

'My dear Mary Ann'

Letters to Gaspé



Jane Edwards examines family letters from Jersey to Canada that paint a picture of life in the Island in the late 19th century.

In March 1887 Canon George Clement officiated at the marriage in St Ouen's Parish Church of Mary Ann Le Marquand, aged 42, and widower Thomas David Le Page, aged 44, who had travelled from his home in Point St Peter, Gaspé, in Canada, leaving behind his four-year-old daughter Jane¹ in the care of his mother and sister.

There was little time between the ceremony and her departure to Gaspé for the bride to contemplate her change in status from spinster of the parish living on her limited savings to being a stepmother and mistress of a house and 114 acres of farmland in a distant country. Apart from a visit to Annie Bono, a dressmaker in Sand Street, St Helier, and an endless round of farewells to her friends and relatives, Mary Ann was busy packing, for she would not only be taking her personal possessions with her on the long voyage to Canada, but also the Jersey-made mahogany furniture that she had inherited from her mother, Marie-Catherine Le Marquand, née Bertram².

Some 113 years later, Jersey resident Marian Kirkbride went to Gaspé with the specific intention of finding Jersey-made furniture³ that she could include in the dissertation she was researching for her Master of Arts degree in Fine Arts. Thanks to an extraordinary stroke of luck, she was directed to the Le Page house, where she was amazed to be shown Mary Ann's furniture by her grandson, Vane Le Page. Successive generations of the Le Page family had not only kept all Mary Ann's furniture and personal items, but also quintessentially Jersey objects such as a metal milking can and a wooden handbarrow. The house, built entirely of wood, is one of the oldest in the area and was built by Thomas David's father, also called Thomas, between 1843 and 1845.

Born in the parish of St. Mary, Thomas senior made his first trip to Gaspé in 1835, when he was a sailor on the Robin-owned ship the *Seaflower*. His son served an apprenticeship as a caulker in the shipyard at Point St Peter, which was a prosperous and very successful establishment owned by Jersey merchants Elias and James Collas. Thomas then made a living as a farmer and fisherman, selling his catch to Collas.

The house and its time capsule of objects and personal effects was such a rare survival from the past that Marian decided that it should be preserved, with the hope that one day it could be opened to the public. She knew that if the house was sold on the open market its contents

would have been dispersed and the story that they had to tell would have been lost. Marian felt that the only option was to purchase the house and its contents and this is what she and John Appleby did in 2004, when Mr and Mrs Le Page decided that they wanted to move to a more modern and manageable house. Amongst the documents left in the house, a mixture of legal papers, bills, receipts and accounts covering the period 1817 to 1910, were 14 letters, written in French and English, which had been sent to Mary Ann from her friends and relatives in Jersey.

They are a fascinating record of the preoccupations and interests of the correspondents, and as such afford a unique glimpse into life in Jersey in the late 19th century.

Mary Ann was born in 1845 in the parish of St Ouen. The sea was in her family's blood. Her father Francis and his brother Peter both went to sea at an early age. Her father became a captain in 1852 and made a number of voyages to Gaspé on the *Gem*, a brigantine owned by Abraham de Gruchy. Unlike their father George, who made his last voyage on the *Tiphys* in 1872 at the age of 73, Francis decided to pursue a more speculative career in Gaspé.

He bought a plot of land next to the Le Page house and became an agent for the Jersey merchants, arranging transportation of cargoes. The Canadian Census of 1861 shows that the captain, his wife Mary Ann and her brother Francis Elias were living in Point St Peter, but we do not know what happened to them between that year and the Jersey Census of 1871, which reveals a dramatic change in their circumstances. Mary Ann is a housemaid in the Le Cloche household in Colomberie, St. Helier, Francis Elias is a 'commis' and their mother has been admitted to the General Hospital. Normally, a sick relative would be cared for by her own family, but Marie-Catherine's family, the Bertrams, were experiencing their own problems.

In 1828 Marie-Catherine's brother Francois (1790-1867), in common with a number of Jersey merchants, had made the move from commerce to banking and 'finance capital', becoming a partner with Nicolle and de Ste Croix in the Jersey Banking Company. In 1814 Francois had married Sophia de la Perelle (1798-1888). A son, Francois Elie, was born the next year, and in 1821 so was a daughter, Sophia⁴. Business ties between the Bertram and Nicolle families were further strengthened when Sophia married



Clement Nicolle



Francis Elias Le Marquand



Thomas David La Page



Mary Ann Le Marquand



St Ouen's Rectory

Clement Nicolle and the couple had two sons, Clement de la Perelle and Charles. The Jersey Banking Company was closely associated with the Nicolle family's trade with Newfoundland, but in 1863 the company collapsed and was taken over by the newly formed alliance of de Gruchy, Renouf and Clement. In July 1863 de Gruchy, Gosset and Company took over the Jersey Banking Company.

Sophia's brother Francois Elie (1815-1898) became a bank clerk and lived with his unmarried daughter Louisa and son Edward at 50 St Saviour's Road, while a second son, James⁵, lived next door with his grandmother Sophia. Francois Elie recalls that difficult period in his life when writing to his cousin Mary Ann on 28 May 1888. Now aged 73, he was 'pretty well worn out...at the beginning I had to struggle against misfortunes in business, and now when prosperous in that area am suffering in another shape'. His daughter Louisa, aged 32, and son Edward, 28, had been in poor health for some time and had even spent the winter with relatives in Australia in the hope of improvement. This was not to be, and he writes that Louisa was 'very near death' after 'an operation on her left side' and Edward, who had weak lungs, 'is very ill and unable to attend to his business'.

Three months earlier, in February, Louisa had sent a delightful letter to Mary Ann. 'My dear Mary Ann...It is too late to wish you a happy New Year and I know you are happy! ... How many barrels of provisions have you demolished? ... We had quite a snow-storm on Sunday night; the College trees looked so lovely yesterday morning Papa had them photographed by Mr Eager.'⁶ For the close-knit farming community in St Ouen, this weather was causing some anxiety. The sister of a farmer wrote to Mary Ann that it has been 'freezing so much that hundreds of cabots⁷ of potatoes have been frozen before they were planted'.

Louisa's brother James also wrote regularly to Mary Ann. He became chief clerk with the Jersey Savings Bank and looked after

her financial affairs, a service which he continued after her death and for which the Le Pages sent him a box of dried cod every year. James wrote to Mary Ann in 1888 to tell her that his grandmother, Sophia Bertram (née de la Perelle), had died at the age of 90. We also learn from this letter that his uncle, Clement Nicolle, had been involved in the biggest financial disaster in Jersey's history. On 11 January 1886 a notice appeared on the door of the Jersey Banking Company stating that the bank had been compelled to suspend payment. Clement was one of the directors and was arrested and tried for fraud⁸. Although he was acquitted, Clement's bitterness at his personal bankruptcy created a rift between the families that was never healed. James writes that he was shocked to hear that Clement was declaring in public that his marriage to Sophia (she had died in 1858) was 'the cause of his ruin' and that her mother, James's grandmother, had been 'the cause of his getting mixed up with the fisheries!!!'

Mary Ann's father, Captain Francis, may have pinned his hopes for wealth on the 'fisheries', but he also knew that investment in property was a more secure option. In 1844 he drew up a detailed contract with Jean Le Brocq to build a 'bonne maison en pierre', with all the latest improvements, in Rue des Nouettes, St Ouen. The family were living there in 1877 when his wife Marie-Catherine died. The bill for the funeral in St Ouen's Church shows that the captain purchased 23 yards of black crepe and 22 pairs of kid gloves (it was the custom in Jersey to give the mourners a pair of new gloves). Four years later Captain Francis and his son Francis Elias were lost at sea.

We do not know the circumstances or the date. All that has survived is part of an undated letter written to the captain from a Mr Fowles in St John's, Newfoundland, explaining that Francis Elias was too ill to travel, so it would appear that father and son were working together in Canada when their deaths occurred. In 1881 Mary Ann sold the house in St Ouen and her grandfather's

thatched cottage opposite for £257, giving £90 to her brother's widow, Elizabeth de la Haye⁹. The Jersey Census taken that year reveals that Mary Ann was now housekeeper to the Curate of St Ouen, her cousin Clement de la Perelle Nicolle, the son of Sophia, and Clement Nicolle.

Mary Ann was a deeply religious person, and if there is one noticeable feature of the letters that were sent to her it is the strong religious beliefs which are expressed by all the letter writers. The 1880s were a period of intense activity and achievement for the parishioners of St Ouen, who were led by their inspirational rector, Canon George Clement. A contemporary described him as 'a man of outstanding ability' who, with his wife and two daughters, 'worked year in year out for the progress and well-being of the Anglican community....He did wonders. The parish church was restored ... the National Schools were built and finally so was St George's Church at Vinchelez.'¹⁰ As a regular worshipper in the church, and housekeeper to a very popular curate, the Parish Church would have been the focus of Mary Ann's life.

One of the main topics of interest in letters written in February 1888 was who would succeed the ailing Dean of Jersey, William Le Breton, the father of Lillie Langtry. His improper behaviour in Jersey had caused him to be transferred to an impoverished parish in London, but there is no hint of censure in the letters. 'They say he suffered agonies and never a murmur escaped him. His wife nursed him for the two last months. He died in London.' Louisa Bertram felt that even if Canon Clement's health was better, he would not be considered as a candidate as the decision would not be made in Jersey. 'Influence will win the way in England.'

In 1883 Curate Nicolle died at the age of 29¹¹. That Mary Ann looked after him with care and affection is evident from James Bertram's letter of 1888, in which he says that his grandmother had instructed him to give Mary Ann £100 'as a token of appreciation for your kindness to Clem'. Whether Mary Ann stayed on as housekeeper to the next incumbent or lived with relatives, we do not know. It is possible, though, from a remark in another letter, that she went to stay with her cousin Philip Picot on his farm in St John.

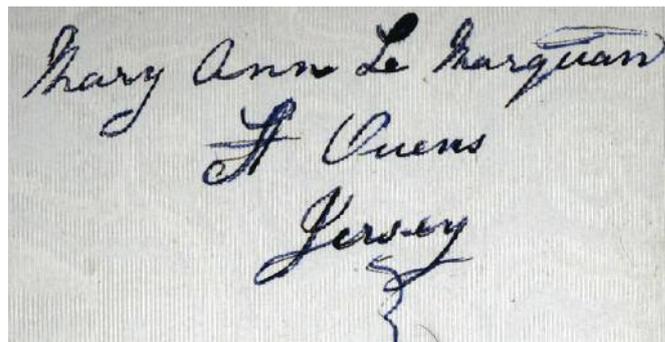
Wherever Mary Ann was living between 1883 and her marriage, she had formed a very close friendship with fellow churchgoer Harriet Briard, from whom five letters have survived. She lived with her sister and brother-in-law James Prouings above their drapery and grocery shop near St Ouen's Village¹². Harriet's letters, punctuated by quotations from the Bible and hymns, are full of details about events in 'our dear old church', whether it be the names of the teachers in the Sunday school, the biblical texts which were being studied or the latest fund-raising schemes of Canon Clement.

In a letter written in March 1888 she tells Mary Ann that the Vice-Dean, the Reverend Le Feuvre, dropped down dead in St Helier's Parish Church. 'I saw him dead in the Vestry. It was so solemn but to me not sad. It seemed glorious to die there in God's house with his surplice on.' Harriet usually wrote to Mary Ann after Sunday lunch in between the morning service, which was in French, and the afternoon one in English. It was a great relief for her to learn that Mary Ann's local church, the Anglican Church of St Peter's in Mal Bay, had the same order of service.

In a letter written on 18 December 1888 Harriet promises Mary Ann that she will not gossip about the disclosure in her last letter that she is going to have a baby. 'I do rejoice with you ...for though I cannot speak by experience yet, it seems to me that next to being a happy wife that of being a mother is the greatest earthly happiness to a woman's life.' However, Mary Ann did not tell her when the baby was due, and in a letter dated 10 February

Harriet writes that she was surprised to learn from someone else that the baby was due in March. She worries that once the baby is born Mary Ann will forget her 'poor lonely friend in little Jersey'.

Francis James was born on 28 March, but sadly, Mary Ann died twelve days later and was buried in the cemetery of St Peter's Church. On 5 August Harriet wrote a letter of condolence to Thomas David Le Page, in which she describes her distress when she was told that Mary Ann had died and 'could not and would not believe it' until she saw the official notice of death in the newspaper. James Bertram continued to look after Mary Ann's financial affairs, finally discharging his obligation to her in 1910 when he sold a cõtîl¹³ in St Ouen that Mary Ann had kept when she sold her family's properties.



Jane Edwards is a freelance writer and researcher, was co-curator of *Chasing the Cod - Jerseymen in Canada*, the exhibition staged in the Jersey Museum between April and November 2007. Her previous publications, written under her maiden name of Ashelford, include *The Art of Dress. Clothes and Society 1500-1914*, The National Trust and *Royal Journeys. Victoria and Albert in the Channel Islands*, JAB Publishing.

¹ His first wife Jane Susan Coutanche from Jersey died in 1883, aged 24 after the birth of daughter Jane. A prize from St Lawrence Sunday School and a beautifully worked sampler made when she was 11 have been kept by the Le Page family.

² The Bertrams lived in Homestead, Grouville; Marie's father was the parish Constable (1795-8). Her marriage to Francis in 1836 was her second. Her first husband Elie Hubert died in 1828, leaving her interest from public bonds he held in Buenos Ayres; his will is in Jersey Archive D/Y/A/21/21.

³ Marian Kirkbride's article about the furniture, 'From Jersey to Quebec: The House and Furniture of Mary Ann Le Marquand' is published in *Furniture History* Vol. XLI (2005), pp 45-56.

⁴ Sophia Bertram (1821-1858) was a very talented artist. Her two volumes of paintings of wild and cultivated Jersey flowers are in the Société Jersiaise Library. See also Jane Ashelford, *Royal Journeys. Victoria and Albert in the Channel Islands* (Appleby Publications, 2004), p.51.

⁵ There is a photo of James Bertram, dated 1867, sitting on the steps of Victoria College with the Cricket Eleven in Photographic Archive, SJPA/014554.

⁶ Robert Eager's photographic studio was at 57 Bath Street. The Bertram house was opposite the grounds of Victoria College.

⁷ A cabot was a measurement of volume – a cabot of potatoes was about 40lb.

⁸ Philip du Heaume, Clement Nicolle and William Lawrence de Gruchy, managing directors of the Jersey Banking Company, were arrested on 27 February 1886. More information can be found in *de Gruchys. The History of Jersey's Department Store of Distinction* by Beth Lloyd (Robert Hale, 1982), pp. 47-51. Du Heaume's daughter Adela Philippa was married to Clement's son Charles.

⁹ The interior and exterior of the house, now called Westwood, is remarkably unchanged from the description in the contract. Her grandfather's cottage is now called Mi-Marais. Record of the sale of the property to the Pirouet family in 1881 is in the Public Registry, Jersey Archive.

¹⁰ 'Memories of St Ouen' by CT Bartlett. Paper given to Jersey Society in London, 1937. Reprinted by Société Jersiaise, 1998, p.20.

¹¹ After his death, parishioners paid for a splendid granite memorial to be erected in the cemetery of St Ouen's Parish Church; a photo was sent to Mary Ann.

¹² Harriet's brother Henry was a farmer in St Ouen and one of the witnesses at her wedding. According to the Jersey Census of 1881, the shop was next to Les Ormes Farm and next but one to No.1 Les Jardins Road, where Mary Ann was living with Clement de la Perelle Nicolle.

¹³ A cõtîl is a steep field, usually on the south-facing slope or side of a valley.