

JERSEY COUNTRY LIFE MAGAZINE

RURAL

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Come fly
with me

Flying birds of prey
at St John's Manor

Your Garden

Winter is not necessarily
sleepy time for the garden

Health.

Community
and Farming

How are health and
wellbeing relevant to
farming in Jersey?



CHANGES IN THE LANDSCAPE OF RURAL JERSEY

PART 2 from the 18th Century to modern times



Artist: Tom Lloyd, painted in 1883.

From a talk by Doug Ford, given at the RURAL Landscape awards evening at CCA Galleries in July. The first part of his speech on the early landscape of the Island was published in the last (autumn) issue of RURAL

Even as late as the late 18th Century, Jersey's population was around 20,000, only about 3,000 of whom lived in the urban areas of St Helier and St Aubin – farming still provided the backbone of the Island and the backdrop of Island life was still very much rural.

Jersey cider became a lucrative commodity for export and was shipped in bulk to England, where it was exempt from duty. In the early 1800s, annual exports averaged almost a million gallons. The Jersey industry began to decline during the 19th Century, when industrial advances in England made cider-making a viable and profitable business there.

The wealth generated by the rural economy saw improvement in the quality of rural housing and farm buildings and, of course, the profits from Newfoundland cod trade saw the building of a number of cod houses. The Island benefitted from increased agricultural productivity, encouraged by rising grain prices and the demands of an increasingly urban population on the mainland.

However, with the end of the Napoleonic War in 1815 life was about to change radically; waves of fresh English immigrants resulted in the population rising to around 55,000 by the mid-1800s. The patterns of settlement have become more strongly nucleated as a result of the improvement of the road system under General Don, which promoted the development of new villages - Victoria Village, Le Carrefour Selous, Beaumont, First Tower - while the traditional centres of population - Town, St Aubin and Gorey - continued to grow and better port facilities were built.

As the Agrarian revolution kicked in, the more progressive farmers developed a more scientific approach to growing coupled with the introduction of new machines. Lime brought over from nearby Norman ports such as Regneville made a fundamental contribution to the restructuring and improvement of the soils on the Island and this was then supplemented from about 1850 by guano from the Pacific coast of South America. This more or less coincided with the decline of the cider trade, stocking knitting and sheep grazing.

By the middle of the 19th Century, selective breeding resulted in the development of the Jersey cow and better housing for the cattle improved the quality and efficient redistribution of farmyard manure, so increasing agricultural productivity.

Jersey is, of course, synonymous with the potato – although grown as early as the first quarter of the 16th Century it really became popular in the late 18th Century, replacing parsnips as winter food for the Islanders themselves and to sustain their livestock, going on to become as much a Jersey 'brand' as the famous cow.

The gradually increasing acceptance of this imported vegetable in England spread to Jersey, where weather conditions and the Island's southern aspect were right for the cultivation of early potatoes, leaving land free for other crops later on. Indeed, the potato and the cow complemented each other, the early season allowing root crops to be grown afterwards as winter food for the small herds.

Special spades and a five-pronged fork were designed for digging potatoes in Jersey, and in the 1760s along came 'La Grande Tchéthue', a monster, deep-trenching plough pulled by six to eight horses or oxen.

Other crops were either forsaken or treated as secondary as the potato boom continued, even after the disastrous blight years of the 1840s, which had such tragic consequences in Ireland. A significant advance was made when a St Ouen farmer, John Lecaudey, using early potatoes from England, proved the advantages of planting on Jersey's south-facing slopes, the cõtils, to produce early crops ahead of the Island's competitors.

Then in 1878, the Jersey Royal Fluke new potato, with its own special taste and texture, was born. Farmer Hugh de la Haye cut up and experimented with the parts of two giant potatoes bought from a local merchant's, which became the forerunner of a hardy, apparently virus-resistant potato that was tagged the 'Jersey Royal Fluke' and which, exclusively belonging to Jersey, has proved a best seller for over a century.

Although more often than not in the shadow of the potato, the tomato has enjoyed its share of success as a Jersey product although never to the same extent as in our sister isle. Once the preserve of a few well-heeled growers who could afford to cultivate under glass, it became a maincrop outdoor option late in the 19th Century, being grown either as a first crop or after early potatoes had been taken from the ground, which in the latter case extended the time required of the Breton workforce.

One of the most interesting views advanced in the recent Plémont debate was that the site should be allowed to 'return to nature'. But what does that mean?

Does it mean - leave it alone and allow nature and time to recolonize the area? Or: to interfere with nature and demolish the man-made structures and then create a new natural reality?

The natural landscape has not existed in Jersey or indeed most parts of western Europe for well over 7,000 years or perhaps 10,000 – 20,000 or 30,000 years.

The rural landscape has been changing ever since the first farmers cut down trees to create fields. Over the years it has been modified to meet the new demands of new crops and new techniques. In the last century, increased demand for agricultural products has taken its toll on the health of the land. Larger and heavier tools have compacted the soil and overuse of man-made fertilisers has resulted in a breakdown of soil structure and, in some cases, the compromising of our water supply. And of course the greatest threat to the rural landscape as ever is increasing urbanisation due to a growing population, which in turn needs more housing – green field, brown field, land reclamation versus environmental protection, National Park, Ramsar...

Geography professor Stentor Danielson of Slippery Rock University of Pennsylvania has remarked that the environment 'is a culturally mediated source of opportunities and constraints'. As applicable to Jersey, surely, as to Slippery Rock, Pennsylvania.