

MILLSTONE MAKING IN FRANCE: WHEN EPERNON PRODUCED MILLSTONES

Translation of an article 'Quand Epernon produisait des meules à moulin' by J. Beauvois, Les Moulins, (Publication semestrielle de la Fédération française des Amis des Moulins), No.4, 1980, pp.5-13. The French article is illustrated by 16 old photographs collected by Mme. Colmont. While trying to remove in my translation many of the obscurities and ambiguities of the original (as they appear to an English reader), I have nevertheless tried to retain something of the flavour of the French text. I am grateful to Kenneth Major for drawing my attention to this article, and to the officials of the Fédération for permission to publish this translation.

D.G.T.

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Epernon is a small town of Eure-et-Loir, situated at the northern limit of la Beauce, between Rambouillet and Maintenon, about 30 km from Chartres.

Situated in a charming valley, it is famous, among other things, for an important deposit (or bed) of millstone rock, exploited mainly since the 19th century.

The Parisian Basin, La Brie, La Beauce possess important millstone deposits which, situated in the centre of large areas of cereal production, have been exploited practically since mills first appeared. On the other hand, the millstone rock of the Epernon region, little appreciated over a long period, found a considerable economic outlet only in the second half of the 19th century, when the choice in manufacture changed from the porous 'éveillée' stone to the solid type.

It is this which explains why one finds two Epernon enterprises, Chevrier and Moulin, in the amalgamation of nine specialised millstone firms which created the Société Générale Meulière (S.G.M.) in 1880 at La Ferté-sous-Jouarre.

The ruthless competition which drove the manufacturers to opposition among themselves gave way at this time to a protective alliance of the profession. Actually the danger was very real. A revolutionary and perfected system for the milling of cereals using cylinders [of iron] was on the point of being adopted by millers. This process had begun in Central Europe, gaining ground due to the economic and industrial thrust of the 19th century.

Technically, the replacement of the early porcelain cylinders which were costly and fragile, by fluted cylinders of cast iron which were much more resistant and manufactured industrially at minimum cost, permitted milling to achieve its industrial revolution.

In this context, the millers had to defend themselves and were re-organised to create a financial capital which would permit an early and unprecedented commercial development directed above all towards export.

There was likewise a second stage in which the will to adapt to the reality of a mechanical world in full flight led to the creation of a new sector of activity specialising in the manufacture of milling plant and based on the mother-firm of La Ferté-sous-Jouarre. There were left in France only three large enterprises for the extraction, manufacture and marketing of millstones.

Epernon thus saw established on its soil the subsidiaries of the rival firms of La Ferté-sous-Jouarre - Société Générale Meulière, newly-created, and the Société Dupety-Orsel, a long-renowned firm established in 1751.

The S.G.M. was installed near the station, utilising of course the facilities of the railway. The Société Dupety-Orsel, although having opened a yard on the station approaches, had its main activities at the edge of the town on the Maintenon road (Vernot Yard).

Later, a third enterprise, the Abrasienne, producing millstones in agglomerate, was set up on the Rue de Cady.

Epernon was a large city of stone, and although the millstones were an important activity, they were not the only products of the quarries.

Sandstone quarrying became important with multiple uses. In this connection we should dispel the misunderstanding that these two activities were really only one.

In reality, the materials were totally different. The hardness of the millstone grit was incomparably greater than that of the more tender and friable sandstone.

In spite of comparable techniques of working, few of the sandstone-hewers changed over to the quarrying of the millstone grit, so true was it that the millstone rock of the Epernon region had properties to repulse the best intentions: igneous rock, compact and pure. Its extraction was done in quarries open to the skies, the beds of rock being found at depths varying from 3 to 12 metres and having a thickness of 0.5 to 2m on average.

The quarrymen's work was very rough, as also were the workings, for practically everything was done by pick and shovel. It was necessary to have an iron constitution, and the view of the quarries gave an impression of a convict prison.

The tasks of the workshops were just as trying; everything was done by hand. The cutting, the assembly of the pieces and particularly the finishing operations, furrowing, surfacing and above all chiselling, which forced the operator to be close to the stone and thus to breathe the dust produced by the blows of the tools, led to that terrible disease: silicosis.

The cases of silicosis were numerous and recruitment was difficult. Applicants on the spot were rare, and to meet the needs workmen were solicited from competing firms; sometimes, even, it was necessary to go further to find the workmanship, and by underhand means try to rally some units from the firm of Brisgault-Garnier of Cinq-Mars-la-Pile, 20 km beyond Tours. They also waited at the exit of the yards of Saint Hilaire du Arcouët, in La Manche, hoping to recruit some granite-hewers.

Men of sorrow, hirelings particularly hardened to effort and suffering - you could say you wouldn't tread on their corns. Nevertheless, like miners, they were proud of their craft.

Like all corporate bodies, millstone-making had its traditions of companionship derived from distant times.

St. Léger was the patron-saint of millstone-makers, and St. Léger's Day was the occasion of rejoicing.

At Dupety-Orsel, the personnel assembled after the morning mass, and an excellent meal, copiously 'watered' as was proper, was offered by the management. It was quite otherwise at the S.G.M., a 'young' enterprise which had broken with ancestral customs.

With the death of old traditions, the new doctrines propagated during the 19th century penetrated into all bodies.

These wild and hardened men, with barely-tolerable working conditions, who gained their living so laboriously, without help or assistance in case of illness, were animated by a free spirit mixed with anarchy. The profession remained profoundly stamped with this, and participated in all the struggles and claims of workers at the beginning of the century. However, it must be stated that except for the moments of great activity in workers' demands, in particular the great social struggles in 1909 and 1910 including those at La Ferté-sous-Jouarre, the unions never succeeded in establishing themselves among these shy individualistic workers.

In 1938, at the S.G.M., in replacement of M.Trochu, a new director was named : M.Colmont. He was to spend all his life in the service of the S.G.M., where his uncle, M.Nollin, mayor of Jouarre, was an administrator.

Engaged in the enterprise in the profession of accountant, M.Colmont went to Epernon and gave evidence of a great dynamism. In spite of the increasingly uncomfortable situation of the millstone industry, he directed the enterprise for more than 20 years, encouraged by his wife. Both were able to gain the confidence of their personnel, perfectly integrated into this professional sphere which they loved and had known for a long time.

The S.G.M. exploited five quarries, supplying not only the workshops of Epernon but also those of La Ferté-sous-Jouarre. There were also relations with Italy and stone was despatched to the workshops of the Baldeschi-Sandreani factory at Cantiano.

Under the influence of its director, the S.G.M. at Epernon was endowed from 1935 with mechanical equipment for extraction and transport - mechanical shovel, loco-tractor, and flat wagon.

At Epernon, millstones of different diameter were produced, from the French millstone in solid rock and even monolithic owing to the homogeneous quality of the beds, to the so-called English millstone, smaller but more complex. The techniques of mounting or making-up the stone and the texture of the rock used were dependent on the function; all the needs of millers were taken into account. Epernon produced above all millstones for grinding cereals, but also cocoa-beans, mustard-grains, spices, mineral and chemical products, etc.

A policy of export had become vital after the victory obtained at the beginning of the century by the cylinder over the millstones. The definite adoption by the big mills of the cylinder technique permitted a better mastery of the production of white flour. Above all the large capacity for millstone production necessitated a search for other outlets; the millstone companies sold about 80% of their production to foreign firms. The station at Epernon was very important and wagons were chartered for distant destinations. Millstones were regarded as ballast in the loading of the ships.

The Dupety-Orsel Company had a big trade with Tsarist Russia. After the First World War, the economic blockage of Russia deprived them of an important market and nearly proved fatal to them. In spite of everything they remained traditional to the end, producing only millstones.

Epernon never got its 'letters of nobility': all its millstones were marked as supplied by La Ferté-sous-Jouarre.

In 1940, the German troops overran Epernon, occupying the millstone factories. They ransacked the Dupety-Orsel works, largely destroying the millstones in course of manufacture, among other things utilising the eye-hole as a hearth. The heat produced shattered the stone, thus destroying the products in the yards.

As for the S.G.M., strategically badly sited, they endured the effects of bombardment without too much harm. In this critical period, the director, M.Colmont, was mobilised, and left the responsibility of management to his wife. She succeeded, with much difficulty, in evacuating the workshops. She re-organised the activities of the firm, and was then soon relieved by her demobilised husband.

The internal market had diminished; exports were re-started and a certain number of orders were despatched to Germany.

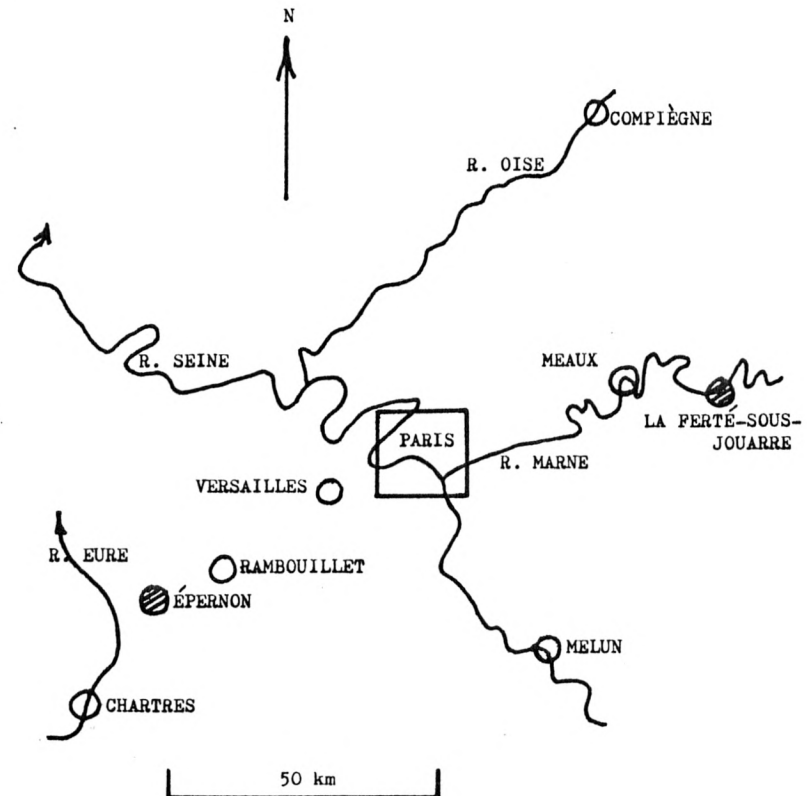
The war had been fatal to the Dupety-Orsel company of Epernon; the S.G.M. continued, but the situation became more and more of a compromise. Eventually, in 1951, the S.G.M. was wound up and the personnel of La Ferté-sous-Jouarre was almost totally dismissed. However, the millstone industry of Epernon did not wish to die: it survived for several years more with the Société de Construction d'Appareils de Meunerie (S.O.C.A.M.) The last orders were honoured in 1958, then the closure was final.

It was the end. Never again would Epernon hear the familiar noise of the hammers which had accompanied all hours of the day.

The yards of Dupety-Orsel had already been broken up and sold in lots for building. There remain today only some shreds of this enterprise - poor witness of what was a vast workshop with its forge, its hot chamber, its depot and its loading platform.

As to the S.G.M., the workshops and the director's house have remained to this day. A porch is still adorned with millstones, ultimate vision of what was once a branch of prosperous activity.

I thank particularly Mme.Colmont for her valuable help in completing this article. I have also consulted the too-sparse notes which M.Colmont left us, published in a regional edition of the 'Parisien Libéré'.



SHOWING THE LOCATION OF THE MILLSTONE-MAKING AREAS
OF ÉPERNON AND LA FERTÉ-SOUS-JOUARRE