

Victor Hugo

Born: 26 February 1802, Besançon (France)

Died: 22 May 1885, Paris (France)

Introduction

Victor Hugo is the most famous person ever to have lived in the Channel Islands. He is famous all over the world and is best known for writing novels, poetry and plays.

How did he come to live in Guernsey?

Hugo left France in 1851 because of his political beliefs. He lived away from France for many years in *exile*. He spoke out publicly against the leader of France, Napoleon III, and called him 'a traitor to France'. Hugo first moved to Brussels, then Jersey and finally Guernsey.

Hugo arrived in Guernsey in 1855 and stayed for 14 years (he even stayed here after he could legally return to France).

Hugo's writing in Guernsey

Hugo was already a well-known writer when he moved to Guernsey. A year after moving to the island, Hugo sold a book of poetry that would help buy his house. The book was called 'Les Contemplations' and the house was Number 38 Hauteville – now known as Hauteville House.

During his time in Guernsey, Hugo completed two major works. They were 'Les Misérables' and 'Les Travailleurs de la Mer' (Toilers of the Sea). He showed his admiration of Guernsey people at the front of Toilers of the Sea: 'I dedicate this book to the rock of hospitality, to this corner of old Norman land where resides the noble little people of the sea, to the Island of Guernsey, severe and yet gentle...'. These words are also inscribed on the Hugo statue in Candie Gardens.



Photo of Victor Hugo (from a postcard)
from c. 1863.

Credit: Guernsey Museums.



The Victor Hugo statue in Candie Gardens before the museum was built.
Hugo never saw this statue, as he died almost 30 years before it was unveiled.

Credit: Guernsey Museums.

Leisure time

Hugo enjoyed swimming in the sea and often bathed at Fermain or Havelet. He calls the view from the cliff paths 'a show full of magic'. He also enjoyed walking and explored the island by carriage. The people he met and the island scenes inspired his writing.

Not just a writer

Victor Hugo was also a talented artist and produced over 4,000 drawings in his lifetime. He generally worked with dark colours such as brown and black. Hugo did not share his artworks with the public, but often gave them to family and friends.



This stormy seascape, signed by Hugo, was painted in 1856 in Guernsey.

Credit: Guernsey Museums.

Hugo was also a statesman and human rights activist. He spoke out against capital punishment in Guernsey and other places.

Hugo and his family

Hugo and his wife Adèle had five children together. The girls were Léopoldine and Adèle. The boys were Léopold, Charles-Hugo, and François-Victor. Sadly, all his children (except Adèle) died before Hugo.

Dinners for poor children

Hugo wrote that everyone should be treated equally. From 1862, Hugo invited poor children of the island to have dinner with him. He wrote, *'every Tuesday, I give a dinner to fifteen little poor children, chosen from among the natives of the island... my family and I serve them'*.



Hugo with children at Hauteville House. Credit: www.victorhugoinguernsey.gg

Later years

Hugo returned to France and died there aged 83. He was recognised as a national hero for his writing and political work. It is thought that at least two million people followed Hugo's funeral procession.

Places to visit

- Hauteville House www.visitguernsey.com/see-and-do/things-to-do/victor-hugo-house-hauteville-house
- Guernsey Museum at Candie (where there is a bust of Hugo by the French sculptor Rodin)
- Candie Gardens (to see his statue in the gardens)

Glossary

- Exile - when someone is forced to leave their country, usually because of political beliefs
- Statesman – a respected political leader
- Human rights activist – someone who stands up for all people to be treated fairly
- Capital punishment – when someone is killed as a punishment for a crime

Sources

- Story of Guernsey by Jason Monaghan
- Guernsey Hugo's Guernsey by Gerard Pouchain
- Guernsey Museums website www.museums.gov.gg
- www.victorhugoinguernsey.gg
- Wikipedia

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