

Solving Mysteries in Cemeteries

George Matheson suggests that gravestones can sometimes offer unexpected clues when researching your ancestors

*“Who was he?” “What’s he doing here?”
– I asked as I stood at the foot of a grave in Guernsey.*

As happens, I expect, to many people for whom genealogical research includes travel to places our families came from, I'm becoming familiar with cemeteries, intrigued by gravestones and accustomed to visiting with long-deceased relatives in their final resting places.

Cemeteries can be critical sources of information. When records are non-existent or impossible to locate, it's often from gravestones that we get answers or clues as to where to search next. And sometimes, what we find on them is surprising - leading us in unexpected directions or to dead ends.



[Candie Cemetery St. Peter Port](#)

At least four generations of my family lived on this small island in the English Channel before emigrating. My grandfather (Clifford J. Loney) was 2 years old when, in 1883, he and his young parents boarded a ship for Canada; they were among the last of the Loney family to leave Guernsey.

In 1912, he took a trip back there on his honeymoon. In his diary he chronicled in some cryptic detail his 3 days in Guernsey. A July 26 entry reads: "...St. Martin's Church - stood at altar, saw father's home..." That left me wondering what his father had told him about Guernsey; whether he had been drawn there in search of his ancestors.

I'll never know for sure what drew him there but it was an enduring feeling of closeness to him that drew me to the place of his (and my) roots.

On my first visit in 2009, I found La Bellieuse, the farm house in the village of St Martins where his



parents had lived when my grandfather had been born. In the parish church directly across the laneway, I walked up to that same altar my grandfather had stood before and where he had been christened. And in its cemetery, I located the grave of his grandfather (my gr2 grandfather,) William John Loney. He had died in 1863 at the age of 40, "leaving," as the stone reads, "a wife and six children to mourn their loss." He was buried there alone as his wife had remarried after he died and was buried in another St. Martin's plot as the widow of her second

husband, William H. T. Parson.

Standing at the grave of my gr2 grandfather had been a strange and somehow exciting moment - one that prompted me to search for other ancestors' grave sites. The search for his parents, William Peter Bartholomew Loney (sometimes referred to as "Captain") and Margaret Le Page, took me back to St. Peter Port (SPP) where, on a visit to Priaux Library, I found a record of her burial in a cemetery right across the road from the Library.

Guillaume Loney son of Michel Loney of the Parish of St. Saviour, Jersey and Marguerite Le Page daughter of Samuel of Catel, Guernsey were married together 27 August 1820.

Candie Cemetery in SPP is a rolling field of grass and stone overlooking the town and the sea. Though some have fallen over, most stones stand erect and amongst those still standing, I came across a badly eroded and barely readable headstone that marked the grave of "Margaret Le Page, Widow of WPB Loney, died May 26 1865 Age 75." There were two other names on that headstone neither of which was her husband. Buried alongside her is a granddaughter, "Amelia Elizabeth, Loving daughter of John and Amelia Loney" who had died in 1870 at four and a half months of age. As for the third name, the engraving simply read: "Also In Loving Memory of Peter De Putron, 25 Jan 1907, Died age 55."

Now, “de Putron” doesn’t show up anywhere in my family tree; neither by birth nor marriage. I quickly calculated that this man was only 13 when Margaret died so he couldn’t have been a second husband or secret lover. So who was he – this stranger buried on top of my gr3 grandmother?

The first thing to do was to check the cemetery ledgers. The Guernsey Constables oversee the burial grounds and their records show that Plot E99Y, as it was labeled, had been purchased for £1 18s 0d by Margaret’s son John on 28 May 1865, three days after her death. A day later, on 29 May 1865, her body had been buried there, for another shilling. (As an aside, de Putron’s burial 40-some years later had cost 8 shillings – 700% inflation.)

The burial record confirmed what was engraved on the tombstone but it gave no clue as to why this stranger was in the grave.

De Putron, I discovered, is an old Guernsey name dating back to Androit de Puteron, a ‘jurat’ (judge) in the Assizes Roll of 1309. Over the centuries, the de Putron family had become established owners of large parcels of land. One area to the southwest of St Peter Port is still referred to as “The Village de Putron.” (However, only five de Putrons now remain in the island’s phone directory.)

It was on one of these properties, “Hubits des Haut”, a granite farmhouse on Les Hubits Rd. on the outskirts of the village of St Martins that Peter was born in 1852. Successive censuses recorded that he lived there with his parents for 33 years. Eventually, in 1885, as a “late-bloomer,” he married Amelia Caroline Fuzzey, the daughter of Isaac Chorley Fuzzey, a cloth merchant, and moved into St Peter Port.

Hubits des Haut rang a bell for me for it was just down the lane from the farm where the Loneys were living and working as tenant farmers. At that time, the village would have been small and rural; most residents would have been familiar to one another. For almost 20 years, the de Putron and Loney families would have been neighbours; the boys being of similar ages might well have been childhood friends.

But in the late 1870’s, the Loneys started to leave Guernsey for England and Canada; John leading the way in 1878 with the others following until, by 1885, all were gone.

Far away exploring new lives, they would have had no use for the extra space in the cemetery plot. Perhaps they had figured that the best thing to do with the deed was to give (or sell) it to their long-time friend, Peter de Putron. Possibly that was how his name, decades later, ended up engraved on the tombstone.

Or maybe it was merely a coincidence that they had lived near each other. With no member of the Loney family still residing in Guernsey, the constables might have considered the plot to be abandoned and allowed a stranger to be buried in the vacant space. Familiar with island practices, Maria van der Tang at *La Societe Guernesiaise* supported this second possibility: “I have seen this before,” she wrote, “it would have been because there was room in the grave so they used it, it doesn’t seem to matter if they were a relation or not.”

Either way, Peter de Putron was just a stranger.

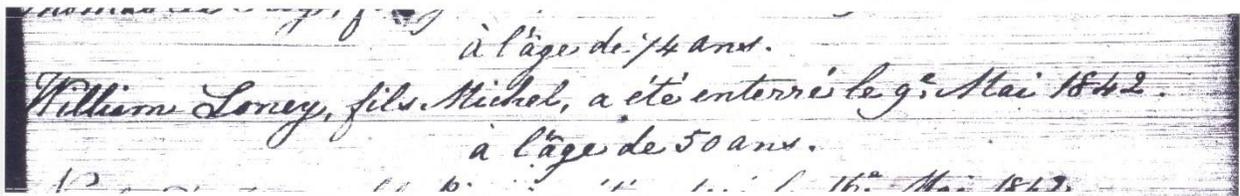
As for the whereabouts of Margaret's husband, I remained stymied. Repeated requests and record searches for a William Peter Bartholomew Loney had come up empty except for a brief entry of his marriage to Margaret in St Peter Port in 1820. Then he had been identified as 'the son of Michel of St. Saviour, Jersey.'

Guillaume Loney son of Michel Loney of the Parish of St. Saviour, Jersey and Marguerite Le Page daughter of Samuel of Castel, Guernsey were married together 27 August 1820.

With that tidbit, my search broadened to include Jersey but again nothing about William or his father, Michel, was found. So, where was William?

For years, my relatives (who were also interested in family genealogy) had concluded that, since he was referred to as 'Captain,' he had probably died on board ship and been buried at sea. So, I turned to the old island newspapers preserved at the Priaux Library in search of a mention of any shipwreck occurring around the presumed date of his death. There was none.

Puzzled and empty-handed, I persisted and eventually, with the help of Amanda Bennett, the Chief Librarian at Priaux, a burial record was uncovered. He had died in May 1842 (not 1849 as claimed by others) and been buried in the cemetery in the nearby parish of Castel, the home of his in-laws, the Le Pages. Most likely, the Le Pages had provided the grave for their son-in-law.



à l'âge de 74 ans.
William Loney, fils Michel, a été enterré le 9^e Mai 1842.
à l'âge de 50 ans.
12 11 b. 16^e Mai 1813.

Eager to find and stand at the foot of William's grave, I went out to Castel. It was a grey, overcast day and the cemetery had a particularly ancient look about it - many stones overturned, few readable. After walking row by row through the uneven ground, I left disappointed, not having found his actual gravesite. Later, Maria provided perspective: "there would not have been plans back then and the ground does get reused." "I am afraid," she concluded, "that mystery is going to stay a mystery."

This year I will walk once more through these Guernsey cemeteries as I have many times already. I'm not sure what I will be looking for; maybe hoping that magically a name will appear, a stone will be found or a familiar grave will tell me something I've missed so far. Or maybe I'll go there just to be amongst those of my grandfather's family who lived, died, and are buried, there.