

COME TO CHELTENHAM

By Douglas Trapp

It is appropriate that the 1962 Convention is to be held here in Cheltenham Spa for in the past "the garden town" has had many connections with winemaking. The Romans were the first to establish vineyards in this area, a fact borne out by the remains of terraced slopes at Churchdown and Over, also the finding of vats, presses and grape pressings during archaeological excavations at the Talsey in Gloucester.

These vineyards were owned by Romans of the 2nd Legion who were emulating those they had known in their native Italy. During the dark ages these fell into decay and were never re-developed, due to the fact that the Nordic invaders preferred mead to wine.

The Benedictine monks were the next viticulturists to come into the Vale of Gloucester; during the period 600-800 A.D. they established monasteries throughout this beautiful valley of the Severn and in accordance with the rules of St. Benedict, laid out vineyards, to provide wine for their services and for their sustenance.

They found that the soil, being mostly oolitic debris, sand and gravel; together with the mild temperature and low rainfall average, favoured the growth of the vine.

This accounts for the fact that within the Hundred of Cheltenham there were seven vineyards; today they are just place names.

The grape grown was a Pinot type known Millers Burgundy and the amount of wine produced must have been prodigious, as shown by a manuscript giving an account of a feast given by the Bishop of Hereford in his hunting lodge at Prestbury in 1262 when six sextaries of red and two of white were consumed.

The peak period of winemaking was during the 14th and 15th century and evidence exists to suggest that wines were exported from this area.

Probably the vineyard that will be most remembered is the one at Tewkesbury on which the Lancastrians drew up their forces at the Battle of Tewkesbury during the Wars of the Roses. All these vineyards fell into disuse after the Reformation.

How Spa arose

Cheltenham, which derives its name from the small river Chelt that runs through the town, was for centuries just a small village, containing a long main street, a mile and a half in length. In 1716 it was noted by a certain townsman that pigeons congregated around a certain pool and on taking samples of the water found it to be more or less saline.

It was fashionable at this time to travel about the country taking the "waters", and it was not long before the medicinal values of the Cheltenham Waters became known.

His Majesty George III visited the place in 1788 and its growth as a Spa was assured. Many noble lords and ladies came to set up residence, followed, of course, by the retired army officers who have become something of a joke.

To these people are attributed the beautiful Georgian houses with their Corinthian Pillars and Grecian Styles, also the layout of Cheltenham with its beautiful Promenade, Regency Crescents and Terraces, and its parks and gardens, not to mention the two world famous colleges.

Among the famous who have resided here are Handel, Gustav HoIst, Tennyson, Sturt, Dr. Wilson and Fred Archer, Dr. Jenner and Lord Byron.

From a small Neolithic village on the banks of the Chelt, this town has grown to become the largest in Gloucestershire with a population of 80,000, employed mainly in numerous small industries. It is governed by a town council which is housed in the Municipal Offices in the Promenade, the main part of which was gutted by fire on Boxing Day 1960 and is now covered in a lacework of steel scaffolding. At one time this town was called "Poor, Proud and Pretty," today it is "Prosperous, Progressive, and still Pretty !"

Cheltenham Spa, where the 1962 Amateur Winemakers' National Conference and Show is being held on 6th and 7th April, has an historical association with winemaking, as Mr. Douglas Trapp, of the Cheltenham Amateur Winemakers' Association, points out in this article. Incidentally, "the garden town" was also one of the first in the country to have a winemaking association.

The Town Hall, where the Conference will be held, is a building in the Renaissance Style, the main hall being capable of seating 1,500, so that it is the largest hall in which the convention has yet been held. It contains a central spa where the principal waters of medicinal value can be obtained free of charge.

We Cheltonians extend to you all an invitation to come to the heart of the Cotswolds, fill our Town Hall and partake of the Cheltenham Waters.

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