

THE FRENCH MILLSTONE STORY

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The Emergence of the Societe Generale Meuliere

In the 1800's, a group of millstone merchants and builders was given leave to prospect in the Bois de la Motte (Plaiderie), not far from La Ferte sous Jouarre. The names of Marquand, Depaux, Colet, Guillmet and Baudouin were included. Of these, only the name of Baudouin survived to suggest the whole group were amongst those firms which combined in later years to rival the Grande Societe Meuliere, under the name of the Societe General Meuliere.

This Society was established in 1884 from half-a-dozen firms in La Ferte and a couple in Epernon. In the 20th century the group diversified more than did the G.S.M, but ironically, its consequent viability was the cause of its earlier downfall and it was taken over, and then closed five years before the G.S.M, in 1953.

The following were the founding members of the S.G.M, and where information about them has been published, this is included:

1) Roger fils & Cie

This firm was founded in 1802, won a number of awards between 1844 and 1876 and is the only one which achieves mention in a normally somewhat uncritical academic textbook of 1903.

Indeed, the Public Relations department of this firm was amazingly well developed. In 1858 long eulogistic articles were carried in several issues of the superficially objective "Revue des Sciences", ostensibly the organ of the "Societe des Sciences Industrielles, Arts et Belles Lettres le Paris". Translations of some of these appeared in "The Miller" in the 1880's, though reference to the firm is dropped. An earlier, similar report was garnered by a deputation of the Committee of Arts and Manufacturers of the National Academy of Paris in 1851; the translation of this report in Baird's edition of Hughes' "The American Miller" reveals significant passages of text identical to that of the report later made by M. Lunel in his own "Revue des Sciences". (M. Lunel also played the piano at the Society's musical evenings). The firm also exhibited in 1851 at London's Great Exhibition, but the juries there, judging from what they saw before them, awarded Roger fils no more than an Honourable Mention on the grounds that the objects which they exhibited were not of such fine quality as, and their collection was less complete than, those of Gueuvin-Bouchon & cie, a rival company also from La Ferte sous Jouarre. I am afraid that this did not deter the firm from claiming that they had been awarded a medal at that Exhibition: if it were for some product other than millstones, which is possible, this is not apparent from the prize index. But this slight did perhaps drive them to improve and to increase their production over the next few years, and to engage in an overwhelming publicity campaign which led them to dominate the literature from then onwards until the late 1870's.

Amongst the writings are three drawings of this firm's premises, which lay to the north of the river, between the railway and the Bois de la Barre. Two of these illustrations show the interior of the yard, and although they bear a recognisable similarity, one to the other, one dates from 1858 and the other from about 1877 and there are significant differences. One reason may be that the later engraver had a sharper eye for detail, and most of the processes can be picked out; horse-drawn carts are bringing in burrs and taking away finished stones and a crane in the station yard stands beside some flat rail trucks. Flat two-wheeled handcarts are also being used to wheel stones about the yard; the earlier picture shows a small hand-operated crane being used to load one of them.

Against the inside walls of the works in both engravings are the lean-to working sheds, but the later one clearly shows the millstones propped up

against the back wall, evidently in the course of construction. The most important change was that between 1858 and 1877 the centre of the yard had been built over with a two-storey block having a row of chimneys, suggesting the location of forges, while a steam engine and belt drive at the far end perhaps drove fans and grindstones. The new building displaced the banding operation, which moved to one end of the site, so that in 1877 we see two grates for heating the iron bands: they have covers which can be raised by pullies. Stables and cart sheds are probably in the range of buildings, some of which can be seen in 1985, beside the road; stores for the fuel for heating the bands, for the forges and for the steam engine are not identifiable, though there must be wood or peat for heating the bands, and coal, or possibly coke, for the other fires.

The twenty years between the first picture and the second is precisely that period when production doubled to reach its peak, an increase shrewdly anticipated by Roger, as an article in the "Revue des Sciences" in December 1859 explains. The article resulted from a promise to readers to publish each year an analysis of improvements carried out at La Ferte by Roger fils - a promise not thereafter honoured, as publication of the Revue became more and more sporadic until the last two numbers limped out in November 1863 and March 1864. Unfortunately the article we are here concerned with is not illustrated, but it does say that the size of the undertaking was doubled in 1859 as a result of the construction of new workshops totalling more than a hundred metres in length, and including a central enclosed building of more than two hundred square metres designed for the building of stones during the winter. "It is well known", said the article, "that it is virtually impossible to build millstones during that season because of the frosts which preclude the use of plaster". The new building, including a form of central heating, was big enough for forty men to work in, so that construction could be as actively pursued in the winter as in the summer, and millers would no longer suffer long delays in deliveries. The work of shaping the burrs evidently continued in open-sided sheds, of which a new range was built.

The article also carried the opinion of "un praticien habile", but anonymous, that an efficient miller is unlikely to wear his stones down by more than a centimetre in ten years, but that after three or four years the stones "no longer possess the same qualities they had when new. That is why I have no hesitation in renewing my stones every four or five years, because the millstones are the soul of the mill ... The reason lies in the deterioration of the molecules which go to make up the pierre meuliere, as a result of the constant friction, and the heat caused by this friction". The author goes on to equate this phenomenon with that of metal fatigue (! in 1859). He also mentions that "in their large workshop the firm has set up two horse-driven mills ... to test different kinds of millstones and different kinds of grain".

The exhortation to keep buying new sets of millstones (perhaps unnecessarily) has a curious pre-echo of the contrived built-in obsolescence to which we have become accustomed.

The extra facilities introduced by Roger are symptoms of a new degree of standardisation and mechanisation certainly not obvious in the yards in 1858 when this firm began to pride itself publicly on its innovative methods. Nevertheless, in the 1850's Roger were building four to five hundred stones against orders from France, England, Germany and Belgium; in addition to this they reckoned to specialise in the export of burr-stones, some 24 000 of each from La Ferte and Epernon being sent to England, Italy, Germany, Russia and America. In 1852 there were some 300 workmen in the yards and quarries, but by 1858 this had already risen to over 400.

Roger et fils also owned quarries at Epernon, the districts of Roches and Saint-Lucien being mentioned. The discovery of suitable deposits there was apparently a chance find in about 1840; the stone was similar and said to be little, if at all, different in quality.

2) The firm of Bailly, founded in 1842, was advertising in Luxemburg in 1851, but by 1884 it had become Baudoïn Renaud and Lefevre.

3) Gilquin fils et cie was one of the half-dozen firms whose stones were bought up in haste by the Ministère des Travaux Publics, in a rare demonstration of speed and foresight by a government department, and loaded on to the last trains to reach the Paris termini from the east before the siege of 1870. Of the other companies, one was Dupety's firm and the others were Roger, Bailly, Alexandre Fauqueux and Ladeuil. All these firms, like Gilquin, became assimilated to S.G.M. Indeed the remaining supplier, the company of Gaillard aine, Petit et Halbon was the trade mark of the Cie du Bois de la Barre, also a constituent of S.G.M. So it does seem that there was already a close connection between these firms in 1870 - and the fact that they were approached and responded so promptly on that occasion almost certainly results from government contracts which Bailly and others had had to supply military mills.

4) Bois de la Barre, founded in 1837. Gaillard aine, who appears to have been the doyen of this firm, won the approval of Ch. Touaillon of Paris for his efforts to rationalise the industry, but he had died by 1867 when Touaillon was writing.

5) Of the remaining five firms, three of which were in La Ferte, not much more information had been published. Of the firms in La Ferte, Bertrand, Morel et fils had been founded in 1820 and Ladeuil et Cie. in 1825. Alexandre Fauqueux & Cie was the successor to Edmond Petit who may be the Petit, Sons & Co of Nantes who were represented at London's Great Exhibition in 1851 by "millstones, suitable for grinding wheat, in general use in France". The report of the "Syndicat des Grains" in 1884 quoted the performance of stones installed by Alex. Fauqueux at the somewhat indifferently powered mill at Penchen, then in the Grand-duchy of Baden. Of the two firms whose businesses were at Epernon, Chevrier and Moulin, nothing more than their names at present appears in print.

The Societe General Meuliere

The Society had its workshop on the rue Pierre-Marx, on the north side of the town and between the river Marne and the railway. Two engravings of about 1900 exist and show, apart from a generous stock of burrs and finished stones, a network of tramways within the works and an advertisement for "meules a remise" (reduced price millstones). The situation beside the railway cannot be far from that of Roger fils, who heads the list of constituent members, but the engravings of Roger's works are quite different. They may have been adjacent.

The S.G.M. diversified into the manufacture of all kinds of milling equipment, including smutters, sifters and roller mills, but the premises closed in 1953 when the business was transferred to other centres owned by a consortium which had taken over the works after the second world war.