Information Bureau | 2019

History

APCOR
Portuguese Cork Association

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BRIEF GLIMPSE OF THE CORK HISTORY

Despite its many different uses, for centuries the most faithful ambassador of cork IN the world has been the natural cork stopper, a closure of exceptional quality that is still today preferred and demanded by the great wine producers. However, throughout History there have been numerous references to this product and its varied applications.

- The first trees identified as cork oaks date back millions of years.

- The cork oak became established in the region it occupies today around 10 thousand years ago.

- In **3000 BC**, cork was already being used in fishing tackle in Egypt, Babylon and Persia. In addition to its use in fishing tackle, cork appears in Carthaginian cemeteries in Sardinia in the form of engraved sheets, assumed to have been used in boxes for precious items, and in urns as the coverings of a number of "nuraghi" – cone-shaped monuments. In some Egyptian sarcophagi, amphorae with cork lids for storage of foodstuffs were also found.

- In modern times, in Greece, amphorae containing wine and sealed with cork, dating back to the **5th century BC**, have been found.

- In Italy remains dating from the **4th century BC** have been found vestiges that include artefacts such as floats, stoppers for casks, women's footwear and roofing materials. Also dating from that period is one of the first references to the cork oak, by the Greek philosopher Theophrastus who, in his botanical treatises, referred in wonder to "the ability that this tree has to renew its bark after it has been removed".

- The Romans (namely Varro) found other uses for cork, and in the **2nd century BC** recommended it for bee-keeping, due to its thermal properties.

- Wine and cork are two products that have long been companions. Proof of this is an amphora from the **1st century BC** found in Ephesus: not only was it sealed with a cork stopper but it still contained wine.

- Around **400 BC**, according to Plutarch, when Rome was under siege by the Gauls, messengers were sent, crossing the Tigris river by holding onto pieces of cork to help them float.

- According to Virgil (**70-19 BC**) Roman soldiers used cork to cover their heads, as a thermal insulant.

- Later, in the **1st century AD**, the renowned Roman naturalist Pliny the Elder made extensive reference to cork oaks in his celebrated Natural History. He explained that in Greece the trees were adored as symbols of liberty and honour, which is why only priests were allowed to cut them down. In the same work, we can read that cork oaks were consecrated to the god of Olympus, Jupiter, and their leaves and branches were used to crown victorious athletes. In Pompeii, the Roman city destroyed by the brutal eruption of Mount Vesuvius, wine amphorae sealed with cork have also been found.

- In the **2nd century AD**, Dioscorides, a Greek physician, noted several medicinal applications of cork – in particular for hair loss.

- Portugal can be proud to have been a pioneer in environmental legislation, since the first agrarian laws protecting cork oak forests were enacted in the early **13th century**, in 1209. In 1292, Dinis, king of Portugal, banned the felling of cork oaks in Alcáçovas.

- The first reference to the extraction of cork and use of the bark pocket in the tanning of animal hides is found in **1320**.

- References to exports of Portuguese cork to Flanders appear in **1438**.

- During the Portuguese Discoveries, the builders of the ships and caravels used to discover new worlds used cork oak wood to construct the parts most exposed to storms. They maintained that the "sôvaro", as the tree was then called in Portuguese, was the best possible material for strengthening-pieces: as well as being extremely resilient, it never rotted.

- In **1510**, a number of objects made of cork are represented in the window of the Chapter Room of the Convent of Christ in Tomar, Portugal.

- In **1560**, the *Covento dos Capuchinhos*, in Sintra, and the *Convento das Carmelitas*, in Buçaco, Portugal, used cork to line their cells.

- In France, in the last quarter of the 17th century (**1680**), the French Benedictine monk Dom Pierre Pérignon, treasurer of Hautvillers Abbey, began using cork to seal the bottles of his famous champagne, *Dom Pérignon*. A choice which stood the test of time, being adopted in 1729 by Ruinart and in 1743 by Moët et Chandon and is still in used today.

- In the **17th century**, in England, the physician Robert Hooke obtained the first microscopic images of cork using a microscope designed by himself.

- However the systematic cultivation of the great cork oak forests that characterise the Iberian Peninsula, which can still be found in Catalonia and Portugal, dates only from the **18th century**, when the production of cork stoppers became the main objective. This was also when the first studies were made of its chemical composition by the Italian chemist Brugnatelli, and the first compendium on cork oak culture. In 1790 is published and signed by the Portuguese Joaquim Pedro Sequeira, the compendium "Azinheiras, Sovereiras e Carvalhos da Província de Além-Tejo".

- In **1700**, cork stoppers began being used, and in **1770**, with the start of the Port Wine trade, the cork stopper industry, which was linked to the sector, began to flourish in northern Portugal. Stoppers were cut by hand and a man could make around three stoppers per minute.

- In **1750**, the English company Henry Bucknall & Sons Limited was established in Portugal with the aim of buying and exporting cork to the United Kingdom, where it would be processed. At the time there were also other companies operating in Portugal, namely Mundet, Wicander, Robinson, Rankins, Avern, and Armstrong in Spain. Exports went out to all five continents. In the same year the first factory for the production of stoppers was set up in Girona, Spain and a hundred years later the industry had taken root throughout the country.

- In the **19th century**, France, Italy and Tunisia invested in the systematic planting of cork oak forests and countries as different as Russia or the United States also started planting cork oaks.

- In **1836**, a machine for cutting cork boards into strips was invented.

- A cork-making machine is said to have been invented in **1850** by Francisco Vidal y Monner, able to produce 3 to 4 thousand cork stoppers per day, as well as machines to count and gauge stoppers. Around the same time, specialist workers from Catalonia arrived in Portugal, bringing with them expertise and the latest techniques in the industry.

- In the mid **19th century**, Portugal was home to barely more than ten cork factories, increasing to 46 in 1877, mainly in Aveiro.

- The first references to cork paper arise in **1880**, made in Germany by the firm Karl Lindemann using hand-operated machines.

- In **1890**, cork parquet (plain or white agglomerate) was invented in the United States and in 1909 Charles McManus discovered composite agglomerates. In **1892**, John Smith from New York discovered and patented black agglomerate. He produced life jackets filled with cork granules, and one night, following accidental exposure to a fire, he noticed that the granules had become stuck together, forming a dark brown mass.

- The final years of the same century saw the start of production of stoppers made up of two pieces of natural cork stuck together, in Reims, France.

- In the next century, the cork industry in the different cork-producing countries began to invest more in innovation and development, launching various new products onto the market. In **1903**, cork stoppers with natural cork discs and a body of agglomerate first appeared.

- **1920** saw the start of production of stoppers with a "head" to facilitate extraction. Five years later, production of agglomerate blocks took off. In **1933**, a technique for the production of agglomerated cork rods was developed, enabling production of technical cork stoppers.

- Several years later, patents were registered for the use of cork in driving belts and tyres, and during World War II cork was used in a wide range of military equipment.

- In the **40s**, there are references to the use of cork dust to preserve fruit during transit.

- In the **50s**, cork was used in small items of rustic furniture, furniture veneers and toilet seats. An American company produced the first agglomerate cork covering tiles, coated with a vinyl layer.

- In **1952**, Jacques-Yves Cousteau recovered from the depths of Italian waters 7000 amphorae around 2200 years old, some still sealed with cork stoppers and containing wine.

- In **1956**, the **Portuguese Cork Association** was established, at the time called the Grémio Regional dos Industriais de Cortiça do Norte (Northern Portugal Regional Group of Cork Industries).

- In recent decades, various initiatives have emerged aimed at research and the definition of international standards for the cork industry, including the **Confédération Européenne du Liège (C.E. Liège)**, founded in **1987**. Formed by cork federations from various countries, this organisation presented in **1996** the International Code of Cork Stopper Manufacturing Practice, a key document for quality control in the production of cork stoppers.

- In the 21st century the use of cork has increased, particularly in innovative areas such as **Design for Sustainability and Eco-Design**. Increasingly, new generations of artists seek to create everyday objects – tableware, articles for kitchen, leisure, furniture - from the "fruits of the earth", materials that are one hundred per cent natural and contribute to environmental sustainability. Cork increasingly occupies a prominent place in fashion and in other industries, such as transport and sport. It is in the NASA shuttles and the ESA spacecraft, in top competition kayaks, in tennis and cricket balls, it is part of the special effects of Hollywood movies, in the world's most expensive whiskey, it is used for international award-winning designer items, and it walks around on the feet of a lot of people. This raw material has been

used for numerous purposes due to its special natural characteristics. New uses for cork are found every year.

- In **2016,** during Euro 2016 in France, cork was used in four stadiums. This new technology combines cork and synthetic fibres and uses the unique properties of cork to guarantee a safer and more resistant football pitch. Thanks to the material's high shock absorption, body impact is reduced, thereby protecting the players' joints.

- In **2018**, the Liberty Hall Museum, in USA, auctioned off through Christie's Auction House a portion of its collection of centuries old wines and spirits, raising funds to provide handicap access to the museum. The entire collection, discovered during a 2016 museum renovation, includes over 40 demijohns (wicker covered 5-gallon bottles) and 6 cases of Madeira dating back to 1796, and over 300 bottles of various spirits from the 1800s – all collected by the Kean family over their 185-year residence at Liberty Hall. The remainder of the collection will be used to establish a permanent exhibition entitled "History in a Bottle: the Kean Collection of Historic Wines & Spirits", opening in Spring 2019. The highest price realized was for a demijohn of 1846 Madeira that sold for $39,000. Prior to the auction, the bottles were opened to be recorked and the wine was sampled and found to be in perfect condition, perfectly preserved under the 100+ year old original cork.

During this year, APCOR launched the 1st information centre about cork sector, the **Cork Welcome Center**. Here it is possible to find numerous products that used cork as a principal material. This is also a cork information centre (contents and images) about cork production process, from forest to final products.

Several examples can be found on the APCOR site. www.apcor.pt

Source: História da Cortiça (History of Cork), Luís Gil, 2000, newspaper and internet articles