

# **THE INFLUENCE OF THE HUGUENOTS ON THE CITY OF LONDON**

**Read by Alderman Michael Savory  
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The Huguenots would approve of this gathering. They were a disciplined people, and if an elder of their church failed to invite the minister home for a good lunch after the service, he would be forced to pay a half crown fine.

Not that I am likening myself to a minister but I am delighted to address you this afternoon about a community who contributed much to their adopted home and yet, one which appears to have vanished.

What happened to this industrious group of devout craftsmen and women and how has their influence affected the City?

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I shall start with an overview of why they came.

Disenchanted with Rome and in tune with the ecclesiastic reformers of the sixteenth century - Calvin, Luther, Knox - these French Protestants comprised around a million people rising, at their peak, to one third of the French population. A pejorative term, they are thought to have been named Huguenot after the Swiss 'eidgenossen', meaning Confederate.

A protracted series of reprisals - massacres and torture mostly - precipitated the first departure from France. The established Catholic church felt threatened by the steady drain from Rome by these so-called Protestant 'heretics'. Not only that, but the Huguenots took their resources with them which was a potent cause of Catholic concern.

Emigrating in two protracted, but distinct waves, the first left continental shores around 1536. Other countries of refuge were Ireland, the German states, Switzerland, Sweden, Denmark and Russia, the American colonies and South

Africa. Those who remained, some 700,000, were forced by Rome publicly to recant their Huguenot faith. The *Nouveaux Convertis*, as their name suggests, were newly converted in name only. It was a sham and they maintained their Protestant beliefs in secret.

By the end of the seventeenth century, which saw Louis XIV revoke the Edict of Nantes in 1685, 164,000 Huguenots had left France and Holland and of that number around 45,000 had come to England, dispersing to Bristol, Brighton, Southampton and to the North East and West of England.

So, to return to the first settlers.

The first mention of French and Dutch congregations in London is in 1548 and two years later, Edward VI granted the Strangers, as Huguenots were termed, the use of St. Augustine's Chapel in Austin Friars, off Broad Street here in the City. The French contingent peeled off, from the Dutch, to St. Anthony's Chapel in Threadneedle Street and thus were laid Huguenot foundations in the City of London.

The Strangers represented a complete cross-section of their own society. While they were mostly skilled craftsmen, traders and merchants there were also the poor and a few aristocrats in their number.

It is the middle classes, though, who made the greatest contribution to life around them. They had had the foresight to take their wealth with them when they fled papist France and Flanders and to that extent they were entirely self-sufficient. Their skills, some of which were new to England, were greatly valued by Government and, naturally, resented by the indigenous traders. In 1564, Secretary of State William Cecil had already noted the economic benefits which their skills brought and welcomed their continental influence and trading contacts.

Henri of Navarre, whose accession to the French throne in 1589 depended on abjuring his Calvinist faith, endeavoured to protect his Huguenot brethren by signing the Edict of Nantes. This order officially recognised achievement by Huguenots and gave them religious, civil and judicial liberty.

The Edict eased the heavy influx of those seeking refuge to worship in peace yet Huguenots continued to come to London. Even in those days, London was the main centre of economic life in the British Isles. Further, it already housed a large and active Stranger community and as such, attracted more wishing to find a home from home. Thirdly, and I quote '... [it was] *neare enough for*

*intelligence of the affayres of those princes and of many sodaine daungers that may be offered by them'. So London, built on the Thames, was protected by the estuary yet was eminently accessible to legitimate travellers. London's very location gave safety from Catholics' reprisal.*

However, the Strangers were not all refugees from political persecution. Approximately one third came for economic reasons and the largest number congregated in the City.

These people were engaged in commercial and industrial activities such as weaving of linen, silk and sailcloth, and as furniture designers, printers, engineers and bankers. Commercial traders and merchants settled in the City, where the majority of trading was carried out. The artisans meanwhile - the jewellers, cooks, peri-wig makers, perfumers, the musicians - went to Westminster and Soho to be nearer the Court.

By 1593, five years before the signing of the Edict of Nantes, there were 631 families consisting of husband and wife. Of these 460 had children and the majority of families had between one and five children. Seventy-five per cent of the 2,957 children were born here and legally well on the way to becoming integrated with the English population.

This aspect is central to the Huguenot evolution in England.

So skilled linguistically and socially were they that their integration with English society was absolute. Interestingly though and despite their high levels of literacy, they did not produce their own newspaper. Indeed, Strangers were employed as translators of foreign news as it was far cheaper to pilfer continental reportage than to send out scouts for it. This, however, seems to be the only form of literary expression. Huguenots were not great writers, the one exception being Sheridan Lefanu, the Irish born 19th century novelist.

When Henry IV signed the Edict of Nantes, congregation levels at St. Anthony's dropped, hinting at a general return to the continent. Yet in 1641 a second French church was built at what is now known as the Savoy.

The church continued to play a central role in their lives and the Stranger's Church was one of the first to be rebuilt after the Great Fire in 1666. This fact highlights that their devotion did not diminish as their wealth increased. They maintained, and it must be said still maintain, a degree of modesty which is intriguing. As 'Doers' they 'Did' but Don't shout about what they Do.

Despite their rigorous integration into English life, their trades kept them closely assembled. The community of silkmakers and weavers who insured their properties - once burned by the Great Fire, presumably twice shy - stretched from the Old Artillery Ground at the HAC, across Bishopsgate and Spitalfields to Bethnal Green.

In an account of her ancestors, Joan Evans wrote '... An interesting community of Huguenot refugees ... had its center in Spitalfields. Their forebears had come over from France in the years following the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685. They had become naturalized in England yet their descendants still formed a foreign community. [They were] ... a closed society with the intelligence that accompanies the easy use of two languages, [along] with the piety of a persecuted race and with the frugal wealth of Frenchmen who are, or have been, dependent upon their own exertions for a living.'

Their houses, which still stand today, can easily be identified. The flat front of elegant Georgian grace on five storeys. Fournier Street, which is just the other side of Spitalfields, has a tell-tale row, four floors up, of multi-paned windows. These large windows were designed to let in as much light for weaving as possible. Walking around that area is wholly reminiscent of its first inhabitants; Nantes Street, Fleur-de-Lis Street, Calvin Street and so it goes on.

In those days, however, City life continued albeit with hindrance.

The skills which the Huguenots brought were eminently tradeable. Many of them were duplications, albeit superior, of services already offered. This influx of new talents galvanised the City Guilds and Livery Companies. They sought to protect their interests and, in the case of the Goldsmiths, created an effective closed shop. All alien goldsmiths within the City and two miles beyond were subject to the wardens of the Goldsmiths' Company. Consequently, there was no need to admit foreign craftsmen to the Company in order to control them.

The struggle between State and Merchants is as intriguing as it is understandable. The former could only benefit while the latter saw only the demoralising effect on their vested interests by foreign competitors. It is an indication of the power of the Livery Companies that the Worshipful Company of Goldsmiths sent a deputation of wardens, in 1583, to the Lord Mayor and the Bishop of London to prevent Jean Louis, silversmith, from being admitted to their number. They failed.

The end of the seventeenth century was the dawning of a new age for commerce. Seven of the twenty four founding fathers of the Bank of England in 1694, and its first Governor, Sir John Houblon, were of Huguenot descent, while in 1724, Henri Portal signed an agreement with the Bank to supply paper

for the printing of its notes. Huguenots also made writing-paper and newsprint too. William Hogarth learnt his engraving skills from Ellis Gamble, the Huguenot gold and silversmith.

It became a popular saying that a 'drop of Huguenot blood in the veins was worth £1,000 a year.'

Innovators of all sorts, Huguenots were responsible for simple and effective inventions. It is said that the corkscrew was invented by a Stranger and much earlier, in 1609, Robert Thiery was given the Freedom of the City at the request of James I on the grounds of his extraordinary skills of invention, being the first to weave material from the silk of silkworms nourished in England. In this instance, the City fathers acceded to the request and he was admitted to the Weavers' Company on payment of 6 shillings and eightpence to the Chamberlain of the City.

Indeed, in two generations, Huguenots were absorbed into English society, faster than anywhere else with the exception of French speaking Switzerland. It is because of this total assimilation that outstanding features of Huguenot influence are unapparent. Even though they retained their faith, their way of life and living became Anglicised. Second generation Strangers married into their host society and their so-called profile merged into that of English traders and craftsmen.

In the 1690s, the Court cabinet maker, Jean Pelletier acquainted England with the baroque gilt furniture which had distinguished the court of Louis XIV and which inspired the work of John Gumley and James Moore for George I. Hugely creative, Huguenots were also responsible for introducing, designing and making *pièces du rococo* furniture, gardens, glass. Paul de Lamerie, perhaps the finest gold and silversmith England has seen, died in 1751. He was the prime influence on English smithery. Robin Gwynn says: "It is now half a century since Joan Evans pointed out the overwhelming predominance of Huguenot workmanship in the Great Russian Imperial Collection of English silver and subsequent work has confirmed her conclusion that any history of craft in England from 1680 to 1775 must chiefly concern itself with Huguenot smiths."

They were distinguished soldiers as well. Not surprisingly, there were Strangers with William of Orange at the Battle of the Boyne; there were Strangers in the *Résistance* during the war and one, Michel Hollard, was 'the man who saved London' by locating the site of Germany's V2 rocket launches, while General Sir Peter de la Billière 'dared and won' in the Gulf in 1991.

There have been some who came to the City and stayed. Pierre de Cazenove left France for Geneva at the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes. His progeny went on to become startlingly successful players in the City's expansion and one hundred and thirty eight years after the Cazenoves left France, a great-great-grandson, Philip, created a partnership with another Huguenot descendant and founded the stockbroking firm Menet & Cazenove in 1823.

The Church continued to play an important role in the lives of Huguenots, despite their assimilation into English life and culture. Indeed, the Church has taken on a number of different faces and in a sense mirrored the development and evolution of its congregation. Dodging around the Stuarts, rebuilt after the Great Fire, moved on to allow for the building of the Royal Exchange, the Church has retained a calm constancy.

From EC2 the Church removed to St. Martin's Le Grand for nearly 50 years, by which time the GPO decided its headquarters could be built only on that spot. It is an indication of their quiet determination that a new site was found in Soho. Distanced from the City, Soho gave ready access to descendants of the 'Courtly' craftsmen who had colonised the area long before. In 1891, the foundation stone was laid by Sir Joseph Savory, the Lord Mayor of London, who was, naturally, a Huguenot. He was also an ancestor of mine. Upon completion of Aston Webb's design, the Church's last and, I do hope, final move to Soho was completed in 1893.

Naturally I have endeavoured to search the Huguenot lineage in our membership of the Guildhall Historical Association.

There was a William Mahew, a brewer, who was admitted to the Freedom of the City on 20th October 1618.

A John Toye may have lived in Wolverley, Worcestershire, but had property connections in the City in 1696.

While the Challis's have had a remarkable journey. Simon Challis, at the request of Lord North, was made a Freeman of the City on 7th October 1600. Two hundred years later, Thomas Challis, a butcher in St. Giles Ward, sired a son who became Lord Mayor in 1852.

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Rather as a mist evaporates, one is unconsciously aware of the air's freshness yet consciously unaware of the reason.

So we have the Huguenot influence on the City of London. It is everywhere we look. The City dress code owes its crispness to Huguenots, the City window boxes came from a Huguenot tradition, even the coffee spoons in front of you are of the King's design, French in origin and bearing Huguenot simplicity.

Low key as ever, I learnt recently how one can always tell a Huguenot apart.

It happened that I went to a corporate City doctor for an annual check-up. Having taken blood pressure, checked my teeth and reflexes, he asked me to go behind the curtain and strip to my underwear, which I did. Drawing back the curtain, he asked immediately if I was a Huguenot. Much surprised I said "Well, yes I am. But how did you know?" "Short, fat, hairy legs" he said.

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