

Parisian passion

Rory Clarke grew up in Dublin, met his wife Gaëlle in London, and they relocated to Paris 26 years ago where they have their home on a 13th century street, once a haunt of the Irish lover of Louis XV

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Paris is always a good idea, Audrey Hepburn famously said in the movie *Sabrina*, and Rory Clarke would definitely echo that sentiment. The urbane Dubliner has lived in the city for 26 years with his elegant French wife, Gaëlle, and their three twentysomethings – their apartment is right in the centre within spitting distance of the Louvre – but Rory still remembers his first trip to the French capital at the age of 19.

“It was 1982, my friend and I took the ferry and then the train to Gare St Lazare. I was so excited I started nudging people, ‘it’s the Eiffel Tower’. Of course, these were daily commuters who saw it every day,” he recalls with a laugh. “I remember walking along the Seine and I made up my mind, this is where I want to be.”

It didn’t happen immediately but the seeds were sown. Fortunately Rory, who spent years with the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) in Paris and more recently at the prestigious

Council of Europe Development Bank, already had a grounding in all things French from his early years.

One of six children, he grew up in Blackrock, Co Dublin, and went to primary school in Hollypark where teachers from the nearby French school often taught, and after attending secondary at

Blackrock College, he spent a year in Newpark where he met the inspirational John de Courcy Ireland. “He was a real Francophile and inspired a French interest in me. I would listen to longwave French radio to try and improve.”

Rory decided to do geography and economics at Trinity with the





Rory and Gaëlle Clarke in their apartment on one of the oldest streets in Paris. The street is right in the centre, dates from 1292 and stretches from Les Halles to the Palais Royal. The two-storey apartment dates from the 1700s. The couple fell in love with the location and also its lovely features, including the original beams. Because the ceilings are low, the couple decided that modern Danish design pieces worked well and many were bought locally and at furniture markets



Omar Sharif wrote to Mum on her 50th 'Dear Jo, we're of the same generation, love Omar.' I think Mum still has it

idea of becoming a journalist like his father, and the course stood to him in his career. But his passion for all things French and France persisted and he even took a year out to go to France, first Paris and then Brittany where he taught English at a thalassotherapy spa. "There was no gap year then, you

needed a bit of courage because you didn't have much money," he says. "The spa was a well-known destination for stars. I remember meeting Omar Sharif and got him to write a postcard to my mother Josephine on her 50th birthday. He wrote 'Dear Jo, we're of the same generation, love Omar.'" I think

Mum still has it. I also met Nastassja Kinski, Catherine Deneuve, Simone Signoret and Herbert von Karajan. I was very happy there but I had to get back to my life."

Rory finished his degree in Trinity where he specialised in urban issues, influenced by his »

My favourite room

» experience of inner city life in Paris. At the time Temple Bar was about to be turned into a bus depot and many protested against the development. Rory is proud that his thesis unearthed some important facts about the area.

“My two little discoveries were that there was a viable economy there; artists studios, furniture makers, fashion designers. But the real clincher was an old map of Dublin which myself and the Trinity librarian discovered – the medieval streetscape was protected as a Dublin planning priority so CIE, as it was then, could not create a depot which would remove the cobbled streets of medieval Dublin. I’m not saying it was all me but I was part of that movement of people. Yes, we needed a transport hub. Yes, we needed a stronger economy but we needed to nurture this authentic part of Dublin. I’m proud to have been part of that.”

After graduation, Rory went to the Sorbonne and did a two-year pre-doctoral about planning laws. Then he went on to Oxford to do a PhD, but while there saw an ad for a job in *The Economist* publications in their intelligence unit (EIU). He got the position and relocated to London to launch a career that encompassed all his interests, including journalism, economics, geography and urban planning.

France was always uppermost in his mind so when Gaëlle, a marketing student from Burgundy, walked into the office, he was eager to make her acquaintance. As she tells it, he was very quick off the mark. “On my first day, I just came out of the lift and this guy popped his head out of his office and said, ‘Hey, come here,’” she laughs. Rory plays down this ambush and insists “When French people came I always made a point of welcoming them.”

The two immediately became firm friends, played tennis together – Gaëlle, who had once played with Ilie Năstase, usually won – then after five months just before Gaëlle’s internship ended they realised they had “grown fond of one another”.

“Literally 10 days later, we



Above: Gaëlle and Rory at their favourite local restaurant at the corner of their street, where a two-course meal at lunchtime costs less than €20

Right top: The kitchen was a separate room but Gaëlle is a wonderful cook and both she and Rory love to entertain, so they took down the walls and had it incorporated into the dining room with a peninsula between the two allowing the cook to enjoy the conversation while concealing the cooking mess. There is a soundproof utility room for washing machines and a basement cellar

Right: A detail of the living room which is all about their interests – art, photography and especially music. All their children play instruments



decided we wanted to get married. It was on a traffic island waiting for a cab on Harrow Road, coming out of a friend's place after a bottle of wine. Next morning, we were like 'Do you remember what we said, are you still on?' The answer was yes. Gaëlle went back to France, and the pair married a year later in 1995. After their marriage, Gaëlle came back to the EIU but when their eldest Roman came along, she gave up that work and eventually started her own business teaching English to all ages, from four to 86.

Roman was a toddler when Gaëlle became pregnant again and they decided to move to Paris. "We wanted central urban living and a job came up in Paris with the OECD – I was brought on to give the OECD *Observer* magazine a facelift. Over the years, I published pieces by policymakers and world leaders, including some Irish politicians, pieces by Mary Robinson and Peter Sutherland. One of my last jobs in the OECD was creating podcasts. I did one with Paschal Donohoe."

The pair's other children – Emilie and Clarence – came along, and Rory, as well as being busy with his work and being a father, threw himself into fostering relations between France and Ireland – he's a member of both NetworkIreland and the France Ireland Chamber of Commerce.

"Thirty years ago, the French went to Ireland to admire the landscape. Today, thousands of them go to work in leading pharmaceutical and tech companies. Ireland is part of their lives, like France is part of mine," he says, adding that cultural ties have also strengthened. "Paris has an affection for Irish writers. Joyce and Beckett both made their names in Paris." Though not a writer, Rory has played a part in celebrating their work, both at a Beckett festival and also as a member of the Paris Bloomsday Group – they give readings at venues like the Centre Culturel Irlandais, the Irish Embassy and Shakespeare and Co, the left bank bookshop which Joyce made famous.

The couple are interested in all things cultural, especially music and photography, and they have

an interesting collection of images by top photographers lining the walls of their apartment – including a photograph of John F Kennedy's hands taken by the renowned Cornell Capa who spent 100 days with JFK.

Their apartment is on Rue

Coquillière which runs from Les Halles to the Palais Royal. They've lived here for the last 10 years, having spent the first 16 years in Paris renting an apartment on the Rue de Rivoli. "We had three kids, we wanted four bedrooms. Gaëlle had friends on this street and heard that this apartment on two floors had come up for sale. It's 18th century, pre-Haussmann. It needed work, new wiring, new floorboards, but we were taken by the character, the old ceiling beams. It's got the four bedrooms, unheard of in the area, and while it's on the fifth floor, as well as the stunning stone staircase, it has an elevator. We loved it straight away."

While the apartment was built in the 1700s, the street itself dates from 1292. "It's said that Louis XV's Irish mistress, Marie-Louise O'Murphy, frequented the street," Rory notes.

Despite being right in the centre of Paris, Gaëlle says it's very village like. "The night we moved in, we told the kids to go across the road to have a bite while we unpacked. The owner Nico sent them back with food for us. Now we're great friends. And I remember collecting curtains that were being cleaned, I forgot to bring money and the dry cleaner still gave me the curtains. I said 'You don't know me' and he said 'You're down the road'. Everyone here knows everyone," Rory adds.

"You hear a lot about the 15-minute city – so many services locally, you didn't have to leave your area. Daycare was close, the kids' schools were all nearby and there are so many parks." In the pandemic, their 1km walk was either to the Pompidou Centre or the Opera.

With Covid-19, their local community grew even closer; their son Clarence is a sound engineer/musician and every night



A view down the curved stone staircase to the ground level. Amazingly, a removal company managed to negotiate a piano up the stairs to the fifth floor, the day before lockdown



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of the first lockdown – with the windows of the apartment wide open, after the applause for the health workers – Clarence played a tune, a different one every night for 55 nights. "Suddenly we had new friends at balcony level. He'd wake up, say 'I need to learn a different song'. He did play *Bohemian Rhapsody* a few times and Louis Armstrong's *What a Wonderful World*."

Roman, who has a PhD in neurophysiology and works for a start-up in Rheims, and Emilie, a legal counsel, also play music.

Gaëlle, whose brother is in the wine business in Burgundy, is a fantastic cook. She and Rory love to entertain both French and Irish friends. They have a table and Danish chairs in their cosy dining room that comfortably accommodates a crowd.

Rory's life and work has always been about people and the way we live in cities. He still loves Dublin, where his mum and siblings still live, and London – but Paris is home, just as he had hoped it would be all those years ago. ●