

A Brief History of the English Community in Geneva and Holy Trinity Church

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English Refugees known as the Marian Exiles

The beginning of the 16th century in many parts of Europe witnessed a general movement towards reform of the church in general and the production of vernacular Bibles, Psalters and service books in particular. In England this process of reform had accelerated under King Henry VIII, continued during the reign of Edward VI and then suffered a swift reversal when Queen Mary came to the throne in 1553. Her harsh and persistent attempts to revert to Catholicism encouraged or forced caused many to flee to the continent often in fear of their lives. These 'Marian exiles' went to cities such as Basle, Frankfurt, Emden, Strasbourg, Padua, Zurich and Geneva, where they were generally received with great humanity and allowed places for public worship.

The English Church in Geneva dates from those times.

16th century origins

Calvin had persuaded the Council of the Republic of Geneva, in recognition of the hospitality traditionally offered by the English nation to other refugees, to allocate to the English community a small church adjoining the Cathedral, St Marie-la-Neuve, for administering the sacraments and preaching in English. This request was granted on 14 November 1555. The Marian exiles shared the church, now known as the Auditoire, with a group of Italian Protestants.

Modern research has shown that the English community in Geneva never exceeded two hundred and the number fluctuated considerably with the continual coming and going between the various communities of exiles throughout the continent. A number of the exiles in Geneva applied for and were granted citizenship including John Knox who came in September 1556.

On their arrival in Geneva the exiles opened a Parish Register, now known as the '*Livre des Anglois*'. It recorded the names of the refugees who arrived in Geneva on 15 October 1555; the names of the English already in Geneva at that date; the names of those who arrived in subsequent years; a list of ministers, deacons and elders who were elected annually; a list of baptisms, marriages and burials. This, the earliest and most precious document of the English Church in Geneva, is housed in the Geneva State Archives. It has been agreed that all Holy Trinity's extensive archives will eventually be put on loan there for safekeeping.

The exiles found themselves caught up in a whirlwind of biblical scholarship and translation. Calvin and the Genevese were writing prolifically, translating the Bible

into French and producing a metrical psalter. The Spanish and the Italians published Bibles in their own languages.

In February 1556 the exiles produced '*The forme of prayers and ministration of the Sacraments etc vsed in the Englishe Congregation at Geneua: and approued, by the famous and godly learned man, John Calvyn*' printed in Geneva by John Crespin. It comprised the Confession of Faith, the Liturgy of the English Congregation in Geneva, and an English metrical version of fifty-one psalms, together with accompanying music and a translation of Calvin's catechism. In essence, this small book contained the basis of worldwide Presbyterianism and had a permanent influence on the Reformation in Scotland.

Arguably the most notable achievement of the exiles was their biblical translation. *The Geneva Bible* was translated by William Whittingham, Anthony Gilby, Lawrence Humphrey, Miles Coverdale (former Bishop of Exeter), Christopher Goodman, Thomas Sampson with contributions from a few other scholars. It is based on the *Great Bible* for the Old Testament and Whittingham's revision of William Tyndale's 1534 edition of the New Testament. The latter had already been published in Geneva by Conrad Badius in 1557.

The scholars who produced the *Geneva Bible* had access to the best Hebrew and Greek manuscripts including Beza's codex. This edition had many innovative features and heralded a new era of English translations. It was the first Bible in English to be illustrated, annotated and divided into verses. Italics were employed to denote the addition of words to clarify the text. This Bible ran to at least 140 editions between 1560 and 1644. This and not the King James's version was the one that the emigrants on the Mayflower took to America with them in 1620.

The printing and publishing was largely organized and financed by a rich Exeter merchant, John Bodley. His son, Thomas, was later to set up the famous Bodleian Library in Oxford. The printer, Rowland Hall, not only published major works whilst here but continued doing so when he moved back to London. Interestingly he named his printing works there '*the halfe Eagle and the Keye*' after the heraldic arms of the city of Geneva and he also used the Geneva motto '*Post tenebras lux*' (after darkness light).

After the death of Mary Tudor late in 1558, exiles began to return home. An astute Queen Elizabeth I appointed many of them to important posts in her church and government. Throughout her long reign she kept in close contact with Geneva and supported it, not only verbally but also financially, in its constant struggle against Catholic threats of invasion. Strong links had been forged with England and Scotland and many outstanding scholars from both countries were invited to teach at Calvin's college, which would later become the University of Geneva. It became the practice for the nobility of England and Scotland to send their sons to Geneva to study theology, law and the humanities, ensuring that they thus received a strictly Protestant education. This influx of British students to Geneva to complete their studies continued right down to the 19th century.

The emergence of a distinctive Anglican presence

Contacts between Geneva and England continued throughout the ensuing years and cultural exchanges flourished. In 1685 the Rev. Gilbert Burnet, distinguished historian, Court Chaplain and later Bishop of Salisbury, at that time exiled in Geneva during the reign of the Catholic King James II, received permission to hold services according to the liturgy of the Church of England Book of Common Prayer.

In 1813, after 15 years of French occupation, Geneva regained its independence and the English came flocking back: members of the aristocracy on the Grand Tour, merchants anxious to increase their trade, and students. Geneva had displayed a marked degree of 'anglomania'. The English community enlarged, and began to feel more and more urgently the need for a place of worship in which to hold services in accordance with the rites of the English Book of Common Prayer. The Geneva State Council acceded to their request by offering them the use of the hospital chapel (now part of the Palais de Justice in the Bourg de Four). The first service was conducted there on Christmas Day 1814 by the Rev. Charles R. Sumner (later Bishop of Winchester). A fixed tenure of that building for twenty-five years was agreed. It was granted on condition that

a) the expense of establishing and maintaining the church be borne by the English community, b) services be in English with the simplicity customary in English parish churches, c) an ordained Church of England priest be appointed by the authorities in England, who d) would be approved by the State Council and subject to their authority.

The Church Committee first applied to the British Minister in Berne to request the appointment of a Chaplain and then set up a subscription list amongst the English residents to raise the necessary funds to cover the Chaplain's stipend, the salary of an organist and the running expenses of the church. However, by 1820 there had still been no official appointment to the Chaplaincy by the British Government and the Committee itself undertook the nomination of the Chaplain.

At this period, the Church of the English was not only constantly soliciting money for its own finances, but it was also generous to those in need. Poverty was rife throughout Europe and disease was ever-present. Between 1817 and 1853 the Church Committee Minutes record over seven hundred entries of alms given not only to individuals, but also to whole families and groups of people travelling together. Several hundred francs were donated to worthy causes amongst the local Swiss inhabitants and a regular contribution was made to the Genevese Bureau de Bienfaisance.

There was a long and fruitful collaboration with the welfare authorities of the city. Women members of the congregation played an increasingly important part in the life of the church at this time, both in fund-raising efforts and in social undertakings, such as the founding of a Girls' Friendly Society to help and support English governesses and other female employees in Geneva.

In 1887 Holy Trinity Church endowed a bed at the Cantonal Hospital to commemorate Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee. A British subject could occupy this bed for up to thirty days in any year free of charge. Ten years later the community set up the

Victoria British Aid Fund to help British residents in '*necessitous circumstances*'. This fund is still active and needed, although the free bed is no longer available.

Holy Trinity Church is built

In 1846 a group of British residents launched a subscription fund in Geneva and England to build church of their own and petitioned the Council of State for permission to acquire a plot of land on which to construct it. It was not a favourable time for such a project as the 1848 revolutions were plunging Europe into turmoil. However, through the mediation of Sir Robert Peel Jnr, then British Minister in Berne, the Council of State granted the Committee a parcel of land on the site of the old fortifications of the city. A Foundation called the Anglican Chapel at Geneva was formally established on 19 April 1851 to organize church affairs. Building began in May 1851 and, after some setbacks, both in the building itself and in its subsequent furnishing (the tower was never strong enough to hold the two bells which it had been planned to house), Holy Trinity was consecrated on 30 August 1853. The officiant was the Bishop of Winchester, Charles R. Sumner, who, as we have already seen, had close personal ties with Geneva. By October 1852 the Committee had drawn up a strict code of rules and regulations for the administration of the church - a lengthy document designed to cover every possible contingency. The composition of the Committee was strictly laid down and absolute power over all Church affairs vested in it. The terms of appointment of the Chaplain were defined and the nature of the church's alms-giving clearly stated.

Holy Trinity Church had a stormy beginning. Early financial difficulties were exacerbated by unexpected structural problems in the building and these in turn were followed by dissension and disagreement between the Committee and the Chaplains - strife which extended to the relationships between the Committee and the Church Authorities in England.

Peace and progress

From 1877 to 1914 there ensued a period of peace and progress in the life of Holy Trinity. Fund-raising, as is the case with any self-supporting organization, was a major source of concern. The building continued to require costly maintenance and there were necessary increases in the Chaplain's stipend and the organist's salary. However, Holy Trinity at this time assumed a position as one of the leading institutions in the city.

The English community was well integrated with the local population. The Genevise enthusiastically participated in many of the social and sporting events organized by the church community. The British Consul, Daniel Barton, founded the Harmonie Nautique band, which still flourishes today, and also built the Victoria Hall, Geneva's prestigious concert hall, to enable the band to perform in bad weather. A memorial plaque to his wife, Victoria Alexandrina Barton, is to be found on the south wall of the chancel. She was the daughter of Sir Robert Peel Jnr, Queen Victoria's goddaughter and a member of the Church congregation. An indication of Holy Trinity's standing may be seen in the fact that when, in September 1890, the train carrying Queen Victoria from Aix-les-Bains stopped at Cornavin station for exactly nine minutes, it was the Chaplain, Rev. Joseph Last, who had the honour of presenting a Loyal Address on behalf of the English community in the presence of two

consuls, two generals and the former chief Chaplain of the British Forces, all of whom were residents in Geneva.

Church and State in Geneva were separated in 1907. Three years later the Anglican Chapel Foundation was re-constituted as a charity: *'The Society of the Anglican Church of the Holy Trinity in Geneva'*, thus falling into line with other churches recognized in the Cantonal list of public service bodies. The new Constitution stipulated that all British subjects of both sexes would qualify as active voting members of the Society, provided they had resided for one year in the Canton.

War Years

With the outbreak of the First World War in 1914 there began a period of increasing difficulty for the church. Financial problems loomed once more. Nonetheless, a suggested amalgamation with Emmanuel, the American Episcopal church built in 1874, was fiercely resisted. Holy Trinity had no alternative but to apply for help from the Colonial and Commonwealth Church Society until it was able to stand on its own feet once more.

In the 1930s, with the depreciation of the pound sterling to fifty percent of its previous value, many British residents were obliged to leave Geneva and the number of visitors dwindled considerably. The war years of 1939 to 1945 accentuated this downward trend and it was only thanks to the providential arrival of a new and energetic Chaplain, Rev. Cecil Williams, that the church avoided having to close down altogether. The congregation was reduced to a mere handful, but these few were nonetheless active and in 1945 Holy Trinity was able to make a generous contribution towards the reconstruction of churches in Europe destroyed during the war.

The United Nations era

After the difficult post-war years, Holy Trinity entered a period of great activity and progress which has continued to this day. The need for a church hall had long been felt and the efforts and enthusiasm of the Ladies' Working Party provided the initial funds and impetus for its construction in 1966. Today the hall has become a vital part of the church 'plant' and not only houses many church activities but is also rented out to a number of regular users.

Over the years the interior of the church was thoroughly refurbished. However, by the early 1980s it was clear that only a complete internal and external renovation would suffice to put the deteriorating building in good order. Many eminent sponsors supported the Renovation Appeal launched in 1983. Many individual and collective fund-raising efforts were made and a generous loan from the Geneva Cantonal authorities enabled the work to go forward. The Appeal was boosted by the listing of Holy Trinity as an Historic Monument in February of that year. Consequently, on 2 June 1985 a Service of Thanksgiving to celebrate the completion of the work was held in the presence of the Bishop of Gibraltar in Europe. The renovation work included the installation of a new organ by the Swiss organ builder Kuhn. This has much enhanced the quality of choral services, a key feature of worship at Holy Trinity Church.

Holy Trinity's musical reputation locally has led to a further link with the Geneva community. In the seventies attendance at the traditional Christmas Eve *Service of Lessons and Carols* became too great to be contained within Holy Trinity itself. After a couple of years of holding the service in the Old Catholic church of St. Germain, it was moved to the Cathedral of St Pierre, where it has remained ever since. It is the only city church big enough to hold all who wish to attend. During the 150th anniversary year of Holy Trinity Church in 2003 the Carol Service was broadcast live from the Cathedral by Television Suisse Romande (TSR).

Maintenance of the building and its adaptation to meet changing needs continues. Since 1986 the small area beneath the newly installed organ in the North transept has been re-furnished as a chapel. Weekday Communion services and evening prayer groups now have a more intimate setting for the smaller numbers who attend. In 1993 the baptismal font was re-sited in the South transept. Pews in both transept areas were replaced by removable chairs. This enabled more flexible usage of these areas, and created a space for families with infants in prams or pushchairs. In the early 1990's, thanks to generous donations from the Loterie Suisse Romande, local authorities, benevolent organizations and parishioners, the church hall, kitchen, toilets and floor were modified and a platform lift was installed to ease access for the elderly and handicapped, In 2015 the makers of the Kuhn organ gave it a major overhaul and installed an electronic update. The renovation of the church clock and tower will be completed during 2016 thanks to the generous intervention of the Hans Wilsdorf Foundation.

Nowadays

The most significant change in recent years has been in the composition of Holy Trinity's congregation. Like the city, it has expanded to include increasing numbers of English-speaking people from around the world, working for international businesses, UN and non-governmental organizations. Nelson Mandela has worshipped here, Kofi Annan was married here and Desmond Tutu has preached here. A truly world-wide Anglican church.

In the early nineties several members of Holy Trinity Church congregation living in the neighbouring Canton of Vaud started an outreach to English speakers living in towns and villages in the vicinity of Nyon. Today this has become an independent chaplaincy, La Côte, holding services in Gingins and Divonne, France.

More than thirty different nationalities are represented among regular worshippers but this figure is probably much higher since it does not include visitors and temporary residents of other denominations. This brings a new spiritual dimension to the life of the church. It reflects the hospitality offered by Geneva citizens to English exiles over 450 years ago, which is still at the heart of church and community life here today.