

# THE FRENCH PROTESTANT CHURCH OF LONDON

SIR ASTON WEBB ARCHITECT, BUILT 1891-1893



Edward VI was not thirteen years old, and had only been king for three years when, in 1550, he granted by Royal Charter to John a Lasco the right to establish a strangers' church in London.

It is from this original church, that, five centuries later, the French Protestant church of Soho Square is the direct descendant.

Its history highlights the successful integration of French refugees, the Huguenots, fleeing persecution.

Today it takes the form of a vibrant and dynamic Francophone community.

## 500 YEARS OF HISTORY

Welcome to the French Protestant Church of London!

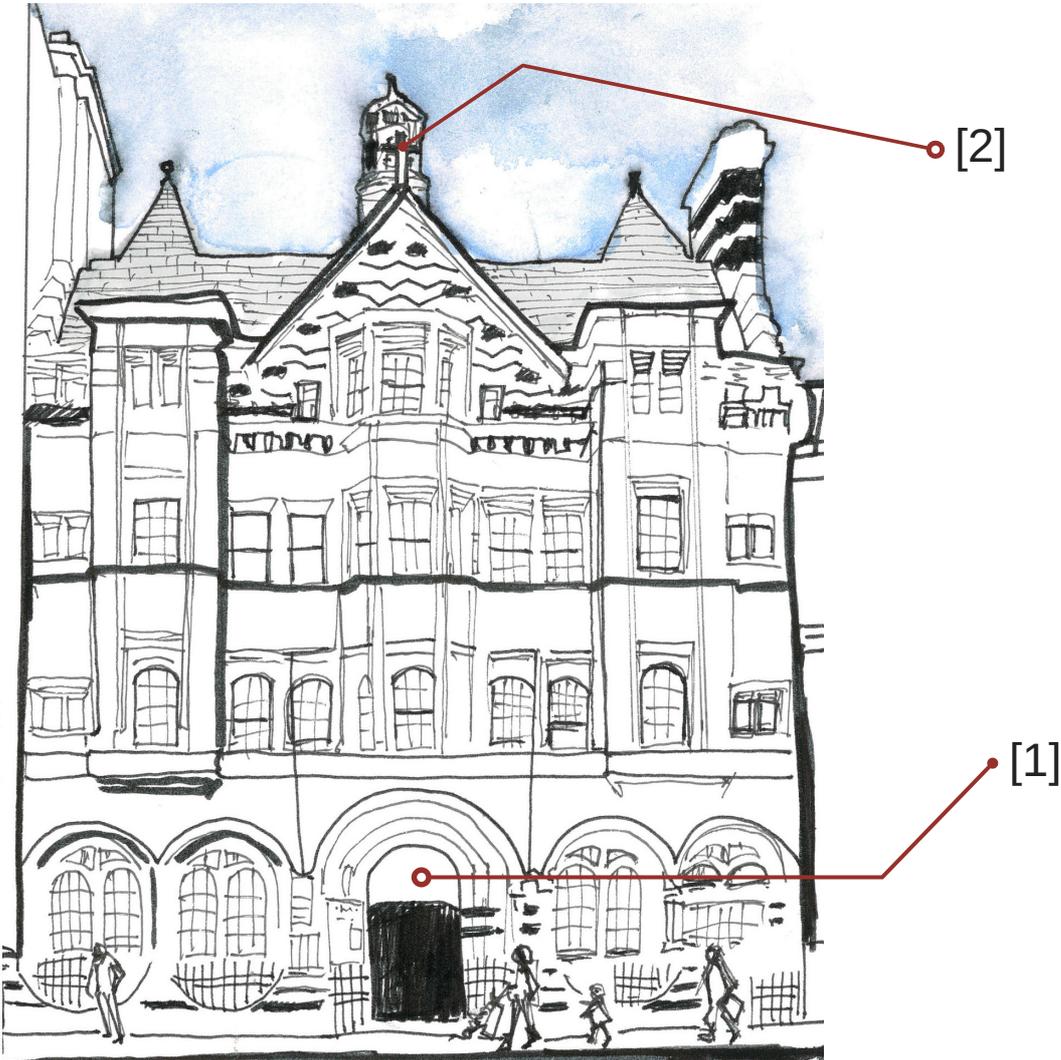
We hope that you enjoy this striking and unusual Grade II\* church, designed by Sir Aston Webb in 1891 and dedicated in March 1893.

Built at the rear of an enclosed rectangular site and hidden behind a rather stark façade, the spaciousness and lightness of the church does not fail to surprise the visitor.

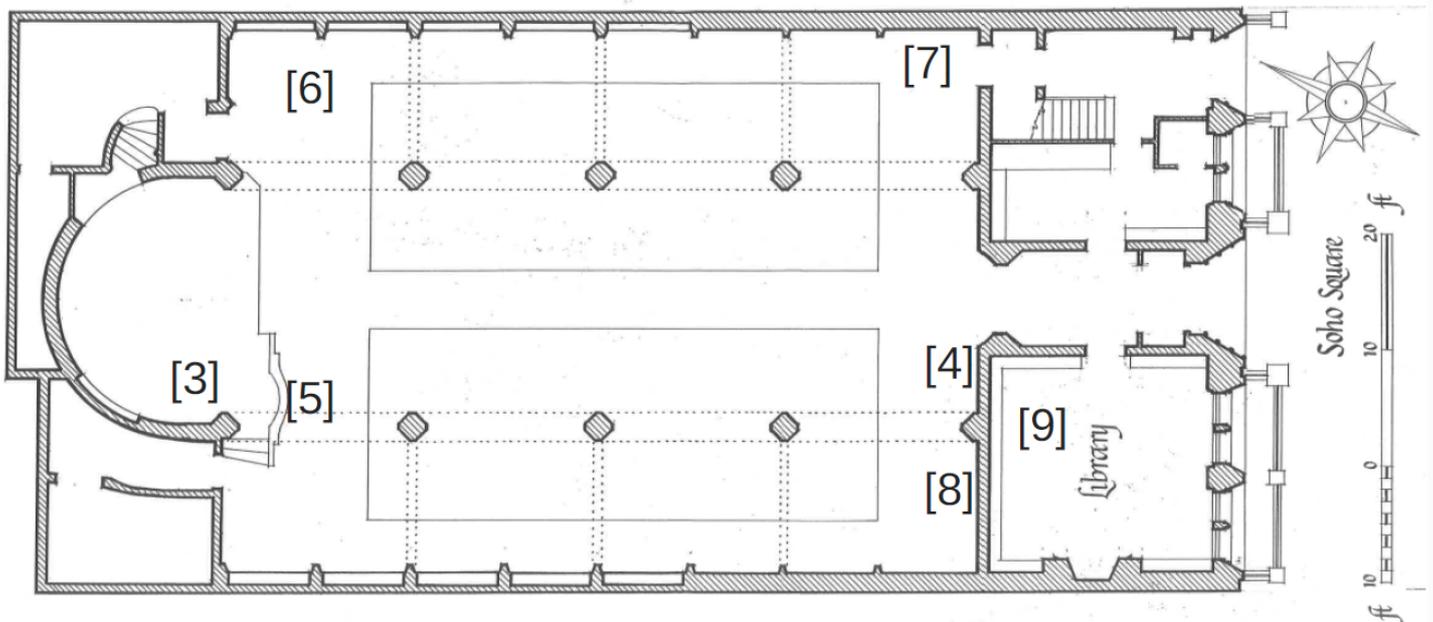
Thanks to high stained-glass windows and the warmth of the buff-coloured terracotta Aston Webb managed to create the welcoming space for worshippers you will now discover.



# Façade and plan of the Church showing the position of items



in London.  
It is from this original church.



# Introduction

The story of the French Protestant Church of London can be traced back to the reign of **Edward VI**, when the young English monarch, son of Henry VIII, favouring the ideas of the Reformation, authorised, by Royal Charter on **24th July 1550**, the founding of a Strangers' Church of mainly French and Walloon origin.

Thanks to this early foundation, the French churches of England were in turn able to help their co-religionists fleeing the wars of religion, and later, the persecutions of Louis XIV.

In total, around **65,000 French Protestants found asylum in England**, of which 40 to 50 thousand during the reign of Louis XIV ("The Great Refuge"). At the height of these persecutions, more than 28 churches existed in London alone, and about twenty more outside London.

Often highly trained and bringing with them sophisticated methods of production, **the Huguenot refugees made long-lasting contributions to English crafts and knowledge**, for example in the textile, clock-making, cabinet-making and printing industries, but not only. The names of John Houblon, first governor of the Bank of England, of Romilly, champion of the reform of Criminal Law, of Minet in the insurance services, etc. all exemplify the swift assimilation of this community.

With the process of **assimilation**, the French Protestant churches closed one after the other.

At the end of the 19th century, **Soho** was London's major French neighbourhood (and briefly in the 18th century the location, at Monmouth House, of the residence of the French ambassador) and was therefore the obvious setting to build a new church, when the previous church (in St Martin le Grand) was destroyed as part of the extension of the General Post Office.

When the consistory of the French Protestant Church of London chose **Aston Webb** (1849-1930) as the architect of the new church in Soho Square, he was already famous for his design of the Victoria Law Courts in Birmingham (1886). His style, at the time, was a blend of numerous influences, an eclecticism that can be found as much in the church of Soho Square as on the façade of the Victoria and Albert Museum, which he designed at the same period (1891).

## The façade

The façade of the Soho Square church, a Grade II\* listed building, with a view over the square is in the gothic and Flemish style, covered in **blue bricks from Luton and Doulton terracotta**.

The ornamental architectural details which cover the façade were designed by **William Aumonier**, a sculptor of distant Huguenot descent, established on Tottenham Court Road and who had previously worked with Aston Webb on the Victoria Law Courts in Birmingham.

The building is designed over **four levels**. Five rounded arches punctuate the ground-floor. The central arch is embellished with ornamental terracotta details. Contrary to the usage in continental churches, a **tympanum designed by John David Prangnell**, winner of the British School at Rome scholarship in Sculpture in 1948, was added in in remembrance of the Royal charter granted in 1550 and describes the Huguenots' exodus and their welcoming in England **[1]**.

The roof is topped with a small bell-tower **[2]** which still shelters the original bell, no longer in use.

# The inside of the church

The inside of the church, designed at the time for a congregation of 400 people, conveys a surprising feel of space and light, the warmth of the buff-coloured terracotta in stark contrast with the stern façade.

Borrowing from Romanesque architecture, Aston Webb filled the nave with light provided by domes piercing the aisles, large triforium bays and the five stained glass windows of the apse. The four bays of the nave are defined by imposing Roman arches, embellished with complex terracotta mouldings of antique inspiration.

The **nave has a wagon roof made of sequoia wood**, which is another direct borrowing from medieval architecture. Around the roof of the apse are **six wooden sculpted crowns [3]** commemorating Edward VI's 1550 Royal Charter, of which a replica hangs on the left of the entrance **[4]**.

In the tradition of French Protestant churches, **the interior is mostly bare**. A few **inscriptions** are, however, noteworthy: on the wall opposite the apse, one can read "The Church of the Lord Jesus" and on the terracotta pulpit, "In Christo Vita et Libertas"**[5]**.

The modern **cross**, added in the 1970s, hides the original cross drawn by Aston Webb, of eclectic and ornamental design. The **terracotta font [6]** with scrolled feet and a shallow basin has a dedication to Jean à Lasco and was added in 1950 for the 400th anniversary of the Royal charter.

Near the entrance is a First World War **memorial tablet** designed by Adrien Montagu in 1920 **[7]**, brought from the demolished French Protestant School, commemorating four students. Beside it is the school's **bell**. A **handwritten memorial [8]** in a glass-fronted case commemorates members of the congregation lost during both the First and Second World Wars.

The William Hill's **organ** dates from 1893.

## The Library

The Library [9] was first mentioned in the church council minutes (Actes du Consistoire) in 1613-1615 with a gift of books, provision of space and appointment of a librarian. Saved from the Great Fire of London in 1666, the archives and books have been housed since 1893 in a room specially designed as a library by Aston Webb. The collection consists not only of books – some bequeathed by members of the congregation – but also of archives, the oldest dating back to 1560.

From original sermons written by Calvin, to Royal Charters allowing the foundation of new churches or Consistory minutes, these archives give us an insight into the daily life of a community affected by historical events. Distressing stories can be read into the lists of collections made for the reception and relief of the French refugees, who had to leave their possessions behind.

**We raise funds to restore this magnificent building,  
feel free to help us by giving generously**

FRENCH PROTESTANT CHURCH OF LONDON - 8-9 SOHO SQUARE - LONDON W1D 3QD

Tel: +44 (0)20 7437 5311

secretariat@egliseprotestantelondres.org.uk

www.egliseprotestantelondres.org.uk