

Friday, July 19th, 2019

Dear Mustafa,

I am again in 'France Profonde' - to be precise I am in the commune of Saint-Andeol de Clerguemort, one of most isolated parts of Lozere, which is one of France's most remote departments.

The commune's name harks back to a more bloody period in its history. Clerguemort translates to dead priest, and specifically a dead Catholic priest. This is a Huguenot area in which its Protestant inhabitants suffered badly during the religious persecutions after the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685 by Louis XIV. Many 100,000's of Huguenots fled France at that time, but some stayed in the mountains and toughed it out....and killed Catholic priests. So this commune is quite unique; its Catholic 'eglise' remains in ruins whilst its Protestant 'temple' remains intact and the centre of proud local activity.

The Edict of Nantes, originally issued by Henry IV in 1598 was a liberal statute that guaranteed freedom of worship to all French citizens. It is arguable that this law was thrust onto a society that had not yet reached that same point of view on religious freedom. Maybe for this reason, or maybe because the Huguenots were an industrious and wealthy community, the Edict of Nantes remained unpopular with the broad French population. After its revocation the expelled Huguenots ran to the Netherlands, Sweden, Prussia, the African Cape, and England, eventually landing in America.

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Nimes, the closest city to me with an airport, was one of the wealthiest of Huguenot cities and if you go to the small regional Museum, Le Musee du Desert, you can see a still life of a Huguenot family all in seemingly very modern dress. One of the Huguenot industries was a new and hard wearing cotton fabric that was designed for working in the countryside; it went by the name "de Nimes" (from Nimes). The expelled Huguenots took this know how with them to their new welcoming homes - and "de Nimes" became "denim", today a global fashion icon. Its association with its French origin was completely lost.

It is unusual for countries to score such ill-conceived own goals as France managed in the 17th Century but I have some fear that the UK will be scoring one just like it - something we have avoided doing for centuries. Just as the French people did not accept the first Edict of Nantes, a strong core of the UK population felt the same of our entrance into Europe in 1975, and after four decades the 'Revocars' are now in charge, as the world has fundamentally changed from the 1970's. The open question is what will our modern day Huguenots take with them, depriving the UK of its "de Nimes".

See you in a week - Chris