

La Société Sercquaise

Founded in 1975 to study, preserve and enhance Sark's natural environment and cultural heritage



Summer News 2018

Dr Roger Veall

Members will be sad to learn that towards the end of May our plant recorder for many years died in Hampshire, aged 94. Until recently Roger and Psyche were regular visitors, carefully monitoring and recording Sark's flora and leading numerous wildflower forays. Roger recorded many Sark 'firsts' and made valuable additions to our

Herbarium, passing on much of his learning – including the art of pressing botanical specimens – to Susan Synnott. She attended Roger's funeral in Hampshire, conveying the society's love and sympathy to Psyche and our appreciation for their joint work. Psyche hopes to visit Sark again in the near future.

Activities in the Room and Cider Barn

Following the AGM on 7th April there have been no ordinary meetings of the Society or Council, but there has been a lot of activity. After a slow start, fine weather has brought visitors to the Heritage Room at the rate of about 13 a day. As our contribution to the bailiwick theme of 'Occupation and Liberation', Jane Norwich re-mounted her exhibition on the Sark Deportees, who were represented by their German ID photos on luggage tags. Later in May this display and Susan Synnott's Spring Wildflowers gave way to a major summer exhibition about a green and sustainable environment. Many groups and individuals worked together to make this our most ambitious show to date. Displays illustrate the environmental projects and aims of each group: our 'Conservation Commandos', Sark in Bloom, the Watch junior wildlife group, Roots Festival, Permaculture gardeners, Kia Taerie, Sark Public Works, UK Overseas Territories Conservation Forum (in which we have had representation for some years now). One panel records last year's visit of the Dutch group 'By the Oceans We Unite' and in the Cider Barn a life-sized wickerwork dolphin made by Shakira is covered with plastic beach litter. On the grass apron (the scene of one of June's excavations) Roz Rolls has created a Permaculture garden that has attracted large numbers of visitors daily.



Roz's Permaculture garden



Shakira's dolphin

Archaeology

Sir Barry's Oxford team returned from 9th to 23rd June. Very many thanks to all the people who helped and supported the excavations. Friends of Sark Archaeology contributed over £10,000, including £1000 from La Société. Kirsty Grant again lent her house to accommodate many of the crew. Andrew Prevel took charge of preparations (including erecting a new cattle fence in Little Sark, assisted by RA) and clean-up operations. Back-filling and turfing at Le Manoir was greatly speeded up by the help of an enthusiastic group from HSBC Guernsey, organised by Pat Cunneen. Many thanks to Sally Ward Jones, and to Emma and Nick van Zeller for tolerating the massive earthworks with enthusiastic interest. When the weather returns to normal the grass will recover!

A major trench in the Manoir Garden contained in its upper layer household rubbish from the late Victorian period, including a shoemaker's leather and clog soles (the 1891 Census lists a P. Hamon shoemaker living in Manoir Cottage). We have put five buckets of this fascinating household trash in the Cider Barn for visitors to pick over and identify. Barry's report on this year's excavations appears below. On 8th September at the CI Archaeology Conference in Jersey he gave a talk on 'Sark: remoteness and connectivity', followed by Emma speaking on Sark's prehistoric pottery. So our story got a full airing in an international gathering and surprised many.

Excavations are already planned for 2019 (probably the last week of May and first week of June) and we shall be looking for volunteers to sort and wash pottery and other finds. Robin Scott, a promising six-year-old geologist, has already booked her place!

Sir Barry Cunliffe reports on Sark Archaeology 2018

This year excavations were concentrated on two sites, the Manoir, where work continued to explore the Roman and medieval settlement discovered last year, and Little Sark where we examined two mounds, potentially of Neolithic date, sited on the west coast.

Le Manoir

The 2017 excavations at the Manoir established the presence of a Roman ditch and an extensive medieval cemetery and raised the possibility that the Cider Barn might have originated in the medieval period, possibly as an ecclesiastical building. This year's work was designed to explore the extent of the Roman and medieval structures.

We now know that a substantial ditch, possibly a major boundary, ran roughly E-W across the site passing below the Cider Barn and the north end of the Manoir buildings. It was about 5m wide and more than 1.5m deep. The filling contained Roman pottery provisionally dated to the 2nd century AD. The eastward and westward extent of the ditch is still to be defined. A second, smaller, ditch ran parallel to it 16.5m to the north (in the Manoir orchard). It was 1.7m wide and 1.2m deep. It, too, produced imported Roman pottery of the 2nd century. Another, slighter, ditch was found running at right angles between them.

The arrangement of the ditches suggests that the settlement had been carefully laid out dividing the available space into regular plots. The ditches served to define the plots and also to provide





drainage. No direct evidence of buildings, timber or masonry, has yet been found in situ but fragments of typical Roman roof tile indicate the presence of structures somewhere in the vicinity. The Roman pottery recovered includes Samian ware (terra sigillata) from Gaul and amphorae from northern Italy, showing that the inhabitants had access to trading centres providing Roman luxuries. A fragment of a bronze brooch was also found. These are tantalizing hints that the settlement may have been of high status. In the early medieval period much of the area became a Christian cemetery. Last year we identified the western boundary of the burial ground defined by a ditch running N-S a few metres to the east of the Manoir. This year we were able to plot the approximate northern and southern limits of the burials, though we have yet to identify the actual boundary markers. The cemetery covered an area of about 45m N-S and exceeded 30m E-W. It was tightly packed with burials. In one small trench in front of the Cider Barn 10 separate grave cuts were identified in an area of 4.5sq m (but not all lay fully within

the trench). A reasonable estimate of the cemetery population would suggest more than 1200 individuals – not excessive for a burial ground which could have been in use for up to eight hundred years. We are hoping to obtain radiocarbon dates for some of the burials in the rare instances where bone fragments survive.

The excavations were able to demonstrate that the Cider Barn is not a medieval building but probably dates to the early years of Helier de Carteret's recolonization of the island. We did, however, discover an earlier building, constructed in dry-stone walling, that was in an advanced state of decay at the time when the Cider Barn was built. It lay within the cemetery and may have been one of the ecclesiastical buildings noted by de Carteret at the time of the settlement in 1563.

We need to find out more about this enigmatic structure.

One final discovery is worth mentioning. Sometime at the beginning of the twentieth century a small pit had been dug to dispose of rubbish cleared out of the Manoir. Among the rich and varied collection of debris, including old boots and cobbler's materials, was a photographic plate, possibly of the 1860's or 70's. Miraculously, it still showed two male figures staring nervously at the lens. The search for their identity is now on.

Above, left & right - Excavations at Le Manoir.





Old boots & cobbler's equipment found at Le Manoir.

Little Sark

During our initial field survey of Little Sark, Philip Perrée pointed out two distinct mounds on the cliffs above the west coast. These we designated Duvallerie 1 and Duvallerie 2. Both had the potential for being Neolithic burial mounds and deserved investigation.

Duvallerie 1 was an elongated mound projecting into the field from the cliff-edge scrub. A trial trench laid out across it quickly showed that it was a natural geological formation.

Duvallerie 2 was quite different. It was a slight, oval-shaped, mound with a single pointed stone projecting some 0.7m above ground in the centre. Our initial interpretation was that it was a standing stone around which a mound had been built – a

type of monument well known in Brittany and southwestern Britain. Excavation, however, showed it to be far more interesting. Originally the “standing stone” had been part of a small raised tor of natural granodiorite. At some stage much of it had been cut away to leave a single column of living rock standing to a height of 1.2m above the surrounding lowered surface. This surface, of freshly quarried rock had

The Little Sark excavation



been levelled in places using large lumps of white quartzite. The “standing stone” was no ordinary piece of rock but was chosen to be exposed because it encapsulated the interface between the intrusive granodiorite and the gneiss – a feature created some 60 million years ago when the molten granodiorite began to force its way upwards. It must have been the unusual nature of these two juxtaposed rock types that attracted attention and led to the rock being exposed as a standing monolith. Pottery found in the crevices of the rock platform suggests that the creation of the monument dates to the Neolithic period. At some stage, after its initial exposure, turves were piled up around the stone probably completely covering it. Subsequently the turf mound eroded exposing the top of the stone.

The Duvalerie “standing stone” is a remarkable, possibly unique, monument. It is a reminder of the reverence with which the early settlers treated

the natural landscape in which they lived.

The excavations of 2018 have added much to our growing understanding of Sark’s prehistory and early history. So, what next? We have three sites in mind for 2019. First, we would like to return to the Manoir to learn more of the Roman settlement and of the enigmatic medieval building. We would also like to return to the site on Little Sark, near the Sablonnerie where, in 2015-17, we exposed a small part of a Neolithic settlement. New radiocarbon dates now show the site to date to the 48th century BC. At such an early date these must have been among the pioneer farmers to establish themselves in the region. Finally, we hope to explore a possible Early Bronze Age house on Gouliot headland close to where some years ago Jo Birch found a superb barbed and tanged flint arrow-head. It is an ambitious programme but then Sark has so much to offer.

Barry Cunliffe 1.xi.18

Conservation Work

Blackthorn clearance has re-opened the marvellous view of l’Eperquerie and allowed some wildflowers to regenerate. Somewhat reluctantly, we put up split-rail barrier at the urging of the carriage drivers. There has been an increase in the carriage tours taking people up for the view. Inevitably, the rail has been used as a bike park but more people are walking the paths. In the centre of the island Sue Daly’s Sunflower Project, after a slow start, has blossomed into a field of gold, richly scented and buzzing with insects.



NATURE NOTES: Entomology, Ornithology, Marine Life

Entomologist and TV presenter George McGavin and his wife Lois stayed for five nights in July. George is a patron of the Alderney Watch Group and devoted much of his stay to encouraging our young naturalists in Sark Watch. The whole of Sark School went on a Bug Hunt picnic, netting insects in the Sunflower Field, the Wet Valley, and on the Eperquerie. At the Forest School George showed baby spiders hatching under a microscope. At the Hall there was a good crowd for his fascinating lecture titled 'What have insects ever done for us?' George has captured the enthusiasm and affection of our young naturalists and hopes to return. Following on from his visit came prizes to the five children who found the most interesting bugs. As a footnote to this, later in the summer, one of our youngest Guernsey members, Morley Tostevin, found a *Graphosoma italicum* – a fine black and red striped bug, feeding on wild carrot.

George and RA identified a Dartford Warbler on Derrible Headland, two sightings – possibly the same bird. This was encouraging since the species has not been noted in Sark for over three years. A Marsh Harrier was seen over the abandoned vineyard south of the Mill on 26th August. In the spring a migrant Osprey was seen fishing in Gouliot Passage (17th March). Young Peregrines have been active on the west coast during August. The nest in the gulch on Moie de Mouton was not used this year. Judging from their perching sites, this pair may have moved to the east side of Brecqhou.

'Sark sea lavender', growing low by the shore, was identified by Guernsey botanist and artist Joshua Gosselin as a sub species, *Limonium binoversum sercquense*, differing from Guernsey's *sarnense*. On a recent visit geneticist Myles Axton compared specimens under the microscope, and has suggested that determining the evolutionary relationship between the two would make an interest project for a student of plant genetics.

In the Jupiter Pool (Venus Headland), botanist and science journalist Susanne Masters photographed the iridescence of Bushy rainbow wrack. After her visit she donated the superb second edition of Seasearch's *Seaweeds of Britain and Ireland* (2017), together with the suggestion that La Société might start a herbarium for seaweeds. The technique for preserving seaweeds is technically simple and instructions downloaded from the web are lodged in the Marine Biology grey box. This would be a very useful and practical way to fulfil our obligations under the Ramsar Convention to monitor the Gouliot site and to keep a watchful eye on invasive marine flora.

So much to be done!

Best wishes to all our members with hopes for a fine Indian Summer.

The Editor would be pleased to hear of any Sark-related projects or comments that can be flagged up in the next News.

Richard Axton September 2018
raxton@guernsey.net

