

# HISTORY OF ST PIERRE DU BOIS

Extracts from “St Pierre du Bois - The Story of a Guernsey parish and its people”  
by Marie De Garis  
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“Although its only legal name is St. Pierre du Bois, colloquially the parish is referred to simply in its anglicised form, St. Peter's, with the parishioners as the St. Pierrais. In this book for the purpose of brevity, St. Peter's will be employed where feasible with the appellation of St. Pierrais for its inhabitants.”

“St. Peter's is about 4,500 vergées, or 1,800 English acres in extent. It is situated five miles west of Guernsey's town of St. Peter Port. In a series of little hills and valleys it descends from the high plateau to the east bordering the Forest parish down to the shores of Rocquaine Bay. The bay forms the whole of the western edge of the parish. To the north end of the bay substantial sand-dunes sheltered the land from the onslaught of stormy seas and high tides. At the northern most point at the tip of the Braye peninsula is the islet of Lihou joined to it only at low tide by a rough half-mile causeway over which the sea flows every mid-tide. It is only safe to cross to, or from, Lihou for a few hours when the causeway is uncovered.”

“Between the Braye and Perelle Bay to the north is Les Anguillières, a shingle bank unique in Guernsey. A natural defence against the sea, it protects the low-lying areas of La Rousse Mare and La Claire Mare. Although sections of this marshland have been built upon, it is still rich in wild life. La Société Guernesiale has acquired a large extent of it, preserving much of the marsh as a wet-land and a haven for migratory birds.”

“Another low-lying locality bordering the bay is La Mare Haila and Les Salines, a swampy region on which in early times salt fish was dried in summer. Since the second world war considerable new private housing has been constructed in the marsh. At times of storm, with an influx of extra water flowing from the stream that crosses St. Peter's from east to west, together with high seas driven over the sea-wall, the region is apt to be flooded with water several feet deep. La Société Guernesiale also possesses some fields there which in early summer are covered with the rare loose flowered orchid *O. laxiflora* and other wild flowers now becoming increasingly scarce.”

“Jutting out from the middle of the bay is the tiny islet which for many centuries has been, and is still, known by St. Pierrais as Lé Châte, or Lé Châte de Rocquôine (Rocquaine Castle). The building on this rock is now a small maritime museum run by the Ancient Monuments Committee (*Heritage Committee*) of the States of Guernsey. A survey of Channel Island defences dated 1680 of which a copy is in the Royal Court library, shows that there was then some kind of stone fortification. It was rebuilt and fortified during the Napoleonic Wars and named Fort Grey in honour of Earl Grey, Governor of Guernsey, 1797 to 1807. It was also occupied by the Germans during the second world war. English-speaking people usually refer to it colloquially as the ‘Cup and Saucer’, because of the similarity of the tower surrounded by rock to these two homely utensils. Fort Grey was sold by the War Office to the States in 1891 for £185. The sale included the fine stone causeway linking it to the shore. Archaeologists have reported finding Neolithic pottery on the islet's cliff-face and fragments of this bricquetage can be picked up even today.”

“To the south of the parish, St. Peter's is bounded by the smallest of Guernsey's ten parishes, Torteval. Two narrow strips of land cut into that parish thus giving St. Peter's access to the south coast cliffs.”

“St. Saviour's parish forms the boundary to the north and north-east of St. Peter's. A spring rising in a field just to the north of Plaisance Road forms a natural boundary between the two parishes for some distance. It feeds the roadside cattle trough in La Mare Road before crossing under the roadway into St. Saviour's, eventually reaching the reservoir at Les Padins.”

“Geologically the west of the parish is composed of diorite, whilst the south, north-east and east is mainly talvein granite.”

“The water-shed through St. Peter's rises from a spring at Les Marchez on the Forest parish border. The stream flowing through the parish meets secondary sources at Le Douit Beuval and Les Vinares. It passes Le Moulin de Cantereine (*Quanteraine*), meanders through fields and meadows, along hedges and under roadways until it reaches Rocquaine and deposits its waters into the bay at a former defensive post known as the Brock Battery.”

“The main highway of our parish is the road built for military purposes by the then Governor, Sir John Doyle in 1816. This road runs from St. Peter Port across St. Martin's and the Forest entering St. Peter's at Les Marés Gouies (now Passiflora) down to L'Erée.”

“A secondary road constructed a few years later is known as the Rocquaine Road. It starts at Les Brehauts and goes past the church and Le Coudré on its way to Rocquaine.”

“In the building of these roads a certain amount of ‘tidying-up’ had to be done to widen them. The church had to cede a corner of Les Buttes (which is trésor property) and various land-owners had to give a few feet here and there. When the L'Erée road passed Les Islets eight feet of the former alms-house had to be demolished. A similar amount was taken from the cider-press barn at Les Islets farm alongside. Prior to this time the principal road system was by way of Les Grandes Rues, Les Vinares, La Boue, Moulin du Becquet and Le Douit. Possibly the old sanctuary road would have branched out off Les Grandes Rues to La Hougue Falle, La Rue de Cantereine (*Quanteraine*), and on to the Rocquaine coast. At that time the stream, which now passes under the roadway at le Douit Beuval, formed the first of three ponds there on its way to Le Moulin de Cantereine (*Quanteraine*).”

“There was a period of great movement in the then known world from about 3,000 to 2,000 B.C. Sometime within this era there possibly landed at Rocquaine a tribe of Iberians, little dark people thought to have originated along the Mediterranean seaboard. They would have followed the stream and constructed their rough circular dwellings in the valleys through which it flowed, where the soil was fertile and easy to work. The uplands, the ländes where the terrain was poor and scrubby would have provided scant shelter from the strong westerly winds and also have been more visible to the sea-marauders and pirates, even at that time active along the known sea-routes and the territories bordering them. Later came the Bronze Age people from Northern France. They were a more civilised race, tall, fair-haired and blue-eyed, who could work in iron and other metals. They must have married with the earlier settlers for both types, the dark and the fair, are common in the indigenous island stock today.”

“As men's tools improved, the land began to be cleared of much of the scrub and thorn which originally covered it. Gradually small settlements were established and a simple form of husbandry evolved with the organisation that enabled a community to live and work together. We are still, to a large extent, governed by its rules.”

“The trackways that these people beat between their little settlements became, in course of time, the highways and byways which to some degree form our present road system.”

“These iron-age people built defensive-and-look-out posts on cliff headlands and on high ground. All these sites were chosen with care. In later ages more sophisticated forts were constructed. The medieval train-bands and militia used them. Centuries later they were extended as fortifications against a feared Napoleonic invasion. Even the Germans made use of them by greatly enlarging and strengthening them further during their Occupation here during the Second World War. These early ancestors of ours, primitive though they might have been, were not dumb. They could work out problems of defence for themselves. They knew, with the meagre resources at their command, what could be achieved with them. They would not have survived otherwise.”

“What the religion of these people was, we do not rightly know, but that they held certain beliefs connected with the earth mother, goddess of fertility, is most probable. The prehistoric remains still extant in the parish and the place names of others which have long disappeared, all bear witness to some kind of primitive religion. A noted local historian, Colonel T. W. G. De Guerin, writing in the Transactions of La Société Guernesiaise for 1921, was of the opinion that in an island possessing for its size Europe's most prolific prehistoric sites, St. Peter's is the richest parish in the number that once must have stood upon its soil. De Guerin mentions particularly the Marés-Gouies-Les Marchez vicinity which he identifies by the place-names, Pouquelaies, Trepieds, Dehus, Rocques and Rocquettes, which he states as the most numerous in such a small area anywhere. He actually names twenty-six sites of prehistoric significance within the St. Peter's borders.”

“Still in being is the passage-grave or allés couverte, twenty eight feet long, constructed into the Hougue Nicolle on the Braye at L'Erée and known as Le Creux ès Fées, (the fairies' cave). Also coming up the L'Erée Road on the right-hand side, about a mile from the coast is La Longue Rocque des Paysans. It has been described as the largest menhir in the Channel Islands and stands solitary in the middle of a field on the farm of that name. Overlooking Rocquaine Bay it is not surprising that several legends concerning this menhir have arisen in the course of time.”

“The menhir stood sentinel over another passage-grave a few yards from it which was similar to Le Creux ès Fées. This passage-grave was still in existence 150 years ago when the archaeologist F.C. Lukis first came upon it. Lukis made a drawing of it which is today at the Priaulx Library. He abstracted permission from the owner to examine the earth-covered hougue more thoroughly at some future time. However when he did return to it he found that the farmer had destroyed it completely. It was then widely believed that to disturb these chambered tombs in which our prehistoric ancestors buried their dead, boded nothing good to those brave or foolish enough to attempt it.”

“The arrival of Christianity to Guernsey must have created a great upheaval in the lives of the people but we do not know how much, or how little, individuals were affected by it. Observances and beliefs that have been held sacred and steadfast in the minds of a people over many generations cannot be dislodged easily. In fact this earlier pagan religion was never entirely obliterated. Although we may be unaware of their genesis many modern superstitions have their roots in this far-distant past.”

“Fairly early, as Christianity became firmly established the payment of tithes was made compulsory by Rome. The need to make it clear to which Church or Chapel-of-ease these tithes had to be paid made it necessary to determine boundaries exactly. We may take it that it was for this purpose that our own parish limits were created and defined. The parish thus acquired the Saint's name of Peter, St. Pierre, to which apostle the little Chapel-of-ease on the site of the present church had been dedicated. Thus our parish was first determined as a civic entity for ecclesiastic convenience.”

“The first documentary mention of the parish dates to the year 1030 A.D. in a charter by which Duke Richard II of Normandy placed four Guernsey parishes and churches under the patronage of the Benedictine monks of Mont St. Michel. One of the parishes named is St. Pedro du bosq, St. Peter in the wood. The deed was confirmed by Duke William the Conqueror in 1048 and later still by Pope Adrian IV in 1155.”

“This early documentation became in course of time a deluge:-Extentes, Proclamations, tax-lists, fief livres de perquage, parish, church and school records, contracts and deeds of every description, old newspapers, wills and inventories, the whole accumulation of archives of centuries gone by. This book is largely based on all this written data.”

“Unfortunately, on two separate occasions a lot of parish evidence has been lost by fire. The first incendiary, in 1791, occurred when the Rectory was burnt to the ground and all the records kept there were destroyed. Fortunately, the actual registers of births, marriages and burials were held in the church itself and were saved.”

“The second cause of destruction happened in 1969 during an interregnum between two rectors. The male members of the church congregation decided that this was a golden opportunity to clear the rectory outbuildings of an accumulation of several generations of discarded church furniture and old records and liturgies. For several weeks a team of men, acting on the conveyor-belt system transported the whole lot on to a big bonfire which was kept burning during the period. They made a thorough job of it.”

“For administrative ease St. Peter's is divided into four cantons with three douzeniers responsible for, or representative of, each canton. The four cantons are Rocquaine, Les Adams (L'Érée), Les Marchez, and Les Yvelins. This last is the canton on which the church, and now the Parish Hall stand.”

“Yvelin is also a former parish surname. Thomas Yvelin was one of the jurés of St. Peter's who journeyed to St. Peter Port one day in 1307 to lay a protest about an appropriation of common land before the English justices.”

“Often people took the names of their localities as surnames. They were already in use colloquially. Names of places have always been given as a means of identification. Richard who lived in a marshy area would be known as Richard de la Mare or Richard Dumaresq. If he lived up a hill he became Richard Le Huray or Dumont. Anyone dwelling on the cliffs or near them adopted, or was given the surname Fallaize or Falle. The historical aspect of surnames was illustrated in the type of names given to foreigners who settled here in times past. Among St. Peter's family names we have Langlois the Englishman, pronounced 'Longlais'; Gallienne or Gallez, the Welshman; De Jersey, from Jersey; Le Breton, a Brittany man and Norman from Normandy. De Lisle came from some unspecified island.”

“Others took their names from their occupations. Many of these trades are no longer practiced and have not been carried on locally for centuries. They are illustrative of a life lived by our forefathers quite unknown to us. Thus we have Bichard, the goat-herd; “

“Batiste, the weaver, from cloth woven locally called batiste; Moullin, the millowner, tenant or mill-hand; Robilliard, bone setter; Tostevin, winetaster; Le Messurier, surveyor; Martel, hammerer, probably the blacksmith; and Le Maitre, the master or boss.”

“More people took their fathers' fore-names. Thus came either Collas, or Nicolle, or Collette from Nicolas; Jehan from John (the Ancient Norman spelling of which was Jhon); Guille or Guilbert from Guillaume (English William). Torode, one of our more common local surnames, is a very distinguished name for it comes from the Scandinavian god Thor.”

“Yet other surnames are descriptive of the personal appearance of some long-gone ancestor, or are nicknames. The roughest humour of those days belong to this class of nomenclature. And they have endured. They form, even today quite a large proportion of our local surnames. To quote but a few with a parochial connection at some time, we have Carré, the solid built or square one; Blondel, pale-face; Allez and Alles, fleet of foot. ‘A fin faeu Alles’ is the Guernesiate expression of someone running at ‘the speed of light’. Roussel, or Renouf or Rougier, or Renier, signified the original ruddy complexion or red hair of some ancestor. Mollet means softish; Grut was the tall one; and Bonamy was a good friend.”

“Then there are those nick-names given to players in the local mystery plays performed annually in all the churches in pre-Reformation times as part of the religious education of the people: names such as Le Ray or Le Roy, the King; Le Conte, the Count; Le Page, the page-boy; Le Moigne, the monk; Le Sauvage, the outsider or wild man; Le Sage, the wise-man, now extinct as a family name but still a place-name in St. Peter's. Paen or Payne, now known as Paint, was the heathen, and Le Cornu was the announcer.”

“The only building of any size in the parish was the Church. Consequently it had other uses other than Sunday worship and the performance of religious plays. The parish munitions were stored in it. Parish meetings were held there as well. Any transactions involving property or rentes that had taken place in the parish the preceding week had, by law, to be proclaimed publicly after the Sunday morning mass in the presence of the congregation. This was termed the Audience, or Oyé de Paireisse. The public acknowledgement in the presence of witnesses made the transaction legal and the consecrated ground helped to give greater authenticity to the agreement. In the 15th century the custom arose of depositing a record of the deed in the Greffe at St. Peter Port as an additional safeguard. This gradually made the proclamation obsolete. Nevertheless the traditional usage of the Audience de Paireisse lasted until the end of the 16th century.”

“The twelfth century was a period of great increase in population, resulting in more demand for food. To further this need the Crown gave permission for fief holders to enclose and appropriate for their own personal possessions any wastes and *landes* within, or touching their fiefs on condition that they cleared and assarted them. This was quite a laudable plan for at that time comparatively large tracts of Guernsey in each parish were still scrub and marais. A fief-holder or Seigneur, could then himself cultivate the reclaimed land or sell it, retaining his feudal dues on it.”

“Such enclosures or clearances naturally deprived the poor people of many privileges of pasturage and warrenage which they had always enjoyed upon these wastes. In St. Peter's, the Prior of Lihou, acting for the Abbot of Mont St. Michel, the Seigneur of the Fief St. Michel, took advantage of this Royal Permit and seized all the marais of La Rousse Mare and Claire Mare. The parishioners were understandably bitter at this expropriation for it put a stop to their fishing in the large pond in the middle of the marsh and also to the free grazing of their beasts and the custom of rabbiting in the area.”

“Assizes by English judges on circuit were held in the Channel Islands at intervals of roughly three years. Besides the usual business of Assize these Itinerant justices were directed to adjudicate on particular suits or to hear complaints against the island government, the Jurats, the Church, etc. In the Assize dated 1309 our parish lost no time in sending four of its jurors to complain to the English judges about what they considered as the encroachment of La Rousse Mare. They were earnest in telling these justices that since the taking of the area by the clerics people could no longer put their animals *à bonaon* to graze there in summer, nor were they any longer able to go rabbiting or to go fishing in the pond to which ‘since time knows not to the contrary’ they had always had free access.”

“The learned men from England listened sympathetically to our delegates and agreed with them that La Rousse Mare was common to all, but as the St. Pierrais could not produce any documents to substantiate their claim nothing could be done to grant them repossession. Nevertheless in order to show some practical sympathy to our four jurors and because they had pleaded their cause well the Justices ordered that they be given two pence for their trouble. Two pence, even in those days could have been scant consolation for lost *landes*. Let us hope that the sum was enough to buy each of the four men a good tankard of ale before their long trudge back to St. Peter's.”

“As in all small island communities the soil and the sea have always been the basic source of life in Guernsey. The harvest of the sea was the first commodity traded commercially. Conger, mackerel and whiting were salted and dried for export to England, Spain and France.”

“The salting of fish was done on the salt marshes around the coast called saleries or salines. The fish was split open and held apart on wooden tripods or trestles called perques for drying. These drying places were called eperqueries or pezeries.”

“So important was this fishing activity that it attracted business men and merchants to the island from elsewhere, especially Gascony. Some of the newcomers married local girls and settled permanently here. One of these, Jean Du Gaillard, acquired the small sub-fief of Du Gaillard on which the original parish schoolhouse stood. The fief still bears his name. Another newcomer was Pierre De Garis or Garris, a native of the town of Garis in Gascony, whose numerous descendants became prominent in parish government in the west, notably the Castel, St. Saviour's and our own parish of St. Pierre du Bois. The Reformation put an end to the many meatless days required by the Roman Catholic Church and finished the local fish export commerce. The opening at that time of the Grand Banks cod-fisheries in which a Guernsey fleet was soon employed did little to ease the loss of this commerce. Only the young and hardy dared venture to those rough and dangerous Newfoundland coasts and cod-banks.”

“However some fish was still dried for local consumption. My mother, at the end of the 19th century, remembered seeing fish especially whiting, being dried on the thatched roofs of the fishermen's cottages at L'Érée.”

“In early times agriculture was mainly communal. It is possible even probable, that some private rights existed. The arable land was, cultivated in strips separated from each other by verges of unploughed turf called riages. After the harvests were gathered the fields became common pasture land and individual rights surrendered for a time, open to all cattle, irrespective of ownership, in the practice known as '*banon*', or Guernesiais '*bonaon*'.”

“Flax and hemp were grown for cloth up to the 17th century in the wet meadows and are mentioned in inventories. We know that saffron for dyeing purposes was also cultivated “

“because of the fieldnames, "Courtil à Saffron" in different parts of the island. In St. Peter's, the field opposite La Maison de Haut in the Rue Des Messuriers still bears that name.”

“The introduction of roots such as parsnips, late in the medieval period hastened the end of *banon* for it meant that areas of land which grew such crops had to be enclosed. It was at this period that most hedge-construction began to be undertaken. This also meant that flocks of sheep could no longer be kept in any large numbers in St. Peter's. One St. Pierrais though who still had a sizeable flock must have been Pierre Brehaut of La Tourelle. In his 1574 will, he bequeathed all his spring crop of lambs to the poor children of the parish. It was possible for Brehaut to keep sheep because his property bordered the desolate uninhabited area of Les Landes Yvelins over which they could freely roam. However, when Thomas De Lisle made his own will in 1616 sheep are only mentioned in pairs or even singly as bequests.”

“Fields were still being hedged in as late as the 17th century. In *fief livres de perquage* such as that of the Fief St. Michel of 1670 there are several entries concerning some tenants' ‘neuf courtil’, (new field) or ‘neuve piéche de terre’ (new piece of land). By the 1700's there are no such entries. We can conclude that by that time St. Peter's was more or less parcelled out and enclosed.”

“The hedges changed Guernsey's landscape completely. Our island would be a poorer, bleaker, prospect without them. Hedges had other purposes than that of protection of crops or affirmation of possession. Gorse and bramble and trees were sown or planted on top of them for use as firing. Indirectly they also afforded shelter for innumerable species of flora and fauna which found a home in these massively constructed earth-banks.”

“Vraic has always been gathered in vast quantities to use as manure on the land or in order to be dried for winter fuel. The time for its gathering was regulated by law to ensure an adequate supply every year. The right to collect it from any particular beach in Guernsey depended strictly on the parish in which one lived. Our St Pierrais could gather the seaweed on Rocquaine beach, L'Erée and Lihou only. As St. Andrew's was the only parish without a coast-line it was permitted to collect from Lihou also. The St. Saviour's area extended from the beach at La Rocque to Richmond. Torteval, the smallest parish, fetched its vraic from Portelet to Les Pezeries. The present causeway connecting Lihou to Guernsey was constructed by two local farmers in 1647 from an earlier very primitive one, chiefly for the purpose of vraic carting from that islet.”

“By the 19th century greenhouses for the cultivation of grapes started to appear all over the country parishes. The first such commercial greenhouse in St. Peter's was built by Thomas Lenfestey at La Houquette in 1858. It was soon followed by others. Many farmers began to build greenhouses to merge horticulture with their farming activities. These early greenhouses were all of the lean-to type, built against a ten-foot stone wall. Another low wall two feet high supported the structure of wood and glass. Grape vines were usually planted outside this low wall and passed into the lean-to through openings in the wall. They were supported in their growth up the glass by horizontal wires.”

“The St. Peter's grape-growers were considered the best in the island. The gravelly soil in the parish suited the crop. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Mr. Thomas Tostevin of Plaisance was known as the Grape King of Guernsey because of the excellence of his grapes and their success at local shows. His grapes graced the tables of the most aristocratic and moneyed families of England. His chief rivals were other St. Peter's growers who also cropped superb grapes both ‘black’ and ‘white’. Green grapes such as Canon Hall and “

“Muscat of Alexandria are always described as ‘white’ and the purple Alicants and Marocs as ‘black’.”

“In the first decade of the 1900's span-type greenhouses largely replaced lean-to's in newly constructed glass. At first they were still built on low stone walls, but later, glass ‘fronts’ which let in more light became universal. When two or more greenhouses were erected side by side they were described as vineries, a name that in Guernsey remains today to specify blocks of glass even when used exclusively for tomato or flower growing. A tomato or flower vinery seems very much a contradiction in terms but is unique to Guernsey.”

“Just before the beginning of the 1914-18 war tomato growing, to a large extent, began to oust grapes as an under-glass crop. A spate of greenhouse building all over the island took place for the sole purpose of growing this fruit. Many of these new tomato vineries were financed and run by English newcomers. In St. Peter's, a Mr Lilley built an extensive range of glass at Les Heches, to the south of Plaisance. A Mr Wilson came over and constructed another vinery in La Route du Lihou near the Longfrie. Mr Wilson was later joined by the Fowler brothers of "English Usage" fame, first by Francis and later by Henry. When Henry arrived both brothers built their own little granite cottages on the vinery about a hundred yards apart. Henry added a small wooden hut, always referred to as The Studio, at right angles to his cottage with a small fireplace in it. It was in here that they wrote much of their joint literary works.”

“The Great War put a stop for a period to greenhouse building but after peace was declared in November 1918 there was a further big expansion of glass. By that time most of the St. Peter's farmers had a few hundred feet of both old and modern span greenhouses. Grape growing was by now out of favour, the cost of transportation to the English markets was too high. Some people, reluctant to pull out their vines carried on with both crops for a while, keeping the oldest glass in grapes and the rest in tomatoes. In those days yields of five to seven pounds of tomatoes per plant were usual - a far cry from the present day when with greatly improved methods of cultivation a grower expects his fruit to produce over thirty lbs per tomato plant, which it must do for the crop to pay financially.”

“Until 1920 all produce had to be carted to the White Rock for shipment to England by horse and van. A St. Pierrais who did a lot of carting for growers was Alfred Le Lacheur, des Arquets. He also undertook commissions to and from town for local people on demand. For those who seldom visited St. Peter Port this was a great boon. Alfred was credited with the power to do anything he liked with horses and other animals. He was rather looked askance by some parishioners on that account.”

“Also after 1920 flower growing outdoors, daffodils and iris, which in other parts of Guernsey had already been cultivated for some time, became general in the Higher Parishes. Vergées of bulbs were planted. Although potatoes, broccoli and also radish, were still grown the area cultivated was nothing like as extensive as it had been formerly. In its turn outdoor cultivation in these last decades of the 20th century has decreased almost to the point of extinction, very few daffodils are now planted.”

“Although there are one or two tomato vineries producing quantities of tomatoes for the English markets the culture of this fruit has, in its turn, declined considerably. A lot of glass is now devoted to flower production - roses, carnations and especially freesias. Some growers have installed all-night lighting in their greenhouses with the consequence that even on the darkest nights there is always a glow in the Guernsey sky.”



“At the time of writing very little glass is being constructed in the parish. For one reason the cost is prohibitive. Another is the difficulty of getting permission from the Island Development Committee. The official policy of the States is to make the Higher Parishes a green area and as much as possible a "museum countryside", with the hope of encouraging tourism and promoting what is preciously called "Our Island Heritage". Time alone will reveal if the wisdom or reasoning behind this philosophy will ultimately be for the benefit of both St. Peter's parish and for the island.”