

"Why Guernsey?"

George Matheson has made many trips to explore his family history on the charming island of Guernsey in the English Channel and offers some tips and recommendations for fellow researchers



Photograph from 1878 – "C.J.Loney was born here" appears on the reverse side.

Holding an 1878 sepia photograph, I strolled along a quiet ruelle (or country lane) until there in front of me was the same image: the old farmhouse in which my grandfather was born with the steeple of the church in which he was baptized rising in the background.

That was back in 2009. It was my first trip to Guernsey and my first taste of the excitement of what is widely referred to as "Genealogical Tourism" or as I prefer to call it "Ancestral Tourism." It's a curious notion — this idea of going back to a place where someone on the

family tree once lived.

I had gone in search of the ancestral home. The odds on my finding it were, I knew, not good. All I had was that old photo on which someone had scribbled "C.J.Loney was born here," and a birth certificate on which Bellieuse Farm, St. Martin's Parish, Guernsey was entered as his place of birth. My grandfather was barely 2 years old when, in his mother's arms, he boarded a ship to Canada. That was back in 1882 and, as far as I knew, there was no family left in Guernsey.

While I might have hoped, I

honestly never expected, to actually find that farmhouse. And it had never occurred to me that Guernsey would be a place I'd want to return to over and over again. But I've been back 5 times now and friends are asking: "Why Guernsey?"

It's not on most people's Bucket List of places to go; it was never on mine. Before planning that first trip, I'd never thought of going there and probably couldn't even have told you where it was.

Now I can point to it on a map as that tiny (24 square mile) island situated in the English Channel between England and France. (Editor's note: Officially it is named the Bailiwick of Guernsey and is not part of the United Kingdom, but rather a possession of the British Crown. It is defended by the United Kingdom and lies within an area that is considered to be the common travel area of the British Isles. Along with the Bailiwick of Jersey, they form what are collectively known as the Channel Islands.)

For cruise passengers whose ships docks there briefly, it amounts to a short stroll along St. Peter Port's High Street, a visit to Victor Hugo's home and a tour of Castle Cornet. For WWII history buffs (or anyone who has gotten a glimpse into the 5 year Nazi occupation by reading *The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society*) it involves a quick tour of sites such as the Occupation Museum, the Underground Hospital and the numerous German fortifications. For most people it's only a brief stop in a longer trip.

But for genealogical researchers or *Guernseyphiles* who have come to know Guernsey as I have, it's a place to sojourn, savour and return.

Admittedly I struck gold on that first trip. Anyone who has

gone in search of an ancestral home and actually found it will know something of how magical that seems and how one can continue to be drawn back to that spot. On every return visit I learn a bit more about my ancestors and the place they called 'home.' It's a given that I'll pay a visit to St. Martin's Parish — drop by the farmhouse, spend some time inside the church and stroll through the churchyard where, with the rector's help, I have located the worn tombstone marking the grave of my grandfather's grandfather, the town grocer, who had "died at age 40 leaving a wife and six young children.

And I'll sit and listen to ancient hymns reverberate inside The Parish Church of St. Peter Port. That church, usually called

Town Church, was first referred to in Norman times when it served as a fortress. The present day tower dates from 1721 but the nave goes back to the 13th century.

Attending a service there is something of another/old world experience that's enhanced for me by the awareness that two centuries ago my great-great-great grandparents were married there.

Town Church is just a pleasant stroll along the harbour from *St. George's Guesthouse*, the hospitable comfortable spot on



St Peter Port and Castle Cornet.

TRAVEL INFO AND SUGGESTIONS

POPULATION: 62,732 in 2014

GEOGRAPHICAL SIZE: 24 sq. miles (62 square kilometres),
9 miles (14.5 k) x 3 (4.8)

LOCATION: in the English Channel between Portsmouth (England) and
St. Malo (France)

Visitor Information:

www.visitguernsey.com/home

Bus routes (£1) on the island

[http://hctgroup.org/uploaded/Guernsey%20Summer%202014/
Route_Map.pdf](http://hctgroup.org/uploaded/Guernsey%20Summer%202014/Route_Map.pdf)

Resources:

- Priaulx Library, Guernsey's Historical and Family History Research Centre, www.priaulxlibrary.co.uk
- La Greffe, the office of the Clerk (Greffier) of the Royal and Magistrate's Courts, responsible for the records of the Island's government, www.gov.gg/article/4761/the-grefe
- Island Archives, St. Barnabas, Cornet Street, St. Peter Port, www.guernseyancestry.com/archives.php
- La Societe Guernesiaise, Family History Group www.societe.org.gg/sections/familyhistory.php

Travel:

- Aurigny Air Services, www.aurigny.com, offers 6 flights /day between Gatwick and Guernsey
- The Condor Ferries www.condorferries.co.uk, Guernsey/Weymouth ferry with crossing durations from 2 hours 30 minutes runs 8 times per week while the Guernsey/St. Malo ferry operates up to 12 times each week

RECOMMENDATIONS

Accommodation:

- St. George's Hotel, a budget guesthouse, a short ten minute walk from SPP's High Street, www.stgeorges-guernsey.com.
- La Barbarie, in the country parish of St. Martins, in a quiet green valley, 20 minutes by bus (#81) from SPP, www.labarbariehotel.com.

Restaurants (there many good ones):

- Village East on the embankment, www.villageeastguernsey.net.
- La Nautique, always a favourite, overlooking the harbour, www.lenautiquerestaurant.co.uk.
- The Absolute End, a seafood restaurant less than 50 meters from the St. George, www.theabsoluteend.com.

the Esplanade where I'd booked a room prior to my first visit and to which I always return.

St. Peter Port (SPP), Guernsey's picturesque capital and main port, is where most tourists first head; it's a charming destination.

In the warmth of noon day, its cobblestoned **High Street** (aka **The Pollet**), now a pedestrian way winding through the centre of town, fills with tourists darting in and out of the shops and boutiques as dark suited business people, involved most likely in the lucrative business of international/off-shore finance, lunch in the many fine restaurants. Tending to specialize in seafood (fresh and abundant) and to serve local farm produce (including fabulous ice cream made from the milk of Guernsey cattle) along with excellent wines, they do it all in continental style. And, yes, I have my favourites.

In the pleasant dimness of the evening, its practiced quietness invites ancestors to emerge. One can hear the sounds of the past: balls bouncing off the walls, horse hoofs clomping on the stone, even the jack boots of the 'occupiers' marching by. And, in 21st century style, Castle Cornet lights up. Reaching out toward the sea, with the oldest part dating back to the early 13th century, it serves as a dramatic reminder of Guernsey's rootedness in ancient history, ruled at various times by the Romans, Franks, Bretons and ultimately the Normans. In 933 the Normans took control, bringing the language, laws and institutions that are still evident. When William, Duke of Normandy, a while later (in 1066) conquered England, Guernsey became linked to 'The Crown' (the King

or Queen of England) as a Crown Dependency and to this day, although their autonomy is guaranteed in a 1204 charter, the people of Guernsey refer to the Queen as “their Monarch, their Duke.”

I’m not sure (yet) how far back in Guernsey history my ancestors can be traced but, wandering the streets of SPP I’ve stood outside the house where my great-great-great grandmother, in her widowhood, struggled as a *mantua maker* (mantuas were a popular piece of clothing worn by women of the higher class as a gown or robe worn over stays, stomacher and a coordinating petticoat.) And I’ve wandered often through the still lively market area which was bustling in the days when my great grandfather was working there recognized by “the Royal Court as a fit person to be a Master Butcher.”

Much of the information I’ve gleaned about him and other relatives from generations past has come through research done at *Priaulx Library*.

Housed in a converted Georgian townhouse, to anyone exploring family history it’s something of a gold mine.

The records, mostly on microfiche now, are extensive and the librarians are not only remarkably knowledgeable and diligent but also enthusiastic and, as I have discovered more than once, remarkably adept at solving mysteries. Words escape me to relay how it felt one day to turn the actual pages of the newspaper printed on Thursday



The red-gowned Chelsea Pensioners in Liberation Parade.

December 16th, 1880, the day my grandfather was born and to read that it was “a cold day by Guernsey standards” — “some said the most severe in 50 years.”

On several occasions, I have chanced to be in Guernsey on Liberation Day (May 9th) celebrating the end of the Occupation. I have stood in the crowds along the Esplanade watching the pageantry of the parade of the Bailiff, the Lieutenant Governor, the *Jurats* and the

elderly, red-gowned Chelsea Pensioners.

Several times, as bystanders dispersed after the pomp, I’ve hopped onto a bus for a short ride to the L’Ancresse golf course at the northern end of the island where hundreds had gathered to watch the annual flat field horse races around the fairways. Not to be seen as a misfit tourist, I’ve lined up to place a wager with one of the bookies: “five pounds on #5 to win in the first,” exchanging my pound notes for a chit later to be swapped for my winnings.

Guernsey is so small and the bus service is so great (frequent, reliable and the fare is only £1) that it’s easy to get to not just the golf course/racetrack, but to all the island sites without a car. It’s one of the few places I travel to where I never rent a car. In fact, with walking shoes and a good map, many places are enjoyably accessible on foot.

A few years back, when my son had accompanied me on one of my Guernsey trips, he and I set out for a walk along



Annual flat race at L’Ancresse.



Fermain Bay from the South Coast trail – what Victor Hugo would have seen.

the sometimes rugged but lovely southern coastal path that leads from SPP to Fermain Bay near St. Martin's. We chatted as we walked, matching our footsteps to those of Victor Hugo 150 years earlier as he walked and imagined his epic novel "*Les Misérables*." In exile for 15 years from France due to his fierce, vocal opposition to the Second Empire of Napoleon III, he lived in Guernsey describing the island, in "*Toilers of the*

Sea," as the "rock of hospitality and freedom."

At times our walk seemed positively haunted not just by these speculations about Hugo but also by ghosts of relatives neither of us had ever met — the ones who may well have walked that path themselves.

While SPP remains the focal point for my visits to Guernsey, no visit is complete for me without a stay in one of the traditional country inns. My

favourite is *La Barbarie* in St. Martins located down a winding lane from the old farmhouse. As the story goes, centuries ago the son of the owner was kidnapped by barbarians and only returned when the family paid a large ransom. Now it is a charming comfortable inn with an excellent dining room and relaxing swimming pool. A path leads down to Saints Bay and the secluded coves of the South coast where one might see in one's mind the pirates and privateers of bygone years dropping anchor.

Whether it's on that path, at the farmhouse, in the library or at a great restaurant, I feel fortunate (or just plain lucky) to be there.

My answer to "Why Guernsey?" isn't a simple one. It is more than my having found the old farmhouse I initially went in search of and more than all that I have discovered about my ancestors. I have come to be fascinated by Guernsey as the 'home' of my ancestors — where they had lived and worked and sometimes struggled, and from where I had come, and by Guernsey the modern travel destination — rich in history and charming in culture. Genealogical/Ancestral tourism is, for me, not just about finding a farmhouse or a tombstone but about exploring and enjoying the 'world' my ancestors lived in and seeing what that 'world' has become. ☎



La Barbarie Country Inn.



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