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# THE SWISS COMMUNITY IN THE U.K.

## THE SWISS COMMUNITY IN THE UNITED KINGDOM

The Swiss colony in Great Britain is justly proud of a long history. Its beginnings date back to the eleventh century when William the Conqueror was crowned by a Swiss Bishop. For centuries Swiss soldiers and teachers, doctors and artists, bankers and diplomats made a name for themselves in the British Isles.

The Swiss Church in London was founded as early as 1362. During the Free Trade period, young Swiss merchants were attracted by Britain. During the First World War an important initiative was taken by the Swiss in London to gather all Swiss abroad in a national organisation which should have as its aim to promote co-operation between the Swiss outside Switzerland and their homeland. The first branch abroad of the Nouvelle Société Helvétique in Switzerland was founded in England when, in 1916, the *London Group of the N.S.H.* was created. At that time, it had a permanent Secretariat. This society is still today one of the most active Swiss organisations, and meetings on Swiss problems and subjects of interest take place monthly.

The *Swiss Mercantile Society* looks after the well known college where hundreds of Swiss students learn and improve their English every year. The SMS (London Section) organises monthly meetings.

Important youth work is done by the *Swiss Churches* in London, and their

ecumenical co-operation is exemplary. They also run a mothers' union and women's circles.

Then there is the *City Swiss Club*, founded in 1857, catering mainly for Swiss businessmen. The *Swiss Economic Council* represents Swiss business interests.

The *Swiss Benevolent Society*, as the name implies, looks after the less fortunate compatriots, both temporarily and permanently. The *Swiss Welfare Office* and the *Swiss Hostel for Girls* are two more institutions taking care of young people.

The *Unione Ticinese* consists mainly of Italian-speaking countrymen and women.

The *Swiss Club* (Schweizerbund) is a purely social group which meets only occasionally.

The stamp collectors are attracted to the *Swiss Philatelic Society* and the marksmen to the *Swiss Rifle Association*.

All these organisations co-operate in arranging the Swiss National Day Celebration on 1st August every year.

Finally there is the *Anglo-Swiss Society* whose membership is both Swiss and British.

In other parts of the country, too, the Swiss have various societies. The *Swiss Club in Manchester* is one of the leading and very active organisations in the Midlands, not to forget the *Yorkshire Swiss Club*.

There are Swiss groups in *Edinburgh* and in the *West of Scotland*. And there are informal groups in many towns, such as Bournemouth, the Channel Islands etc.

Many clubs and societies have ceased to exist in the course of time. The oldest of the London groups, the *Société de Secours Mutuels* founded in 1703, closed down only a few months ago. There used to be a gymnastic society, a male choir, an orchestral society and others no longer functioning due to lack of members.

But there is plenty of life, and most societies meet weekly or at least monthly. Addresses and information may be had from Consulates and the "Swiss Observer"

The Swiss Centre in London's Leicester Square plays an important part in fostering the image of Switzerland. Unfortunately, the planned cultural and social Forum of Switzerland had to be abandoned due to lack of finance. Some of the task of promoting Swiss cultural life has thus fallen on the new Swiss Embassy in London. Much has already been done by the Ambassador and his colleagues. Their co-operation with Swiss organisations manifests itself in many ways, one of them is that the AGM of the *Federation of Swiss Societies in the United Kingdom* always takes place at the Embassy. The meeting elects the delegates for Berne every three years.



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