

PETER LE LIEVRE

1812-1878

‘Death, which has lately been so busy among us, has just removed from our midst one who, throughout the whole of his career, commanded the affection and esteem of all who knew him. The news of the death of Mr Peter Le Lievre... has cast quite a gloom over the town’.¹ Thus the *Guernsey Star* of the 19th February 1878, reported the death of a talented artist whose work is unknown outside his native island of Guernsey. Unlike his better known contemporary, Paul Jacob Naftel, Peter Le Lievre never exhibited his paintings or sought election to the Society of Water-Colour Artists. Either would have brought him recognition, and perhaps even wealth, but his painting remained a private hobby known only to his friends and ‘those who have visited his studio’.² Since his death, however, Peter Le Lievre's watercolours, which depict with charm, delicacy and accuracy the landscape, buildings and people of nineteenth century Guernsey, have commanded an increasingly high local esteem.

Peter Le Lievre was born in St Peter Port in 1812 and lived his entire life at No 17 Hauteville, a large, but modest, three-storied town house built in the early 1800's in a street curving steeply out of town. He was the son of Pierre (or Peter) Le Lievre and his wife Maria, elder daughter of Thomas Le Lievre of Les Godaines, Guernsey. The lower part of the house was evidently a shop where Pierre sold white and black paint, red lead, turpentine and linseed oil. The Le Lievres were involved in a number of enterprises, including a lead manufactory which in 1811 was located in nearby Fountain Street. These eventually came together under one roof in new premises in Upper Le Marchant Street.

Young Peter was educated at Elizabeth College in St Peter Port and was one of the first pupils after its re-chartering in 1824. He had a classical education and seems to have done well at his studies. There is no record that he received any formal art instruction, although his artistic talent must have been evident. His first known published works form part of a series of prints commissioned by Matthew Moss to record Channel Islands views when the artist was barely in his twenties.

On leaving school, however, Peter went straight into the family business which soon ceased to deal with general merchandise and concentrated on wine. From all accounts he was perfectly contented with his commercial career and had soon acquired a reputation as a man of sound judgement and business ability. The miniature on ivory of Le Lievre by his sister

Mary dates to around this time. It shows a serious, slight young man dressed in black with high collar and black necktie. His dark hair is worn in Byronic style, his brown eyes gaze out of the picture under slightly curved black eyebrows over a straight nose and delicate mouth. He wears no jewellery or ornamentation and his clasped hands look business-like with their short, rounded fingernails. This is the portrait of a young man of affairs, not a dilettante.

On his father's death in 1848, Peter was left in charge of the family business. A bachelor all his life, he found it comfortable to remain with his widowed mother and younger sisters, Mary (born 1813) and Louisa (born 1818) at the family home in Hauteville. After his mother's death in 1856, his two sisters, who also remained unmarried, kept house for him.

As an able man of liberal views, Le Lievre felt his debt to the community, becoming Constable of St Peter Port in 1846 and 1847. After his father's death, as a wine merchant in his own right and prominent member of the business community, he was elected to the St Peter Port Douzaine (or Town Council), an office he was to retain for the next thirty years. He was a member of the Committees of the States of Guernsey for the construction of the New Harbour and the Town Markets. The New Harbour was a vast engineering feat which in the mid-1850's increased the size of the Harbour from 8 acres to over 80 acres, making it the finest deep-water anchorage in the Channel Islands. Le Lievre is known to have designed the two lighthouses at the ends of the new piers. A design by him for the Town Market exists in a private collection and, although this was not adopted, it was said that 'to his good taste the architect of the new Market is indebted for many useful hints'.³

Le Lievre also involved himself in the religious and educational affairs of his Parish. He became Churchwarden of the Town Church in 1856 and continued in office for over thirty years. He took a particular interest in the fabric of the ancient building and was responsible for the decoration of the organ pipes. At the same time he also held the office of Treasurer to the St Peter Port Sunday Schools. It must have been in recognition of his great interest in this area that the Town Church lectern was donated in his memory by his two sisters in 1879.

His educational interests were not, however, confined to the Church. He was one of the original and founder members of the Mechanics' Institute at which he filled the office of Treasurer for thirty-nine years. From 1850 he also became a member of the Board of Directors of his old school, Elizabeth College.

Like all islanders at this time, Peter Le Lievre served in the local militia. He was

commissioned as a nineteen year old Second Lieutenant of Artillery in 1831. He rose through the ranks of Captain in 1835 and Major in 1838, to become Lieutenant-Colonel in command of the Royal Guernsey Artillery Regiment in 1868. His Artillery uniform coat and dress sword can now be seen on display in the Militia Museum in Castle Cornet.

Well might the *Guernsey Comet* report that 'his death deprives the public of a useful servant'.⁴ For most people these activities would be sufficient, but Le Lievre found time to pursue, not only his hobby of painting, but also an interest in natural history and archaeology. In Ansted & Latham's book 'The Channel Islands' several references are made to molluscs and crustacea first noted by Mr P Le Lievre. Furthermore his name is bracketed with the great Guernsey natural historian and antiquarian, F. C. Lukis, as 'the chief authorities on stalk-eyed crustaceans'.⁵ Le Lievre had been a slightly older contemporary at Elizabeth College of Lukis's archaeologist sons. He became a keen amateur archaeologist, painting the flints and potsherds excavated by the Lukis family with 'great feeling for textures and surface'.⁶

In total contrast to his prominent public profile, Peter Le Lievre kept his artistic talents completely in the background. His published work was restricted to less than a dozen prints commissioned by Matthew Moss in the early 1830's; seven illustrations in the 1876 second edition of Tupper's 'History of Guernsey'; and the nineteen illustrations he contributed to Ansted & Latham's 'The Channel Islands' of 1862. The first known exhibition of his work was mounted twenty-six years after his death, after the death of his sister, Mary, in 1904. Mary bequeathed twenty-seven of her brother's watercolours to the Guille-Allès Library and these were displayed, along with four paintings by Paul Naftel. The catalogue produced for the exhibition goes some way towards explaining Le Lievre's attitude to his art: 'These pictures' writes the unknown author 'were executed simply as a labour of love, in his hours of relaxation, by a much-occupied business man, who for many years was one of Guernsey's best-known and successful merchants... he was of so retiring a disposition that none but his intimate friends ever saw his pictures; he scarcely ever mentioned them in conversation; and, as a consequence of this strange reticence, his name is quite unknown in the art circles of England and the Continent'.⁷

Despite his busy public life and amateur status, Peter Le Lievre's output of paintings was considerable. The Guernsey Museum & Art Gallery's present collection is based on the 27 paintings bequeathed by Mary Le Lievre in 1904, augmented by a further 103 paintings and sketches bequeathed by great-niece May Bremner, née Le Lievre, sent from Australia after her death in the 1950's. A recent acquisition has been the purchase in 1988 of a leather-bound

sketch book containing a further 48 pencil and watercolour drawings. Other works are still owned by descendants of the artist and a few have been acquired by private collectors.

The majority of Le Lievre's pictures are watercolours; a single large oil painting depicts a view of Castle Cornet and St Peter Port from the now-demolished First Tower. Many of his larger watercolours depict the cliffs and bays of Guernsey's south coast, notably Petit Port, Moulin Huet and Le Gouffre. Others show the Moulin Huet valley and water lanes, an area that would have been well within walking distance of Le Lievre's Hauteville home. He must have owned a carriage or horse for many sketches and paintings show west coast scenes, such as the *vraic* (seaweed) gatherers in Rocquaine Bay or shipwrecks. One of the latter is the sketch of the *Oneida*, wrecked in 1849, where Le Lievre depicts the horses and carts engaged in salvaging her cargo of cotton. Boats are a constant theme in Le Lievre's work, sometimes on the water, but often stranded at low tide on the sands or the harbour bottom. He must have travelled by sea to Sark; its rocky coast was a favourite subject and he also painted La Coupée, the dramatic, narrow neck of land separating Little Sark from the main island.

Le Lievre's interest goes beyond marine subjects, however, with some of his best paintings depicting St Peter Port itself. One large watercolour shows the high houses overhanging narrow Cow Lane, up which the cattle used to be driven from the boats to market. A charcoal and chalk drawing perfectly depicts the chill, grey coldness of the High Street on a January day in 1852. A watercolour of 1847 depicts the interior of a Sark cottage in loving detail, complete with an old lady busy at her knitting. Castle Cornet, then standing in the sea almost half a mile from St Peter Port, is another favourite subject, either alone or as part of the seascape. A spectacular watercolour shows the Castle surrounded by high seas and stormy skies, while a boat in the foreground desperately makes for the Old Harbour. A watercolour of the Town Arsenal, built in 1850 and now the Fire Station, may well be a design for the building. Le Lievre was a Major in the Artillery then and the painting is stylistically very like his design for the Castle Lighthouse.

Some of Le Lievre's best work, however, must be his sketches of his fellow islanders; an old lady with bellows, another knitting, a gardener with a watering can, fishermen with crab pots, shrimping nets or tackle, a young man with his gun and dog, a red-faced old man with a ladder, a young boy sitting for his portrait, a cat sleeping on straw. Le Lievre brings to life a vanished world with a skill that is equalled by no other artist in Guernsey.

Peter Le Lievre died on 17 February 1878, in his sixty-sixth year. He had been suffering

from gout for some time and had just retired from business. The cause of death is given as 'gout' in the records, but from his obituary, it seems more likely to have been a heart attack. He was buried on the 21 February in the Le Lievre family vault in Candie Cemetery, not fifty yards from the art gallery where his paintings are now exhibited.

The contemporary obituary mentions, in passing, Peter Le Lievre's skill 'as a painter in water-colours',⁸ but perhaps we should return to the anonymous author of the 1904 exhibition catalogue for a truer assessment of this self-effacing artist. One can hardly do better than to agree with the author that '...now his (Le Lievre's) works are made accessible to a wider public, their many admirable qualities will flash forth as a revelation to the skilled artists and art critics, to whom they will by degrees become more familiar, and who are so thoroughly capable of appreciating their striking merits'.⁹

References

1. *Guernsey Star*, 19 February 1878.
2. Ansted & Latharn 'The Channel Islands' 1862.
3. *Guernsey Star*, 19 February 1878.
4. *Guernsey Comet*, 20 February 1878.
5. Ansted & Latharn 'The Channel Islands' 1862.
6. Le Lievre 'Guernsey Artist and Enthusiast' *Country Life* 1988.
7. Exhibition Catalogue 1904, Guille-Allès Library.
8. *Guernsey Star*, 19 February 1878.
9. Exhibition Catalogue 1904, Guille-Allès Library.