

# The British origins of France's oldest (championship-winning) football club

by Martin Greenacre

LONG BEFORE Paris Saint-Germain came to dominate French football, a British club reigned in the capital.

That club is still alive today.

Standard Athletic Club (SAC), founded in 1890 by a group of Britons who had come to Paris to work on preparations for the Exposition Universelle of 1889, claims to be the oldest French football club in continuous existence.

"They came to work on building the Eiffel Tower, all of that stuff," explains Club president Rich Parkin, 57, who is also a management consultant.

"I've heard the word 'engineers', but I suspect they were mainly plumbers and woodworkers, and things like that."

The founders would regularly meet in Le Copernic bar in the 16th arrondissement, which still exists, and decided one day to start playing football together.

Standard have an even greater claim to fame, however: they won the first ever French football championship in 1894.

Six teams, all from the Paris region, participated in the knockout competition, with Standard beating White Rovers, another British club, in the final.

In the early years of the competition, the trophy was donated by American newspaper editor James Gordon Bennett Jr, known as Gordon Bennett (yes, that one). "There was this weird stipulation that it would go to the best team in Paris.

"If ever it went to anyone outside Paris, then it would get returned to America," said Mr Parkin. Today, the original trophy is displayed in governing body FFF's museum, with a photo of the SAC squad.

The competition eventually opened up to clubs elsewhere in France in 1899, which did not prevent Standard winning a fifth championship in eight years in 1901.

That history might be largely forgotten to most French football fans but it left an indelible imprint on the European game –

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On our shirt we have five stars for how many times we've won the French national league

**Rich Parkin,  
SAC president**

Belgian top-flight club Standard Liège is reportedly so named in reference to the Paris team.

The club bought its five-acre grounds in the forest of Meudon, on the outskirts of Paris, in the 1920s.

Football is not the only sport here that is steeped in history. Standard's cricket team, which organises an annual tour of the UK, is the "reigning silver Olympic medallist", Mr Parkin says.

Cricket has only been played once at the summer Olympics: in Paris in 1900. "Two teams entered, and we lost."

A team came over from Great Britain to face a French team mostly made up of British expats. "I think six of them came from Standard and five came from somewhere else, and they rolled them out and they lost."

Although much more international today, the club remains intrinsically linked

Queen Elizabeth II opened Standard's clubhouse in Paris in 1957



Photo: Standard Athletic Club



The football team continues to play matches on Sundays. Their badge is the Royal Standard, pictured above



Photo: Standard Athletic Club

to its British roots. It flies the Royal Standard, the flag used by the monarch, and Queen Elizabeth II even came to open the clubhouse in 1957, and a second time when it was extended in 1972.

"The old clubhouse got blown up," said Mr Parkin. "We sit on a hill above Paris, so the Germans took it over and used it as an aerial monitoring station during the war. While they didn't destroy Paris, they did happily destroy the British club as they left. It took about 13 years to rebuild."

The club was entirely British until the 1960s, but now hosts around 1,000 members from 60 countries. To join, you need to be able to speak English, have an international profile – such as having lived in multiple countries – and have a sponsor within the club.

"We position ourselves as an international English-speaking club, British and Commonwealth predominantly.

"What we look for is not a little England. It's a place where all these people who've lived in lots of places in the world – Argentinians who live in France, or French people who went to Singapore or Hong Kong and have moved back, or went to London and came back post-Brexit – are members."

Asked whether the club was a hub for the British community, Gerald Strouts, 51, a chartered surveyor and vice-president of the club, said: "What do you have in Paris that could be classed as a hub for British people? It would be a pub, I suppose.

"We have our own clubhouse with a bar, with English beer, and on top of that we have the social and sports facilities."

Mr Parkin interjected: "We are the sole point of sale of Theakston and Theakston Old Peculier outside the UK."

Both men spent their formative years in the UK, with Mr Strouts moving to France at 25, and Mr Parkin when he was in his thirties after more than a decade in the United States. "We do Bonfire Night every

year and have a fireworks display, and I discovered the club through that. It's good to feel connected with the traditions you knew when you were a kid," said Mr Parkin.

Standard continue to play friendlies on Sundays against local teams, in the same red and black kit. "On our shirt we have five stars, just like Brazil, for how many times we've won the French national league.

"I suppose some of the scorelines are the same, but other than that, there's not much similarity with the illustrious team of the 1890s, given that Gerald is centre-back and I'm in goal," said Mr Parkin.

After more than a century of continued existence, the club, like many British institutions in France, has recently had to adapt to a new challenge: Brexit.

"Last year, we ordered our new football shirts. I think it took about six months and they crossed the Channel three times," Mr Strouts said.

Yet there is a long enough institutional memory to put things in perspective.

"The reason Standard dropped out of the French first division was because in the 1920s France started putting requirements to have residency cards if you were playing in the French league. We couldn't get enough Brits to have French residency cards, given the strict immigration requirements, to get a decent team out any more," Mr Parkin said.

The club is run by volunteers as a not-for-profit association. A full membership costs €1,270 per year, but with significant discounts for many groups. For example: €635 for those aged 30 to 35, €260 for students, and €440 if you only play one sport.

"If you're under 30, it costs you less than being in any gym in Paris. And we've got a gym. You can play cricket and football, we've got an outdoor swimming pool, squash courts, eight tennis courts, a snooker table, and a bar," Mr Parkin said.

Full details are at [www.saclub.org](http://www.saclub.org).

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