HISTORY BRANDY and OYSTERS

Notes from a Study tour of LES DEUX CHARENTES

FIRST IMPRESSIONS, if not profound are often honest. Here to commence the record of a study tour in South West France at Easter are a few impressions: —

We met our guide, Jaques Lastenet, a thorough-bred Frenchman. The girls are smashing . . . the afternoon was spent romping about.

Alan Nicholl.

In Paris we went on the Métro to Les Halles (the equivalent of Covent Garden). Then we saw the main vice area of Paris. We visited the flea market which is infested with Algerians.

Michael Prestedge.

From the beds we picked oysters, mussels and cockles. One of the crew cooked them on a small stove in the bows. They were delicious . . . It was Good Friday, we went on a snake hunt.

Barry Burge.

The Port of La Cotinière is famous for prawns. The Mayor showed us the auction hall and then his office where the different types of fish breed. At Mornac we were shown the old port by a native. Friday was our last day of work. We went aboard a typical fishing boat and waited while the fishermen worked in the oyster beds.

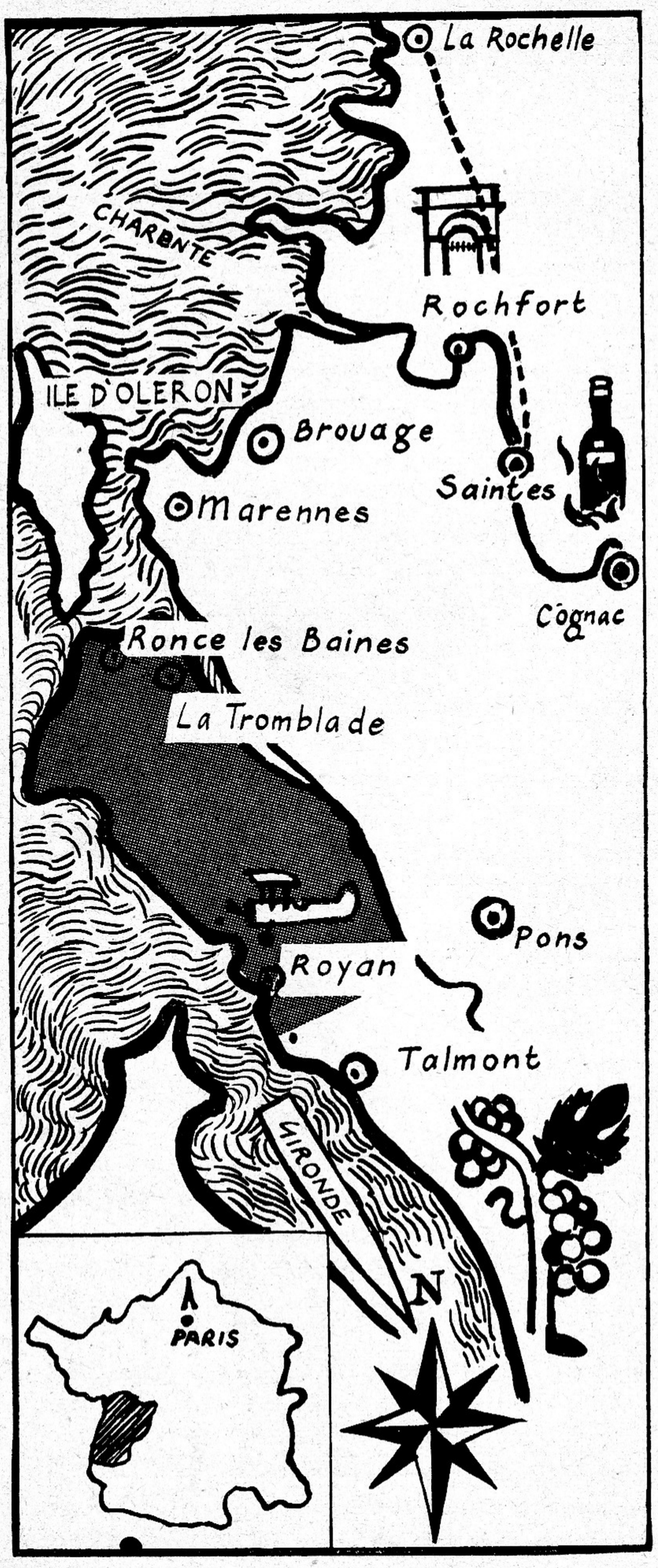
Roy Vincent.

Square yellow fields of colza, destined for oil and cattle cake, emerald pastures between queues of bushy vines whose roots plunge six times the length of a man below sandy soil; salt pans which, having served the needs of Europe in the scurvy middle ages, serve again to-day as oyster parks, vast forests of maritime pine defying the perpetual Atlantic are the natural sources from which the departments of Les Deux Charentes draw their life.

A twenty minutes trot from La Tremblade, a town of six thousand which doubles itself during the summer, is a group of converted farm buildings, white washed, mushrooming at the fringe of a state pine forest. Here for ten days Wandsworth colours mingled with those of two dozen or so French men and women training to be directors of the famous Colonies de Vacances. But let the travellers tell their own story. In "A brief Outline of the Area Saintonge-Aunis" prepared by Michael Clenshaw we learn that the area of study is one of the richest in Anglo-French history and includes Guyenne whence came iron from Spain and salt to London in the Middle ages. The Saintonge-Aunis coastline (to quote Clenshaw) is clothed with forest pine behind dunes of storm blown sand. The spring weather is mild, with showers. In a moment of sobriety Martin Mason at a loss for something to do, made the following summary of the visit:—

"Farming and forestry, fishing and the oyster industry are the main occupations I covered. General farming is concerned with vegetables and cattle, the milk from the latter forming the raw material of an important plastics industry around La Rochelle. Most of the vegetables are consumed locally. The vineyards provide the famous distilleries at Cognac with their raw brandy and, as a by-product there is the manufacture of white and malt vinegar which we saw at La Tremblade. The forests yield resin for processing into turpentine, building materials, scaffolding and pit props which I was told come even to England.

"The Oyster industry is focussed upon La Tremblade and Marennes. The local men go out at 4 a.m. (I did not verify this myself) and sail with the tide to the oyster beds upon which their flat boats rest as the tide recedes. Men, and women in season, work hard with large rakes moving the oysters to enable them to take in sufficient nourishment— especially after storms which pile the shells up one upon the other. At La Tremblade I bought oysters at 60f. a dozen (a penny each), in Paris they were 5d. each and in London 8s. to 10s. a dozen."


La Rochelle
CHARENTE
Rochfort
ILE D'OLERON
Brouage
Saintes
Marennes
Cognac
Ronce les Baines
La Tremblade
Pons
Royan
Talmont
GIRONDE
PARIS
N

A forest survey was made under the guidance of a chief ranger and here is what George Alderson, after having handled a two stroke mechanical saw, had to say about forestry:—

"The French state forests in this part of France owe their origin to land erosion by the sea since the 11th century. It was not until . . . —1824 that M. Marcel Brémanchier commenced the planting of coarse grass hummocks and then pines (interposed Vincent-Townend the real Professor of the party).

"In a half century or so the sand has been halted and the annual decay of undergrowth has built up a layer of moss covered soil. Some of the trees originally planted are still to be seen. The pine is tapped for resin by slashing the bark (as they do with Malaya rubber trees), and soaking the gash with a dilute solution of sulphuric acid. This produces a blister which is cut and from it flows the resin. From the forest around La Tremblade ten thousand hecto-litres of turps are annually obtained and sold at 50f. per litre giving an annual income of three million francs".

The Life of an Oyster

Alderson discovered that the life cycle of an oyster is far from simple, and the fact that 75 per cent. of the population of La Tremblade are in some way connected with oysters did not make investigation more easy. For every French informant seemed to tell a different story. Now oysters thrive best where salinity is not too strong and the wide mouth of the river Suedre, on whose banks La Tremblade stands, has the right density. The "spat" or small larva are encouraged to anchor to special "collectors," in the form of lime-washed tiles, or rosaries of slate or again bundles of willow wands that make unexpected forests when the tide is low. After feeding upon plancton, the oysters, two or three centimetres long, are removed to fattening parks where they remain for three years. If they survive attacks of starfish, winkles, crabs, sea urchins and squid, they are moved inland for fattening and in this period they form a partnership with a minute water organism. After feeding upon the oyster the organism is in turn devoured—an act which forever turns it a darkish and very palatable

green! The phase of moon, availability of plancton and phase of tide involve many complications which the Scientific and Technical Office of the Pêches Maritimes try to solve. The main problem we had to solve was to find the francs for the Muscadet which custom decrees shall wash down the oysters!

Saviez-vous que?

Whilst crossing from the arrival platform Gare du Nord to the Paris Métro, a distance of fifty yards, Martin Mason got lost.

At Cognac, roofs and walls are black due to a fungus which thrives in an atmosphere heavy with the fumes of distilled brandy.

In the Gallo-Roman arena at Saintes (the ancient Roman prefecture) can still be seen the iron cages from which lions rushed to battle with gladiators.

German submarine pens still exist at La Pallice (the modern port for La Rochelle), and that unexploded mines around German blockhouses at La Tremblade remind visitors that "les deux Charentes" were part of the Nazi Atlantic Wall 1939-45.

Burge, Eadie, Nicholl and Prestedge sang "Diana" to an appreciative audience of French students near Royan, where English and French knights did battle in the reign of Henry IV.

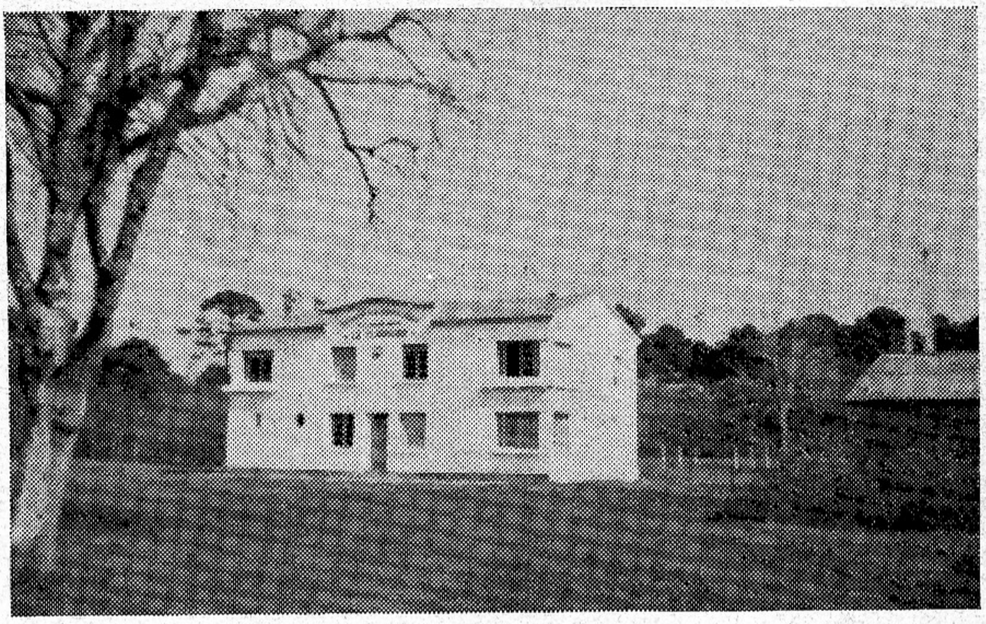
In 1868 *a Portuguese ship had to jettison a cargo of oysters at the mouth of the Gironde. This was the beginning of the oyster industry which to-day accounts for more than* 60 *per cent. of French output.*

Weight for weight oysters are as a food better than milk.

Royan, destroyed by the Nazis, rebuilt as a show piece of town planning with a market in the form of a giant shell-fish , was an English possession in 1271.

The Origin of Cognac

Which reminds us to report on the famous city of Cognac. In the eighteenth century an Irishman, James Hennessy, warmed the blood of comrades at home with a sample of the "pineau" of Cognac. Thus he became a public benefactor, and as the first exporter of cognac a figure in the economic



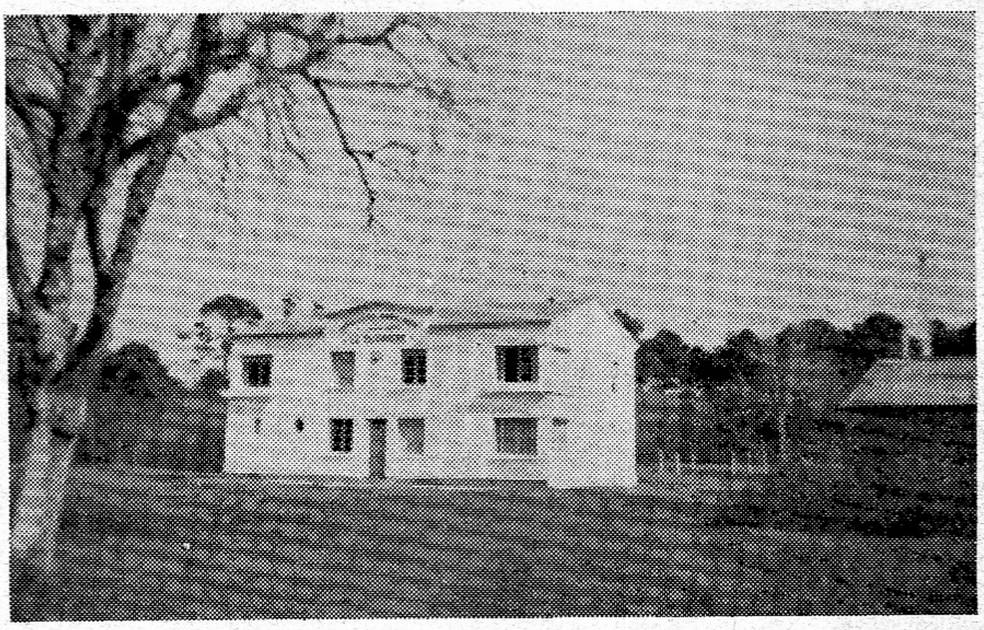
The Dormitory

history of France. Our tour of the "Etablissments Hennessy" began with a tasting of several fine amber samples in suitable goblets. Roy Vincent writes, "We saw the big casks containing the brandy which will be left for forty to sixty years. The longer the better . . . then we moved on to Saintes Cathedral."

Roger Hardy who had taken a personal interest the previous day in the wine industry was indisposed, but David Snell was able to confirm that "the brandy made at Cognac is the best in the world. After the grapes have been crushed, the farmer puts his white wine into a copper still. He lights a fire under it, and tends it for six months. The liquid thus made is very alcoholic. The farmer sells his best brandy to a merchant who, in turn, offers only his best to such firms as Martell or Hennessy. The chief tasters of those firms then blend the brandies which are left to mature in oak casks, never for less than six years."

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