

Vernet-les-Bains – History



(English version, by Joanna Coryndon, of the page "Historique" in the French section of the Vernet-les-Bains website, www.vernet-les-bains.fr)

Early History

Although evidence of human habitation dating from as early as the prehistoric era has been found in the Cady Valley (in the form of caves and dolmens), the history of Vernet-les-Bains goes back to the second century BC. During this period iron ore began to be mined and three settlements grew up: St Vincent, Castrum Verneti and Saint-Saturnin.

In 863 AD the name of "Villa Vernet" appeared for the first time, and in 880 AD reference was made to the "castle of Vernet".



The Marca Hispanica

In the 9th century the area known as the Marca Hispanica (which corresponded to the present day regions of the Pyrénées-Orientales, the Aude and Spanish Catalonia) was ruled by three dynasties of Carolingian counts loyal to the Emperor: the Counts of Roussillon-Perelada-Empuries (to the north-east), Pallars Ribargorça (north-west) and Urgell-Cerdagne (centre). Vernet came under the authority of the Counts of Urgell-Cerdagne.

As time went by however, imperial influence waned and these noble bloodlines began to assert their autonomy. The aristocracy played a significant part in the founding of abbeys (fear of Muslim invaders meant that many abbeys in Spanish Catalonia had been abandoned).

Thus Guifred de Cerdagne-Conflent founded the Abbey of Saint Martin du Canigou, and between 1007 and 1009 endowed upon it the lands of Vernet and Casteil.



A new territorial order

The beginning of the 11th century also witnessed the emergence of a small, locally-based military aristocracy which indulged in numerous acts of extortion against the property of the peasantry and the Church. In 1027 a synod meeting in Toulouges evoked the principle of the inviolable "circle of peace within a radius of thirty paces around churches".

In Vernet the population gathered around the castle, which belonged to the Abbey, for protection.

In the 11th and 12th centuries the power of various lords became established and a feudal system operated. Among the noblemen of the day the Vernet family (Guillaume, Pons, Pierre and Raymond) made many donations to the Abbey of Saint-Martin du Canigou. At the end of the 12th century the Vernet family bequeathed almost its entire fortune to the Abbey, after years of a close, if sometimes conflictual, relationship between the two.



The Kingdom of Majorca

In the 13th century, Jaume I, known as “the Conqueror” because he added so much new territory to his existing lands, divided his kingdom between his two sons: he gave Aragon to the elder, Pierre, and Roussillon and the Balearic Islands (the Kingdom of Majorca) to Jacques, the younger.

Between 1276 and 1344 the estates of the northern Pyrenees, as well as of Montpellier, were part of the short-lived kingdom of Majorca which held power for 68 years. Peace and prosperity were not to last however. Pierre of Aragon never accepted the division of lands between himself and his younger brother, Jacques II of Majorca. His heirs continued to contest the split until the Kingdom of Majorca, finally defeated, gave its allegiance to the Aragon crown. During the wars and conflicts that marked the 14th century the mining industry enjoyed a new boom in Vernet even though the ironworks had all but disappeared due to a shortage of wood.



In time, Vernet supporters of King Jacques III of Majorca paid a high price for their partisanship. The communities of Vernet, Cerdagne and Conflent were taxed harshly. To cap this misfortune, the disastrous 14th century was cursed by a plague much like the Black Death which swept through population, cutting it by at least half.

Fatricidal fighting

In the 15th century Ferdinand the Catholic was king of Castile. His successors also became kings of Aragon and inherited Catalonia including Roussillon, Cerdagne and Conflent. The whole region found itself under Spanish control and in conflict with France.



In 1472, Louis XI, king of France, lent money to Jean II, king of Aragon, who was at the time fighting the Catalans of Barcelona.

In return, Jean gave Louis the revenues from Roussillon, Cerdagne and Conflent. Louis not only took the money, he also occupied the area by military force.

This lasted from 1472 until 1493, when Louis's successor, Charles VIII, decided to return the region to the Aragon crown, in order to dedicate himself to the conquest of the Kingdom of Naples.

By 1630 the Thirty Years War was raging. Richelieu was one of Louis XIII's ministers. There was fighting in northern Europe where Spain had taken the Netherlands and in Roussillon where French troops “demolished the castle of Vernet” in 1654.

In 1659 the Treaty of the Pyrenees granted the Catalan lands of the northern Pyrenees to France and those in the south to Spain. The concept of a "Great" Catalonia had had its day and the partition led to a lasting sense of resentment.

In 1660 the French royal administration had trouble asserting its authority and there were uprisings when it tried to impose taxes from which the Catalans had hitherto been exempt (e.g. the introduction of a tax on salt).

The years of 1667 and 1668 saw the revolt of the “Angelets” who fought against the salt tax and the loss of their historical rights. This uprising was repressed (with a blood bath in Vernet).

Moving towards the Kingdom of France

From 1678 Vauban started to fortify the towns of Roussillon to protect the frontier (France and Spain were still in conflict). Mont-Louis, Villefranche-de-Conflent, Arles-sur-Tech, Collioure, Bellegarde (le Perthus) and, most importantly, Perpignan formed a new defensive network. This period saw serious economic crisis and demographic decline in Roussillon.



In 1698 the abbot of Saint-Martin du Canigou decided to build a military hospital near the communal swimming pool, fed by thermal spring water, where local people bathed freely, but in insalubrious conditions.

In 1710 there was a flood in Vernet which destroyed the entire original village of Villalonga (on the left bank of the Cady) and the Vernet Baths were destroyed by fire.

By the time of the death of Louis XIV in 1715, Roussillon, Cerdagne and Conflent had been incorporated into the Kingdom of France; but for all that were not considered wholly French.

In 1733 the monarchy made the decision to withdraw national troops and to entrust protection of the area's fortifications to the local people.

By the middle of the 18th century the economy of the area was more stable, but it still did not benefit from economic growth in neighbouring Languedoc (nor from that in Catalonia south of the Pyrenees).

Natural resources

In 1754, during the reign of Louis XV, a doctor from Montpellier, Venel, remarked upon the therapeutic benefits of Vernet's thermal spring water, but lamented the dilapidated or non-existent state of the spa facilities. The Abbot of Saint-Martin du Canigou – owner of the Baths – was called on to put them in good order or to give them up.

In 1783 the Abbey was abandoned and Vernet lost its status as Church land.

In 1788 the Baths were sold to Doctor Pierre de Barrera who instigated a complete refurbishment project. He installed new baths and changing cubicles, promised free entry to the poor of Vernet and embarked on the construction of a proper spa establishment.

In 1789 the French Revolution broke out and, in 1790, the province of Roussillon (together with some Languedocian communes in the Fenouillèdes) became the Pyrénées-Orientales department.

In Vernet, the spa changed hands and a new spring was discovered. At the same time fighting intensified in Conflent where the Spanish seized Villefranche. General Dagobert used the Aude valley to skirt around the Spanish and retake the town.

In 1795, following the death of Robespierre, a peace agreement between France and Spain was signed but by then war had had disastrous effects on the region; when Bonaparte seized power in 1799 the Pyrénées-Orientales was sinking under the weight of internal problems.

Between 1800 and 1808, regeneration was the order of the day and, while creating an economic boost proved challenging, the mining industry enjoyed a renaissance in Conflent.



From 1808 onwards the war with Spain caused the regional economy to collapse once more and during this period (the first quarter of the 19th century) the inhabitants of the Pyrénées-Orientales seem to have adopted French nationality definitively. The region went through a period of change, but even though the situation remained unsettled the agricultural and wine-growing industries developed, tourism emerged, and “*thermalisme*” (thermal baths, water cures and the associated services, facilities, and social activities) became a huge success with the upper classes in the spa towns of Vernet, Molitg and Amélie les Bains.

“Le thermalisme”

In 1833 an inhabitant of Vernet, Monsieur Mercader, drilled on his land on the right bank of the Cady and discovered three sulphur springs. He began to put them to commercial use by building the “Mercader Thermal Baths” for “*curistes*” or those seeking to “take the waters”.

In 1834 Monsieur Morat, owner of the original Baths (on the left bank) sold them on to Messieurs Lacvivier and Couderc, known as “the Commanders”, who built the smart hotel which later became the Ibrahim Pasha.

Vernet had begun to enjoy a certain notoriety and Professeur Anglade from Montpellier attributed the public’s enthusiasm for the town to the “beauty of the setting, the purity of the air one breathes there.. the effectiveness of the water treatments..” and noted that he had observed “most encouraging therapeutic results”.



One of Professor Anglade’s colleagues, Professor Lallemand, had as his patient the son of the Pasha of Egypt and Constantinople, Prince Ibrahim Pasha. In 1846 Professor Lallemand prescribed a stay in Vernet for the Prince who became the talk of society and at the end of the 19th century, during the Belle Epoque period, made Vernet famous in a way it had never been before.

From 1855 onwards, the railway network was extended throughout the region. In 1861 Vernet’s mining concession was renewed and the number of small workings operated by individuals increased: levels of production were stimulated in anticipation of the arrival of the railway at Villefranche de Conflent.

The Belle Epoque

The thermal baths, the fruit tree crops and the mining industry meant that Vernet was booming. Conflent and Cerdagne became accessible to tourists with the advent of the “*le train jaune*”, “the little yellow train”.

In 1880, the descendants of Monsieur Lacvivier sold the original baths to three business partners who in turn sold them to an engineer from Paris.

As for the Mercader Baths, these were owned by the Count of Burnay, a wealthy banker from Lisbon who, in 1903, entrusted their day-to-day management to Emile Kiechle. This highly successful German director started the process of modernising the facilities and completed the construction of the Mercader hotel. Something of a trail-blazer of modern marketing techniques, Kiechle promoted

the Baths to a British clientele for the winter months (the French and Spanish aristocracy frequented Vernet-les-Bains in the summer). At the very beginning of the 20th century he took the innovative step of establishing regular contact with the main British newspapers and press agencies. These were Vernet's glory years when, for British visitors, the town became "the Paradise of the Pyrenees". In 1914 Kiechle founded the Vernet-les-Bains Thermal Baths Society and initiated Gustave Violet's monument to the Entente Cordiale (representing the historic 1904 agreement between Great Britain and France after certain disputes about colonies had been settled), which should have had its inauguration in August 1914. Unfortunately, this was the moment that war broke out and Kiechle, a German, left France. In the inter-war years the spa town got back some of its *éclat* and its clientele: celebrities and aristocrats returned to enjoy Vernet-les-Bains.



The 20th Century

In 1940 the devastating floods, known as the "*aïgua!*", followed by the Second World War, struck a terrible blow to the town's economy.

From the 1950s onwards, water cures for people of all incomes became the main industry; a new phase had begun for Vernet-les-Bains.

