

A History of stmarksversailles



Compiled by one of our church members
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The history of St Mark's starts with the story that Louis XIV gave the land, close to the Chateau at rue du Peintre-Lebrun, upon which our original church, (affectionately known as "little St Mark's") was built. Whether this is true or not, a map has been seen showing a chapel on this site, and certainly an English Church existed in Versailles before 1814. This is the date of the oldest surviving Register. It has probably been known as St Mark's since 1822. Unfortunately many records were lost when the Church was destroyed by fire in January 1911. This building erected in 1860 had been paid for by the Chaplain of the day out of his own pocket and was subsequently sold, on his departure, to The Colonial and Continental Church Society in 1875.

A lengthy association between Maisons Laffitte and Versailles followed the fire; the Rev. Vivian Evans, living in Maisons Laffitte was appointed Chaplain of Versailles and Maisons Laffitte and came to live in Versailles. It was he who drew up the plans for a new church on the site and his energy and enthusiasm were such that all the money was raised and the church built in less than two years and the completed church opened on November 21st 1912. It remained open throughout the First World War and was also kept open, but without any recorded services, during World War Two. Services were resumed after the war using Army Chaplains with no doubt the army providing the bulk of the congregation. During the subsequent years there were frequent changes of chaplains and sometimes very small congregations.

At this point, we should remember Maurice Simpson, who served as Chaplains Warden for over 25 yrs, and through his devotion kept the church open both during and after the war. Sometimes the congregation consisted only of himself and his daughter.

Towards the end of the 1960s, when NATO and SHAPE were forced to leave France, the congregation took another hit as the British families who were associated with these organizations left. So in 1969, when the Rev. J. R. Maugham left, his successor, the Rev. Philip Walton, was instructed by the Bishop to close down St Mark's and concentrate on Holy Trinity at Maisons Laffitte. But Maurice Simpson was still Chaplains Warden and St Mark's did not close! However the financial situation was precarious and I remember one council meeting in 1971 when all members had to pledge their own money to meet any debts and keep St Mark's open.

When Great Britain joined the then EEC in the early 1970s, the British community began to grow, particularly in the western suburbs, and the St Marks congregation grew quite quickly. The congregation now included an increasing number of children, and the two vestries which were used for the Sunday School were full to overflowing. Moreover it was no longer possible for one man to adequately serve the two congregations.

When I joined St Marks in 1970, the chaplain, Philip Walton, lived in Maisons Laffitte and came to St Mark's every other week and provided a recorded sermon for the weeks he was not present. Lay Assistants took the service on these Sundays. However, soon the chaplain was taking a service at 9.30 am at Holy Trinity and another at St Mark's at 11,00 am. Then once a month, going on to Caen to take an evening service for students. Pathfinder groups were also formed and were taken by the chaplain himself.

Alan Lindsay became chaplain in 1974 and in 1977 the space problem was solved by the Bishop of Versailles, Monseigneur Simmoneau, who came to our rescue by offering us the use of the Chapelle de l'Ecole de Grandchamp for our Sunday services and also the kitchen and dining areas for our social functions. So from the autumn of 1977 the main 10,30 service was held at Grandchamp, and a 9,00 am communion service at St Marks. This continued until 1986 when the sale of "little St Mark's" was underway.

The workload problem was solved also in 1977 by the appointment of the Rev. David Vail as Assistant Chaplain. This required St Marks to fund the accommodation for the Vail family in the Versailles area thus allowing David Vail to concentrate on St Mark's. This obvious division of ministries led to David being inducted as Chaplain of St Mark's on March 30th 1980. When he left in 1982, St Mark's was firmly established as an independent chaplaincy with an ever growing congregation. This included a small group who had been meeting in various houses in Chevry. This being the forerunner of the present day congregation at St Paul's. Jonathan Wilmot, who succeeded David Vail kept up this momentum and in 1985 introduced an evening service at Noisy-le-Roi alternating with those at Chevry.

During this period we still had the St Marks church in rue Peintre Lebrun, and though very little use was being made of the building, it was felt that we must retain it until our future building needs had been secured. The site itself could not be redeveloped due to very severe building restrictions in the area so close to the Chateau. At this time an American Missionary Society had taken over an adjoining building and made an acceptable offer. At the same time a search was underway to find a new site that could house a Chaplain and a Church! The only serious contender was a piece of land with a house at Pont Colbert. At the time the council was not unanimously in favour of the purchase and partly for this reason The Intercontinental Church Society (the successor to The Colonial and Continental Church Society) did not approve the purchase. In 1986, however the Pont Colbert site became available again, and this time the council agreed to the purchase, which was endorsed by an Extraordinary General Meeting of the congregation. The ICS offered to help financially and along with generous donations and interest free loans from members of the congregation we were able to complete the purchase, and after much hard work and repairs the Wilmots moved into Pont Colbert in 1986. The site at Pont Colbert also contained some outbuildings, one of which had been a stable which was immediately converted into a chapel by installing the altar, reredos, pews, pulpit and lectern from "little St Mark's.

The council then started to seriously consider how we should move forward to create our new church centre. So at the end of 1988 two committees were formed. A Building Committee to define the needs and canvas ideas on what type of Church Centre we should have and an Appeals Committee to devise a plan to raise the money. At the outset it was decided that we

would build the church without using commercial funding, so that future congregations would not inherit any residual mortgage payments. So when the Rev. Martin Oram became chaplain in October 1988 architectural plans for a church centre were well advanced and a fund raising project was underway. This was not all plain sailing however, as changes in planning rules led to constant modifications to our original ideas.

Through all these difficulties, our architect Noel Bidot who as a Christian and an old friend of St Mark's proved to be a tower of strength, modifying the plans as each problem arose. With his help, planning permission was obtained and the official appeal was launched on April 19th 1990 with a dedication service at Grandchamp to which the British Ambassador, who was the patron of the appeal, was invited along with the Mayor and Bishop of Versailles. During the following months it became obvious that, even with the generous giving that resulted from the appeal, we would have to wait several years before we could complete the whole project. Here again Noel came to our rescue and put forward a modified building scheme that would enable us to advance in stages. Stage 1 would see the proposed Sunday School area and closed garage converted into a worship area. Stage 2 would link the existing chapel to Stage 1 and include an entrance lobby, kitchen, toilets and office space. Stage 3 would complete the project by building the church on top of Stage 1.

In July 1992 we had sufficient funds to start work on Stage 1, but always bearing in mind the words of Bishop Edward Holland, who during a visit advised us "not to spend what we haven't got". So when the next chaplain, the Rev. David Marshall was inducted in October 1992 work was underway and on July 25th 1993 we said goodbye to Grandchamp after 17 yrs and started to use the new worship area which was dedicated by Bishop Edward in September 1993. The mid 1990s saw the licensing of David's wife Angela as assistant chaplain, which made it easier to minister to the growing needs of both St Mark's and St Paul's. Also during this period, the fund raising continued and work on Stage 2 began in January 1998. This also included a complete refurbishing of the chapel.

The Second Stage was completed and dedicated by Bishop Henry on September 13th 1998. Through this period the congregation continued to grow with a considerable increase in children and young people. So when David and Angela left, having overseen two of the building stages, the need to complete the centre became more pressing.

In May 2005 the Rev. Paul Kenchington was inducted as Chaplain and in September 2006, the Rev. Tim Norman joined St Mark's as Associate Pastor. Then in 2008 the Rev. Elaine Labourel was appointed Associate Chaplain with responsibility for St. Paul's. At this time the Reach Project was started and its success in raising the money enabled the final stage of our building project to go ahead in January 2011, and the first service in the partially completed church was held on September 4th 2011, when we said goodbye to the Kenchingtons. After this, Elaine Labourel became the interregnum chaplain for both churches and continued in this role until the Rev. Chris Maclay became chaplain in August 2012. During the interregnum, Stage 3 of the building

project was completed and was ready for the induction of the new chaplain on September 16th 2012.

The completed church will be dedicated by Bishop David on February 16th 2013. This account of how St Mark's has evolved over the last 200yrs does not tell the whole story. The real history of St Mark's, is one of a church that has welcomed and comforted those who have felt the need of help in a foreign land. It has brought many individuals to know God and others to a deeper faith. It has ministered to the homeless. It has inspired our young people to go out to serve God in Africa, Latin America and Asia and given Christian knowledge to our children and youth groups. This is the legacy of St Mark's. Let it continue for the next 200 years and beyond.