

# Researching the Age of a Family History Treasure

**George Matheson uses carbon dating techniques to research the age of the home in Guernsey where his grandfather was born**



*Bellieuse Farm, Guernsey. (Courtesy of author)*

**F**reshly painted white and surrounded by flowers, this old stone farmhouse is likely to catch the attention of any passerby. But the first time I came upon Bellieuse Farm, it was more than the charming exterior that drew me to its door.

This was the house where my grandfather was born — and I had come here in pursuit of his life. (See *“An Old Photo Led Me Back to My Roots”*, *Family Chronicle*, July/August 2012)

When the gracious current owners invited me in and gave me a tour (a “looksee” they called it) of their home, I was taken by the tasteful blend of the modern with the ancient and found myself imagining

what the place had been like 130 years earlier, on that December day in 1880 when my grandfather had just arrived as a newborn. I could almost see the large interconnected family rushing around and hear his first cry.

His birth suddenly became no longer just a date on some ancestral “tree” but a “memory.”

By the time I arrived back in Canada, I was starting to think of this place as an ancestral home. And I was curious to find out as much as I could about my family’s connection to Bellieuse Farm and to Guernsey.

It’s a small island country of 25 sq. miles, with a long recorded history that includes

the intermarriage of “old families.” In the 1800s, the Tardifs, one of those families — and the largest land owners in St. Martins parish — had owned the building along with the surrounding 20 acres of farmland and were leasing it to an immigrant Englishman named William Parsons.

After my great-great-grandfather William Loney died, aged 40, his widow married Parsons in 1865 and she and her children moved into the house. Her son James Loney, my great grandfather, later met and married Louisa Parsons, Parsons’ niece and James’ own stepcousin. Meanwhile, James’ sister Ellen had married into the Tardif family.

On a subsequent visit to *The Greffe; the Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages* in Guernsey, I came across records of two earlier Tardifs associated with the property: Daniel Tardif (1777) and Guillaume Tardif (1667).

But Bellieuse Farm dates from much further back in time.

It lies on land once inhabited by Neolithic tribes of 5,000 BC. All around Guernsey are traces of those times including defensive earth works, *menhirs* (large upright standing-stones similar



LEFT: A standing-stone, now referred to as *La Gran'mère du Chimquière*, stands in the laneway to St. Martins parish church just across from Bellieuse Farm. (Courtesy of author)  
 RIGHT: Standing stone as a threshold. (Courtesy of author)

to Stonehenge) and *dolmens* (single-chamber megalithic burial chambers built above the ground). One of these standing-stones, now referred to as *La Gran'mère du Chimquière*, stands in the laneway to St. Martins parish church just across from Bellieuse Farm.

Many such large stones once standing throughout the island are known to have been taken down and reused during a building boom in the 17th century. The front of Bellieuse shows signs of having been remodeled at that time — quite possibly by Guillaume Tardif. One of these massive standing stones now lies at the threshold over which one walks when entering the house.

Records show that in 1199, the land on which the farmhouse stands became part of *Fief Blanchelande* when it was acquired by the Abbot of Blanchelande from the Abbot of Martinvastin in Cherbourg France. Originally, the Fief had been granted by William the

Conqueror in the 1150s as payment for services for the dukedom of Normandy.

Fiefs were often given as “Thank You” gifts from the Duke to loyal subjects, soldiers or, as is likely in this case, to churches on the condition that the priests pray daily for the donor. In return for taxes and charges, the feudal lord (or *Seigneur*,) had the power in the fief to collect taxes for the King, oversee disputes, and dispense justice including inflicting the death penalty.

Records document the history of the Fief. In 1563, the abbey’s ownership was revoked and, under orders of Queen Elizabeth I to sell off holdings on the island connected to Roman Catholicism, it was sold to a local Guernseyman.

While many Fiefs have become inactive, Blanchelande continues to this day with its Court meeting regularly to rule on local matters such as tenancy leases and the distribution of charitable funds. (The last

feudal due, the *congé*, which entitled the seigneur to a *treizième* (1/13) payment when a house was sold, was finally abolished in 1985.)

Given this rich history, I was even more curious about the farmhouse itself. How old, I wondered, was it.

As it turned out the answer to that question lay, in fact, within its own walls.

To delve further into the history of the house, I made a 4th trip to Guernsey in 2013 and on that occasion had the opportunity to meet with a man who proved to be the bearer of more information than I had dared hope to uncover.

Roger Berry, former President of the Board of Administration of Guernsey, is a local historian, author of *Fief de Blanchelande*<sup>1</sup>, and an Officer of the still functioning Court of the Fief. (As a *Vavasseur*, he is one of four Jurymen of the Court who continue to report changes of tenants on the Fief.) Berry is also, most importantly, a previous owner of Bellieuse Farm.

Sitting with him across the table in his home situated directly across from Bellieuse Farm, he described what poor condition it had been in when he had purchased the building in the early 1970s. Restoring it had required tearing through some of the existing interior walls behind which he had discovered an earlier wall of “*linenfold*” — oak wood carved to imitate folded or draped linen cloth. Used to clad interior walls and form choir stalls, linenfold had become popular across Northern Europe in the 14th to 16th centuries. The simple, low relief character of the

<sup>1</sup> Berry, Roger Charles.OBE. *Fief de Blanchelande and aspects of Guernsey’s Feudal Heritage*. Guernsey Post. 2012.

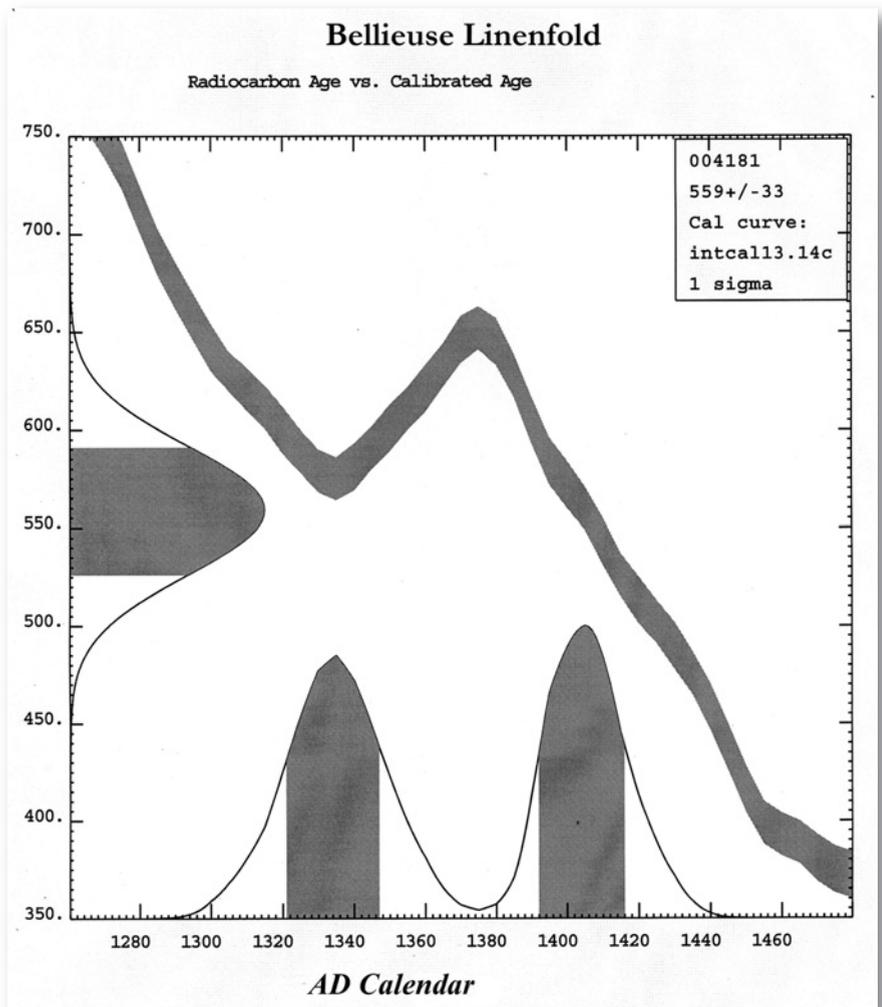
actual wood suggested it had been produced early in this period. And, being of oak, a tree not found on Guernsey, supported the idea that it had been imported from the continent.

Much of the linenfold he uncovered suffered from the effects of time, decaying from rot and woodworm, but Roger had been able to salvage some of it and he gave me a sample as a memento.

Once back in Canada, I researched the possibility of radiocarbon dating, a technique that uses the decay of carbon-14 (14C) to estimate the age of organic materials, such as this piece of wood.

Live trees absorb both 12C, a stable form of carbon, and 14C, an unstable radioactive form, from carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. When chopped down for lumber, the proportion of 14C begins to decrease at a known rate while 12C remains constant. The measurement of the remaining proportion of 14C in a sample gives an estimate of its age in years. This rate, however, fluctuates over time according to solar radiation and other events in the atmosphere. When these factors are taken into consideration (calibrated), a relationship between radiocarbon and real age can be determined, producing a calendar date (or date range).<sup>2</sup>

Having arranged radiocarbon dating with the Accelerator Mass Spectrometry Lab at Accium Biosciences in Seattle, WA, I carefully removed a small sample from my piece of linenfold from Bellieuse, sent it away and anxiously waited. When the report finally came, it revealed that the wood used to construct



DirectAMS code	Submitter ID	$\delta(^{13}\text{C})$	Fraction of modern		Calibrate age	
		per mil	pMC	1 $\sigma$ error	range	Relative probability
D-AMS 004181	Bellieuse 1	-34.1	93.28	0.38	1321 – 1348 AD 1392 – 1417 AD	48.8 % 51.2%

Graphic result of the radiocarbon testing done on the author's sample of the linenfold paneling. The two vertical areas on the lower axis indicate that the wood used to construct the original interior walls dated from as early as 1321 and not later than 1417 (excluding the period from 1349 to 1391.) (Courtesy of author)

the original interior walls dated from as early as 1321 and not later than 1417 (excluding the period from 1349 to 1391.)

Whether the original house was built, as some have imagined, for monks who laboured to construct the church across the lane, as a rectory for its priest, or as a home for tenants working the land, I may never know, But I can marvel at how a

modern technique can reveal old secrets — the Bellieuse farmhouse, most likely dating from the 1300s, was already an ancient dwelling when my grandfather's first cries of life were heard there in 1880. ■

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<sup>2</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Radiocarbon\\_dating#Calibration](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Radiocarbon_dating#Calibration)