

# BCWA

## British and Commonwealth Women's Association

### Club History

Our Association was established at a time, not so very long after the war, when Paris was a difficult place for expatriates to live in - no relocation agencies in those days! Women did not work and were stuck at home with children in a country where they did not speak the language and knew nobody. Many women were lonely and unhappy; they felt isolated and marooned; they lacked stimulation partly because it was difficult to get books in English. There was a clear need to do something and, fortunately, there were women on hand bold enough to meet the challenge.

Rather like a good French wine, the British and Commonwealth Women's Association comes from two root stocks which were grafted together. In 1962 two women, who had set up a group known as "Housebound Housewives", joined forces with Lady Mason, wife of the British Ambassador to NATO in the days when NATO was housed in what is now the Université Dauphine. Lady Mason had come from Brussels where she had seen a similar association. Together they established the association and set up a committee.

A room was rented high up in the Grand Hotel to house a library which was built up from donations of books and a monthly lunch was held, initially in the Grand Hotel and when that became too costly, at a restaurant in the rue Jean Goujon in the 8th. There was always a speaker at these lunches: people like Peter Townsend, Princess Margaret's boyfriend, the Duchess of Devonshire or a BBC correspondent. The association gradually started more activities and visits to places of interest.

From its foundation the BCWA has tried to be responsive to the needs of its members. In those early days there were many retired British nannies and governesses who, in the days before French social security, needed help. A committee member was appointed to be responsible for Senior Citizens in the community, an annual charity was set up to aid them and a team of volunteers visited them to assess their needs.

Finding a "home" for BCWA has been a recurring challenge: we have had a room in Maples Furniture shop where a member's husband worked; we shared premises with the British Legion for a while, but the men did not like us being there; we rented a room in St Michael's church for a year and then spent eighteen years in St George's basement. It was

during this time that clubroom lunches were introduced. In 1996 we moved our club room, to new premises in rue de Belloy, where we stayed for 12 years. Since January 2008, we have been installed in the rue du Faubourg Saint-Honoré where we are able to offer various activities. However our lease has now ended so we will be organizing twice weekly get togethers at the Royal British Legion. All our usual group activities, which will now take place in members' homes and at other locations, will continue as will visits, walks, restaurant lunches.

Technology has changed the way in which many things are done. In 1964 the first BCWA newsletter was published typed on A4 paper and reproduced on a roneo machine. The present format was adopted in 1975. Newsletters were dispatched, as they are today, by teams of volunteers but, in the early days, there were no computers to print the address labels - all the addresses were handwritten! Today, the newsletter is put together on a computer and sent by email to the printer, then to our internet-connected members, or by post.

Our membership too has evolved. Now we have more professional and working women and women who want to work but cannot find a job in Paris often because their French is weak.

The Association formed by our founders was a lifeline for those early members. We join today for exactly the same reasons that they did - to speak English and to enjoy the company of friends with whom we can take part in a variety of activities. But while the BCWA has remained true to the objectives laid out by the founders it has also changed with the times so that it is the modern, forward-looking association it is today.

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