

JERSEY COUNTRY LIFE MAGAZINE

RURAL

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From Jersey Flour to Jersey Bread

Local bread from local
flour for local people

Food for Thought

Join India Hamilton and
RURAL magazine for a
very special meal

The Landscapes of Rural Jersey

A new art competition
is born



THE LANDSCAPES OF RURAL JERSEY

PART 1 From earliest times to the 17th Century



Artist unknown

Abridged from a talk given by *Doug Ford* at the
RURAL Landscape awards evening at CCA Galleries
International in July

Throughout the ages, the alternating periods of hot and cold climates meant that the sea level rose and fell dramatically and the vegetation growing here changed with the circumstances.

During cold periods, much of the earth's water was locked up in ice caps, and sea levels fell by up to 100 metres. Mammoths and humans were able to walk on a hill that was eventually to become Jersey in the northwest of what is now France. The loess which covers parts of the Island was blown here from the ice caps and formed a thick deposit, several metres thick in places, contributed greatly to the fertility of the soils.

Alternately during the warm periods, the ice caps melted and sea levels rose in some instances up to 40 metres above current levels. This old coastline is plainly visible simply by taking a drive around the coast from Gorey to St Aubin and then La Pulente to L'Etacq and looking to your right.

When the climate warmed up then trees began to appear and the region became forested before the cold returned and the trees died off to be replaced by tundra once again.

We are now in a warm inter-glacial period which has so far lasted about 10,000 years; with Jersey becoming the island we know around 7,000 or 8,000 years ago about the same time as the continent was cut off from England – a couple of thousand years after Guernsey had become an island. This then is the natural environment or landscape.

When the first people arrived in Jersey about 250,000 years ago, Europe was in the grip of an ice age. The polar ice sheets moved further and further south, drawing water from the oceans and causing the sea level to drop. Although the ice never reached as far as Jersey, during the coldest periods sea levels dropped by more than 11 metres which meant the islands were connected to what is now mainland France.

To these early humans the island would have appeared as a rocky outcrop in the middle of a vast tundra-like coastal plain and, as they followed the herds of animals, they would have made temporary camps in

places such as La Cotte de St Brelade and La Cotte à la Chèvre, where they lit fires of wood and dried dung and butchered the animals which they had killed.

As soon as humans began to organise themselves into communities and society evolved, Man has been interfering with the natural environment. So humans in the Paleolithic and Mesolithic periods cleared small patches of woodland and vegetation on a seasonal basis to create better hunting conditions. However, it was really only with the advent of farming in the Neolithic period that people began to have a significant effect on the landscape in which they lived. There is evidence for quite extensive woodland clearance in this prehistoric period.

Armed with polished stone axes and fire, these farmers began to clear the native woodland to create the fields in which they grew their crops and kept their herds of sheep and cattle. As they now lived a more or less a settled lifestyle, people began to live for long periods in one place. This meant that the once absorbent and moisture-retaining soils formed by the loess and water borne alluvium began to require constant attention and manuring which was originally achieved through simple crop rotation and herd management while the more acidic thinner soils of the granitic areas required the application of manure. There appears to have been a slight environmental problem in the early Bronze age about 2-2,500 years ago with the land not being able to support as many people and there was some abandonment especially with a rise in sea-level inundating some of the more marginal low lying land.

During the Iron Age, Roman, Migration and early Mediaeval periods farming in the Island was very much of the subsistence variety – food crops grown in open fields fertilized by manure and since the 12th Century by seaweed (Vraic) collected from the shoreline and offshore reefs after the autumnal gales. Much of the Island's woodlands had been felled, and sheep ran along the marginal land along the cliffs of the North and North West coast. What woodland there was, largely deciduous oak and sweet chestnut, was concentrated on

the north facing sides of the valleys and the resource was heavily coppiced to provide a variety of timber for building and used for jobs around the farm. In 1631 the cartographer William Speed described the woodland in the Island as 'scant'.

Wheat was the main crop and a staple food to the extent that it was used as a currency as tenants paid 'rentes' to the land-owning seigneurs with a share of the corn they produced on their small portions of land. This is still echoed today with rateable value of property in the Island today still being expressed in quarters – quarters of wheat.

Settlement on the island tended to be isolated farmsteads, kin-related hamlets (Villes ès Nouaux, Ville ès Norman, Ville ès Vibert, etc) – or clustered around the parish churches. And like most settlements on the Atlantic seaboard, houses were built along an east-west axis presenting the longest side of the building to the warmth of the sun and narrowest gable end to the prevailing westerly winds.

Following on from the end of the Hundred Years War, in the middle of the 15th Century, there was a gradual increase in agricultural incomes and productivity as the Island developed a cash economy based upon the stocking knitting trade using largely imported wool. From the early 17th Century, the production of cider entailed extensive planting of orchards, especially in the centre and east of the Island. These orchards, coincided with the extensive enclosure of formerly open fields; mirroring the practice in nearby Normandy, farmers used hedge banks planted with oak and varieties of field elm, which were pollarded or coppiced for fuel and timber to provide shelter from the wind and protection - up to a quarter of the Island was given over to apple trees.

The resulting hedgerows had a considerable visible impact on the landscape of the Island rendering it 'like an entire and continued forest' according to one of several contemporary observers. It was this proliferation of trees and hedges that necessitated the twice-yearly branchage that is still a feature of country life.

To be continued in the next issue.