

A Tale of Two Forests

Around 8000 years ago rising sea levels finally swamped the river valley that we now call the English Channel leaving only the tops of a few high hills above the water. Twenty or so miles from the French coast, in the bay of Normandy, these hills became known as the Channel Islands.

Most westerly of the Channel Islands sits the tiny island of Lihou. Technically it is only an island for half of the time because when the tide recedes a granite causeway is revealed and Lihou becomes a peninsula of its larger, neighbouring island - Guernsey.

The name 'Lihou' is thought to come from long ago when the local language was influenced by the Celts from France, the Vikings or 'Norsemen' from Scandinavia and the Romans. The first part, 'Li' is likely to come from the French word for 'the' and 'hou' from the Norse word for mound or island. So Lihou means 'the island'.

In nearby France, close to the town of Granville, is the medieval monastery of Mont Saint Michel and it was the monks from Mont Saint Michel who built and consecrated a priory on Lihou Island in the year 1114. At that time, Granville, had a different name; it was called 'Roque de

Lihou'. Legend has it that large forests surrounded both Roque de Lihou in France and the south-west coast of Guernsey until a great storm and tidal wave in the year 709AD swept away the trees and submerged the land in both areas making Lihou an island for the first time.

The Forest of Vazon in Guernsey and the Forest of Scissy in France covered much of the land and both Lihou and Rocque de Lihou would not have been adjacent to, or surrounded by the sea before the great flood, they would not have been 'islands' as implied in the Lihou name. It seems likely from the sequence of events and also from the Norse element 'hou' (the Vikings invaded at the end of the 8th century) that the name Lihou was first used sometime after the flood, probably between 800 and 1066 when we know Roque de Lihou was so called in documents recording it as a gift to the Grant family from a grateful William the Conqueror for help given in his conquest of England. Roque de Lihou was later renamed 'Granville'.

So Granville was named after a family name and there are numerous other examples of such naming, not the least of which are Port Lihou in Australia and Lihou Reef on the Great Barrier Reef, both of which were named after Captain John Lihou from Guernsey. Tracing the family name back to the island, however, is not quite as straight forward. We cannot be sure if the first people known as Lihous migrated from the French town now known as Granville, to Guernsey,

whether they were raised or worked on or near Lihou Island and hence became known as 'Lihous', or what association between the family and place led to the family name that was first recorded in the 1445 and has passed down the generations to this day. There are no records of the name that pre-date the 1445 Guernsey records anywhere in the western world, including nearby France. Only on the far side of the world is there another example of the name; there is a city in the Shanxi province of China where the name is derived from a very different linguistic history, specific to that region, and the name is almost certainly unconnected. Given the coincidence of such a rare name occurring at roughly the same time in roughly the same location in this remote corner of the western world, the balance of probability strongly indicates that the first Lihous almost certainly were so named because of their connection with the island. It was also common practice for surnames to reflect the location of families and the only other likely location might have been Roque de Lihou in Normandy, as it was known before the eleventh century, but those who settled in the island from Normandy were typically given the surname 'Norman' just as the family name 'Breton' was applied to migrants from Brittany. The absence any of other Lihous in or around Granville and the cluster from early times in Guernsey, despite most of the population being killed by the French in 1294 makes a compelling case for the Lihou name deriving from Lihou

Island.

Whilst the above is conjecture, we do know from parish records who each Lihou, in one particular family, was from the year 1445 onwards. Of each generation, we know their names and in most cases when they were born, died, their spouses' names, and the children they raised. We can also speculate, from historical records, how each Lihou might have lived, what they believed in, and what might have occupied their daily lives. As the years progressed, our knowledge of the individuals in the family becomes deeper, culminating in the absolute certainty of the present generation, parents and grandparents. Thanks to the Internet and the dedication of those who have chronicled the many parish records, it has been possible to chart a near complete tree of all recorded Lihou families, and to establish a single common ancestor, Nicholas Colline Lihou, the father of two sons who may well have been what folklore had long described as the first Lihous, the two Lihou brothers of Les Vauxbelets.

This book is a record of the Lihous in one branch of the family from Nicholas to the present day, embellished by local and national history. Hopefully each chapter will serve as a time capsule for future generations moved by an appetite to understand their ancestors.

Just as science deals with evidence, history deals

with recorded events and unfortunately both are fallible. Presented in this story, 'facts' are provided from research and records and these are combined with speculation where knowledge of the individual lives has long since been lost. However, early scribes were not always diligent in the accuracy or clarity of their record keeping, subsequent transcriptions may have been be prone to errors, and some events may never have been recorded or subsequently lost. Fortunately, the records we do have are more than sufficient to support the majority of our story. The wisdom of those who still remember narratives handed down orally through families and friends also enriches what we know or what we think we know and over time more information, anecdotal or otherwise may still come to light. Should the picture become more detailed, this account must be extended and contributions from readers will be gratefully received for publication in future editions because our history continues to be discovered.

Peter Lihou

Year 1470: Nicholas Colline, Born 1445

Being as our common tongue here is a local patois, mostly French in origin, I'll contrive to inform you about our lives in my coarse English albeit low and, some might say, more vulgar than it ought properly to be.

We all come from somewhere and our lot could have trudged here in ancient times before we were islands, likely as not to hunt for food. They might have landed by boat a few thousand years ago from Iberia or they could've come across with the Celts from France in the last couple of centuries. We don't know much about the early times; nothing was written in the parish until present times. Beyond me old man and what he told me of his folks, it's a blank, but we all comes from somewhere and for us that somewhere was our island; Lihou.

Don't suppose it was ever really ours in the proper meaning or that that was the very beginning of us but our lot worked Lihou from early times even before the first holy people came. Being holy and with their minds on more spiritual considerations, our lot did their bidding;

farming, warrening, fetching and carrying, keeping their dwellings warm and dry. The word was, the island was bigger in the old days. Then came the monks from Mont St Michel and somebody had to build their Priory, them being too gentile and all. Luckily for them we could work with stone, a skill that's been passed down in our family from father to son. Not content with our hard local granite, they insisted upon bringing the soft stone over from France which, although needed moving that great distance, meant our job as craftsmen was a good deal less arduous and they could have their ornate arches and holy images. Whilst other locals worked inside the finished Priory, our lot took care of the buildings and land. They named the island Lihou after their Rocque de Lihou and Guernsey folk named our family the Lihous as was the custom, being as we did for them on Lihou Island.

By rights, I reckon our lot should have the fief of our Lihou being as we was there first but there ain't nothing written upon which we could rely to stake our claim. And some might argue, we don't know nothing for sure. What I do know is us Lihous are good Christians, hate the French, and love Guernsey as well as our little island. But there's still folks here who take to the old beliefs and leave coins for the Gran'mère du Chimquière and dance around the dolmens chanting 'Qué hou hou, Marie Lihou'!

Me, I came into this world here in St André about the

same time as my wife Jehanette in the year of our lord 1445. She's a Le Cornu and we met in Jersey when I landed with Admiral Harliston's force and the trained bands of my fellow Guernseymen to rout the French from the island in the year of our Lord, 1468. She lived with her folks in St Ouen which we liberated first with the help of their militia. We took to each other straight away and she came back with me once most the island was cleared. The admiral and his men stayed on and laid siege to the last of the French for 5 months in Mont Orgueil, a castle on the other side of the island, before they too was routed. It was reckoned to be a great victory as the French had held Jersey for seven years and the islanders still rings the bells there each Christmas to celebrate. Jehanette and me tied the knot here in our parish on 26th May that year and I took the whole day off to celebrate.

We have a simple life. Me and Jehanette have been blessed with two sons, Calixte and Jean, a couple of years after we was wed, both still living. At 25, I suppose I'm what could be called 'middle-aged' now and sometimes I feel the years have taken their toll. I works the land most days and fish when there's time and tide, rising before first light when the cottage is cold and my damp woollen tunic vexes my neck. That's in the winter at any rate and even with a linen shirt and braies under my hose, it can be bitter cold first thing. We're lucky to have a granite cottage with a byre screened for the livestock over which

we sleeps in our solar, t'would be worse otherwise. We've a hearth too but needing to be frugal as we do with fuel for the fire and without proper glass in the windows nothing takes the edge off the coldest winter mornings. The rest of the year it's cosy as can be 'cept come the long summer nights when it's too hot for comfort.

Jehanette sets us up first thing with a little dark bread and cheese before I steps out to work our 69 vergées at La Mare in the Fief St Hélène but with the demands of young Jean and Calixte to watch, that's about all she can do before the rounds of feeding and caring for the little'uns gets in the way of her daily chores. We keep a few dozen fowls for their eggs and meat and when the Lord is inclined to be good to us, the snares deliver rabbits or I lands a couple of dozen mackerel but mostly we lives off what grows in the land and whatever the seasonal crops provides us for our table. Like most, we keeps a goat for its milk and even have a pair of oxen to pull our plough, but come harvest time we still need the good will of me old man, our neighbours and their young'uns to gather the crops. Then there's old Sampson a good sturdy horse for general work and getting about. A thousand bushels of wheat and over six hundred tons of parsnips or thereabouts can take some lifting. By Michaelmas our grain store is usually high with wheat and barley and when it comes to Spring and the feast of Charrue, we've usually had our fill of parsnip! To our good fortune we've a decent orchard which

provides apples for the most wonderful cider in the parish and a fair amount eases the flow of conversation at the feast, perhaps a little too much most years!

Some folks keep a cow, pigs or even sheep but with our land so occupied, there's no more grazing so we trades with them that has em for whatever they're short. Come market day on a Tuesday or Thursday - I avoids Saturday, I takes the cart into town with whatever is ready through the seasons; wheat or barley, clover or parsnips and of course me apples. Once a year it's necessary to stay longer as I must pay me tax at the Grange in quarters of wheat. My tithes and champart being collected by the grangier from the farm. I leads old Sampson the last half mile or so, past the barriere stone at Cornet Street and into the market. Truth is, I hurry to do my trade, pay what's due, and be on my way. Town has its share of cut throats and them looking for the easy way to get what's not rightfully theirs and there's the plague too, I might go in health and leave not knowing I'm carrying death with me to all my dear family. So I'll give Sampson a drink and fill my water jack at La Tour Beauregard gate and head back towards the parish. Then there's the rent to pay on the farm, tis mine you understand, in all ways that matter. I own the cottage and the land passed to me by my old man and one day I'll pass it to my oldest boy Calixte as dictated by preciput, our custom, but there's rents to pay for it being a farm like. Rents was fixed long ago in quarters of wheat and we

must find it for the Seigneur or risk his wrath.

Tis my usual practice to load the cart with furze from the valley on my way back from market, which I piles up in the corner of the cottage for the fire. Then there's the vrac and come spring tides I makes me way down to our old island with me cart and reaping-hook to harvest this most valuable of blessings. Of the two sorts, one finds it's way to our table and both go on the land to enrich it and boost our crops. On a good tide, with the help of family, we'll cut and gather enough to cover the fields and fill the store where it can dry for use later in the year as more fuel for the fire. Being as St André don't have a coast, we're still allowed to gather from Lihou. It's a good day out and usually time permits on a low spring tide for a few ormers and limpets to be prised from the rocks allowing us a splendid supper to thank those that assists us.

Men my age do our bit for what we informally calls our 'militia' and I won't be found wanting when it comes to defending against the French or pirates who often raid and plunder our islands but shyness of heart prevents me from stating too loudly how else we makes a living. Nevertheless, I must say it now ahead of any talk of God, the church and our dignitaries. 'Lampin' as we call it involves going to the shore when a foreign ship is sighted, and signalling, by way of a waving lamp, so as to tempt her aground on our rocky coast. When seen to be floundering in

poor weather, the alarm is raised and those nearest the shore gets things going but my kin passes the word when she's hull up off the lee shore by a youngster on horseback and a few of us join them that's already assembled and wait for the terrible crash before looting whatever we can salvage from the wreck in our small boats. It's a grim business with seldom few survivors and them that does is all too often knocked on the head, but the pickings are good so long as the church don't demand an indecent share.

Some is troubled by our lampin but it's no less than they does to us with their constant marauding and carnage. But the gentry, feint of heart and the pious likes to paint us black even though they takes their cut of the spoils. It's mainly the French comes raidin our shores. They'll beach at night when our guard's down and run a mock along the coast or cut there way into town, where the pickings are richer, if there's enough of em. My old man reckons three thousand Spanish soldiers of fortune once landed at Vazon, they plundered and cut all the way to Castle Cornet itself, where they laid siege to us Guerns until ordered off by the French. Then, when I was a lad, the French was the ones who besieged Castle Cornet. But, like I said, we hit them back a couple of years ago when they was up to the same old tricks in Jersey. We done well out of that and some of our merchants got special privileges in England as reward, increasing their riches. In an island like ours, when some does well it usually gets spread about and I got

stone masonry work on some of those merchants' properties as a result. But each battle leaves fewer of us and them that don't fall is often badly injured. Me old man said I must stand up and face em when it's needed but keep my family as safe as can be accomplished from marauding raiders. He told me that's why our lot moved inland to St André in more or less the middle of the island. He also reckoned that when the old Prior was found out and sent back to Mont St Michel for his misbehaving, and Guillaume Michel took over from him, Lihou became less in need of us lot and our living was harder. So we set up inland here at the Les Vauxbelets in St André and I hope my dear Jehanette, Calixte and Jean will be safer as a result. The old man and me built the cottage and we ekes a living. Each Sunday Jehanette, the children and me takes our places half way up the pews in St André and we give thanks to the Lord for our good fortune. Our lives is regulated by the bells of St André; announcing when we should worship, births, deaths, weddings, parish meetings and all manner of events. Worst of all, the warning of raids and our call to arms. Church brings all our neighbours together and is our chance to sort what needs sortin in our parish and discuss what's goin on. Our rector, Jean Eccur, informs us what is happening in the world and gives us moral guidance in his sermons. We prays for an end to the wars between Lancaster and York and we asks our Lord to protect the King and our new Bailiff, Pierre Beauvoir, and to give them the wisdom

to defeat our enemies for another week.