

The history of the Paris Branch, one of the very first overseas Branches formed in 1921

Reflecting on her journey as a Legion member and looking ahead, Janet Warby, the Paris Branch Secretary, said, 'I come from a Legion family with my Grandmother joining in 1935 and my parents, husband and now children being members. I am currently the Senior Standard Bearer in Paris and was the Women's Section Deputy Standard Bearer for Kent County prior to moving to Paris. Whilst we have serving and ex-serving personnel and their families that require our support, there will always be the need for The Royal British Legion as it's the premier Armed Forces charity still in existence. I would hope that the Legion will continue to prosper both in the UK and abroad.'



Photo: Paris Branch supporting the Pedal to Paris event with Standard Bearers Fiona Terris and Janet Warby

Photo Credit: Paris Branch

The Paris Branch in its first decades

On 4th May 1921, a group of gentlemen, mostly belonging to the Veterans' Association formed in Paris, met to consider the formation of the Paris Branch of the British Legion. The decision was made then and there to start the Branch with the work beginning the following month. The first Honorary Presidents of the Branch were the British Ambassador, Lord Hardinge of Penshurst, and Field Marshal Foch while Rear-Admiral Sir Edward Heaton-Ellis was elected Chairman.



*Photo: Desk Ornament given to the First Chairman of Paris Branch Rear Admiral, Sir Edward Heaton-Ellis
Photo Credit: Paris Branch*

Since its first years the Branch has focused on looking after the numerous ex-servicemen and their dependents who have fallen on hard times in France.

One example from 1925, which demonstrates the support given to the Armed Forces community back then, is that of an ex-Duffadar of the Bombay cavalry who had lost his right arm in action on the Belgian front. During the war he had married a French woman (as did many others) and they had two children. After the war this ex-serviceman bought a small business in Amiens, but because of debts he eventually sold the business and came to Paris in search of work. His savings exhausted, he approached the Legion. The Branch succeeded in finding work for him and, fighting for his pension with the Indian Government, finally acquired a satisfactory settlement.

Holding an Annual Service of Remembrance in Notre Dame on 11th November is one of the traditions of the branch. This one, which continues today, dates from the 20s and was initiated when, on 24th July 1924, the British Commonwealth War Memorial plaque in Notre Dame was unveiled by H.R.H. Prince Edward of Wales, accompanied by his brother Prince Henry, in the presence of the President of the French Republic, Monsieur Gaston Doumergue and Marshal Foch.



Photo: Notre Dame
1924-25
Photo Credit: Paris
Branch

*Photo: Outside
Notre Dame
cathedral
Photo Credit:
Legion Magazine
December 1935*



PARIS BRANCH OUTSIDE NOTRE DAME CATHEDRAL.



Photo: Service of Remembrance at Cathedral St. Louis des Invalides, Ambassador with two Chelsea Pensioners, the service was prior held at Notre Dame before the 2019 fire

Photo Credit: Paris Branch

Another tradition maintained over the years is the rekindling of the flame which takes place in August every year. The Branch have been upholding this tradition since 1924, even during the pandemic, the only exception being the years of the Second World War.



Photo: Arc de
Triomphe 1924-25
Photo Credit: Paris
Branch

Photo: Rekindling of the
Flame
Photo Credit: Legion
Magazine December
1925



Photo by Henri Manuel.

PARIS MEMBERS PAY TRIBUTE.



CAPTAIN MAURICE JEFFES RE-KINDLING THE FLAME OF REMEMBRANCE AT THE TOMB OF FRANCE'S UNKNOWN SOLDIER AT THE ARC DE TRIOMPHE ON BEHALF OF THE PARIS BRANCH OF THE BRITISH LEGION.

The Metropolitan Area's party went to Paris where, assembling at the end of the Champs Elysees, they marched to the Unknown Soldier's Grave, under the Arc de Triomphe, where a wreath was placed with a fitting ceremony bearing the inscription 'La Légion vivante a l'honneur de saluer la Légion disparue.' (The living Legion has the honour of greeting the missing Legion)

Photo Credit: Legion Magazine September 1931

For the 10th year in succession the ceremony of reviving the Flame of Remembrance on the Tomb of the French Unknown Soldier at the Arc de Triomphe was carried out by the Paris Branch on 4th August, the 21st anniversary of the entry of Great Britain and the Empire into the Great War.

There was a strong muster of British ex-service men and the delegation with the Standards of the Paris and Arras Branches, Paris British Volunteer Corps, and Canadian Legion. The ceremony, short but very impressive, was witnessed by a large number of French people and visitors.



LEGION REVIVING THE FLAME, PARIS, AUGUST 4th, 1935

Photo Credit: Legion Magazine September 1935



*Photo: Children assisting to re-kindle the Flame at Arc de Triomphe 2020
Photo Credit: Paris Branch*



*Photo: Arc de Triomphe wreath 2020
Photo Credit: Paris Branch*

The visit of the Prince of Wales to the headquarters of the Branch was a great success. Noticing General Gouraud, the Prince stepped smartly forward to the Military Governor of Paris with a 'Comment allez-vous, mon Général?' After greeting the members of the Women's Auxiliary Section and members of the Branch, he expressed his admiration at the splendidly appointed rooms the Legion had brought into being.



H.R.H. THE PRINCE OF WALES AND GENERAL GOURAUD
AT THE PARIS BRANCH.

Photo Credit: Legion Magazine December 1926



THE PROCESSION, HEADED BY A DELEGATION FROM PARIS BRANCH,
PROCEEDING TO THE CATHEDRAL AT AMIENS.

Members of the Legion who visited Amiens the previous year (1928) intended to place wreaths on the monument. At that date however, the monument had not been completed. A delegation from the Paris Branch was officially received at the Hotel de Ville and attended a ceremony in front of the cathedral, during which a new flag was handed over to the new formation of French ex-service men.

*Photo Credit: Legion Magazine
June 1929*

Sir George Clerk, British Ambassador to France, presided at the 15th Annual Dinner of the Paris Branch. More than 300 members and ex-service non-members attended and the principal guest of the evening was Lord Trenchard, Marshal of the Royal Air Force. Many distinguished members of the British colony in Paris and a number of eminent Frenchmen were also amongst the guests.



PARIS BRANCH DINNER.

*Photo Credit: Legion
Magazine February 1936*



5. Poppy sellers, November 1936.

*Photo: 1936 Picture of Poppy Ladies at British Embassy
Photo Credit: Paris Branch*

The Second World War led to the temporary closure of the Branch

Soon after WWII broke out the Branch closed down but Branch Members were not inactive as they still held meetings throughout the war while in exile in London. Mr. George Norbury who was a member from the very first days of the Branch until his death in 1988, remembered attending lunches and reunions of the Branch in London, at one of which, at least, Charles de Gaulle was a guest of honour.

On 14th December 1945 the Branch officially reopened with a new committee and Sir Charles Henderson in the position of Chairman. Despite post-war difficulties and a lack of funds, the Chairman, in his address of 1946, said that they aspired 'not only to attain the position held prior to the war by the Paris Branch of the Legion, but to exceed it'. He also mentioned in his speech the arrangements being made to cooperate with the British Charitable Fund to provide relief when required, an arrangement which still functions to this day.

According to George Norbury, in the 50s, a succession of capable Branch Chairmen managed to propel the Branch forward. Among them were Brigadier S. Swinton-Lee, DSO, Lord Norwich, and Colonel H.A. Wilsden, OBE, the latter being Chairman for 7 remarkable years which saw Branch membership rise from about 650 to nearly 1,000.



Commemorating the 50th anniversary of the beginning of the Great War

1964 was a landmark year as the Branch was one of the leading parties when it came to marking the 50th anniversary of the outbreak of the First World War. That year was also the 20th anniversary of the Liberation of Paris following the Second World War, and there was one particularly poignant ceremony, the funeral of Wing Commander Forest Yeo-Thomas, "White Rabbit", a hero of the Second World War, at the Embassy Church, where the address was given by General Koenig, and among those present was 97 year old General Weygand.

With the Legion officially becoming The Royal British Legion, in 1972 our patron Her Majesty the Queen visited Paris and Branch Members had the honour of meeting her. In 1974, there were special ceremonies to mark the 50th anniversary of the unveiling of the Memorial Plaque in Notre Dame and on 11th November that year, the Remembrance Ceremony at Notre Dame was presided over by Admiral of the Fleet the Earl Mountbatten of Burma.

Also in November 1974 the Branch celebrated their 250th luncheon, a tradition that started back in February 1951 with many guests of honour attending these gatherings, including British Ambassadors, Pierre Mendès-France, Madame La Maréchale Leclerc, General Koenig and more.

In most recent years



Photo: Monument to Violette Szabo, Battle Field Trip made by some members of Paris Branch in the Limousin Region of France

Photo Credit: Paris Branch



The Paris Branch has, over the years, organised successful commemorations for the community, inviting representatives from other countries to attend. As Janet explained 'In 1995 our VE Day celebrations included a notable event at the Standard Athletic Club in Meudon with a Drum Head Service. All Ambassadors of WWII Allies were invited to attend. The event included young school children, scouts, guides, cubs and brownies, allowing us to engage the younger generation and demonstrating that the Legion is not just for old soldiers. We have held celebrations for the 90th Anniversary of the Legion and the 60th Anniversary of Her Majesty's accession to the throne with the then National Chairman, HM Ambassador to France and others in attendance.'

In June 2009, the Paris Branch moved from rue Boudreau, having 'lived' there for nearly 81 years, the new premises being situated just a stone's throw from The Arc de Triomphe.



Photo: Old Branch premises located near the Paris Opera

Photo Credit: Paris Branch



*Photo: New Branch premises located near the Arch de Triomphe
Photo Credit: Paris Branch*

Thinking about the work the Branch delivers today, Janet mentioned fundraising activities, supporting the Armed Forces community, of which an annual Poppy Appeal Coffee Morning at the Ambassador's Residence is an example, organising Remembrance events and Battle Field Trips to locations in France and Italy, not forgetting current initiatives designed to reach younger audiences.

To ensure that the memories of those who served or lived through the two wars are perpetuated, two collections of stories from our members have been compiled and edited by Grahame Warby. These are published in two books entitled 'Our Say, Not Heresay' and 'Our Last Say, Not Heresay'.and are obtainable from Amazon.

We continue to organise the Annual Service of Remembrance, formerly held at Notre Dame but, pending reconstruction following the 2019 fire, is now held at the Cathedral of St. Louis des Invalides. We also organise the Annual Rekindling Ceremony at the Arc de Triomphe.

To help young people understand the meaning and importance of Remembrance we work with local schools and invite children to take part in a poetry competition with the winners having the opportunity to recite their poems at the Cathedral on 11th November.'



To celebrate the Legion's centenary next year Branch Members are already working on a booklet that will include a collection of stories documenting the history of the Branch. It will be sold to raise money for the Poppy Appeal. A dinner/dance is also being considered as a way to bring the British community in Paris together to celebrate the Legion's 100th birthday.