

WHO'S THIS GEEZER, EBENEZER?

Gallery brings you the lowdown on Ebenezer Le Page, the ultimate Guern.

Words | Caroline Mauger

In *The Book of Ebenezer Le Page*, an old Guernseyman tells the story of his life, writing of family secrets and feuds, deep friendships and love glimpsed and lost. Ebenezer lives his whole life in the Vale and only leaves the island once, to watch the Muratti in Jersey. He was born in the late nineteenth century and dies in his eighties, living through a tumultuous time which includes the First World War and the German Occupation of Guernsey during World War II.

WHO WROTE IT?

Gerald Basil (G.B) Edwards wrote *The Book of Ebenezer Le Page*, his only novel, in his late sixties. He is something of an enigma; we know he left Guernsey in 1926 and later entered D.H. Lawrence's circle in London, contributing controversial articles to literary magazines. He married and had two children but after his wife had two more by other men the marriage foundered. Although he spoke of returning to Guernsey, his quarry-owning father effectively disinherited him by remarrying and selling the family home. Art student Edward Chaney met Gerald in his old age, when he was living a reclusive life near Weymouth. The encouragement of Chaney and his wife led Edwards to rewrite the book and he dedicated it to them, giving Chaney the copyright. G.B Edwards died in 1976, so did not live to see the publication of his novel.



The Author, GB Edwards and his wife

WHY SHOULD YOU READ IT?

It's hard to imagine what it means to have experienced an era in which so many changes took place, from the advent of the motorcar and the television to the transformation of Guernsey into a tourist destination. The novel has universal appeal: it's more about the impact of recent history on one fallible but honest individual than about Guernsey and its traditions. All small islands are inhabited by characters like Ebenezer - with a toughness of spirit and an ability to cope in times of hardship but also backward and suspicious of non-islanders.

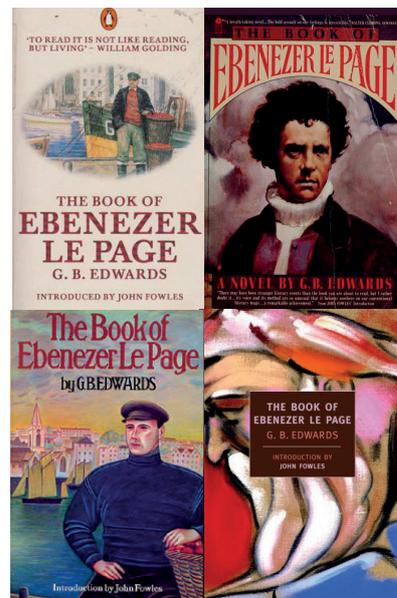
Yet despite its universality, this is a rich history lesson on Guernsey, delivered in a delightful way. Ebenezer is cantankerous and opinionated, but it's impossible not to love him. Through the stories of his enduring love for Liza Quéripel, his deep friendship with Jim Mahy and his devotion to his mother, we see this is a man whose affection, once given, is unstinting. Reading about the Occupation through Ebenezer's eyes brings it to life and his escapades - which include making his garden wall intruder-proof by putting ancient spearheads on top of it - are hilarious. Little gems of information abound, such as the fact that the statue of Victor Hugo was put up in Candie Gardens before the pavilion was constructed and it was seen as a dig by the French at the English, as all the statue of Queen Victoria could see of Victor Hugo 'was his backside.'

As the *Washington Post* put it: 'Imagine a weekend spent in deep conversation with a superb old man, a crusty, intelligent, passionate and individualistic character at the peak of his powers as a raconteur, and you will have a very good idea of the impact of *The Book of Ebenezer Le Page*...It amuses, it entertains, it moves us.'

EBENEZER AT THE LITFEST

Although we know little about G.B Edwards, Ebenezer Le Page is undoubtedly his literary alter ego. Later this year his confidant, Professor Edward Chaney, is publishing a biography of the author, which is to be exclusively launched at the fourth Guernsey Literary Festival, taking place from 16-20 September. Professor Chaney will be in conversation with Stephen Foote of the Guernsey Society, so it will be fascinating to discover more about the mysterious creator of this marvellous character.

Ebenezer will also be brought to life through the BookBench Project. The LitFest, with the generous support of KPMG, has bought a bench which will be painted by local art students with scenes from the novel, under the supervision of art teacher Charlie Buchanan. This beautiful bench, which resembles an open book, will be on display in Market Square throughout the Festival, and will be used by Every Child Our Future to encourage adults to read to children.



The book in some of its guises to look out for

ELP QUOTED

On school:

There was Le Page A,B,C,D,E,F and G in the school. I was Le Page E.

On family:

I haven't said nothing about my cousins, and the cousins of my cousins; but then half the island is my cousins, and the cousins of my cousins.

On romance:

Perhaps it's as well I've never married. Mind you, I've had it a few times under the hedge.

On scandal:

The trouble with marrying a Guernsey girl is you marry all the scandal in the family for three or four generations, half of it not true.

On pride:

She was proud, my mother. She would rather steal than beg, and I'm the same.

On cars:

I reckon legs will die out in Guernsey in a few years; and the future generations will be born with big heads on stumps.

On the States:

So in my old age, I became a worker for the States. I never thought I would sink so low.

On tourists:

If the poor visitors believe half they are told by the bus-drivers and others, they must go away with some very funny ideas about the history of Guernsey.

On life:

I reckon fighting, fornicating and making money are the three easiest things to do in this world; and I have done a bit of all three myself, so I ought to know.