

On the population of Jersey throughout the ages and the origin of the parishes: by NVLRV Rybot 1937-40
With estimates of acreage: by GA Beazeley and J Woodcock

Transcript of paper in the Société Jersiaise Library

Much has been written about the early laws and customs of the island but, as far as I know, (which in truth is not very far), no one has put forth a theory as to why there are twelve parishes in Jersey and why they are unequal in area.

There must be fairly simple answers to these queries – though whether I can hit upon the right ones is another matter.

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By the year 950 Jersey had become an integral portion of the Duchy of Normand and as such had been given an administration organised on feudal and ecclesiastical bases.

That the twelve parishes existed before the year 1000 cannot be proved; but that they were in being before 1090 is almost certain. (Cartulaire).

It cannot be possible that the division of the island into twelve parishes resulted from haphazard evolution, and I suggest, instead, that the division owes its origin to a deliberate plan.

To find it necessary to split up so small an area as Jersey into so many ecclesiastical administrative districts seems to imply that the population was relatively large and evenly distributed over the greater part of the island.

How large?

Here is a question which cannot be answered accurately, because the earliest attempt at a census does not take us back beyond the year 1594.

In the XV11th century estimates are given by HEYLYN, (1629); POINGDESTRE, (1682); and DUMARESQ, (1685).

HEYLYN was much struck by the numbers and poverty of the people. He was told that they were between 25,000 and 30,000 persons in the island.

POINGDESTRE states that it was commonly held that the population of the island was formerly 50,000, - but does not believe it. He thinks, however, that the planting of orchards at the expense of wheatlands and the neglect of agriculture due to the frenzied manufacture of knitted goods had tended to diminish the population. He says that there are "not past twenty thousand" persons in the island.

DUMARESQU is more precise, though he reckons by 'houses' and not by heads. He quotes a house-census in 1594 which gives 3,200 houses; and one of 1685 of 3,049 houses. Allowing five persons to the house makes the population in 1594, sixteen thousand: and in 1685 fifteen thousand two hundred and forty five. (In 1891 there were 9,705 houses, of which 598 were empty. Population 54,518 i.e. six persons to the occupied house).

In the XVIIIth century local production of wheat, even in bumper years did not suffice to provide the population with good bread throughout the year. A sequence of bad harvests entailed great suffering and on two occasions led to insurrection.

I hold the opinion, therefore, that home-grown and sea-derived foodstuffs, in days when people were satisfied with simple fare, might have sufficed for a population not exceeding 15,000 – especially as imports could be introduced from France, wars or no wars.

When Pontbriand and Pere Niño invaded Jersey in 1406, they estimated that the forces opposed to them numbered 3000; and although de Gamez, who chronicled the raid, was a reliable eye-witness, he may well have been guilty of exaggeration on this point.

If 3,000 armed islanders faced the raiders on the Mielles (dunes), there must have been one or two thousand males absent from parade, either engaged on other duties, or sick, or too young or too old to bear arms. Figures such as these would imply a larger population than that which even existed, in the early years of the XIXth century. We may therefore dismiss them with ignominy and be satisfied that the population in 1406 was less, rather than greater than that recorded in 1594.

The island impressed de Gamez as being very rich, and he describes the countryside as covered with farms, fields, gardens, crops and cattle. Moreover he writes that the ransom extracted from the Jersey people, - not counting the loot, - amounted to ten thousand gold crowns, a sum which has been confirmed from other sources.

Going back now to earlier medieval times, the richness and population of Jersey may be gauged from the facts that there were more than thirty water mills and three or four windmills in operation; that a goodly contribution was paid yearly to a host of religious houses in northern France; and that adventuring raiders esteemed the island an attractive El Dorado.

If the accommodation provided by the 12 parish churches serves as a "pointer" to the population of the island, it should be noted that between the years 1050 and 1550, the floor-spaces of each of these buildings was more than trebled.

The early churches, or embryos, were merely rude chapels suited to small congregations; but, as the centuries passed, additional chapels, naves, aisles and transepts were constructed until, at the coming of the Reformation the perfected churches would have sufficed to satisfy the ecclesiastical needs of some 15,000 persons.

On these assumptions it may be argued that the population of Jersey in the year 1050 did not amount to more than 6000 persons.

Having now found it reasonable to suppose that Jersey contained some 6000 persons when the ecclesiastics were perfecting their temporal administrative arrangements, I submit a theory on the distribution of the population throughout the island.

To start with, I know that there was nothing here in the nature of towns or villages, - using those terms in their modern sense, - though I would not deny the existence of small groups of primitive dwellings in the vicinity of certain havens, or along those parts of the coast where shellfish and other sea-food, together with vrac for fuel and manure, is readily obtainable. I picture the people, with these exceptions, as living in rude rubble and clay farmsteads scattered in sheltered situations throughout areas where the richest soils existed and permanent water supplies were available.

On the supposition that the original parish-planners intended to divide the island into equally peopled and conveniently sized areas, I find that, firstly the surface of the island was parcelled out, like ancient Gallia, into three naturally bounded civil portions or ministeria, thus: -

The western portion: OUEN, PETER & BRELADE.	(GROCEIO)
The central portion: MARY, JOHN, TRINITY, LAWRENCE & HELIER	(CRAPOUTDOIT)
The eastern portion: MARTIN, SAVIOUR, GROUVILLE & CLEMENT	(GORRIOC)

I suggest that the western portion, being so overblown by sands and so greatly exposed to westerly winds, supported originally a relatively smaller population than the other two portions and hence could not be divided into more than three parishes.

The central portion (CRAPOUTDOIT), covered with good soil and therefore the best peopled, was capable of division into five parishes.

And the eastern portion (GORRIOC), also sufficiently populous, justified a division into four parishes.

Map 2 [not included] shows how the original division stood after a lapse of six centuries, i.e., at the end of the 17th century.

It will now be seen that BRELADE, (259 houses): PETER, (279 houses): LAWRENCE, (257 houses): SAVIOUR, (241 houses): and MARTIN, (256 houses), with JOHN, (207), lagging behind, have developed by 1685 at a fairly equal rate. Add to these six we may add HELIER which, owing to the late growth of its little town now possessed 354 houses.

Three parishes had gone ahead, namely: OUEN, (306 houses); TRINITY (329 houses): and GROUVILLE, (308).

MARY, (139), and CLEMENT (114), had failed to progress.

It is possible, of course, that between the 11th and 17th centuries readjustments of the boundaries of the parishes occasionally were made. Nevertheless it seems to me that the details I have given give a good deal of support to the suggestions: -

(a). That the parishes came into being as a result of a deliberate plan evolved, probably early in or even earlier than, the 11th century; and

(b). That the intention of the planners was to arrange the boundaries so that each parish should contain an equal number of hearths or homesteads, and also have direct access to the sea.

N.V.L.R. 1937-1940

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Note: When Sir George Carteret re-organised the land forces, (1645), he grouped the parishes into 'fours' and placed each group under a colonel. This showed that the manpower of each group was fairly equal.

Summary

From the 1745 survey, Beazeley calculated that the area of the island was 44.54 square miles.

From the 1914 survey, Woodcock calculated that the area of the island was 44.54 square miles.