Alsace history

When you travel through Alsace, it gives the impression of timeless peace. The sun is shining on beautiful little towns, with quaint and colourful houses, and the white storks of Alsace soar happily in the skies: birds of lifetime fidelity that breed in the rooftop nests that are a feature of the area. Excellent wines grow in superb vineyards, tended by locals that speak Alemannic, an ancient dialect of German, as their native tongue. Peaceful indeed. And yet, and yet!

Peacefulness is for the moment, and in Alsace it has been banished by disturbances, wars, annexations and economic problems many times over the centuries. Even the storks have had problems (not least because people ate them – particularly in hard times), but they are on the mend, and Eguisheim, which we visit on Friday is an increasingly popular residential area for the creatures.

Change is still in the air. This year, the region containing Alsace has been renamed 'Grand Est': the

old constituent names Alsace, Champagne-Ardenne and Lorraine have been dropped.

I'm going to call it Alsace anyway!

Its complex history is very much a result of geography. Alsace is mostly a plain that runs roughly south west to north east, bordered to the east by the Rhine – even here a river averaging 300 meters wide. Even more important are the Vosges mountains that form most of the west side of Alsace. These are substantial mountains, with the highest peak at 4,600 ft, and they are a massive physical barrier – hardly any roads cross them.

So Alsace is a natural pathway from eastern central France to the lower Rhine. You'd travel that way if you were a merchant, or a general with an army.

The Vosges mountains have great climatic influence. This is because of the so-called Föhn effect, much feared by skiers. The prevailing west wind is forced up the mountains, where it loses much of its moisture, transferring latent heat into the atmosphere. When the air descends again on the Alsace side of the Vosges, it is clearer, drier and

warmer. This gives Alsace a hotter summer, with frosty winters.

This makes well for grape-growing, and it is not surprising that Alsace is a prime area for quality viticulture.

The area also has industry. Water-power made Mulhouse, close to Switzerland, Alsace's most important industrial town. Originally textile based, it became known as the Manchester of Alsace, and like Manchester, became a centre of the industrial revolution in the area.

Now to the history, which, in simple terms, is a narrative in five historic periods:

- Early history, and particularly the Roman period, giving the start of viticulture – and a working regional administrative system;
- Post-Roman occupations, the Franks and the Alamans, and formation of kingdoms;
- The medieval Holy Roman Empire, which divided into West Francia, later France, East Francia, later Germany and Middle Francia

between them, a ragbag of regions from Lombardy to the Netherlands;

- The dynastic and religious break-up of Europe, culminating in 1618 in the disastrous 30 Years War after which France acquired Alsace;
- The rise of modern Germany and the wars that followed, with Alsace ricocheting to and fro.

Fortunately, post-1945 history <u>has</u> been peaceful with Strasbourg now a centre of Europe.

The Celts settled in Alsace in about 1500BC, clearing the land for agriculture, trading as far as with Greece. The Romans, under Julius Caesar, conquered the area in about 60BC, and soon established it, bless them, as a centre for viticulture. Julius Caesar commended the Alsatian wines as the best in Europe. We have no evidence about the quality of his palate, but with his authority, no rubbish would have sufficed

Strasbourg existed in the Celtic period, but the Romans made it an important military centre, named Argentoratum. After Roman rule, the local name Strazburg came back.

The Roman era began to unravel in about 300AD, and a variety of regimes, including the short-lived Gallic Empire took over the region. The Franks annexed Alsace in the late 6th and early 7th century under Clovis, their first king. Alsace was then part of the province of Alamans, the name representing the group of Allemanic dialects still spoken in the region today.

The Franks were a Germanic federation, originally from the lower Rhine area. Over the next few hundred years, they gradually took over much of both eastern and western Europe, and down to northern Italy, inheriting the administration system of Roman times.

In 768AD the great Frankish kingdom came under the rule of Charlemagne – Charles the Great, a moderate and wise Christian king, who established the Franks as the protector of the Pope. In a surprise ceremony in 800AD (he hadn't wanted all that pomp), Charlemagne was crowned Holy Roman Emperor by Pope Leo III. The Holy Roman Empire itself, in fact a federation of kingdoms, was

established by Charlemagne's successor, Frederick Barbarossa.

At the peak of the Empire's influence, it comprised three Frankish kingdoms, West Francia (the territory of today's west and central France), East Francia (roughly modern Germany including Alsace, Austria and Switzerland), and between them, an unstable rag-bag, Middle Francia, running north to south from the Low Countries to Lombardy in north Italy.

Big loose empires do not last, and the three Francias duly came apart.

Independent France superseded West Francia, with a complex history that interlocked with ours, while the Holy Roman Empire, now mainly Germanic, remained a sometimes hostile force that stretched from the Low Countries to North Italy, with the Germanic states to the east.

With the belt of Middle Francia regions to its west Alsace was not on the edge of the Empire, and so had a relatively stable time in the Middle Ages, although the number of castles indicates at least local hostilities. Guilds developed in the main towns like

Strasbourg, and Colmar and became municipal leaders: a local revolution by the Guilds of Strasbourg in 1322 established their municipal power. Guild members were in places duty bound to fight as soldiers when needed, so regional battles evidently took place.

In 1262, Strasburg was granted the status of an 'Imperial Free City' within the Holy Roman Empire, giving it a level of autonomy, a voice in the Imperial Diet, the great assembly of the Empire, and a long-lasting independent status.

In 1440, Frederick III became the first Habsberg Holy Roman Emperor. His dynastic entitlement to the Burgundian territory led to by marriage to the Spanish Habsbergs.

Two generations later, his grandson Charles V also became Holy Roman Emperor, as well as being Carlos I of Spain. Thus, the Holy Roman Empire linked Spain with the Low Countries, and also with Alsace, which was seen as a useful route from Spain to the Netherlands.

Charles' brother Ferdinand was allocated the Austrian part of the Empire to run, and succeeded him as Holy Roman Emperor

In the period following the late Middle Ages, all over Europe, from Spain to Scandinavia, and on to Russia, the dynastic and territorial forces were brewing up for conflict, as we know from English history.

Religious conflicts cause by the Reformation caused huge unrest, particularly in Germany, and in Alsace too. The Catholic Habsbergs used all the influence they could to counter Reformation in that area.

All of these conflicts culminated in the immensely destructive 30 Years War, 1618-1648, which was fought by a variety of countries, for a variety of reasons. It caused devastation of much of Europe, with marauding mercenary armies taking the fighting from one place to another. The Holy Roman Empire lost many of its other territories to independence granted by the Treaty of Westphalia that ended the war.

Austria remained under the Habsbergs as the main remnant of the Holy Roman Empire.

Alsace was substantially depopulated by the War[1]. The population of Bergheim for example fell from 2600 to 20. This clearly had a huge effect on the countryside and on wine production in particular.

In 1639, nine years before the end of the war, France had conquered most of Alsace, and this was accepted by the Treaty. Some Alsatian towns, however, remained independent including Strasbourg, still a Free City that had remained neutral in the war. However, in 1681, France forcibly annexed Strasbourg.

After the War, France did not impose religious sanctions against Lutherans in Alsace, and the region had a level of religious tolerance. This helped the country to recover, and Alsace was also helped by recolonisation by Swiss immigrants.

The French Revolution, which started in 1789 had strong support in Alsace, and the Marseillaise was composed and first performed in Strasbourg. Although many were against, the French

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[1] http://www.alsace-wine.net/o/history.shtml

Revolutionary Army prevailed. The subsequent years saw increasing population in Alsace but the economy stagnated, and many Alsatians emigrated.

The rise and defeat of Napoleon led to his deposition in 1814 and the Congress of Vienna that I will refer to in a moment. In 1815, Napoleon was restored, and subsequently defeated at Waterloo, but as a result of this alarming sequence of events, foreign armies were stationed up and down France's eastern borders, and particularly in Alsace, causing substantial economic damage.

The Congress of Vienna in 1814, among other things established, the German Confederation of 39 states, under the nominal leadership, to the disgust of Prussia, of the Emperor of Austria. The conflict between Austria and Prussia led to huge tensions. In 1862, the aggressive Bismarck was appointed as Minister President of Prussia. Subsequent conflicts, including the Austro-Prussian War of 1866 put Prussia firmly in control of the Confederation. Napoleon III of France, unsurprisingly, wanted to limit Prussia's ambitions, and, taunted by Bismarck, declared war on Prussia in 1870, starting the Franco-

Prussian war, with catastrophic results. Paris fell in 1871, and a mini-revolution ensued.

Bismarck annexed Alsace and Lorraine to the new German Empire in 1871, and they were governed from Berlin, although they gained some independence in 1911. This was not a happy time for Alsace, which disliked Prussian arrogance and militarism, and about 10% of the population decided to remain French and live in France, or to emigrate to other countries. Wine growing did not thrive.

When World War I broke out in 1914, the French anticipated German advances through Alsace and Lorraine, and in the Battle of the Frontiers attacked with the so-called Alsace Army. Although they suffered an early defeat in the Battle of Mulhouse, they were eventually able to advance to Strasbourg. However, the German offensive was successful in the North, and the French abandoned Alsace, to reinforce their armies on the Somme.

The Treaty of Versailles at the end of the war gave Alsace and Lorraine back to France.

In the Second World War, Alsace and Lorraine were again occupied in 1940. Young Alsatian men were press-ganged into German armed forces. A few escaped to Switzerland or joined the resistance, and in 1944, some 1500 ex-German soldiers from the area, captured by Russia, were released, and joined the Free French Forces.

VE day in May 1945 was followed by the Potsdam Conference in July, which reversed the German annexations of Alsace and Lorraine, and other regions, including the Sudetenland. The peaceful years since then have enabled Alsace to be the beautiful country that we know today, allowing it to become one of the world's most significant wine-growing areas.

Margaret-Anne and I look forward to a few days of real enjoyment with you all in this lovely part of the world for all its troubled history.