Students] can ask anything they like."

"They don't have to speak in front of other people. It can be open. It's like the confessional and, traditionally, that's what priests do, but in our busy lives today, I don't do that very much."

Children's groups and discussion groups have also moved online, including a recent seminar on the Black Lives Matter movement, which is a "potent" issue in the diverse and international church group, according to Ms Minor-Grayson. She said: "People want to know more, and there is a hunger to do something to help."

Online offerings have been so successful that the next reincarnation for this historical church might be as a digital service, even when a physical return to St Michael's is possible.

Mr Clark said: "I could see, in the future, that half the congregation might watch on Sunday, worship from home and then meet with a group during the week. Church could be bigger if you have people meeting in the building and an online congregation."

A final challenge for St Michael's in 2020 is how to celebrate Christmas.

Mr Clark expects in-person services will be allowed. "We will have a service around Christmas Day and it'll be extra special because we've been stuck in lockdown. We're going to decorate the church, make it special, do it differently, have something surprising. I'll be doing the same Christmas service four times, because numbers will be restricted to about 40 people. It'll be great!"

Virtual Christmas festivities will also be available. "We're going to do two online films over Christmas and we'll try to make them special," he added. "We've got musicians recording Christmas music already."

St Michael's online service is open for all to attend every Sunday at 10.45 at [smp.online.church](http://smp.online.church).