

Jean Hardy* spoke with Eric Zannoni** and Charlotte Legendre*** about the 550-year history of Verrerie de La Rochère in France, the oldest continuously operating glass factory in Europe.

In 2025, La Rochère celebrated its 550th anniversary of the foundation of its glassworks in Passavant-la-Rochère, France, with numerous events marking the year. The final event took place at the Elysée Palace in Paris.

As in the previous year, La Rochère was selected, along with approximately 100 other companies, to participate in the French Heritage Fair, held at the initiative of the presidential couple.

Gilles Ambs, President of Verrerie de La Rochère, had the opportunity to speak with French President Emmanuel Macron (**Pic 1**).

It was not the first time La Rochère has gained the attention of the highest authorities. Between 158, under the reign of Henry III, and 1786, during the reign of Louis XVI, the glassworks passed into the hands of the Kings of France and was directly attached to the Royal Estate.

History

The founding document of the Verrerie de La Rochère is kept in the National Library of France. The first 'acensemement' (i.e. granting of the land) dates back to 1475 and is written in Old French. Here is a translation into contemporary English: "Charles de Bavan, lord of Passavant, grants and abandons, as fee simple, to Simon de Thysac, squire and gentleman glassmaker, all that place and field known as 'aux Rochiers' on the Morteau river ...with the right to produce coloured glass objects large and small...".

The site was located between Lorraine and Burgundy, in the heart of one of the largest forests in France: the forest of Darney.

The forest could provide everything a glass plant needed at the time, i.e. not only wood for heating the furnaces but also ferns which, after incineration, supplied potash which could be added to the raw material to lower the melting point.

Unfortunately, after this period it was not a long, peaceful history: the factory was destroyed twice, first by fire in 1595, then again in 1636 during the Thirty Years' War. Each time, the factory was rebuilt within a few years and production was restarted.

At the start of the French Revolution, more than 200 workers were employed at Verrerie de La Rochère, producing small items such as glass beads, tumblers, etc.



La Rochère celebrates 550th anniversary

▲ Above: Verrerie de La Rochère (the Rochère glassworks) in Passavant-la-Rochère, France.

After the Revolution, activity restarted, focusing on the artisanal production of drinking cups, which were usually made out of extra-clear glass.

Two milestones happened during the 19th century. Firstly, La Rochère was acquired by the Fouillot family in 1854. Their descendants remained the owners until 2021.

Secondly, in 1870, La Rochère produced the world's first glass roof tiles compatible with ceramic tiles standards. In some cases, the same moulds were used in both processes.

A century later, in 1951, the glasswork passed into the hands of the Giraud family, first to Pierre and Elisabeth (fifth generation of the Fouillot family), then to their son Antoine. While he entered the glassworks during industrial age, he also wanted to preserve its artisanal character.

With a small team, he initiated three important changes. In 1968, he put the first modern fuel oven in steady state operation. Between 1999 and 2003, he introduced new and more efficient mechanised production lines.

Finally, in 2009, he designed an electric furnace, which was subsequently installed, already anticipating the problems that glassmakers are trying to solve today, such as decarbonisation.

Antoine Giraud's final contribution was just as important to ensure the future of the plant.



◀ Pic 1. Gilles Ambs (right), President of the Verrerie de la Rochère, presented French President Emmanuel Macron (left) with a gift from the glassworks at the French Heritage Fair.

▶ Pic 2. A glassblower in action. © Nathan Fabry.



Verrerie de La Rochère

Today, the plant is busier than ever, employing 110 people, with a yearly turnover close to €15 million.

However, the factory still contains a 'historical' section, where four glassblowers work (**Pic 2**). A small electric furnace producing up to 500kg per day is in operation for their needs.

Although this activity represents less than 5% of La Rochère's turnover, it remains important to the management, as it connects them to the origins of the glassworks.

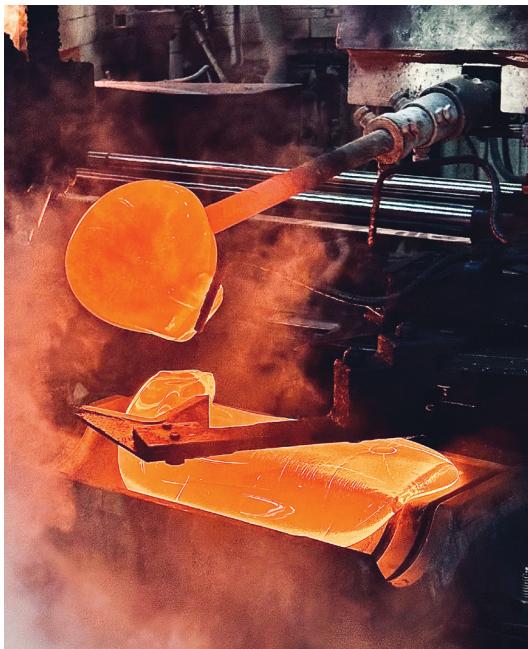
Moreover, this part of the factory is open every

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He initiated the sale of the family shares to Holding Tourres & Cie, a financial group well-established in the glass industry.

A few years earlier, Holding Tourres & Cie acquired the Waltersperger Glassworks, located on the western side of France, in the Bresle Valley, also known as the "Glass Vallée", between Picardy and Normandy. The partnership between Verrerie de La Rochère and Waltersperger created opportunities for collaboration.

The two brands kept their own identity but launched joint programmes that, in some cases, went beyond simple subcontracting. The partnership also enabled La Rochère to access the luxury goods industry.



◀ Pic 3. The forming of a roof tile.

day to visitors, making La Rochère the most visited industrial site in Haute-Saône.

The 'modern' part of the site contains the electric furnace originally designed by Antoine Giraud. It has a capacity of 60tpd, but daily production amounts to 33 tons.

Five feeders emerge from the furnace, supplying five machines: one for tiles, one for glass bricks, two for tableware, and one for small objects such as glass stoppers, etc.

This allows for the production of pieces weighing as little as 17 grams. Each feeder can independently add dyes, while the oven produces extra-clear glass, which substantially reduces losses caused by colour transitions.

Overall, 95% of the plant's activity is industrial. The factory is also divided into two separate sectors: the tableware market, or l'Art de la Table in French, and the architectural market, which includes glass blocks and roof tiles (Pic 3).

For the tableware sector, La Rochère's teams continue to create and manufacture glass items to decorate our tables. The catalogue, over 70 pages long, contains several hundred items.

For architectural glass, the production process is the almost same as for tableware, except the moulds are different. This section features products such as glass roof tiles, floor glass pavers (with mechanical strength), glass wall tiles, and glass blocks. In fact, La Rochère is the last producer of glass blocks in Western Europe.

The glass blocks have been single-walled since the 1930s, and double-walled since the 1960s; double-walled blocks are made by welding two half-blocks together.

In addition, a recent example of La Rochère's glass wall tiles can be seen at the largest metro station in the world, Châtelet les Halles, in the first district of Paris. Renovated in 2018, the station features a 11,500m² wall of silver waves made

from 1,024,505 glass tiles produced in Verrerie de La Rochère, which were installed throughout the underground station (Pic 4).

All these products are subject to the variation of fashion. A design that was popular 20 years ago may fall out of style, only to become fashionable again.

Fortunately, La Rochère has plenty of space to store and organise out of fashion moulds. Although such an operation still requires an optimal inventory management and a rigorous monitoring of production schedules.

Anniversary

Verrerie de La Rochère also contains a museum and shop selling the main products made at the factory. Overall, the site attracts more than 60,000 visitors each year.

To mark the 550th anniversary of the glassworks, an exhibition is currently on display, alongside a Japanese garden designed by Elisabeth Giraud in the 20th century.

Speaking on the anniversary, Mr Ambs said: "This half a millennium testifies to an exceptional history, shaped by generations of passionate glassworkers, who have preserved and transmit their unique know-how.

"La Rochère has resisted to the passage of time with resilience. Its ability to bounce back, to adapt and to reinvent itself is the common thread connecting our adventure.

"It is based on the commitment of men and women who, through the ages, have combined their passion and expertise to bring this heritage to life.

"Let us carry on writing this wonderful story and look forward to the future with confidence." ■

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▼ Pic 4. La Rochère's glass wall tiles in Châtelet les Halles metro station in Paris.
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