



La revue des Amis du
Cadre Noir

Magazine of the Friends of the Cadre Noir



FEATURE

*Horse-riding
and science*

N°89 - 2016 - 14€

Saumur

News of the l'IFCE and of the Amis du Cadre Noir p.61



The Entrepôt Général d'Asnières, or the magnificent lost stud of the Marquis de Voyer (1752-1755)

When Marc-René de Voyer de Paulmy d'Argenson, marquis de Voyer (1722-1782) (fig.1), built his château at Asnières (1750-1752), he also wished to build a stud on the same estate (1752-1755) – a vast group of buildings that was to express his love of horses just as the château did for the arts. He proudly called the stud the "entrepôt général des haras du roi" (general establishment for the king's stud). It stood at the far end of his estate, opposite the present-day bridge¹ at Asnières.

The Marquis de Voyer: an outstanding director of the royal stud (1752-1763)

Although the marquis was only officially appointed director of the royal stud on 3rd January 1752, he had in fact been working in this capacity since April 1749. At this time, his father, Marc-Pierre de Voyer, count

of Argenson (1696-1764), managed to convince Louis XV to place the establishment under the administration of the War department, following the public disgrace the previous year of naval minister Maurepas, who had been in charge from 1732 to 1748. According to the count, the changeover was made "to serve our cavalry as it deserves".

Voyer was looking for a swift solution to the failings of a system that was poorly funded and insufficiently staffed, one that produced mediocre horses and was viewed, he said, "as a decorative object rather than a necessary and indispensable branch of commerce". But in his opinion "the greatest flaw" preventing the existence "of real studs in France" was the disconnected nature of their locations.

Faced with a lack of public esteem and low support from the royal administration, he decided to invest his own personal fortune. "It was to resolve these drawbacks and many others", he states, "that in 1752 I decided to set up on the banks of the river Seine some eight hundred or a thousand yards above my house at Asnières a general establishment where horses would be collected together in order to breed stallions, and to train and care for them until they reached the official age as prescribed in the various ordinances, especially the 1717 ruling whose directives on this matter are both sound and sensible".



The château of Asnières-sur-Seine (1750-1752) today © photo P. Cachau

1. Complete article and references on the site of the Amis du Cadre noir de Saumur, <http://www.amisducadrenoir.fr>.



Fig. 1. - Maurice Quentin de la Tour : Marc-René de Voyer de Paulmy d'Argenson, marquis de Voyer, 1753. Coll. Musée Antoine Lécuyer, Saint-Quentin

It was then as an "entrepreneur", in the words of Nicole de Blomac whose writings have rekindled an interest in Voyer's work, that from the stud at Asnières, he embarked on the almost industrial production of stallions that were needed to improve the French blood-stock. His prime ambition was to meet the monarchy's military needs during a period marked by the War of Austrian Succession (1744-1748), in which he had fought, and which was soon to expand into the Seven Years' War (1756-1763). His thinking was on the same lines as Colbert, whose ideas on the subject had led to the creation of the royal stud in 1665.

Between 1752 and 1758, nearly eighty stallions were produced by the stud where the horses were also trained and assessed before being sent out to other studs in

the different *généralités* (administrative areas under the Ancien Régime). "To fulfil these goals, I required", said Voyer, "an establishment where I could house all the stallions that were sent yearly to the provinces". The stud at Asnières then became the hub of a vast network of establishments where the quality of the stallions served to "correct" the defects of the mares they would breed with and vice versa.

This idea had already been exercising the minds of his predecessors Louvois and Brancas. "I was so earnest about it," said the marquis de Voyer, "that the consequences of my actions mattered little, and I did not hesitate a jot to involve myself in expenditure even though it might exceed my resources. The little hope I entertained of obtaining funds for a purpose whose usefulness I alone could perceive gave me the idea of setting up a stud at my own expense."

So it was with his own money that he engaged the best judges of horses in the country to purchase the one hundred stallions and forty mares he required to develop true thoroughbreds. In 1751, two thousand seven hundred and sixty-four thoroughbreds were recorded at the royal stud; when Voyer resigned in 1763, there were four thousand and eighteen. He had achieved what he set out to do. He continued his work in a private capacity at a new stud he set up on his estate at Les Ormes in the Poitou region.

Magnificent buildings designed by a famous architect

The examples of Louis XIV at Versailles and 'Monsieur le Duc' at Chantilly meant that owning fine stables or a handsome stud was a sign of prestige as well as being an expedient for flattering the king.

As director general of all the studs in France, the Marquis de Voyer once again had to set the tone. His uncle, the Marquis d'Argenson, said that at Asnières he built "stables for two hundred horses, a manège for riding and gaining knowledge of them, in a word



all the buildings befitting such an establishment". The king's architect, Jacques Hardouin-Mansart de Sagonne (1711-1778) whose career was then at its peak, was commissioned to design both the stud and the château.

The stud was built on land acquired 26th June 1750 and 10th February 1751, purchased respectively from Pierre Simon Mirey, equerry, counsel and secretary to the king, and François Moreau, king's counsel and prosecutor at Le Châtelet, part of whose house was used in the fabric of the new building.

If the written specifications of master locksmith Pierre de Lassus are to be believed, and those Voyer sent to the king in 1764, building-work went on for three years from 1752 to 1755, at a cost of over 200,000 *livres* (pounds). A statement concerning fodder made out by the director of supplies at the Invalides in 1755 shows that the buildings were in use by that date.

The stud at Asnières housed as many horses as the Petite Écurie at Versailles in the earlier part of the century and almost as many, possibly more, than Chantilly! The scale of the manège was as impressive as Versailles. Mansart de Sagonne thought the buildings were "the finest yet most gruelling structure in the world", confessing that on the immense building-site, workmen might "lose their lives at any moment". In October 1752, the last two vaults of the manège were still to be roofed.

The architect proudly stated that it was "too large, too beautiful" and aroused "the admiration of all". As for the stables, he added, the "three roof vaults spanning each width" had "consumed an infinity of stone".

The layout

Although the architect's plans and elevations are no longer extant, the layout is known through various documents – the estate plans from 1755 and 1769, but primarily a deeds transfer document dated 1764 regarding the sale of the

property to the king. This provides much information about the buildings (fig.2). The sales contract states that entry to the stud was made through a carriage doorway not shown on the plan dated 1755. The doorway then gave on to "a large courtyard called the storage yard in the middle of which is restraint stall; around this are various stables and stores; at the far end of the aforesaid yard on a line parallel to the entrance are the stud stables and further along on the same line is the manège which is sixty yards long and 45 feet wide", i.e. 58.5 m x 14.4 m. The manège at Asnières was therefore larger than the one at the Grande Écurie du Roi at Versailles (48 m. x 16.6 m.)!

To the right of the main courtyard, the contract mentions a manure yard with a gateway for carts giving onto the Seine, and then an area around the stables and the manège used to walk the horses: this was a new open manège, the other one was not included in the sale. The entire area was walled.

In this way, Voyer provided Mansart de Sagonne with an opportunity to rival the stables designed by his master Jean Aubert at Chantilly, and, to a lesser degree, those of his ancestor Hardouin-Mansart at Versailles. And no doubt he also had in mind the plans of François Mansart for Maisons-Laffitte. Of course, the beauty and scale of the Entrepôt Général des Haras d'Asnières aroused feelings of jealousy in Voyer's detractors and certain of his neighbours. As was the case for the château, the stud buildings were almost completely ignored by Parisian critics.

Yet criticism there was regarding Voyer's avant-garde management of the king's stud. This came primarily from Mme de Pompadour, a rival of the d'Argenson family. Voyer resigned in December 1763, handing over his stud to the king a year later in exchange for the Sarralbe stud in Moselle. The Entrepôt Général d'Asnières remained active until its administering body was dissolved in 1790. It was demolished in the early 19th century.

Philippe Cachau,
Researcher and art historian

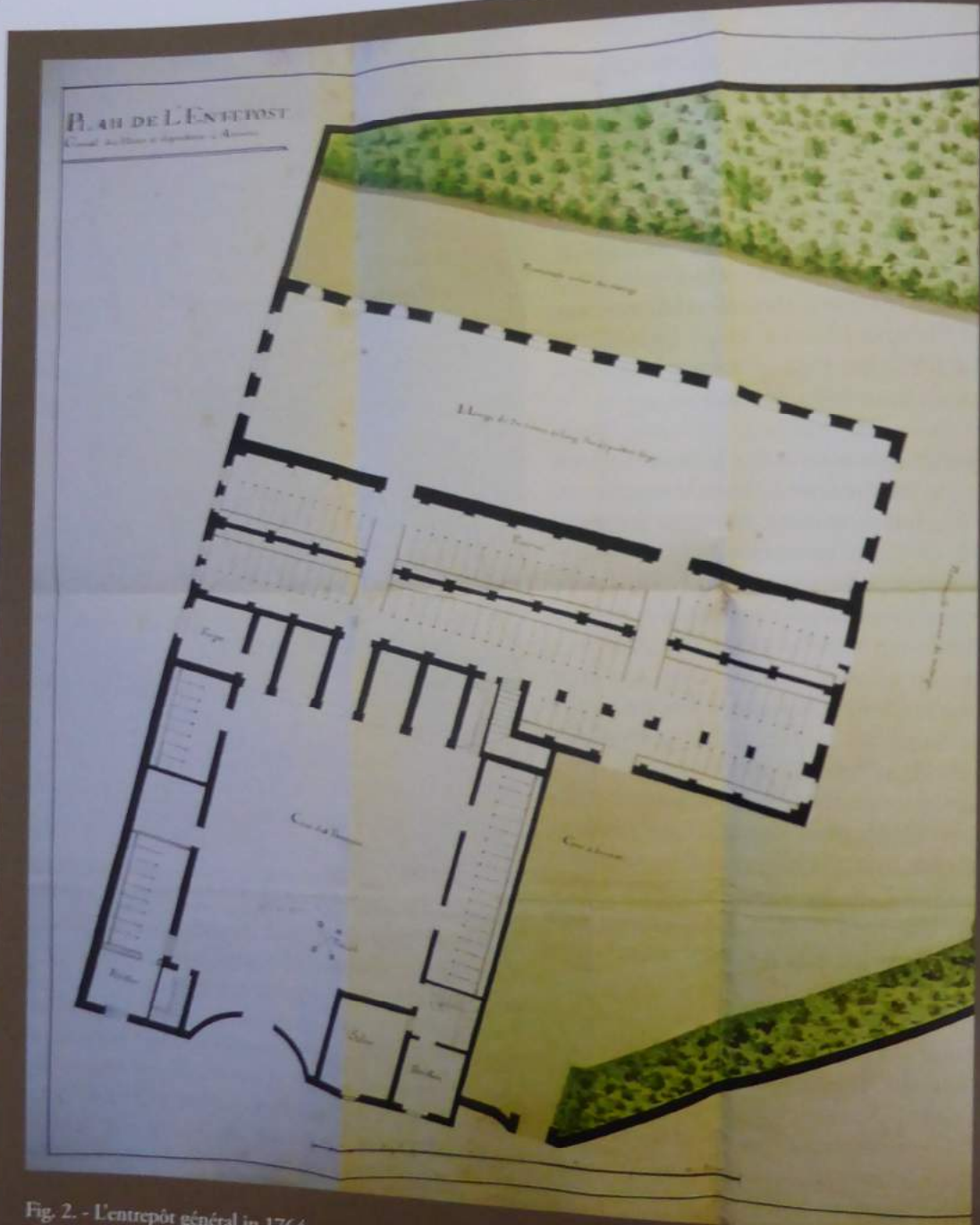


Fig. 2 - L'entrepôt général in 1764
Coll. Archives nationales, minutier central,
CXV, 764; photo P. Cachau