

English pilgrims visit the chateau of Lavagnac (Fr. Tom O’Brien, A.A., in the center)

It was a first that took place this past June 10 when a group of lay and religious pilgrims arrived from the other side of the English Channel here at Lavagnac in order to walk in the footsteps of their founder, Fr. Emmanuel d'Alzon. Accompanied by several Oblate Sisters from Nimes, they were under the direction of Fr. Thomas O’Brien, pastor at Our Lady of the Assumption in East London. The Oblates arrived in England at Charlton in 1903 where they opened a school, three years after the arrival of the Assumptionists. This group of pilgrims had come to the 'Petit Versailles’ of Languedoc, as the chateau of Lavagnac has been dubbed, to recall the memories of the d'Alzon family who had lived here for so many years, but which has now fallen into a sad state of disrepair. On this sunny day, Mr. Bernard Bals, members of whose family worked for the d'Alzon's and who himself has maintained a love for the family, especially its most distinguished son, Emmanuel d'Alzon, led the pilgrims along their way, giving the history of the chateau and explaining the life of its occupants, especially that of Emmanuel whose parents moved here when he was quite young. He related how d’Alzon returned here often once ordained and once he had founded the Assumptionist Congregation, in order to visit his family and just relax. As Mr. Bals explained, Fr. d’Alzon proved himself in many ways to be a prophet, a man well ahead of his time in so many ways.

In front of the château there is a beautiful park lined with sycamore trees that was rebaptized « Breviary Lane, » since d’Alzon could often be seen here reciting the Divine Office. There is also

a small lake where he would take out a boat and on occasion bring his two small sisters along. Once he had learned how to swim, he ventured out in the boat on the River Hérault that runs through the estate.

Unfortunately because of the current state of chateau, it is no longer possible to enter. One can only go up onto the majestic terrace where one is able catch a glimpse of d'Alzon's tiny quarters high up in one of the towers. From the terrace as well, one can get a sense of the immensity of the estate ----- whatever direction one looks, east, west, north, or south, it all belonged to the d'Alzon estate --- thousands of acres of vineyards, olive trees, and fruit trees. Later we visited the small chapel next to the château, also closed because of disrepair; nevertheless one can still peer inside through a hole in one of the doors that reveals some of the charm of this small holy place so frequented by d'Alzon himself. Finally, we made our way to the huge wine cellar where enormous casks still lie, reminders of a once thriving industry.



Mr. Bernard Bals guides the pilgrims through the chateau grounds

In 1633 the troops of Richelieu destroyed the original château and the estate became a rock quarry before the construction of the most recent château. Perhaps one day someone with means will return it to its former glory. Until then the sons and daughters of Fr. d'Alzon continue to come and recall this giant of a man and to fill themselves with his spirit.