

## John Vaudin: Jersey's "Man of Iron"...

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John Vaudin cast the first Jersey letter boxes, which as members of the LBSG we already knew was the case, didn't we? But did he...

Our story starts about 1819 on the Channel Island of Jersey when George Vaudin (born c.1797) and his wife Elizabeth (born c.1799), presumably married (but this has not been traced), and had a son in St Helier that they named John Le Geyt Vaudin. "Le Geyt" was Elizabeth's maiden surname, and it was/is often common practice to use the family name as a middle name. John appears to have been their first born and was brought-up with siblings named Elizabeth, Charles, Emilie and Elvina.

British Census records did not start in earnest until 1841, where we find father George shown as having an occupation of "Iron Founder". In the same census John, now aged about 20, is similarly recorded as being an iron founder working presumably for his father, with the family members all living in Halkett Street, St Helier.

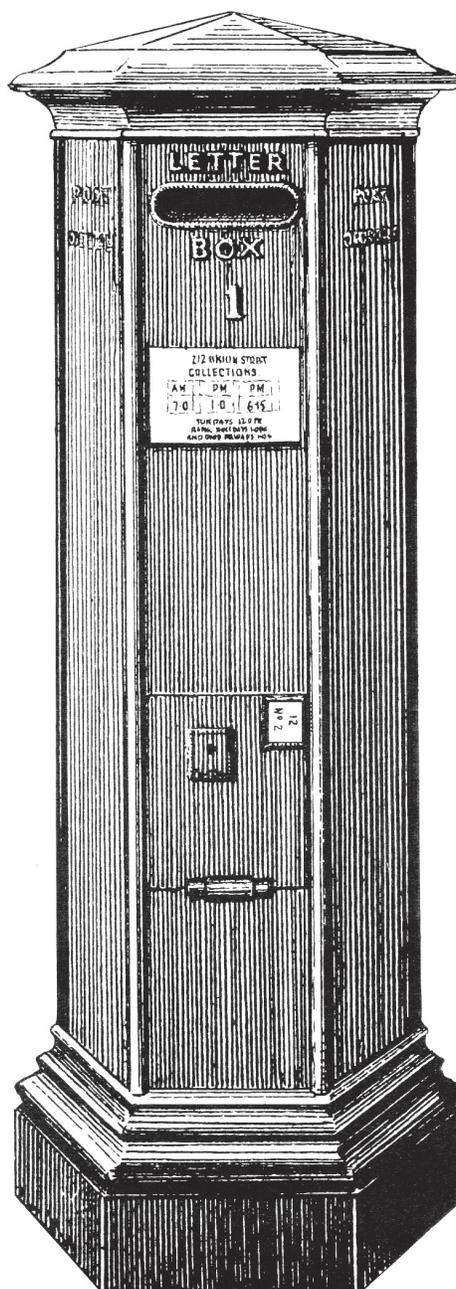
By the time of the 1851 census, John's employment is shown as an "iron and brass founder employing 17 men", so he had branched-out at some point between the two census returns and set-up on his own. The reason for this is revealed later. He was unmarried and living with his French servant Francoise Binard and a locally born apprentice named Joshua Blampied at 27 Don Street, St Helier, where his home was either side of a coach builder and the Harbour Master. So much for the background to the early days of the subject of this article.

BPMA's information sheet on Pillar Boxes states that: "On 23 November 1852, the first four British pillar boxes were introduced as an experiment in St Helier, on the island of Jersey. This was on the recommendation of a regional Surveyor's Clerk, Anthony Trollope. The red-painted hexagonal boxes were *cast locally in the foundry of John Vaudin.*" (my italics).

Checking *The Letter Box* by Jean Farrugia (Centaur Press, 1969), she states on page 26 that George Creswell, Surveyor of the Western District of England, had contacted London in July 1852 writing: "I would ask authority to give an order for the whole number [of proposed letter boxes] to Mr John Vaudin, whose terms appear to be very reasonable". The Postmaster General agreed that Vaudin should supply the boxes and the PO reference in 1969 for this letter exchange was shown as "POST 30/England 685K/ 1814". Page 29 of Jean's book goes on to state that one of the installed boxes was deemed to be too small and so one of Creswell's clerks had: "...been to Mr Vaudin's Foundry and seen the models he used in casting the former Pillars....etc".

All is fine up to this point, in that both Jean and the BPMA will have used primary sources, namely Post Office archival material. It is other available published information that then start to muddy the waters somewhat.

Various websites state that: "The foundry of *Vaudin & Son* in Jersey was commissioned to produce them" (again, my italics). This would tend to imply that father George had his son John incorporated into the company name. With John being unmarried the year before the boxes were cast it is obviously not *his* son that was part of the company – he would have been far too young even if he had existed. Also, John's father had ceased being employed by 1851, for in the census of that year George is shown as being a "Retired Iron Founder" and he had clearly handed-over or sold the business to John some time earlier.



A Jersey Post press release for the 2002 Postal History stamp issue states: “The original boxes were cast in Le Feuvre’s foundry, Bath Street, by John Vaudin, who therefore has his own little place in history.” This would perhaps tend to imply that John was one of the 18 employees of Le Feuvre\*, but, as already quoted, John’s own census entry for 1851 shows him to have been an employer of men, not an employee. Might he have sub-contracted the work to Le Feuvre – but why when there was a foundry that he already owned?

According to *Stamp Magazine*, which was possibly quoting Jersey Post in part: “The boxes were cast at the Le Feuvre foundry in Bath Street, St Helier” (failing to mention John’s possible involvement). This would have been at number 14 Bath Street, where we learn from the census enumerator’s forms that George Le Feuvre was an “Iron Founder Master employing 18 men”. The same family ran an ironmongers shop at number 13 – a ready outlet for the goods that they made in their foundry.

Various sources, most recently *The Guardian*, a British national newspaper, has stated that John Vaudin “designed” the first pillar box. Did he? Clearly someone had to, and maybe as an iron founder he would have presented his ideas and concerns for consideration to the appropriate authorities. He would certainly have known what would work best and what would present problems when casting iron.

So, in summary, did John Vaudin:

- (a) cast the first Jersey boxes at his own foundry (as Jean and the BPMA state),
- (b) cast them at a foundry jointly owned with his father (various websites),
- (c) become involved in the casting of them at the Le Feuvre foundry (Jersey Post),
- (d) have no involvement with the Le Feuvre foundry (*Stamp Magazine*),
- (e) simply design the boxes and not get involved with the casting stages (*The Guardian* and elsewhere).

Or perhaps there is some other explanation that could be an amalgam of some of the above possibilities? I support the writings of Jean and the BPMA (option (a)) knowing their impeccable research pedigrees, so where have all of these other scenarios come from and is there even a grain of truth in any of them? Certainly (b) and (e) can be dismissed straight away, while option (d) appears possible, with option (c) feeling an unlikely situation.

Incidentally, our own *LBSG Guide to British Letter Boxes* simply states that John Vaudin, a blacksmith from St Helier, won the contract. Clearly John was far more than a mere blacksmith, which is generally defined as a smith who forges and shapes iron with a hammer and anvil. An iron foundry on the other hand has been defined as the buildings and iron works for casting metal products from molten metal – far more grand!

By the time of the 1861 census John had vanished from Jersey and cannot even be found anywhere else within the United Kingdom. Regarding John’s possible marriage and certain death, as with the missing census returns it has not been possible to find entries for him anywhere in the UK right through to 1911. All that we can be sure of is that he must have died at some point after the production of the letter boxes in 1852.

I would like to think that maybe he ran off with his French servant, married her, had lots of children and spent a long and happy life in her homeland casting exciting new letter box designs for the French Post Office. The problem is that she was in her fifties and therefore 20 years his senior!

OK, so it is clear that I have not resolved this intriguing question about John Vaudin and his *total* role in the first UK letter box production on Jersey, but perhaps it will inspire others to take-up the challenge and reveal more information where I have failed to find it.

If anyone knows the background story to the Le Feuvre foundry and where Vaudin’s foundry was physically located, then this might be the key to solving the discrepancies. There appears to be a lot of conflicting information out there and the problem is the perennial one for a researcher, namely that the more one person quotes another the more it eventually becomes regarded as fact. For such an important part in the development of the British letter box this apparent misinformation simply cannot be allowed to continue. □

\* “Le Feuvre” as a surname is of Old French origin and is a variant of the French surname “Fevre”, itself an occupational name for an iron-worker or a smith.

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