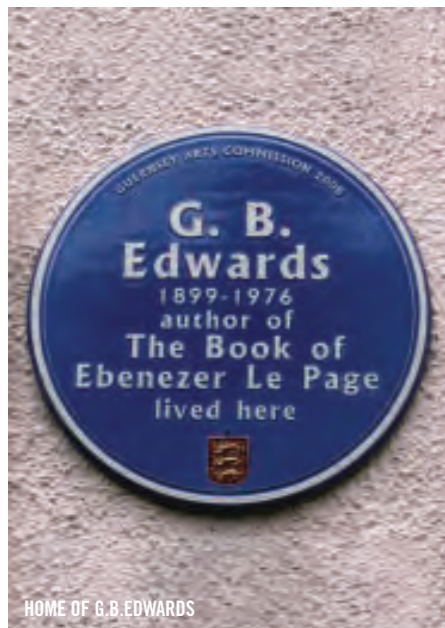


POTATO PEEL PIE AND OTHER STORIES

A new book about the German Occupation of Guernsey is being read by millions. Jon Crocker finds out he's part of the fuss and points out that it's not the first time that the island has been in the literary spotlight – its heritage, scenery and people have provided inspiration for other notable writers.



VICTOR HUGO AND HIS FAMILY AT HAUTEVILLE HOUSE



HOME OF G. B. EDWARDS

"Excuse me, but do you know where the house is in the book?" asked the young couple from the Netherlands. I was standing in my garden in a quiet corner of La Bouvée, near Guernsey's magnificent, storm-battered southeastern tip.

"Book?" I asked.

"Yes, the famous book about Guernsey," they said.

I obviously looked confused.

"This is La Bouvée, isn't it?" repeated the woman, patiently.

It certainly was La Bouvée and a very beautiful part of the island it is too. Stunning views over Herm, Sark, Alderney and Jersey from meandering clifftop paths, quiet lanes, secluded bays and even an award-winning restaurant overlooking the sea hundreds of feet below. At night, the lights of Normandy glint on the horizon.

Victor Hugo

But which house and what book? Until recently, Guernsey was well known in the literary world for two main reasons. It was where the eminent French writer Victor Hugo was in political exile for 15 years in the mid 19th century and where he wrote two of his most well-known works: *Les Misérables* and *Les Travailleurs de la Mer*, or *Toilers of the Sea*, a bittersweet love story set in the island and dedicated to the people of Guernsey.

Hugo's statue stands in Candie Gardens in St Peter Port and his house in nearby Hauteville is a testament to his genius. Not only is his literature at the peak of creativity, but his house with its prominent position and eclectic décor is stunning and inspiring.

Toilers is a wonderful read with memorable descriptions of the hero, Gilliat, battling with the

sea and an octopus as he rescues a steam engine from a shipwreck to claim his treasured reward – marriage to the owner's daughter (I won't give away the ending – read it and see).

Considering Hugo's reputation for weighty and significant tomes, it is unexpectedly accessible and charming, conjuring up a former Guernsey with romance and historical detail, very beautifully told.

But it focused on the granite islets to the north of Guernsey and smuggling in the extreme south-west, which in those days of horse and cart and Shanks's pony, couldn't have been further from La Bouvée.

Ebenezer Le Page

And then there's the relatively unknown but equally wonderful hymn to island life, *The Book of Ebenezer Le Page* by G.B. Edwards.

Lauded by John Fowles and William Golding and hailed by the *New York Times* as one of the best novels of our time, *Ebenezer* resonates with humour and pathos.

The book looks back on Ebby's fictional life in the late 19th and 20th century and the huge changes he endures, creating a sense of time and place as only the great works of fiction can. It is, as Golding says: *"not like reading, but living."*

But again, Ebby wasn't from La Bouvée, which, hunkered down in the pines against the Atlantic winds, was seven miles from his north-west coast home at Chouet, where he lived all his life and had *"only the sea and rocks to look at"*. Even the short jaunt to Town, halfway to La Bouvée, was a long journey for our Ebby.

Potato peel pie

"So do you know which is the house in the Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society?" asked the Dutch woman again.

"Ah," I said, as the literary penny dropped, *"that book."*

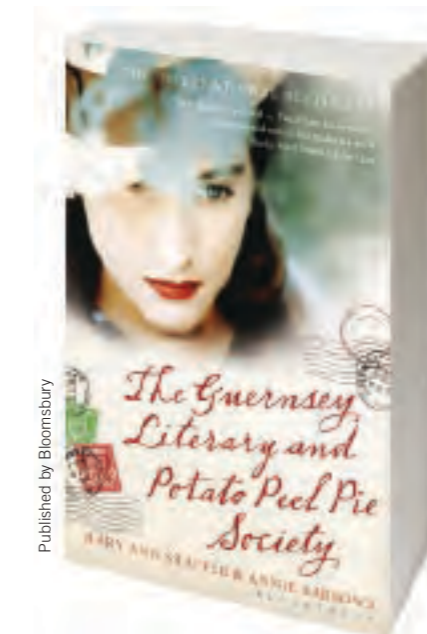


LA BOUVÉE FARM

The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society is the new kid on the block. Written by Mary Ann Shaffer and Annie Barrows, it tells the story in a series of letters of the German Occupation of Guernsey from 1940 to 1945 and a writer's subsequent love for the island and its people.

It's been a smash hit and has sold millions, mainly in the United States, and in Guernsey terms, it's here to stay.

The book's popularity has seen a new class of visitor to the island that is keen to explore the island described by Shaffer and Barrows. Tour guides say that most interest comes from America and Canada, but pilgrims also hail from the UK and as far away as Australia and New Zealand.



It seems that while Victor Hugo has long been of interest to literary groups and French visitors, the Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society has captured the imagination of a wider audience with its stories of adversity, ingenuity and sheer stubbornness.

Which means that tour guides are now busy showing fans of the book many of the places featured in it. They say that these groups' enthusiasm for the novel leads them to a genuine love of the island, falling for its quaint customs, pretty lanes, French place names and hedge veg stalls.

"They love to hear the local language and understand more about the way people lived," says local tour guide Annette Henry. *"And they especially love to hear stories of my family, some of whom lived here through the war and some of whom were evacuated."*

Other stories

Annette has found that these visitors always ask for more of these real life Occupation stories, entranced by the way they mirror the book and

The Guernsey Literary Festival

May 2011 sees the first Guernsey Literary Festival featuring Potato Peel Pie co-author Annie Barrows among its speakers. You can also find out about other authors inspired by Guernsey such as Tim Binding, Mervyn Peake, Elizabeth George and James Herbert. Included in the itinerary are literary events, performances, themed walks, a murder mystery, workshops and talks. Log onto the Guernsey Arts Commission website www.arts.gg for more information.

For information about the many other events held throughout the year, go to www.visitguernsey.com

the way fact and fiction become entwined. Well, I have a story of my own that could have leapt straight from the pages of Potato Peel Pie.

The basic premise for the book is that a group of Guernsey folk come together during the war to illegally eat a pig. As an excuse for breaking curfew, they explain to some German guards that they are actually a literary society.

Now, the Dutch couple was looking for the character Dawsey Adams' farm, called Les Vauxlaurens in the book, but most likely inspired by the 500-year-old La Bouvée Farm, which belongs to my parents.

During the Occupation my one-legged grandfather Bert stayed on the family farm throughout the war. He was fattening a calf in secret, much like the roast pig in the book.

One autumn day, feeding the calf roused the suspicions of a sentry on the nearby hillside. He fired at the farm, hitting the wall above granddad's head.

Finding the calf would have meant severe punishment, and according to my granddad, only his ingenuity under fire, quick thinking, courage and agility saved the calf from discovery and thwarted the Germans in their search of veal for Christmas dinner.

As I related this to the Dutch folks we wondered together whether Mary Anne may have heard this tale and used it as a basis for the novel.

But then again, my grandfather was also a legendary storyteller, so who knows whether that bullet was ever fired or not.

Maybe it was just another great story about Guernsey to be treasured and passed on to people discovering the island. But storyteller or not, let's give him the benefit of the doubt.