

Case Study

“An Old Photo Led Me Back to My Roots”

George Matheson researches his grandfather's birthplace in the Channel Islands

In recent years, tracing family lines has become the fastest-growing hobby in America. According to The National Genealogical Society, it now ranks second in popularity, just below gardening. Its rapid rise can be attributed largely to the Internet that provides convenient, instant access to a vast and ever-growing source of genealogical data. As new databases are released by public institutions, Internet suppliers of genealogical information increase, and more and more online services appear, we come to rely ever more heavily on our computers to link us with our past. For instance, FamilySearch.org alone got over 10 million hits per day in 2011, up from 7 million a decade earlier.

There is no question that the Internet search engine is a priceless tool - a fabulous technology and a natural starting-point for family research. However, if getting reconnected to our roots, both familial and historical, is what we desire, some real-life genealogical exploration may still be required.



When my mother died leaving me the generational family home, I had a feeling that something stored in the attic would serve to take me back to my roots. So, my spare time came to be spent searching amongst the bundles of letters, brittle newspapers, old clothes and broken china for some essential clue. And, by a stroke of luck or, perhaps, destiny, I found it in the form of an 1878 photograph on which was handwritten: Bellieuse Farm, St. Martin's.

The image, while intriguing, rang no bells until, some months later, I came across a "Certified Copy of an Entry of Birth in the Parish of St. Martin, Guernsey" for Clifford James Loney, my grandfather. The entry stated his date of birth to be December 16, 1880 and listed the birthplace as La Bellieuse Farm. I knew that he had immigrated to Canada as a very young boy in 1883 but I had no idea that he had been born on a farm in Guernsey.

All I knew about Guernsey was that it was small Channel Island somewhere off the shores of England.

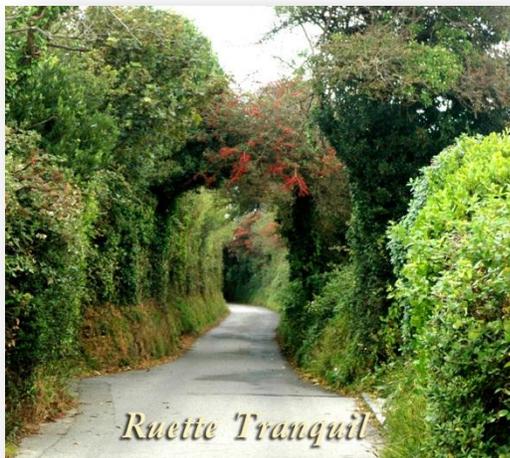
What I quickly learned was that Guernsey is indeed small; only 12 miles long with an area of 24.3 sq miles and a population of 63,000 people. It is situated in the English Channel between Portsmouth, England and St. Malo, on the coast of Normandy. Referred to as the Bailiwick of Guernsey, it is a British Crown Dependency, a separate entity that, while not part of the UK, honours the Queen as its monarch. It has complete autonomy over its internal affairs and most external matters resulting in its popularity with the wealthy seeking to set up off-shore accounts.

While my initial web searching unearthed little family information, it did stir up curiosity about Guernsey. Although not widely recognized as a tourist destination until the best seller: *The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society*, a novel about the Nazi occupation during WWII, put it on the map, its mix of the English language with European culture and cuisine made it appealing. So I decided to travel there and explore my roots on foot rather than to rely solely on the internet.

Guernsey with its extensive library of records, *Priaulx Library* (pronounced Pree-oh) extending back 400 years housed in a quaint old building, Candie House, is well suited to genealogical investigation.

St. Peter Port (SPP), the main town and centre of administration of the island is home to Priaulx, so SPP became my base. On arrival, I made an appointment at Priaulx and the next day I was loaded down with rolls of old-fashioned microfiche that revealed that my ancestors - my great and great-great

grandparents – had all been born and raised in SPP. But for some unclear reason, William Loney, my great-great grandfather had been buried in St Martin in 1863, the same village where records showed my grandfather had been born.



St Martin is one of Guernsey's 14 parishes, with its own centre or village well serviced by local buses so, the next morning my wife and I took the short ride to St. Martin and wandered through the village to a lane-way that our map suggested would intersect with La Bellieuse.

As we ambled along the aptly named Ruelle Tranquille, being watched with mild curiosity by

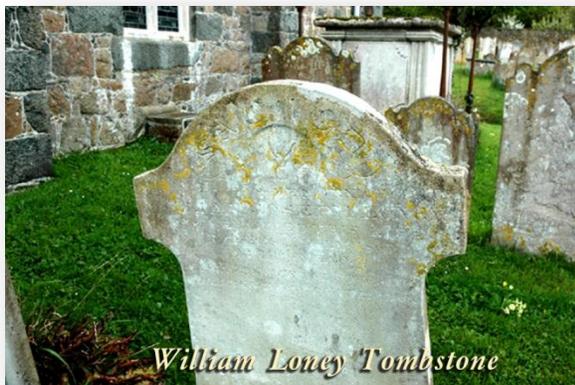
Guernsey cows, we rounded a corner and caught our breaths with a view of the church steeple and farmhouse exactly as they appeared in our old photograph.



Walking around to the front, we saw over the front door, the sign: "Bellieuse Farm." With a mixture of hesitancy



and excitement, I knocked on the door seeking permission to take some pictures of the exterior of the house. The door opened a cautious crack and, holding up the old photo, I explained that my grandfather had been born in the house. Instantly the door swung wide and the owners invited us in for coffee. They shared some of their own history, showed us through the house, and told us what they knew (or had heard) about its history. Tony, now retired, was British and had been a Barrister in the Colonial service in British Somaliland/Ethiopia and Aden where he was deputy Attorney General, before moving to Guernsey to serve as its Magistrate for 14 years. He and Judy, his wife, had purchased the house in 1971 from Roger Berry, a former President of the Board of Administration of Guernsey.



They knew that the house dated at least as far back as the 14th century by French monks lived there while they worked on the nearby Church of St. Martin de la Bellouse. The church actually dates way back to 1048, when William "Prince of the Normans" (William the Conqueror) granted St. Martin's as a Parish Church to the Abbot of Marmoutier, near Tours. At that time, the Channel Islands were under Norman sovereignty. The name "Bellouse" remains a bit of a mystery although some say that it may have come from a Breton word "belorsa",

meaning sloe bushes that are abundant in the area.

After visiting the house, we crossed the lane to explore this ancient but still-active church and search through its church yard for some trace of my ancestors. Eventually, admitting defeat, we sought out the

affable rector who, despite our intrusion on his lunch, received us warmly. Consulting old registry books, which exuded a dusty, lovely aroma of antiquity, he gave us the plot location for my great-great grandfather's grave, so back we went to the churchyard. Although 150 years of rain on soft stone had washed away much of the lettering, his name, "William Loney," remained visible.

Now, having visited this grave site across the road from the farmhouse, I had tangible evidence that the Loney family had been in St. Martin but, as yet, I had no direct connection to the farm itself.

So the next stop was *The Greffe*, the historical land registry for the States housed in the Royal Court record office in SPP. There, I found documents showing that the Bellieuse farmhouse had been owned from 1867 to 1943 by a family called Tardiff, an old island name. Tony kindly got me in touch with Roger Berry who told me that: "The farm has a long association with the Tardiff family who were one of the largest land owning families in St Martin. Certainly they were in residence there in the mid 1800's." Still not knowing of any connection between this Tardiff family and the Loneys, the puzzle remained incomplete.

So, it was back to *Priaulx* where we found census data showing that, although the Tardiffs owned the farm, they actually lived on an adjacent road during the mid to late 1800s. A family by the name of Parsons was recorded, in 1851 and again in 1861, as actually living on, and working, the farm. What happened, it seems, is that, after my great-great grandfather's early death in 1863, his widow, Elizabeth, met and married a widower, William Parsons, in 1865 and she and her six children moved into La Bellieuse with him. By the next census in 1871, a further 3 children had been born so 11 people were living at the farm: all listed as Parsons. As it turns out, James Emanuel Loney, my great grandfather, was one of those from the first marriage. He met and courted his stepfather's niece, Louisa Parsons, who also lived in the village. After they married in 1880, they lived in La Bellieuse Farm with the others. And, it was here that their first child, my grandfather, was born.

Finally I had it – a direct connection between the old farmhouse in Guernsey and my grandfather.

Some would argue that much of this research could have been done on the internet and by email. And, while that may be true, it is also true that I could not have discovered what I did without exploring the places that my ancestors called 'home.' The Internet gives us access to massive databases and hordes of documents but it can never replace the thrill of walking the paths and lane-ways, crossing the threshold of that old farmhouse, and attending services in the churches where past generations had worshipped, been baptized, married and buried.

Those experiences left me with an enduring and fundamentally human connection to my ancestors, a warm familiarity with the old farmhouse, and a fascination with the small island on which it stands.

Our roots live somewhere in the Earth. Now, with the immense power of our computers, we can find the maps to where they lie. But some of the digging and much of the re-connecting we must still do 'on foot.'

GENEALOGICAL SCORECARD

William Loney (great-great grandfather), grocer in SPP

Marries **Elizabeth Louise Brown**

They have four children; two are James Emanuel (great grandfather) and Ellen Augusta

Sometime in 1860's they move to St Martin

William dies and is buried in St Martin's church yard

Elizabeth marries **William Parsons**

He is working the farm owned by the Tardiffs

Living in farmhouse with children

Ellen Augusta marries Theophilus Tardiff, whose family owns the farm, and lives nearby.

James Emanuel Loney (great grandfather) lives with stepfather, mother and siblings in farmhouse

marries William Parsons' niece, **Louisa Clements Parsons**

they have a child **Clifford James Loney** (grandfather) in 1880

All live in La Bellieuse farm house until emigrating to Canada in 1883