

Crucifix rescued from ruined Somme church in WW1 is returned to French village

-ITV News



The crucifix back in the church at Doingt in France Credit: ITV Anglia

A crucifix saved from the rubble of a French church during the First World War and brought to Britain has been returned to France after more than a hundred years. In 1916 the Battle of the Somme was being fought in France between Allied forces and the German army along trench lines known as the Western Front. And in the village of Doingt close to the River Somme in northern France, the church was destroyed after being hit in the crossfire. A British Army chaplain, The Rev Percy Hooson, had been stationed in the area and removed the crucifix from the ruins of the church - and he brought it back to Britain after the war ended in 1918.



People gathered by the ruined church of Doingt when it was safe to return Credit: Old photo

The Rev Hooson later became vicar of All Saints Church in Tinwell near Stamford and put the crucifix on display there.

But at the weekend a delegation of parishioners from Tinwell including current vicar The Rev Olwen Woolcock took it back to Doingt.

They had decided to return it after recently discovering that the ruined village had been rebuilt after the First World War.

And on Saturday it was handed back to parishioners during a ceremony in the village's new church which was built in the 1920s.



Fr Jean-Louis Brunel with the Rev Olwen Woolcock Credit: ITV Anglia

Fr Jean-Louis Brunel, the current vicar of the church of Notre-Dame-de-L'Assomption in Doingt said: "For the church, for the village this crucifix is like a relic because it was more than 100 years it was kept and protected.

"So coming back is something very, very precious I think."

The Rev Olwen Woolcock, vicar of All Saints in Tinwell added: "It has been the most wonderful day. We have so much enjoyed it.

"It's felt very meaningful as well because of the link that we have made with this community through returning the crucifix."



A photograph from 1916 shows the extent of the damage to the church Credit: Archive photograph

Tinwell villager Chas McDevitt - who played the Last Post at a short memorial service before the crucifix was handed back, said: "I think we didn't realise the significance until we'd actually come here that, you know, there's so much more important for for them to have the cross here.

"For us we were caretakers and now it's this aspect of permanence coming back to the church in Doingt."

Hubert Boizard, a local historian in Doingt said because of the time that had passed the village had no record of the crucifix being in their old church.

He said: "We have no information here on the crucifix. We have nothing.

"We know the church was destroyed a lot. And we have English troops, Australian troops in a village in 1917 and 1918 and okay there is a crucifix in Tinwell - it was a surprise because why did it stay in Tinwell? We don't know."

Rutland village to return Somme crucifix after 107 years

-Dan Martin, BBC News

A crucifix plucked from the rubble of the Somme battlefield and brought to England is to be returned to its original home in France.

The cross was originally from the church of Doingt-Flamicourt, which was destroyed, along with the rest of the town, during the World War One battle.

It is believed it was salvaged by a British Army chaplain and placed in All Saints Church in Tinwell, Rutland.

More than a century later, it is to be taken back.



Image source, Mémoire de Doingt-Flamicourt

Image caption,

Doingt's church was destroyed in the fighting

Doingt, near Amiens, was one of many settlements wiped from the map during the 1916 campaign that claimed more than 300,000 lives.

Former All Saints church warden June Dodkin said: "On Remembrance Day 2018 we were commemorating the centenary of the war and the village priest asked if there was anything interesting in the church.

"We suggested the crucifix which we knew, from records, had come from Doingt.

"There was a 16-year-old boy in the congregation, Jonno McDevitt. He looked at it and said 'shouldn't we send it back?'

"We were all a bit stunned. It had never occurred to anyone as we thought Doingt was destroyed.

"But he got his phone out, looked it up and that's when we discovered the place - and the church - had been rebuilt."

Mrs Dodkin said that discovery led to emails being sent to Doingt's mayor, raising the prospect of sending the cross back.

Special permission was granted by the Diocese of Peterborough.



Image source, Mémoire de Doingt-Flamicourt

Image caption,

The crucifix will be returned to Doingt's rebuilt church

The coronavirus pandemic put the plan on hold, but a 10-strong delegation from Tinwell will take the 22in (56cm) oak cross, bearing the figure of Jesus, back to Doingt in June.

Mrs Dodkin added: "They are extremely excited about the prospect of the cross being returned in Doingt - they were very surprised to hear it has been in our church all this time - and we are looking forward to taking it.

"They are arranging a number of events, receptions and ceremonies to mark the occasion.

"It sounds like we will be very well looked after."

Rev Olwen Woolcock, priest-in-charge of the parishes of Ketton and Tinwell, said there had been several false starts in the attempts to discover how the cross had come from Doingt to Rutland.

The answer came, she said, from Sir Giles Floyd who worships at All Saints who explained the cross was found by Parson Percy Hooson.

Parson Hooson served during the Somme campaign as a chaplain and later took up a post at Tinwell in 1932.

She said: "Sir Giles told us Parson Hooson, described by his family as a great forager, picked it up from among the rubble of the battlefield.

"We assume he brought the crucifix with him and placed it on the altar."

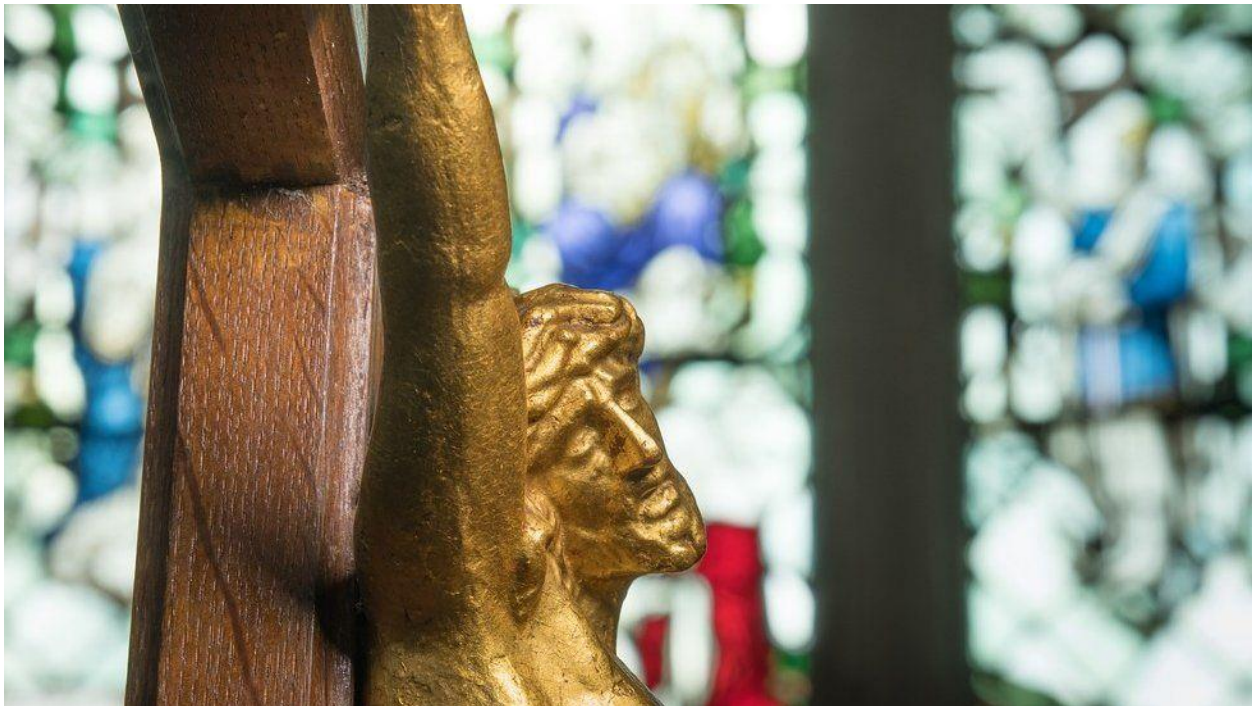


Image source, Tom Carlill

Image caption,

Historians in Doingt say the crucifix's return symbolises peace and hope

She added: "After all the delays of Covid, the visit to Doingt is going to take place this summer and the crucifix will be returned to where it belongs.

"It is a symbol of hope and the promise of new life - a village once destroyed is rebuilt; where there was trauma and death, today there is life and community.

"The crucifix is like the last piece of the jigsaw in that restoration, taken back to where it belongs."

The return of the cross has been co-ordinated with Doingt villager Hubert Boizard, a member of local history group, Mémoire de Doingt-Flamicourt.

He said: "I look forward to meeting our English friends, to remember the past when their country defended France and freedom.

"This crucifix has a very strong symbolic value as a token of peace and hope.

"The return of the crucifix symbolises the friendship between our two nations who fought together for freedom."