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Ancient Maritime Communities and  
the Relationship between People and  
Environment along the European  
Atlantic Coasts

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## THE FISH-TRAPS OF LIHOU, GUERNSEY: A PRELIMINARY INVESTIGATION

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### INTRODUCTION

The small tidal islet of Lihou lies off the west coast of Guernsey, in the Channel Islands (Figure 1). Lihou is accessible by foot for a maximum of four or five hours at the lowest spring tides, and is cut off for up to seven or eight days at neap tides. Although only a few hundred metres from Guernsey, the strength of the currents and the danger of the offshore rocks makes the island a particularly difficult place to approach by boat.

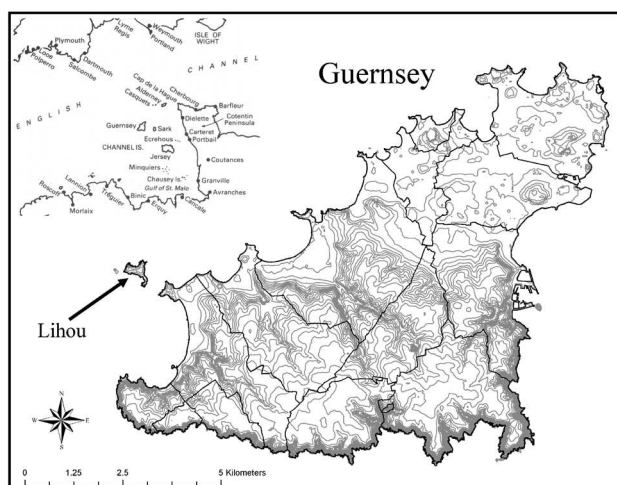


Figure 1. Location map of Guernsey and Lihou.

In the mid-12th century AD, a Benedictine priory - controlled by Mont St Michel - was constructed on the south coast of Lihou. It consisted of the priory building itself, which was decorated with imported Caen limestone, together with associated domestic buildings, and a dovecot. A cemetery was set out adjacent to the south wall of the priory, and further burials were interred within the nave. A series of excavations conducted over the past 20 years, as yet mostly unpublished, have demonstrated that this was a wealthy site, occupied by a small number of Benedictine monks for some 250 years until the forcible confiscation of the “alien” priories in the early 15th century (Sebire 2005, 137-139). The priory may have retained its religious function until the early 16th century AD, although under the control of the English crown (Ogier 1998, 98-99). After that date the site seems to have been intermittently occupied, possibly functioning as a farmhouse until falling into ruin by the mid-17th century. The only other structures on the island are a ruined Napoleonic watch-house, and a farmhouse constructed in the 1960s on the site of a similar building which had functioned as an iodine factory until c. 1930.

On the rocky shore to the south of the priory buildings, exposed at half-tide and below, there are a series of man-made structures: walls and heaps of stones, typically about three metres wide and standing up to one metre high. Although some elements stand out quite prominently at different stages of the tide, they are generally rather difficult to appreciate from the land, and it is really only from the air that one can begin to grasp the scale of these structures (Figure 2). Perhaps partly because of their semi-hidden nature, not to mention the difficulty of carrying out fieldwork in this intertidal zone, the walls and stones have not until now been the subject of any formal investigation. Indeed although the island of Lihou has been the subject of considerable antiquarian and historical interest, the fish-traps seem not to have attracted any attention at all - with the possible exception of a reference in a 16th century AD ballad, and a more informative reference from the late 17th century AD (see below). As well as being almost wholly absent from the literary record, they are also omitted from the 1898, 1938 and 1963 Ordnance Survey maps, which otherwise provide extremely accurate representations of Guernsey’s natural and man-made landscape.

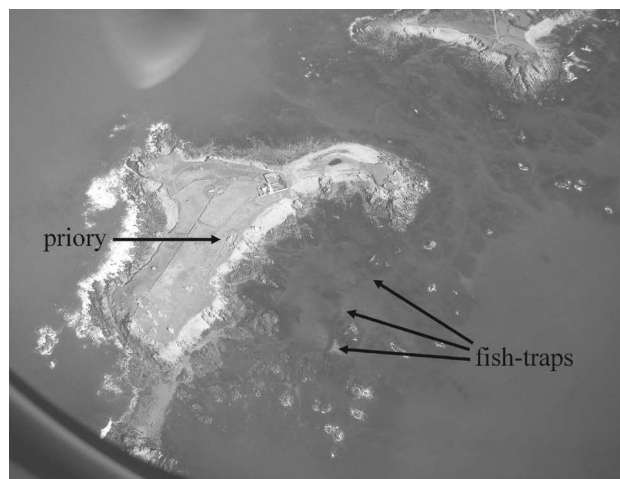
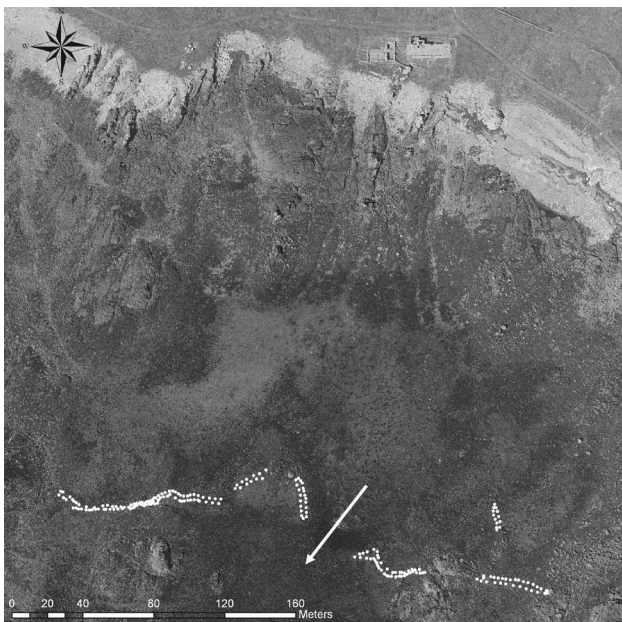


Figure 2. The priory and the fish-traps viewed from above, from the south-west (P. de Jersey).

The purpose of this article is thus to provide a preliminary account of the Lihou fish-traps, and in particular their structure and lay-out. What little evidence exists for their dating will be examined, and some suggestions made as to how these structures may have functioned.

## THE FISH-TRAPS

The structures interpreted here as fish-traps are located in the intertidal zone on the south coast of Lihou, approximately 250m south of the Benedictine priory. At least 240m of man-made structure can now be recognized, for the most part linking a series of small offshore rocks (Figure 3). At mean high water spring (9.3m) all of these rocks are submerged;



**Figure 3.** The extent of the man-made structures in the intertidal zone, marked by white dots. The arrow shows the main outflow of water at low tide. The Benedictine priory is at the top of the picture (photograph courtesy of Digimap, Guernsey).

at mean high water neap (seven metres) the peak of one is visible from the land. The structures themselves only start to become visible when the tide drops below approximately three metres, just below the mean low water neap (3.6m)<sup>11</sup>. At a low tide of 2.5m the eastern and western elements of the fish-traps are clearly exposed (see below), but there remain two channels in the centre area which are open to the sea. As the tide drops further, to below two metres, one of these is closed. The remaining channel still has water flowing out at a low spring tide (mean low water spring is 1.4m), but can be waded - with some difficulty, principally because of the slippery rocks rather than the actual depth of water - at that height. At a low tide of one metre there is only about 0.3-0.4m of water remaining in this channel, and presumably at the very lowest spring tides of 0.1 or 0.2m, the rocks at the base of this channel are completely exposed, although the opportunity to confirm this has not yet arisen. In essence, then, it seems that the fish-traps would have functioned to some degree when the tide dropped below three metres, and would have probably worked rather better at a tide of 2.5m or below. Sea-level has fluctuated slightly since the medieval period (Sebire and Renouf 2010, 374), but not to a degree sufficient to cause any major variation to these figures. Assuming then that the fish-traps were used principally in daylight hours - although their use on moonlit nights cannot be ruled out - there would typically be between seven to 11 days of neap tides per month when the tide would not drop sufficiently for them to function<sup>11</sup>. We will return to the question of how they functioned below.

At low tide the area occupied by the fish-traps forms a roughly rectangular basin, enclosing an area of some 27,000m<sup>2</sup>. The western and eastern edges of the basin seem to be formed by natural boulders, rather than by any artificial means, although it is not impossible that the pre-existing “slopes” have been enhanced by man (as suggested for Breton sites by Daire and Langouët 2008, 53). The seaward ends of the western and eastern edges are about 280m apart and they are joined by a series of disconnected “walls”, which link three natural outcrops. In some parts these walls are little more than heaps of stone, but there are sections which are far more carefully constructed, with up to three courses of stone still visible. Most sections are more or less linear, although there is at least one distinctly curved element adjacent to the largest rock outcrop. The overall form of the structures corresponds well to type B, subtype c in the classification proposed by Daire and Langouët (2010, 12, see fig. 8).

The sections formed by heaps of stone are rather difficult to define, since it is not always easy to identify where the structure ends and where the natural rocky foreshore begins. In some cases the heaps appear to be up to seven or eight metres wide, but more typically the core of the structure is about three metres wide, with the heap rising about 0.5-0.75m above the sea-bed on either side (Figure 4). In some areas there are hints within the pile of stones of more formal structure, notably in a couple of instances where there seems to be a linear face to the seaward side. It may be that the upper courses in these areas have been disturbed and damaged by the sea.



**Figure 4.** Surveying the fish-traps. The white dots mark the inner and outer edges of the structure, here about three metres wide (P. de Jersey).

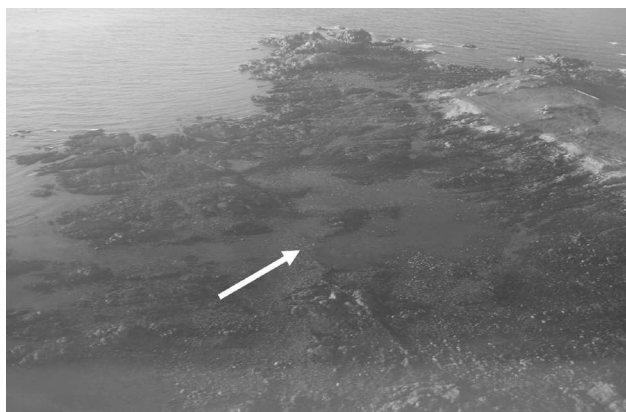
In contrast to the heaps of stone, the best-preserved sections of the fish-traps are far more obviously “constructed”, often consisting of two or three courses of stone with a clearly defined face - generally on the landward-facing side - and standing to a maximum height of about 1.2m (Figure 5). The size of the stone used in these parts of the structures varies, with some particularly large rocks, up to one metre maximum dimension, on the western side of the main tidal opening. Although it is probably fair to say that most of the stones used in the structures could be manhandled by two people, and often by one, some of the large blocks would undoubtedly have required at least three or four strong individuals to move them into position. The majority of the stones are of Icart gneiss, which forms the bedrock of the entire basin area, though



**Figure 5.** One of the largest surviving sections of the fish-traps, standing just over one metre in height (P. de Jersey).

evidently other beach boulders were used if they were suitable and close at hand. This is most obviously the case at the south-eastern corner of the fish-traps, where the presence of dolerite dykes has provided a convenient source for rather smaller, less angular stones, typically only 30-40cm maximum dimension, which constitute a large proportion of the boulders used in a well-preserved linear section of wall some 40m in length and about 3.6m wide. It is not impossible that the variation in the size of the stone used might also have some chronological significance, or perhaps reflect the number of individuals who were involved in different phases of construction.

There are several narrow gaps along the course of the walls which appear to be intentional, perhaps providing points at which nets could be used to catch fish trying to leave the fish-traps. By far the largest gap is a stretch of about 30m, more or less midway along the structure, where water continues to flow out to sea at all but the very lowest spring tides (see above, and Figure 3). It should be noted, however, that a recent oblique air photograph of the fish-traps (Figure 6) seems to show a linear feature running across this area. It has not yet been possible to identify this feature on the ground, but if genuine it could indicate that this channel too was at least partially blocked by some sort of structure.



**Figure 6.** The fish-traps viewed from the south-east. The arrow points to a possible structure across the main tidal outflow (P. de Jersey).

## HOW DID THE FISH-TRAPS WORK?

Our investigation so far has concentrated almost exclusively on identifying and recording the actual physical structure of the fish-traps. Establishing exactly how they might have functioned will require a considerably greater input of time and effort, in particular remaining on Lihou when the island is cut off from Guernsey, so that the changes in the relationship between the structures and the falling (and rising) tide can be recorded. It would also be useful to examine the structures actually from the sea, whether by boat or by diving. In the meantime it is possible to offer some very tentative suggestions, on the basis of what we can see from the land and what we have managed to record at low tide.

The author recently spent just over six hours observing the fish-traps from the slightly higher ground north-west of the priory, as the tide dropped from 8.2m down to 2.5m. A photograph was taken every five minutes on a tripod-mounted camera to produce a simple but effective time-lapse record of the falling tide. The first sections of wall to be exposed are those in the south-eastern corner of the fish-trap “basin”, some four and a half hours after high tide. After another half-hour or so, the heap of stones which separates the south-west corner from the open sea is uncovered. This is one of the most striking features of the fish-traps when viewed from the priory, and by a useful coincidence its exposure also marks the point at which the causeway to Guernsey becomes clear.

On a 2.5m low tide both of the channels either side of the central rock outcrop remain submerged, although the western side is just beginning to clear. As indicated above, the eastern channel retains at least some outflow of water at all but the very lowest spring tides. This channel may be the crux to understanding how the fish-traps functioned, since it would appear that on a tide of *c.* two metres or below, this would represent the only means of escape for fish still trapped in the fish-trap “basin”. As mentioned above the gap here is about 30m and it would presumably have been feasible to run a net between the man-made structures on either side. It is also worth at least mentioning the possibility that some sort of wooden structure existed, either across the gap or on either side, although examination of the surviving stone structures shows no evidence of (for example) wooden posts. They may in any case have left no trace.

Some areas of the fish-trap basin could have been used independently of the structure as a whole. The small area with a distinctively curved sector of wall on its seaward side, towards the south-eastern corner of the basin, could perhaps have been blocked off by a net stretched from one end of this section of wall to the other. At the south-western corner of the basin, a large, roughly circular enclosure is formed when the tide is about 2.7m, which requires a gap of only about 20m to be closed to seal off an area of approximately 2500m<sup>2</sup>.

## THE LITERARY RECORD

As indicated in the introduction, it seems that until now the Lihou fish-traps have escaped all published attention.

Darryl Ogier (1998, 97) notes that Mont Saint Michel's fief on Guernsey also included a fishery known as the Rousse Mare, just behind the headland opposite Lihou, but that was a large pond of brackish water and would not have been confused with the coastal structures on Lihou itself.

It may also be the case, unlikely though it seems, that the Lihou fish-traps have no direct association with the Benedictine priory. Dr Ogier has drawn my attention to a late 17th century AD document (Island Archives, *Historical Documents* XIX, fol. 141-142) which suggests that they could be firmly post-medieval in date, and has kindly provided the following translation:

“The undersigned Christopher Hatton, Baron Hatton of Kirby, His Majesty's Captain and Governor of the castle and island of Guernsey and dependencies acknowledges having given leave and permission to *sieurs* Hellier Blondel and Abraham Blondel, brothers, of the parish of St Saviour, for themselves and their heirs to make and build a fish *pescherie* near the island of Lihou in the best place that they find appropriate, at their charge, cost and expense, and on condition that they maintain, keep up and repair the said fishery (after it shall be made) in future at their cost and expense, and also on condition that the said Hellier and Abraham Blondel their heirs or assigns shall render me and my successors from the said island the sixth fish or fishes which shall be taken and fished in the said fishery, or the seventh of the money that they may make from the sale of fish or fishes which shall be taken in the said fishery at my choice. Whereof the said Blondel brothers are obliged and are to build or cause the said fishery to be built, to maintain and repair it after it shall have been built and made at their charge and costs, on [security of] all and every of their goods and estates and [those] of their heirs. On condition always that if the said Blondel[s] or their heirs do not realise any profit or benefit from the said fishery they may quit it without being constrained in any manner whatever. And it is agreed that I shall have the choice of the best fish which shall be taken in the said fishery at its price before it is put on sale. Done in the said island of Guernsey this 30th day of the month of October in the year one thousand six hundred and eighty-three.

[signed Hatton]”

There seems to be no indication as to whether the Blondel brothers did go ahead and build the *pescherie* as agreed, or whether they maintained it or “quit it”. We also cannot be sure that the structures off the south coast of Lihou are those described in the document; it seems likely, and there are no other obvious candidates “near the island of Lihou”<sup>111</sup>, but it cannot be proven. If indeed the documentary reference and the structures described here are one and the same, then evidently the Lihou fish-traps may have no direct relationship to the priory, at least not in the period of religious usage. On the other hand, it does not rule out the possibility that there were fish-traps contemporary with the Benedictine priory, which could have been re-used or replaced in the late 17th century. The variations in the form of the structures, such as the size of the rocks used, might then be at least partially explained by construction

at different periods. We might also speculate that the Blondels were aware of existing structures when they (presumably) asked for permission to build a *pescherie* - but this is indeed all speculation.

One other possible literary reference exists in the form of a ribald 16th century AD ballad, “*Le Voyage de Lihou*” (Garis 1975, 299-310). The ballad recounts the amorous exploits of a “clerical divine” who goes to fish on Lihou, but is marooned with five “charming maidens”, with perhaps unsurprising consequences. The introduction to the verses mentions that “*Il y a une partie de la muraille de l'ancienne chapelle, où il y avait aussi deux cuves d'une grandeur prodigieuse taillée dans le rocher*”. T. F. Priaux, an amateur local historian who transcribed the ballad c. 1930, queried whether these might be “the only surviving remains of the fishery” recorded in the Hatton document, but it may be worth noting that despite his considerable local knowledge, Priaux did not make any link to the structures under discussion here. It is of course debatable whether the “*deux cuves*” of the introduction, or the “*Deux rochers fort polis, creusés par artifice*” of the poem itself can be equated with these fish-traps, even allowing for considerable poetic licence, and so perhaps Priaux considered this possibility and rejected it - if indeed he even knew of the existence of the structures. If the “*Voyage de Lihou*” does genuinely refer to the fish-traps, however, it would imply that the structures were in place a century or more before the agreement between Hatton and the Blondel brothers was formulated, and thus perhaps tilts the balance back in favour of an origin contemporary to the Benedictine priory.

## CONCLUSIONS

The fish-trap structures on the south coast of Lihou represent a considerable investment of time and effort. At a bare minimum they extend for some 240m and they are rarely less than three metres wide, and often twice that width. Their construction must have been almost wholly limited to the periods around low spring tides and it is difficult to imagine that more than a few metres could be completed on any single occasion, thus suggesting that they were built over a period of many months, if not a couple of years or more. It is very tempting indeed to associate this construction period with the occupation of the Benedictine priory on Lihou - what better way for a few monks to spend their working hours? - but it must be admitted that there is not a single piece of evidence which can be used to provide a firm link between the priory in its religious heyday and the fish-traps. Indeed the only apparently reliable piece of chronological evidence, the contract set up between the Governor, Hatton, and the Blondel brothers of St Saviour - if it does indeed relate to the structures investigated here - provides a much later, post-medieval date. But given the magnitude of the work involved - shifting perhaps 750m<sup>3</sup> of stone across a difficult intertidal landscape - it seems far more likely that this was a relatively long-term project carried out under the auspices of the Benedictine priory, and that the Blondel brothers simply planned to make use of pre-existing structures.

The ballad of the “*Voyage de Lihou*” gives a tantalising suggestion of structures - perhaps fish-traps? - dating back at least to the late 16th century AD and thus implies that they may have been there at the time when the priory was in religious use, but it can hardly be regarded as a wholly reliable source. One further avenue of enquiry, however, may be to pursue parallels with other similar structures around the gulf of Saint-Malo. Among the corpus of fish-trap structures on the Breton coasts assembled by Daire and Langouët, the “*Pêcherie des Moines*” (or *pêcherie nord*) of the Île Saint-Rion, Ploubazlanec (Côtes-d’Armor) bears a striking resemblance to Lihou, both in its general form and in the presence of an adjacent religious foundation, in this case an Augustinian abbey founded in the late twelfth century (Daire and Langouët 2008, 59; 2010, 68). On a significantly larger scale than either of these sites, with some 920m of walls, the fish-traps of the Île Modez (Lanmodez, Côtes-d’Armor) provide another possible example of association with a religious foundation: “*La chapelle, liée à une communauté monastique, a été construite en 1240. La construction de cette grande pêcherie a nécessité une nombreuse main d’œuvre et a dû être aménagée par ce groupe*” (Daire and Langouët 2010, 51). It is thus tempting to see Lihou, the Île Saint-Rion and the Île Modez as examples of a wider theme: the implementation of relatively large-scale *pêcheries* under the auspices of religious foundations, principally during the 12th and 13th centuries AD. It seems unlikely that we will obtain any more detailed chronological information from the structures themselves, and so we may be reliant on the identification of additional archival references to take this aspect of the study any further.

Regardless of the lack of secure historical information, it should be possible to enhance our understanding of the actual physical function of the Lihou fish-traps. Daire and Langouët (2010, 23-36) have shown in some detail how this can be achieved through analysis of the height of the structure and its relationship to variations in tidal level, and there is no reason why the same approach could not be profitably applied to Lihou. There is also potential for further fieldwork: is it feasible to run a net across the largest gap in the structures, given the strength of the outflow of water from the fish-trap basin? Can the smaller gaps in the stone walls also be used to trap fish on the falling tide? Does the fish-trap actually retain fish of significant size over the low tide period, and if so, how were these fish collected? Parallels with other sites, morphology, typology and chronology only take us so far; if we really want to understand the Lihou fish-traps, we need to be able to demonstrate how the interaction of the tides with these considerable structures could actually work.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am very grateful to my colleagues Tanya Walls and Kit Hughes, who braved with me the chilly intertidal zone on Lihou in pursuit of the fish-traps. Darryl Ogier generously provided details of the Hatton document and its translation. I am also grateful to delegates at the HOMER 2011 conference for their advice and suggestions about the Lihou fish-traps, in particular Caroline Wickham-Jones

and Loïc Langouët, and to the two reviewers of this paper for their constructive comments.

#### NOTES

- I - All tide heights obtained from data provided by the Hydrographic Office, Ministry of Defence, as reproduced in the 2011 Tides booklet published by Paul Wiggins, Guernsey. The mean tide level is approximately 5.3m.
- II - It should be possible to calculate more accurate figures using the techniques described by Daire and Langouët (2010, 23-36), but this has not yet been attempted for Lihou.
- III - It is possible of course that other structures have been destroyed, either accidentally or deliberately, since the late 17th century, or that we have so far simply failed to recognise other structures in the intertidal zone.

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## THE FISH-TRAPS OF LIHOU, GUERNSEY: A PRELIMINARY INVESTIGATION

Philip DE JERSEY

**KEY-WORDS:**

*Fish-traps, Lihou, Guernsey, Benedictine priory*

**ABSTRACT:**

*On the small tidal islet of Lihou, off the west coast of Guernsey in the Channel Islands, are the remains of a substantial series of stone walls which appear to have functioned as fish-traps. Some 240m of man-made structure have been identified, linking together a series of offshore rocks and enhancing a natural basin to enclose a large volume of water which drains at low tide. This paper provides the first published account of these structures, describing their form and suggesting how they may have functioned. It also considers whether the fish-traps are correctly associated with the Benedictine priory on Lihou, probably constructed in the mid-twelfth century AD, or whether a documentary reference from the late seventeenth century might also relate to their construction.*

## PIÈGES À POISSONS DE LIHOU, GUERNESEY: UNE RECHERCHE PRÉLIMINAIRE

Philip DE JERSEY

**MOTS CLÉS :**

*Pièges à poissons, Lihou, Guernesey, prieuré bénédictin*

**RÉSUMÉ :**

*Sur le petit îlot de Lihou, au large de la côte ouest de Guernesey dans les îles anglo-normandes, subsistent les vestiges d'une série importante de murets en pierre qui semblent avoir servi de pièges à poissons. Quelques 240 mètres de linéaire de la structure artificielle ont été identifiés, reliant une série de récifs au large, et valorisant la capacité d'un bassin naturel pour enfermer un grand volume de l'eau qui s'évacuait à marée basse. Cette étude représente le premier compte rendu publié sur ces structures, décrivant leur forme et suggérant leur éventuel mode de fonctionnement. Elle prend aussi en considération le fait que les pêcheries pourraient être mises en relation avec le prieuré bénédictin de Lihou, probablement construit au milieu du XII<sup>ème</sup> siècle, mais aussi qu'une référence documentaire de la fin du XVI<sup>ème</sup> siècle pourrait être également liée à leur construction.*