

David Geneste—a Huguenot Vine Grower at Cobham

by CLAUDE MARTIN

Editor's Note. *The article which follows has been translated from the original French. It can be supplemented by a few facts and dates from English sources¹.*

David Geneste managed the vineyard at Painshill Park, one mile west of Cobham, which belonged to the Honourable Charles Hamilton. Hamilton took the lease of the property in 1738 and disposed of it in 1775, under pressure from his banker. During his tenancy it became famous on account of the gardens which he laid out². Charles Hamilton was the ninth son of Sir James Hamilton, Fifth Earl of Abercorn. He was baptised at St Peter's, Dublin, 13 November 1704 and died at Lansdown Hill, Bath, 11 September 1786. He was M.P. for Strabane in Ireland 1727-60 and for Truro in Cornwall 1741-7; and also receiver-general of the King's revenues in the island of Minorca. His eldest daughter and coheirress, Jane Hamilton, married Edward Moore, the author of 'Fables for the Fair-Sex'.

David Geneste married Anne Bateman, by whom he had three children:

- (1) Isaac Geneste, born 8 January 1740/1, baptised at the French Tabernacle, Glasshouse Street, 10 January 1740/1; became apprenticed to a jeweller*
- (2) Jean Geneste, born 5 August 1742, also baptised in the French Tabernacle, 10 August 1742*
- (3) Marie Anne Geneste, born 15 February 1744, baptised at the French Church in Threadneedle Street, 29 February 1744.*

His wife probably died at the end of 1748 and probably he married Elizabeth, by whom he had four children:

- (4) David Geneste, baptised at Cobham, Surrey, 11 July 1754, who must have died young*
- (5) David Geneste, baptised at Cobham, 8 January 1757*
- (6) Benjamin Geneste, baptised at St Mary Magdalen, Bermondsey, 16 June 1761*
- (7) Matthew Geneste, baptised at St John's Church, Thanet, Kent, 18 May 1773.*

Perhaps this last was the son of another David Geneste.

M. Borderie of Bourgade, who was one of the most successful vinegrowers in Clairac in the mid-eighteenth century, owned a vineyard at Béziat, in the parish of Cambes. It came to him through his wife, *née* Marie Geneste, who inherited it from the sister of her maternal grandmother, *née* Marie Lavau.

At the beginning of the sixteenth century this vineyard, which was even then very old, belonged to a family called Roy. They had built on their property a fine house, the frame of which was constructed by the same technique as that used by naval carpenters. It resembled in form the upturned hull of a ship. It is of interest that local legend has it that the building was put up in the days when the region belonged to the English Crown, which had acquired it when Eleanor of Aquitaine married Henry II. The Clairac vineyard is mentioned in a charter granted by Edward I to the people of Clairac for the export of the Clairac wine which was then already famous.

In the seventeenth century the Béziat vineyard belonged to Maitre Hélie Lavau, a lawyer of Clairac and a descendant of the Roy family, who exported wines, as we learn from the tutelary accounts of his son Jacques in 1621. This Jacques Lavau married Judith Denys, daughter of the Minister of Grateloup. Their granddaughter, Judith Dumas, married a townsman of Laparade, a village near Clairac. He was Moyses Geneste, lord of the manor of Feytoul and son of the Minister^{2a} of Lustrac in the Agen region. Moyses Geneste married Judith Dumas on 30 January 1692 and they had a son, David Geneste, who became a refugee in England, and a daughter, Marie Geneste, who married M. André Borderie of Bourgade on 25 April 1723. Marie Geneste inherited the Béziat vineyard from the sister of her grandmother, Marie Lavau, as already mentioned.

The Béziat property is still in the possession of the descendants of the Geneste, Lavau and Roy families. It is the correspondence addressed by David Geneste to his sister Mme Borderie while he was a refugee at Cobham that is the subject of this paper³.

David Geneste, who was born some time after 1692, fled to England, like so many other members of his family and many of his fellow citizens.

The first letter that we have from Geneste is dated from London in 1739, but it does not deal with the business that occupies him there. This letter, which he signs with the anagram of his name, Etseneg, tells us about nothing other than family affairs. It is from the eight letters, some fragmentary, covering the period October 1748 to March 1755 that we learn what follows.

But we will let David Geneste speak in his own words. Like many refugees he has had difficult times and his social position is not what it would have been had he stayed in France. His exile is caused by the religious situation which arose from the revoking of the Edict of Nantes⁴. At this time Geneste would probably be about forty years of age. His wife is sick and it will not be long before he loses her. From this marriage three children have been born—a boy and two girls⁵. In a letter dated 2 October 1748 he informs his correspondent, apparently for the first time, that he is working five or six leagues from his home. He is earning a guinea, or rather, a *louis d'or*, per

week. It is true that he has to provide his own board, but that costs between 7 and 8 *livres* including weekly laundry and he can keep the remainder to supply the needs of his family⁶. The employer of our Huguenot refugee is the Honourable Charles Hamilton whose estate is at Cobham in the county of Surrey, south of London.

It is a fine and extensive property with a park which attracts many noble visitors and it contains a vineyard of about 15 *cartonnats* (about two *hectares*)⁷. The grapes this year are very fine and they are planning to plant about ten acres next year. Visitors always give something to the vinegrower and in the short time that Geneste has been here he has already received about £50 sterling. And so he hopes that after having passed through so many trials and suffered so much he will finally have the blessing of heaven and his bread assured.

As he has been appointed vinegrower Geneste would be very obliged to his correspondents if they would be so kind as to write to him telling him the most suitable methods and seasons for planting and cultivating the types of wine that he saw growing in his youth in his native land. If only he can succeed in his work it will be worth a lot to him annually for there is nobody in this country who understands this work and he found the vineyard in a very bad state. He asks them to send him some pruning knives which can be copied here. They should be addressed to Mr Thomas Minet in London who will forward them. He also asks his correspondents to add some wallflower seed of the best quality and a few other curiosities, including a handful of panisgrass to please the gardener.

You must realise, he writes, that my post is similar to that of my brother-in-law, Trémollière, at Lustrac, involving as it does the overseeing of all except the kitchen, for which there is a housekeeper. The park is full of game and it is unfortunate that he does not shoot. A small river which flows all round it is full of fish. Indeed the place is as pleasant as any he has ever seen and it attracts many visitors who think the same. May God grant that he can stay here for a few years. He asks to be sent news from time to time. Should he have the misfortune to lose his wife he would send his son to Clairac to learn the French language, which he could not learn here; besides, he is sure that he could send him to no better place in the world than to his uncle and aunt. His son will be eight years old next January and although he is so young he already has a strong desire to see his family, because he is often told about his native land. His daughters are aged $4\frac{1}{2}$ and 3 years. No doubt he will be obliged to send them to boarding school if he should lose his wife. After sympathising with his correspondents on the loss of last year's wine harvest and on the fact that this year's does not promise to be any better, he gives news of some of his compatriots, other Huguenot refugees, before ending his letter.

The letter dated December 1750 is very incomplete. In it he recalls how long he lived in abject poverty, no doubt implying that he has now emerged from it. His son does not want to learn French, but on the other hand his

daughter speaks it very prettily. Mr Descombels has been to spend a week with him. (This is the well-known name of another refugee from Clairac.)

The plants of which the vineyard is constituted are as follows: *pied rouge*, *muscat blanc*, *muscat rouge*, *Guill. . .*, *Guillan blanc* and *Sauvoit* and a few other rather quicker-growing ones of which he does not know the names.

Last month a good friend of the children died. This was Mademoiselle Frontin who bequeathed 20 *livres* to the younger of the two girls. (The name Frontin is an old one, well known in the Agen region.)

The next letter is dated 11 November 1751. From eight to ten barrels of wine had been expected this year. They had expected a large quantity of grapes at the beginning of the flowering season but the continuous rain that followed caused almost all of them to drop and the early frost prevented those that remained from ripening. Consequently they had got only two barrels, half of which were mere *verjus*⁸. The same had happened to vine-growers everywhere in England, and he had not heard of any drinkable wine having been produced other than that of David Geneste. He hopes to be more fortunate next year. His noble master has not been at all put off; on the contrary he has ordered more vines to be planted this year.

A refugee from Clairac has just left England, mainly because he cannot master the language. Geneste asks that someone should look after the property that he has gained by the death of his brother-in-law, M. de Robert, lord of the manor of Tagrie, at Ladignac. He also asks pardon for not yet having sent to M. Borderie the overcoat that he has promised him. This letter ends with a request for the cooking recipe for the preparation of sausages and *boudins*⁹ because having bought a pig, which is to be killed for Christmas, he can find nobody here who knows how to prepare it in the manner of his own country.

On 17 September 1752 comes the news that he is expecting a new servant from France, who is to help him to prune the vines. This labourer is to receive five *louis d'or* in his first year and in addition two *louis d'or* to pay for his crossing to England. He is to be fed, lodged and kept and at the end of the year, if he is not satisfied, his return fare will be paid as far as Bordeaux; but if he remains in this employment he will receive seven *louis* per year and if he gives satisfaction he will receive a further 200 *francs* per year and the old clothes of the master vinegrower, who, it seems, is expecting that Mr Hamilton will procure him a government place. If this happens the young man could take his place as master vinegrower and his wages would be doubled. As there are no other Frenchmen about he will learn English in a year.

No doubt Geneste turned to his brother-in-law for help in finding a labourer. But he has also spoken of the matter to others or asked for help and one of these, M. Teyssset, a wine merchant of Bordeaux, will procure him labourers at a cheaper rate. Having accepted the more advantageous terms, Geneste finds himself in a somewhat embarrassing situation *vis-à-vis* his brother-in-law, and so the following letter, undated but of the year 1752, is written

by Laurents Wagner, who is none other than the son-in-law of that refugee who could not get used to England because of the language. Wagner writes on behalf of his friend Geneste to give the necessary instructions to the labourers coming to England, telling them to bring six pruning hooks for the vine and six sharpening stones and two *becats*¹⁰ for digging the stony soil, for these things are apparently not to be found in England. As for their journey, the government will pay; this is, no doubt, the reason why they were chosen. The young vinegrowers have only to apply to Messrs Bethman and Imbert at Chatrons in Bordeaux who will undertake to arrange and pay for passages for those coming to England.

M. la Devèze of Nérac tells us (2 October 1753) who these young vine-dressers are who have just arrived in England. One, named Matthieu Potevin, had formerly been a labourer on the farm of M. de Mercier at Poudepé near Clairac and the other, Paul Ducos, was a share-cropping farmer for M. de Mazelières at Nerac. The latter claims to be very well known to M. Tourou of Clairac; David Geneste gives this last piece of information to his brother-in-law in order to get more information. These young labourers have been selected as a pair because they are first cousins and do not want to be separated when they are in England. They will be lodged in the house of David Geneste. Through the intermediary of M. Borderie, M. la Devèze offers the names of two more labourers who wish to join the others: Verdet, a cutter, and Jean Dallais. However, they will not be free until after the winter and it is by them that they are hoping to send the two pruning knives and the two sharpening stones. As for the spade, M. Teysset has sent it to Mr Duchan, a master tailor living in London (another Huguenot). According to Geneste these young men are very good; they are behaving themselves well and they claim to be good vinegrowers.

Among friends visited in London M. Lacam, an Agenais, is mentioned.

M. Borderie did not tell his brother-in-law that he had just sent his son to learn business at the house of M. Dégalz at Rotterdam, but Geneste learned the fact through other refugees and suggested finding his nephew a place in London. However, M. Borderie does not agree and it is impossible to find out the reason. These Agen people in England speak more Gascon than they do English to Geneste's joy. He asks for two ounces of this year's cauliflower seed to send to M. Teysset in Bordeaux, who also comes from the same area.

On 7 December 1754 we have a reply to a request from his sister Madame Borderie of Bourgade, who is ill and asks for prayers for her health to be made in the French churches in England. Her brother says that he has asked six churches to offer both public and private prayer. Geneste reminds her that 3½ years ago the housekeeper had him dismissed from the house in which he was fed and was earning a *louis* per week. The master having offered his vineyard for lease at an agreed price, Geneste has had to rent a house for himself and his servants. Thus he appears to have his own home and he seems to be wanting to give this piece of information to his sister and brother-in-law because they appear not to have appreciated that

he was employed by Mr Hamilton. Then with a typical Gascon reaction he asserts that he is paying four *louis* per week in rent, although the house is not as big as M. Bourgade's. He receives 35 *louis d'or* but on this he must feed both himself and his men, whereas formerly he was earning 52 *louis* per year and was lodged and fed. It is true that at the moment he has with him only Matthieu Potevin and his younger daughter, whom he has not the means to send to school. His elder daughter is very well and is in a French school in London. The boy is a jeweller's apprentice and is doing wonders. He seems to have a very good hand for design, which is apparently the soul of that profession. His master says that in two years he will be capable of doing the work of a master craftsman: this gives great satisfaction to M. Geneste as, indeed, he knows it will to his sister and brother-in-law. He adds furthermore that over and above the 35 *louis* he receives per year, he has 60 more to spend per year on the cultivation of the vines and to pay for his servants and provide wine for his table, by which he means that he bottles the wine. This year there have been four barrels, two of which were to be sold as *vin de Champagne* at 50 *pièces* the barrel, as he would like his dear sister and brother to sell their wine at Béziat. The correspondence to London should be addressed to the widow Chastel (another name well-known in Clairac).

A letter dated 30 March 1755 (Easter Day) announces that the white wine of the year 1753 was sold eight months later by Mr Hamilton for 60 guineas the barrel. It is esteemed the richest wine of its kind ever seen. Seeing that things are turning to the profit of the landowner while he, the vinegrower, is every year put to greater expense to keep his vines in order, as indeed he pointed out 3½ years ago, Geneste affirms that he can no longer continue with Hamilton unless his wages are augmented. This offended and greatly angered the landowner and he dismissed our vinegrower, saying that he did not intend to give him a farthing more.

Friends in London who were solicited by David Geneste to find him employment suggested a job as a clerk—a job he would have to start on 25th of the same month, the day he left the vineyard. However, a month before he was due to leave Mr Hamilton sent for him to get him to taste this year's wine. This consisted of ten barrels, five of white and five of red, all from the same grapes which were black without any white among them. (This does not seem to confirm the quality of the plants listed above.) This wine was found to be very good and Mr Hamilton then said that he could not believe that his vinegrower was going to leave him. David Geneste replied that he had always hoped to finish his days here and that if he was going it was because he could not live on such low wages. After more than an hour of discussion, Hamilton proposed fifteen pounds sterling per year rent free, to which they agreed. 'And thus I shall still be a vinegrower' writes Geneste 'and if I have the good fortune to make a good harvest this year I hope it will turn to my profit, seeing that there are several gentlemen who are considering planting and I am the only one who can supply the stock'.

This year if there had been the demand he would have been able to supply thirty to thirty-five thousand stock plants and thus make a lot of money for

he has more vines than even they have in their vineyards in Béziat. Hamilton's vineyard needs between twelve and thirteen hundred man-days per year, not counting the labour of the vinegrower himself who does all the pruning and cutting back. The winter has been so bad that there still remain three *cartonnats* (about half an acre) to be pruned, which they hope to finish this week.

Never has David Geneste worked so much and so hard, and, thanks be to God, he is in good health except for his eyes; being forced to bend for an hour or two in the morning he has difficulty in opening his eyes. It is the same when he is cutting back the branches. You would be surprised, he says, if you could see the strength with which the vines grow in this country, the vine being from ten to fifteen feet long and as thick as your thumb. This great rate of growth makes for a condition such that the greater part of the grapes drop off and if the vine is overladen it gives an abundance of grapes which do not ripen. Thus, as he knows that M. Borderie understands the matter better than he does, he begs him as a brother and as a friend to give him his opinion of what he should do to prevent the wood from growing so strongly. The soil is as poor as soil could be.

The tools have not arrived. Five months ago they were seized by the Customs in London and it is probable that they are lost. Geneste asks if they would be so kind as to send him half a dozen wooden clogs, which are useful to have in these parts. In order to hasten the repayment of the loan that he has had in Lustrac David Geneste offers his god-daughter, M. Borderie's daughter, a *louis d'or* and two *pistoles* to the other daughters. He also asks for two sharpening stones to be sent with the clogs. The clogs were sent from Clairac to M. Joseph Borderie at Rotterdam, a nephew of Geneste, who forwarded them to London. Three years later Joseph Borderie was asking his parents in Béziat if they had arrived and why there was no news of Uncle David Geneste, to whom he feared some misfortune may have happened.

NOTES

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2. Arthur Young's *Six Weeks Tour* (1769); *A Description of England and Wales*, IX (1770); *The Travels through England of Dr Richard Pococke, successively Bishop of Meath and Ossory, during 1750, 1751 and later Years*, II (1889); K. Woodbridge, *The Hoares of Stourhead*.
- 2a. The Calvinist pastor.
3. The original letters are at present in the possession of the author who intends to present photocopies to the Society.

4. The revoking of the Edict of Nantes by Louis XIV in 1685 led to widespread emigration by French protestants. (Ed.)
5. The second daughter has not been traced in the English records, in which no exhaustive search has been made. (Ed.)
6. A *louis d'or* was the equivalent of 24 *livres*. (Ed.)
7. About 5 acres. (Ed.)
8. Or sour grapes. (Ed.)
9. Blood sausages. (Ed.)
10. Small spades used for digging round the roots of the vines. (Ed.)