

THE ANDRÉ L SIMON LECTURE 2016

Presented by

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at The Vaults, Leith

“The Scottish Wine Trade”

Let me first acknowledge that I am a businessman; not a historian. The dates, and the facts surrounding them, have been mainly gleaned from a book I recommend to you all: “Knee Deep in Claret: A Celebration of Wine and Scotland” by Billy Kay with Cailean Maclean. This was first published by Mainstream in 1983 and revised in 1985 and 1994. I am pleased to say that the 1994 edition was launched in the Vaults beneath this very room that you visited earlier this morning. We are not sure how old the Vaults are but the earliest recorded mention of them is the 12th Century and they were not new then! The general cobwebs and black botrytis growing on the ceiling (*cladosporum cellare*) are a result of the evaporation of alcohol vapours over the last 800 years and it has been chemically analysed by Edinburgh University and the Edinburgh Botanic Gardens who have found that it is identical to the mould growing in the cellars in Bordeaux and in the Medoc.

This is the oldest building associated with the wine trade in Leith (even perhaps in the whole of the UK) which for many years was the business premises of Messrs. J. G. Thomson and Company. This building is known locally as the "Vouts," a name which, in spelling and pronunciation, carries us back to the troubled days of Mary Queen of Scots, when this building seemed to be as gloomy in appearance as it is today, for, as we have already observed downstairs, it was then known as the "Black Vouts". The oldest date marked on the Vaults today is 1682, when the great building, much lower in height at that time than now, was either reconstructed or rebuilt. Messrs. J. G. Thomson began business here in 1785. It was they who raised the Vaults to their present height of three storeys. But this historic building had been associated with the wine trade long years before Messrs. J. G. Thomson's time, as is shown by the richly decorated walls and ceiling of the original office, small in size compared with the present counting-house. The plaster decoration in the older office is very largely symbolical of the wine trade.

To the left of the actual long bar (in the Anfora Wine Bar restaurant, where we are seated) lies a beautiful & historic dining room. Once named 'The Sale Room' this was where the wines of Bordeaux (and from elsewhere) were sampled by the

members of the local Guild and purchased if approved. The price was then fixed by the Edinburgh Town Council.

As early as the twelfth century, as we have seen, the mariners of Leith brought wine from abroad for the use of the Abbot and Canons of Holyrood. Holyrood had been an Abbey before it became a Royal Palace. In the days of the early Stuart kings, after Holyrood had become their court, the King's wines all came via Leith. The duties payable by merchants on goods landed at Leith were exceedingly moderate in those times, for we find that in 1477 the duty on a tun (4 Hogsheads or 1,200 litres) of wine was only 1s. 4d. Scots (less than 7% of a modern pound sterling).

The Auld Alliance between Scotland and France might have started as a military alliance but it became synonymous with a long-established friendship founded on the Scots love of French wine. The first formal treaty between the Scots and the French dates back to 1295, it was formed as a pact against the English (plus *ca change*!!). But according to historical records the Auld Alliance could possibly be said to originate in the 8th century (year 777) with a military co-operation between Charlemagne of the Franks and King Accaius of Scotland – to help fight any potential invasions in each other's countries.

By the end of 13th Century and beginning of the 14th century the main importation into English and Scottish ports was from Bordeaux (an English colony at this time as was the whole region of Gascony) due to the marriage of Eleanor of Aquitaine to Henry Plantagenet in 1152 resulting in 3 centuries of English rule in South West France and a rule only broken, ironically, by the combined forces of the Auld Alliance in the 1450's.

To summarise a very complicated history, after Robert the Bruce won independence from Edward the second's England in 1314, an even closer alliance was formed with the French, to help protect the Scots against the English. And when Joan of Arc finally defeated the English in 1453 a lot of her army had Scottish blood.

Many Scots fought as mercenaries for the French, and in return Scottish merchants were offered privileges, including freedom from Normandy taxes and direct access to vine-growers to select the choice of Bordeaux's finest wines – a privilege which was eagerly protected for hundreds of years, much to the annoyance of English wine drinkers who received an inferior product.

In the days of Mary Queen of Scots (1542 – 1567), when there was so much coming and going between Scotland and France, claret from France was the chief wine imported into Leith. This trade continued to grow for about two hundred and fifty years until the time of the Napoleonic wars, when it increased greatly in price

owing to the duty imposed on it by the British Government. Sherry from Spain and port from Portugal then began to be imported in increasing quantities.

In those days; and in fact up to and including the 1970 vintage, most wine was imported into the UK in wooden barrels (in "bulk" as it was called) and bottled in England or Scotland.

When the wine arrived at Leith it was clarified naturally by long ageing in barrel and then it was bottled. In many other parts of Leith there were also huge cellars in which were stored, bin after bin, a huge array of wine bottles, each on its side. In this position they lay for from ten to fifteen years, their contents slowly maturing. The temperature of these wine cellars remains the same, day after day, and year after year, never naturally really changing due to the excellent storage conditions. So extensive were some of these original vaults that a visitor to one of them, after traversing long avenues of bins, may peer out of a grating into a street a considerable distance away from that at which he entered. Stores representing fortunes lay unsuspected beneath the feet of Leithers as they walked their streets!

This only changed when the French AOC rules specified that quality wine should be bottled where it was made. When England lost control of Bordeaux it was unable to continue to import claret and turned to its oldest ally, Portugal. Portuguese wines were exported from Oporto and grape spirit (brandy) was added to stabilize it for the journey across the Bay of Biscay. The added alcohol stopped the fermentation early and Port was 'invented'.

The wine trade in Scotland survived the Reformation and the Union of the Parliaments. In England drinking French claret was seen as unpatriotic but during the Jacobite era Scottish nationalists took to claret as opposed to port as a sign of independence. More often than not a blind eye was turned as the wine was smuggled through Leith and rolled up the streets to the New Town. The pillars of Edinburgh society cared not a jot where it came from – they kept drinking it as claret had become part of Scots culture.

Leith became firmly established as one of the busiest wine importing ports from this linkage with Bordeaux and through the centuries Leith-bottled claret earned an international reputation rivaling London and Bristol.

Wherever we may go, we find that the Scots tend to stick together and the mercenaries evolved into a thriving Bordeaux merchant community. Today a single name survives – Nathaniel Johnston et Fils who are located at the heart of the famous Chartrons district, the historic centre of the Bordeaux wine trade and retain

strong links with the outlying chateaux of the Gironde. The Johnston's even have a Boulevard named after them!

While fine wine drinking was previously confined to an elite in Scottish society, times have changed and we now enjoy a range of choice that once would not have been believed. Scots have made their mark on the New World wine trade too – Inglenook of California; Robertson of South Africa; Anderson of Rutherglen, South Australia to name but a very few.

Claret still comes ashore, of course now in bottle, and, given the undoubted quality of Bordeaux wine and our historic attachment to it, will surely always take a favored place in Scotland's cellars!

Leith was one of the chief wine-importing ports of the kingdom, and housed a large number of wine firms, well known as importers of wines of the finest quality and most of them were long established. For instance, in the old ledgers of Messrs. Bell, Rannie, and Company, who began business in 1715, now over two centuries ago, are to be found the wine bills run up by Bonnie Prince Charlie for his gay and brilliant assemblies in 'Forty-five' times. The chief wines coming into Leith in the past were claret from Bordeaux, Burgundy and Champagne via Dunkirk, Sherry from Cadiz, Port from Oporto, and red wines from Australia. Champagne came already bottled, but the other varieties were, as previously mentioned, usually imported in the cask. The export of whisky from, and the import of wine into Leith, has given it a large trade in coopering. In his *Bride of Lammermoor* Sir Walter Scott speaks of "Peter Puncheon that was cooper to the queen's stores at the Timmer Burse (that is, Timber Bush) at Leith."

As your Society is one based on fine dining and most of the wine in these Vaults are sold through the restaurant trade I should add a few words about Scottish Gastronomy. Scotland produces some of the finest raw materials for the table that can be found anywhere. Aberdeen Angus beef, grouse, venison and salmon are known around the world, but top quality restaurants did not exist at all until the 1920s and even in the 1970s they were few and far apart. You have to conclude that the Puritan ethos lingered north of the border far longer than it did in England.

In fact the first quality restaurant in Scotland was created by an Englishman! Arthur Towle was the son of Sir William Towle who was the creator of the great railway hotels that started to appear in England towards the end of the 19th Century. Arthur followed his father into the Midland and Scottish Railway Company and was influential in opening the renowned Gleneagles Hotel in June 1924. It included the first French restaurant in Scotland. Towle's second French restaurant in Scotland was the Malmaison at the Central Hotel in Glasgow opened in 1927. I should also

mention William Heptinstall (after whom the annual Chefs awards are named). In 1929 he opened a hotel in the Highlands some miles from the nearest railway station but Andre Simon in 1945 expressed the opinion that there was no better food to be found in Britain than at Heptinstall's hotel at Fortingall. Time has moved on and Scotland now has 13 Michelin starred restaurants of which 4 are located in Edinburgh.

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