

King in exile who fled

Andy Sibcy tells the story of Alphonse Le Gastelois, who left Jersey to live on the Ecréhous reef in 1961 after wrongly being blamed for sex crimes against children. Mr Le Gastelois died this month aged 97

ALPHONSE Le Gastelois was the wrong man in the wrong place during one of the darkest periods of Jersey's post-war history.

In the spring of 1960, a child was taken from her bedroom and raped, so beginning the Beast of Jersey's reign of terror and setting in motion a chain of events which destroyed the life Mr Le Gastelois had always known.

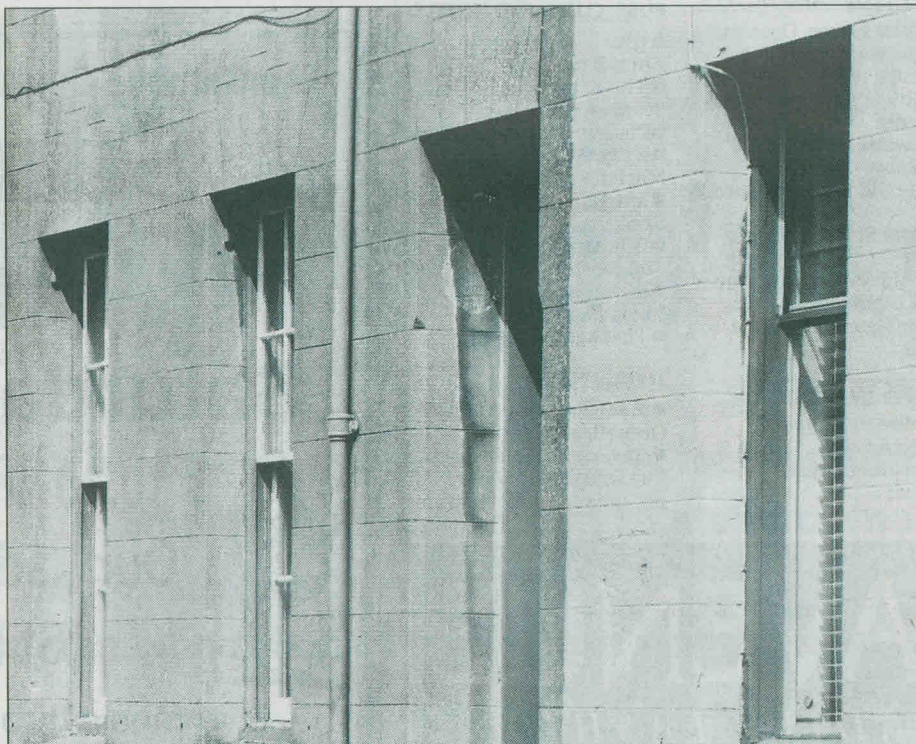
For 11 years, the Beast committed appalling sex crimes against children across the north-east of the Island, his face hidden by a hideous rubber mask.

With a community demanding action, the police were desperate to unmask the attacker.

For months detectives drew blank after blank and called in officers from Scotland Yard, who helped question 30 people.

One of them was Mr Le Gastelois, the son of a farmer from Faldouet, who was known to be somewhat eccentric and wandered the lanes of St Martin at night.

His greatest crime in 1960 was, like the Beast, to wear a dirty old raincoat tied with twine and to have a certain smell about him. A small man of 5 ft 3 in, he was tiny compared with the beast, whose victims described him as being nearly 6 ft.



and could ill afford to lose many more stones.

In 1966, the JEP went out to interview the now famous hermit.

Dressed in a duffle coat over a heavy sweater frayed around the edges, he was asked about his life.

'I get lonely, of course I do, but I never get bored,' Mr Le Gastelois said.

He had a radio for news and developed a great knowledge of the natural world. He came to love his Ecréhous and even after the arrest and conviction of Edward Paisnel, the real Beast of Jersey, on 29 November 1971, Mr Le Gastelois stayed alone on the reef.

During an interview with Channel TV reporter Brian Le Feuvre he declared: 'I'm not coming back unless I have to.'

'This is paradise compared with what I have been through.'

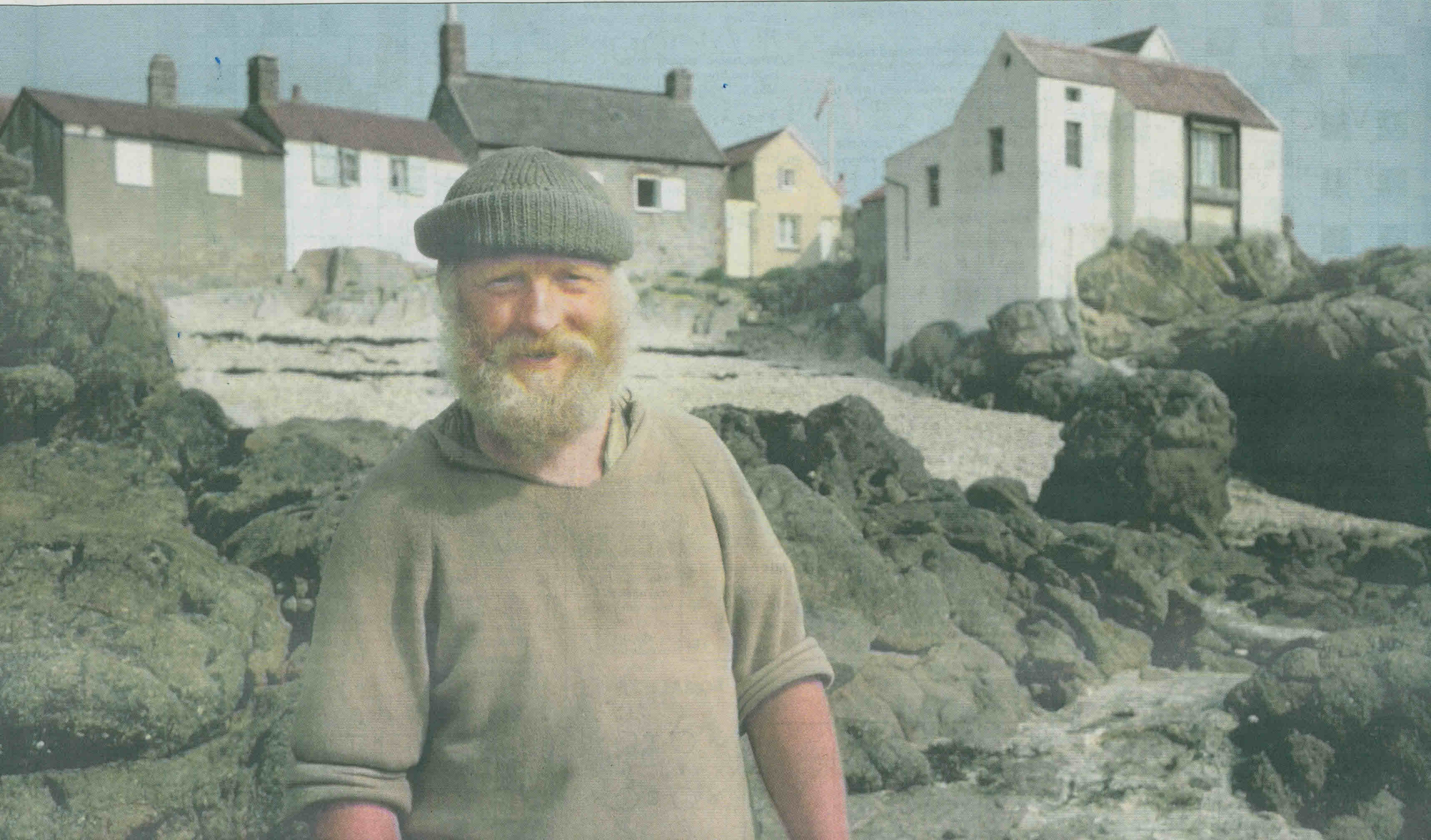
'I have never interfered with any child, or any woman for that matter.'

During his exile, he was, however, brought back to Jersey briefly.

He was arrested and charged with stealing a pair of binoculars from one of the huts.

In court he was represented by Advocate Richard Falle.

from an Island's curses



Interrogation

Mr Le Gastelois's long interrogation by the police, during which his clothes were taken away for forensic examination, was the start of a nightmare which changed the course of his life for ever.

Dressed in an ill-fitting outfit from the police stores, he was released into a storm of public hatred.

Despite there being no evidence against him, someone had released his name as the chief suspect. Within days he was being vilified wherever he went, spat at and cursed.

The police had pointed the finger at the wrong man, but Islanders were baying for blood.

When he could stand it no longer in 1961, Mr Le Gastelois, then aged 47, fled to the Ecréhous, a barren reef populated by seals and seabirds around six miles off the north-east coast, half way between Jersey and Normandy.

At high tide the water laps at the steps of the few huts, which perch on rocks, their only defence against towering winter storms.

For 15 years, Mr Le Gastelois lived on the reef, eking out a meagre existence eating seafood, seaweed and rations from the parcels brought by visitors.

A master of 'make do and mend' who had learned the value of reusing and recycling during the Occupation years, he was an astonishingly resourceful man.

Mr Le Gastelois was born on 9 October 1914 at his parents' home above Fliquet, in St Martin. His family worked the land and were well known in the parish community.

The youngest of five siblings and one half-sister, he was educated at St Martin's School and grew up speaking Jersey-French and French. Even as a young boy he was noted for his beautiful handwriting, which he would later use to write letters to



Mr Le Gastelois back in Jersey in Halkett Place Picture: PETER MOURANT

the Queen claiming ownership of the reef as the self-styled King of the Ecréhous.

During the Occupation he moved to town and stayed with his sister and her family.

His nephew, Will du Heaume, remembers Mr Le Gastelois making two guns out of bamboo, complete with moving internal parts.

'They looked like little German guns. My brother and I would climb up on the wall above Victoria College and shoot at the Germans,' he recalled.

Mr Le Gastelois also made a boat during the war years and one night tried to launch it with the help of one of his brothers. Unfortunately the design was flawed and it listed badly. Mr Le Gastelois was thrown into the water and, being unable to swim, had to be fished out by his brother.

After the war, Mr Le Gastelois returned to St Martin and worked on the land, renting a cottage near where he was born.

After his arrest, public vilification and re-

treat to the Ecréhous, Mr Le Gastelois settled into the hard life of living on the reef.

To begin with he lived in a tumble-down hut owned by Advocate Denys Richardson, who had taken him out there on his boat. Mr Richardson paid him to work on the hut, which initially had no roof, and he soon earned money doing odd jobs for the owners of other huts.

One of the many who remember his shabby clothes and curious habits during those years was Peter Thomson, whose father built a hut on La Grande Breque, a rock away from the other homes. He was ten years old when he first met Mr Le Gastelois, who was still dressed in the clothes he had been handed by the police years earlier.

'We never went to the Ecréhous without stopping at Maufant stores and picking up chewing baccy for him,' Mr Richardson said. 'We never left without giving him any food we had left over.'

He added: 'He was the world's best locksmith and could get into any hut he liked. He would always be sitting on the bench. He would look up occasionally and mutter something. One day an aircraft flew overhead at around 30,000 feet and he said, "That bugger is in my airspace." He kind of believed it too. He was a great guy.'

On another occasion a group of Scouts was staying on the reef and one was skimming pebbles.

He turned to the boy and asked him to stop, explaining that his island was only small

Character

'We immediately put Alphonse's character at issue,' recalled Mr Falle. 'Denys Richardson gave an account of what a good chap he was. We got Reg Nicolle, who taught PE at Victoria College, into the witness box and I said to Reg, "Mr Nicolle, can you give the court the benefit of your view of the character of Mr Le Gastelois?"'

'He responded, "He was a beacon to those who were lost at sea. To those who were cold he gave warmth. To those who were lost he gave comfort."'

'The judge suggested to Mr Nicolle that this had nothing to do with the case at hand and that he had not been asked to describe Robin Hood.'

'He replied, "I have never met Robin Hood", at which point the court erupted into laughter.' Mr Le Gastelois was acquitted and returned to the Ecréhous.

However, it was not his last brush with the law.

In 1975, a States party was sent to the reef to cull rabbits allegedly introduced by Mr Le Gastelois for food and which were eating the scarce vegetation.

They came and shot the animals and as the party returned to the mainland, they looked back to see smoke rising from a hut owned by Lady Trent.

The finger was again pointed at Mr Le Gastelois and arrangements were made for his arrest and return to Jersey.

For many years, Alain Blancheton, a former harbourmaster of Carteret, had visited the Ecréhous and became a good friend of Mr Le Gastelois. It was to him that the Jersey authorities turned for help.

St Martin Centenier John Germain called Mr Blancheton and asked him to be on the reef when they came to take their man into custody.

Mr Blancheton was initially uneasy about helping, but Mr Germain insisted that they knew Alphonse was innocent and it would be better for him to come back and clear his name than to remain on the reef.

'He said it would be better if Alphonse was calm,' said Mr Blancheton. 'We were sitting together talking when the Duchess of Normandy, the States boat, arrived, to take him away.'

'He turned to me and said, "Vé tu bi La Duchesse . . . y vont l'prendre, l'pauvre bougre", which means "Look at that Duchess. They are coming and they want to hang the poor bugger."'

He was imprisoned for three months before his trial and, according to Advocate Falle, who represented him a second time, he put on considerable amounts of weight, thanks to getting three square meals a day.

LONELY EXILE ON THE ECRÉHOUS

'I'm not coming back'

—ALPHONSE LE GASTELOIS

THE oyster-catchers and terns have come back to the Ecréhous, the winter which isolates these rocks has turned to spring, the cormorants have nested and the first home on a slice of barren shingle. They are the chance visitors, the

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Mr Falle argued that a smouldering round from a gun could have started the fire and that Mr Le Gastelois, a non-swimmer, could not have got to the island where the hut was because of the height of the tide.

Again the character witnesses spoke up on his behalf and again he was found not guilty.

After the trial Mr Le Gastelois stayed in Jersey and moved into a small cottage in Dumaresq Street.

There he grew fruit and vegetables in a small garden, but continued to live the austere existence he had always known.

'He always had inner tubes on his shoes,' said Mr du Heaume's wife, Val. 'He used to cut them up and put them over his shoes and boots so he did not have to have them repaired. He only kept what he thought he would need.

'Every morning he ate milk sop, a breakfast popular during the Occupation of bread cut up in little squares with sugar and warm milk poured over the top. He would sometimes add chocolate powder.

'He took so long to eat. I have never seen anyone eat so slowly.

'He would never take a tablet, although at odd times he had to. He used to bandage onions onto his wounds. He was a great believer in onions and garlic.'

She added: 'He was always fiercely independent. He kept himself to himself. He was a character, he really was. He certainly knew his mind. No one would be able to persuade him to do anything which he did not think was right. He had wonderful blue eyes that were always sparkling.

He was such a good man.'

As his age began to take its toll, Mr Le Gastelois moved to Victoria Cottage Homes, where he lived for three years. When his health declined, he spent a short time in the General Hospital before being moved to the Guardian Nursing Home for

three years. For the last 18 months of his life, he lived in Palm Springs nursing home on Trinity Hill.

In 1999, the late Senator John Rothwell took a proposition to the States calling for Mr Le Gastelois to be given £20,000 in com-

pensation for the way he was treated. However, he dropped the proposal when Members voted against his wishes to hold the debate behind closed doors.

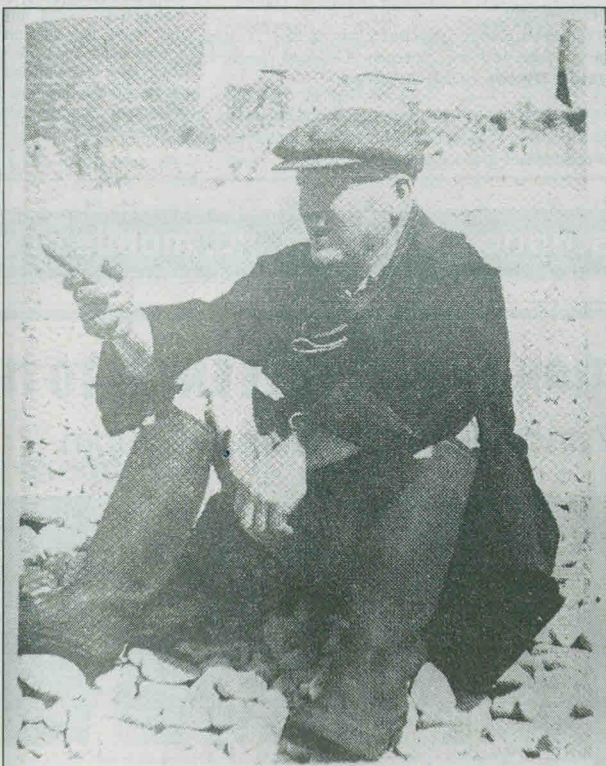
The wrongly accused King of the Ecréhous never received any money or a public

apology. In an interview in 1997 he said: "They ruined my life in 1961. You do feel helpless. There is no one you can complain to. If you complain, you have to complain to the police, which is unfair. There should be an independent inquirer."

He added: "People bully each other at school and they bully each other through life. They don't change."

Alphonse Le Gastelois, who never married and had no children, died on 3 June aged 97.

ALPHONSE LE GASTELOIS THROUGH THE YEARS



Alphonse Le Gastelois : " I'm not coming back unless I have to "

