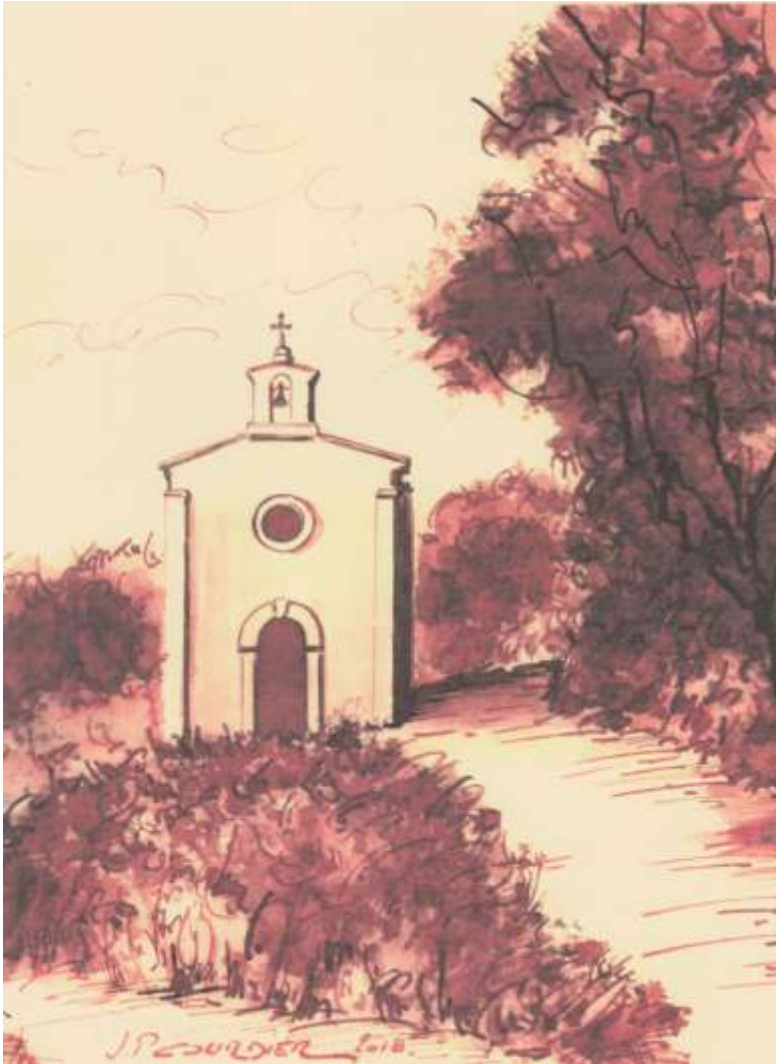


Balade du Clermontois

# **VALMASCLE :**

« From charcoal production to solar panels »



Saturday 5 may 2018

## VALMASCLE : a forgotten village

The guided walk is to show the evolution of the village of Valmascle since the 14<sup>th</sup> Century until today, under the title ***From Charcoal production to Solar Panels***, taking a look at diverse points of interest as seen by a geologist, a historian, an anthropologist, an ecologist and a sociologist.

France has about 36,000 communes and many of them (even at Valmascle's lowest population level of 40 inhabitants in 2015) have seen, over the centuries a population of labourers, smallholders, farmers, livestock farmers, woodsmen, and latterly winegrowers.

These men and women have contributed by their work and animals to the upkeep, conservation and shaping of the countryside as we see it today

If the name of Valmascle (Val Mascla – harsh and hard valley) appears in 1351 under the patronage of the 'Rector de Vallemascla', the history of this area is tied into the geological substrate that is apparent everywhere

Valmascle covers nearly 700 hectares (1700 acres) in countryside full of valleys, slopes and streams that converge in the main valley of the 'Boyne'. This river leaves these hills to flow down to Cabrières and into the Hérault lower valley.

To the north, near to the main road, the commune is made up of small causses (limestone plateaus), heathland, woods, fields, vines and open spaces that were used for a long time to graze animals. The woods provided domestic firewood and the green oaks were used for the production of charcoal until the end of World War 2. This work provided jobs and resources for a large number of inhabitants and encouraged immigration from Italians who had expertise in charcoal production.

The inhabitants of Valmascle are widely spread out, apart from the original central site Mas des Combals, where we can see the Saint-Pierre church, the war memorial and the Mairie, the other homes are several kilometers away : Le Mas de Rouet , that reminds us that sheep were kept and bred and their milk used for cheese making, and then became a vineyard; Le Mas Nougquier further north, not far from Le Mourrel, open heathland where we can now find the aerodrome! Yes an aerodrome in Valmascle, but dedicated to leisure flying of microlight machines and gyroplanes.

If we move towards the centre of the commune, we pass near to Le Mas de Liodres (there is also a ruined house called Liodres le Vieil) and on the slope of the hill we arrive at Le Mas de Liotard that is still occupied. Several hundred yards further we discover, lost in the undergrowth, Le Mas de Gascou, in ruins and very near to the old church that went by the name of Saint-Pierre de Valmascle, or Saint Pierre de Gascou. We shall discover some of its secrets. A cemetery adjoins it.

As we roam across this area we can imagine their way of life, their customs, work and their manner of doing things in this scattered countryside, isolated in the heart of nature as if dug into the origins of rurality. Beyond their human and material conditions, how did these people find moments for contemplation and beliefs, time to practice their religion, to build chapels and churches? Looking at this rural community how did it evolve historically and what heritage has been left by its human presence over several thousand years, to become a commune after the French Revolution? We have come to

discover its memory. Will it fade from recollection? Shall it become, for rationale and efficiency and better governance, part of a larger neighbourhood area with more inhabitants? Our walk around Valmascle is to show how the commune, despite its small scale, has adapted to modern life. Solar panels were installed in 2017. In just over one hundred years the population has gone from an economy based on the production of charcoal to that of an emerging source of alternative energy – quite an exploit!

### **Valmascle : startling geology in an unusual landscape**

The landscape of the Valmascle area is in strong contrast to the landscape of the Salagou and the Clermont area, that can be seen from the north and the south. From a geological point of view we have a Quarternary basalt plateau dating from 1.5 million years, that rests on a much older terrain (more than 300 million years) that is fractured and dissimilar, for which we have no current knowledge. In addition this was not formed where we now see it, but moved from its original position further north.

The plateau basalt situated to the north of Valmascle (see Ba, fig 2) and that follows the Bédarieux road, corresponds to a spread of liquid lava on an ancient continuous slope of a low gradient hill, by a few degrees to the south. The lava might have originated from the volcano near to Camilongue, but also could have come from the volcanoes that run along the Olmet fault line that lies towards the north between Brenas and Frégère, towards the large Escandorgue volcano. 1.5 million years ago the Salagou Valley included the upper part of the pinnacle of the Castellas de Mérifons, and the drainage from Brenas ran towards the south in the direction of Valmascle and the river Boyne valley. The inverted relief that has happened over the past 1.5 million years has resulted due to the erosion between the basalt and the more softer terrain of the bedrock (the ruffe – but also older terrain). For example, that has changed the former valley that was filled with liquid lava into a plateau basalt where we now find Puech Aury.

Towards Valmascle and Cabrières we sink down into V-shaped valleys with narrow floors. Dense scrubland of oaks and edible chestnuts covers grey and beige argillite with sandstone, schist-like and unremarkable. These rocks have been puckered, crushed and slightly heated in the depths of the earth during the formation of the Hercynian mountain chain. This was during the carboniferous period 330-300 million years ago, when an important mountainous chain was created between the Languedoc and the North of France as a result of the clash of the African and European plates. On the southern side of this chain kilometric masses of terrain were pushed and slid into a very deep sea trench, precisely where Valmascle and Cabrières are currently. This is spoken of as a “nappe” for the largest masses (pluri-kilometric), and as “thrust slicing” (as in regional kilometer scale, i.e. Cabrières slices, E diagram 2), and as “olistolites” (from Greek *olistos* landslide and *lithos* rock, O diagram 2) for the smallest fragments immersed in a sedimentary matrix (M, diagram 2). The matrix here is from the Lower Carboniferous period (Visean age -345 to -325 million years). This age – and the existence of the maritime trench – precede therefore both the ruffe of Lodève (Permian - 295 to -250 million years) and the carboneous basin of Graissessac (Upper Carboniferous around -300 million years), which concluded the end of the Hercynian chain. Current

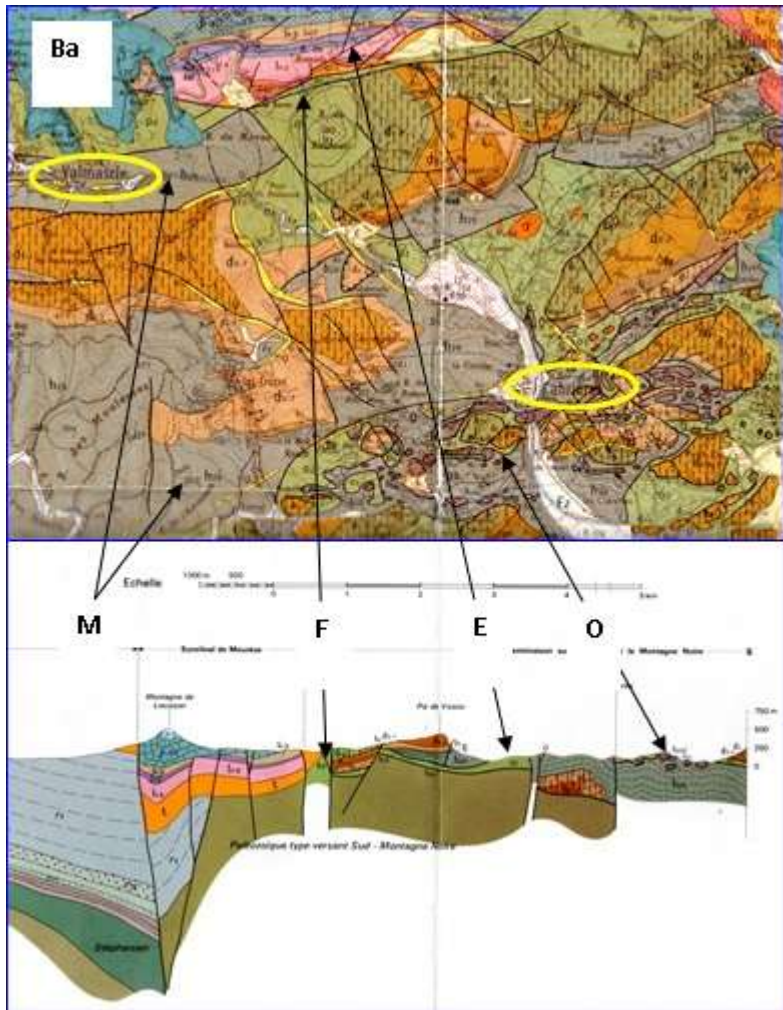
knowledge allows us to draw an analogy between the subduction zones to the west of the Andes, on a level with Peru and Chili.

The deciphering of the geological thrust slices and olistolites of Cabrières was difficult. It took three visits by the Société Géologique de France in 1868, 1899 and 1950, with the participation of the best geologists of the time, in order to understand the geometric position of the terrains situated around the Pic de Vissou, which extends westwards towards Valmascle (photo 1) . But it was only in the 20<sup>th</sup> C and the discovery of tectonic plates, that the geology of this area was fully understood.

The deciphering of the geological “scales” of Cabrières was difficult. It took three visits by the Société Géologique de France in 1868, 1899 and 1950, with the participation of the best geologists of the time, in order to understand the measure of the terrains situated around the Pic de Vissou, which extends westwards towards Valmascle. But it was only in the 20<sup>th</sup> C and the study of tectonic plates, that the geology of this area was fully understood.



Le Pic de Vissou seen from Valmascle. The summit of Pic de Vissou is made up of completely reversed Paleozoic terrain. This continues on to Valmascle.



Extract from geology map of the Valmascle-Cabrières area (above) and geological cross section (below) taken from B.Alabouvette et al. 1982. From the map can be seen numerous faults and tectonic accidents shown by black lines. The black lines show the faults and the curved lines and the circles show the limits of the thrust slicing and olistolites. The straight line of faults West-East situated at the top of the map indicate the Aires faults and mark the southern border of the ruffe basin (that appear on the left of the cross-section) and the carbon of Graissessac. Ba:quarternary basalt; O olistolites; E tectonic scales; F fault line; M matrix of olistolites and scales. On the cross-section the altitudes are exaggerated. Yellow balloons : Valmascle on left and Cabrières on bottom right.

## The Natural Surroundings



“The Harsh Valley” (Occ: val mascla) despite being one of our most modest communes, never the less represents an incredible diversity of mineral and biological resources. Just looking at the geological map of this place showing coloured rocks of various chemical origins (quartz, schist, sandstone, limestone, dolomite rock, basalt etc), we quickly

understand that each of the fauna and flora of this local land originate from their respective biological influence. In addition, in this hilly area, be it salient or not, created by the erosion of small rivers that join up with the river Boyne, other natural environments such as freshwater are created in this small key biodiversity. Then, after

centuries of cultivated lands with livestock grazing under the intense Mediterranean sunlight, came the thick obscure undergrowth and forests, with different features, especially the habitation of wild boar.



The bygone culture of low altitude sweet chestnut trees in Valmascle, occurred on siliceous and schist rock that maintain moisture. This is where we can find a bevy of mosses, ferns and fungi, bushes and shrubs, that are absent from the dry and luminous heathland. If we wish to examine the biological quality of the river Boyne (from its source down to the heavily polluted Hérault river) it is essential to come to Valmascle to find the pure river source at its catchment area.



Amongst the thousands of vegetable and animal species to be found in this commune, we can find the Marbled Newt (triton marbré), Barb fish (le barbeau méridional) and the White Throated Dipper. Of course we can find lots of

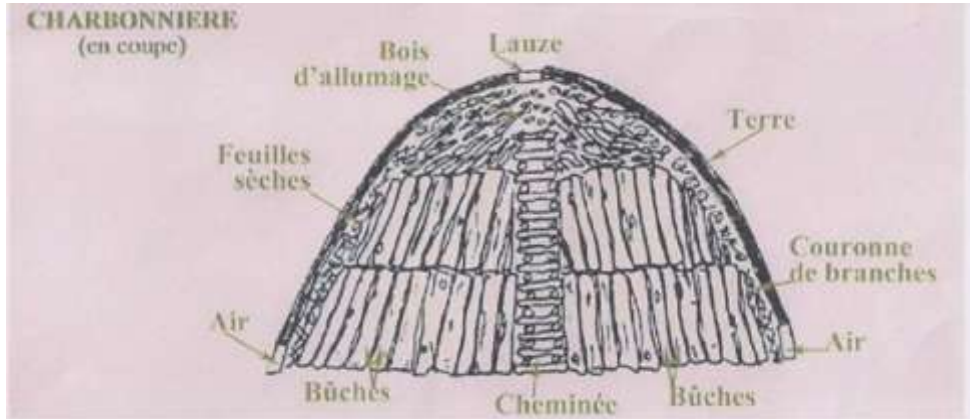
species typical to open areas of original volcanic causses and variegated Mediterranean grasslands.

## Valmascle Charcoal Colliers

It was during the end of the 19<sup>th</sup>C until the start of the 20<sup>th</sup>C that charcoal production was a booming economy. It was destined for industry, heating, cooking and for pharmaceutical purposes.

### The Colliers

In the 18<sup>th</sup>C charcoal workers (colliers) came from around Valmascle. We can find some of their family names up until 1892.



Then, generally in the Midi region of France, we can see that families emigrated from Northern Italy (Piedmont, Bergamo, San Pelegrino) as they were highly valued for their forestry experience (lumbermen, sawyers and colliers). As opposed to the established locals they were seasonal workers. In 1926 the first Italian family of colliers (Zacharri & Michelli) were included in the Valmascle census, originating from the Piedmont area of Italy. In 1931 the Ghisalberti family, from Zogno near to Bergamo, were working for an employer in Clermont l'Hérault.

### The Charcoal Mound

After choosing the best place to establish the charcoal pit and mound, according to stringent criteria (sheltered from the wind), they cut wood – in this case the green oaks, ideal for making charcoal. After several days of drying they built the charcoal mound. The wood was arranged in a compact pile around a central chimney, and then covered with small branches and leaves, and earth to make the mound airtight.

The fire was lit from the top of the chimney by throwing in live embers, and this carried on until it gained the top of the flue opening, which was then closed off so that the fire could spread inside the mound, creating glowing embers that would transform the wood into charcoal. The collier had to be constantly on the watch to ensure the wood did not catch fire, which would have ruined the process. The combustion needed to be slowed down or increased by allowing air to enter the mound. At the end of several days combustion the charcoal mound was allowed to cool down and the charcoal was collected, weighed and bagged, and was then transported down on sledges or sometimes carried on the men's backs. A rough shed was usually built close by to keep

constant watch day and night – this was a small space, made from stones with a roof of boxwood or a metal sheet provided by the ‘boss’. All the family lived in it, children, grandparents, and everyone took part in the different work. Often there was a goat to provide milk for the children and to make cheese, and a mule. These people very rarely went down to the villages, only for buying staple goods and sometimes to go to Mass. Their living conditions were harsh and relentless, the children were born and grew-up in the woods. The season started in the beginning of March and finished at the end of October/November.

### **Saint Pierre de Gascou – a well-nigh forgotten church**



The first indication can be found amongst the list of churches to be taxed in the diocese of Béziers in 1323. ‘L’église de Valle Masclâ’ is mentioned in the accounts record of tithes received by the clergy of the diocese of Béziers in 1322 and 1323. Rebuilding of different parts seems to have happened in the 15thC and 16thC.

In 1636 the Bishop Clément de Bonzi made a pastoral visit to the church of Saint Pierre de Valmascle and carried out a preliminary inventory. He described “4 walls, a nave, a choir” (the plan of the church was a square apses). This corresponds to a description of a church of modest size, neither paved, with no woodwork, with a painting of the Virgin Mary and St Peter and St Paul, a sacred stone ‘set in the slate’ on the altar. There was no confessional

and no bell. However there was a baptismal font and several accessories, chalice, candlesticks, an alb (liturgical clothing) and prayer books. There is mention of a priest’s house near to the ruined remains, but the priest lived in Mas des Combals.

#### **PHOTO**

An ecclesiastical order was written for the religious services to be carried out according to the ancient custom. The school master was requested to teach only according to the orthodox beliefs of the Church. As to the improvements, they essentially covered the nave that should have been paneled in wood, the walls were to be plastered, the painting changed, the floor tiled....”a confessional was to be made with slatted blinds and a bell was to be installed...”







It was during the village council meeting of 17<sup>th</sup> June 1860 that the decision was made to build a new church in the commune of Valmascle. It was decided not to carry out any renovation of the old church. Antoine Poujol, the village mayor, said the purpose of the meeting was “the remoteness and isolation of the Valmascle church, that could imminently collapse, means that the serving priest from Salasc will no longer carry out religious services”. He underlined that the heavy rainfall of the previous years had caused landslides that jeopardized the functions of the church, and that the repairs that had been planned for in 1835, were cancelled. In order to maintain the holy services immediate

action needed to be taken to build a new church, that he wished to build it in the main hamlet of Les Combals where three-quarters of the population lived (now the village of Valmascle).

On 25<sup>th</sup> November of the same year the project was unanimously accepted and the request for building permission made. The way forward for this new construction was difficult due to the poverty of the commune. It was thus decided that the project for two chapels, a confessional and a bell would be abandoned due to budgetary constraints.

Hence the Church of Saint Pierre de Gascou was abandoned in 1860 and made way for the new Church of Saint Pierre of Valmascle.

### **From private dreams of flying to the mastering of airspace.....**

Who hasn't dreamt of defying gravity to glide like a bird above the world, and discover its beauty? The desire for freedom, to overcome the limits, but also to flee from reality – is this common to us all? Do men more often dream of flying in the air than women? This is what we have seen today in the Association Aéronautique club, that welcomes us to their Mourrel Aérodrome in Valmascle. All the members are men, aged over 50, mainly retired.

Often their interest has begun during childhood, perhaps taking after a family member or parent who flew aircraft themselves, or to come up in the community. We could also quote S. Freud who indicated “man searches for confirmation of his virility and power in his dreams of flying”.

The members of the Mourrel club all work well together, they all participate in the maintenance of the site (areas for lift-off, storage areas, maintenance workshop for the

microlights and gyroplanes). This aspect of the community spirit means that in order to be a full member of the club you have to spend a 2-year apprenticeship period. This ensures that costs are reduced and technical details are shared by everyone.



In order to “fly” each person has to be ready to invest personal time, especially as they all live outside of the commune of Valmascle. From Palavas les Flots travel time to Valmascle is one hour, and for the majority of members they are driving 30-45 minutes to the aerodrome. Flying microlights or gyroplanes therefore means dedicating a lot of time for travelling, for flight preparation of the aircraft, amateur repairs plus flight and landing meteorological conditions.

The members of this club are not isolated, they mix and collaborate with other similar groups in the Hérault region. This mainly happens with regard to the amateur construction of the aircraft (microlights, planes etc) with the help of specialized federations such as the Fédération Française des Constructeurs et Collectionneurs d’Aéronefs (FRSA), or the Fédération Française Aéronautique (FFA) that comprises the majority of aero clubs in France. There is also the French Federation of Microlights (FFPLUM) that coordinates the best management practices and flight locations.





Upholding nature protection and the safety of people, the flight sectors follow a marked course, flights over natural habitats are forbidden (such as the breeding grounds for the Bonelli eagle) and over domestic housing such as Le Mas Nougier. Our promenade in Valmascle territory has given us an original sight into modern flights as well as the discovery of age-old customs.

### **The Village Today**

The charcoal makers of the 19thC have left us their heritage of living in symbiosis with nature and how to maintain a link with a denatured society.

Can the photovoltaic panels be compared to this approach? Hence Valmascle, that has a long history of a rural village, can also lean towards the future of modernity and ways of thinking about its rapport with the world. Today the towns no longer have the exclusiveness of social and technical innovation. The countryside also benefits from the distribution of ideas, via numerical media networks. It is an element of fulfillment, of human solidarity and sharing in a world of fundamental transformation. It is also the means to appropriate the necessary tools for a balanced and long-lasting development. The fact remains that it is necessary to preserve the heritage of sense and integration in a vicinity that is rapidly changing.



If innovation is change, the bus shelter below tells us a story about the new look to old territory. Could it be a nostalgic warning?



text produced by le MAS des Terres Rouges



