

La Société Sercquaise

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



Summer News 2016

Obituary - Seigneur Michael Beaumont

Michael Beaumont's sudden death on 3rd July has brought great sadness and the expression of much affection and respect. As President of La Société since its foundation in 1975, Michael worked for its interests to the end. In recent years when the focus of his life was caring for Diana, hardly a month went by without his popping down to the Heritage Room to deposit a photograph or document. Typically, he shunned publicity, working quietly in the back room for the long-term good of the Society and the island.

When Dame Sibyl died in 1974 the sense of an era ending focused in creating La Société Sercquaise, modelled on the long-established societies of the larger islands and devoted to the study and preservation of Sark's heritage, its unique history and natural history. Frank Rountree showed the way, with others we are fortunate to still have with us. His Bird Group became a model of how enthusiasts of all ages could work together to develop expertise and gather vital records of change in the natural world – and bring the knowledge to publication. Jeannie Grant and Shirley Carré worked on history and archaeology; Marcia Marsden took charge of botanical records and specimens. Wes Gibbons, then a geology student, worked in the Seigneurie Gardens and was housed by the Beaumonts, who encouraged him - as they did many young students - to publish his research. Genealogy of Sark's families and tenements was given a great launch when Allan De Carteret (co-author of *The Fief of Sark*, 1969) presented his remarkable alphabetised transcript of the Registers of Baptisms, Marriages and Burials, 1570-1899) to mark our inauguration.

By 1979 Michael had sorted out inherited problems in house and garden sufficiently to remark to me, 'One day I must do something about my grandmother's papers'. He and I and my late wife, Marie, were staring into a large chest where there were three bundles of documents, labelled 'History 1,2,3'. The Seigneurie Archive project was born. While Marie and I sorted and calendared

2000 miscellaneous parchments and papers, Michael took the public records from the Greffe in a knapsack to Guernsey to make microfilm copies. He then got the Greffe office moved from the mouldy cell it then was. From the first he insisted that the Seigneurie Archive would be computerised and its data be thoroughly retrievable. He bought an Amstrad and together we designed a database. When the records occupied more than the 360 Kb that floppy disks allowed in those days, he solved the technical problem. When the Amstrad was not in use for in-putting records, Martin Locke would drop in to type-set the music for his Songs of Sark. The Calendar of Sark Seigneurie Archive was published by the Public Record Office in 1991. An unforeseen consequence was its use in a series of complex historical and legal problems that occupied the Seigneur and Sark for the next two decades. Michael's methodical backroom work on all aspects of Sark's administration led him to make distinctions between the private and public roles of



the Seigneur that had been clouded by his more authoritarian grandmother. It is a pity that his own mild and practical reforms were not recognised by those in Sark who thought their seigneur should be 'more feudal'. Once the Heritage Room was established Michael asked the Society to be custodian of the whole collection.

As trustee of Island property Michael was keen that the Girls' School be put to public use in 2004 and backed the scheme to develop it as a Visitor Centre housing the Tourism Office and a Heritage Room run by La Société. Restoration of the windmill undertaken by Jeremy LaTrobe-Bateman and me in 2001 prompted Michael to research, design and build a scale model of the Victorian machinery. The meticulous work took him four years. One morning in 2007 it was there in the Heritage Room with some laminated sheets explaining the workings. He never looked for fanfares. As well as making over the Archive to our Room, he donated rare books and Victorian

harbour plans from La Seigneurie library, together with some of our most iconic objects: the section of an anti-personnel mine, the ceremonial dagger surrendered by the Occupying forces in May 1945. Sibyl Hathaway's biographer, Barbara Stoney had donated 50 cassettes of interviews done in the 1970s, so Michael put the material on CDs. He digitized the pioneering photographs taken by his great great grandfather, W.T.Collings. He was a generous supporter of the Cider Barn project and when SAstroS (a spin-off from La Société's Astronomy Group) needed a site for an observatory Michael volunteered a dark spot of headland in his Vieux Clos de Bas.

We have so much to be grateful to Michael for, grateful for his scientific, inquiring mind, his practicality, his foresight, his generosity. In La Société we shall greatly miss him but we should also rejoice in his legacy and take good care of it for future generations.

Book Launch

On 21st May we helped Eric Lee launch his gripping WWII tale, Operation Balsalt: the Sark Raid and Hitler's Commando Order. In the morning, over 40 people braved the drizzle to follow the route from the Hogsback taken by Appleyard, Lassen the Dane and the British commandos in October 1942. In the evening twice that number gathered at the Hall to

celebrate the publication with Eric's extended family. Eric orchestrated the event brilliantly, so that after he and Jeremy had spoken, we heard from the son of one of the commandos and then, via the wonders of modern technology, from the last survivor of the raid, speaking from his Australian home.

Eric explaining what happened on the site where the Commandos encountered the German soldiers



Exhibitions

The Heritage Room was open briefly at Easter and then from late April on five mornings a week, occasional Saturdays and special days for the parties (mostly cruises) that have made up an increasing proportion of visitors. Spring Flowers of Sark accompanied the Wildflower Fortnight Walks which Susan Synnott co-ordinated with the Tourism officers. Sark Harbours and Fishing ran through May and June to accompany Guernsey's 2016 theme, The Sea and drew attention to Victor Hugo's stay in Sark in June 1859. It was an attractive mix of plans and photographs with traditional fishing gear, complementing the exhibition on fish and marine life next door. Two

dozen paintings lent by members and friends formed the core of an attractive show of Sark Coastal Watercolours. They were accompanied by printed books (two copies of The Book of Sark – thanks to a generous recent donation) and biographical details on the artists, compiled by Jane Norwich and others. Thanks to her, and to Susan Synnott, Amanda and Howard Petrie, Christine Audrain, and to the owners of the paintings.

With the watercolours safely restored to their owners as I write, a ground-breaking (literally!) new exhibition is taking shape: Sark Silver Mines 1835-1847 is the work of David and Susan Synnott, the result of long and detailed historical research and archaeological investigation. It will be opened by Christopher Harris (who is currently President of Jersey's National Trust) at a members' preview on Monday 21st August and will run for the rest of the year.

The Cider Barn has a new plaque of Welsh slate (left), thanks to a member's generosity. The building has remained open almost every day so that visitors can view the 2015 materials relating to Le Manoir, Michael Beaumont's windmill model and the Archaeology panels, as well as exploring the building itself.



Sark Silver Mine Exhibition Opening Speech By Christopher Harris, President, The National Trust for Jersey

David Synnott has kindly asked me to open this exhibition in my role as President of the National Trust for Jersey. I am pleased to do this. The links between Jersey and Sark have always been strong, as is witnessed by the number of Jersey people who live here. This is an important exhibition both for Sark and for the Channel Islands as a whole. I want to say a few words to explain why the silver mine was so important, and why this exhibition is so helpful for us in coming to understand the events of the first half of the nineteenth century. I ask you to think back to around 1790. The island was remote from the modern world;

Remains of the engine house above Port Gorey





Daniel Vaudin - the only known photograph of one of Sark's miners.

one of its residents who went on to be a leading Methodist was described by a contemporary preacher as "illiterate and believing in sorcerers". In the 1790's Sark was difficult to get to, an island with limited formal educational provision for its children but a healthy place to live, so there was generally an excess of births over deaths. That is what the records tell us. That means that Sark was a place from which young adults emigrated to earn a livelihood in Guernsey or elsewhere. It was not yet a place to which outsiders came to live. The census data for years before 1841 proves that. By 1790 Methodism had just arrived in the Island. By then Sark was a place where political tensions between the Seigneur and his Tenants ran high. The Seigneur's monopoly of milling had been challenged in the Royal Court in 1796 and the following year, in 1797, an attempt was made to burn down the Seigneurial Mill, although the miscreants were never apprehended. By 1855, so much had changed. The island had become part of the modern world; English Christian names were the norm, children were educated in a primary school, tourism had become established and

steam packets linked the island with the outside world. The Seigneurs were now from the liberal Collings family rather than the traditionalist Le Pelleys.

In all of this the silver mine was in my view both the symbol and the catalyst for Sark's entry into the modern world. The silver mine marked the coming of the industrial revolution to Sark. The machinery used was "state of the art". It was the equipment used by the developed and sophisticated mines found in Cornwall, which then produced most of the world's tin. Nowhere was mining then more developed than in Cornwall. It was the world leader in mining technology. The Guernsey shareholders were the speculative investors. They invested in mining in large part because it was a fashionable area to "get rich quick". A mining mania swept Britain in the early years of the 1830's. There were ventures in Herm and Guernsey as well. It was seen as a way to get an exceptional return, just like internet startups today. Elsewhere this mania had driven investment in canals and was to go on to drive investment in railways. The ability to concentrate local capital on a specific project was one of the characteristics of the early nineteenth century. Investors were driven by a desire to better the return they could obtain from government stock.

The Sark and Herm Mining Company went to great lengths to encourage investors. From 1835 they encouraged tourist day tips to the mine, in the hope that visitors would become shareholders. That was one of the beginnings of tourism in Sark. They also had crafted a silver tea and coffee set made of Sark Silver which was displayed in the window of 25 Commercial Arcade in St. Peter Port.

So in a sense we should think of the Sark silver mine as a high tech start up. The simple truth is that that is what it was; it was a high tech start up which commenced in 1835 using state of the art machinery and had failed by 1847. Its demographic impact on Sark was huge. In the summer of 1841 the population of Little Sark had increased to 172 and the population of Sark as a whole to 790, its largest in recorded history. The mine was a large project with its five shafts descending up to 600 feet below sea level and lateral shafts running horizontally for 800 yards out including a short length under the sea to the South West of Little Sark, so that the surf on the shore above could be heard by the miners as they worked below sea level.

This exhibition tells the story of the mine with great clarity. But it also tells another story; the story of the decline and fall of the Le Pelley Seigneurs and in particular of the financial ruin

of Ernest Le Pelley who was Seigneur from 1839 to 1849. If the Le Pelley's had not invested in the silver mines they would have continued to hold the Fief. There would have been no Collings Seigneurs, no Dame Sybil Hathaway and Michael and Christopher Beaumont would never have become Seigneurs of Sark.

I have said enough of the importance of the Silver Mine in the History of Sark. Now I want to say something about this exhibition and the man responsible for creating it. David Synnott is a modest man. He claims not to be a man of letters. I have to say that he is entirely wrong. He is truly a man of letters. The display boards which he has prepared tell us exactly that. They are well written and thought provoking. They tell us a lot about the 1840's and about life in Sark. They are written both with an understanding of the broader world and an empathy for the ordinary people who worked at the mine, whether miners or the bal maidens, the women who worked on the surface to crush the ore. The display boards tell us how hard life was in Little Sark when the mines were being worked.

David Synnott's work has also been wide ranging. The surprise for me when looking at a preview of this exhibition a couple of days ago was to see the photographs from the arid regions of north west South Africa where Cornish mine buildings had been constructed in Okiep in the 1880's. I had never known that such buildings existed.

When David moved to the Barracks he realised that he had something exceptional on his doorstep, which had a story to be told. This exhibition is a tribute to his tenacity and hard

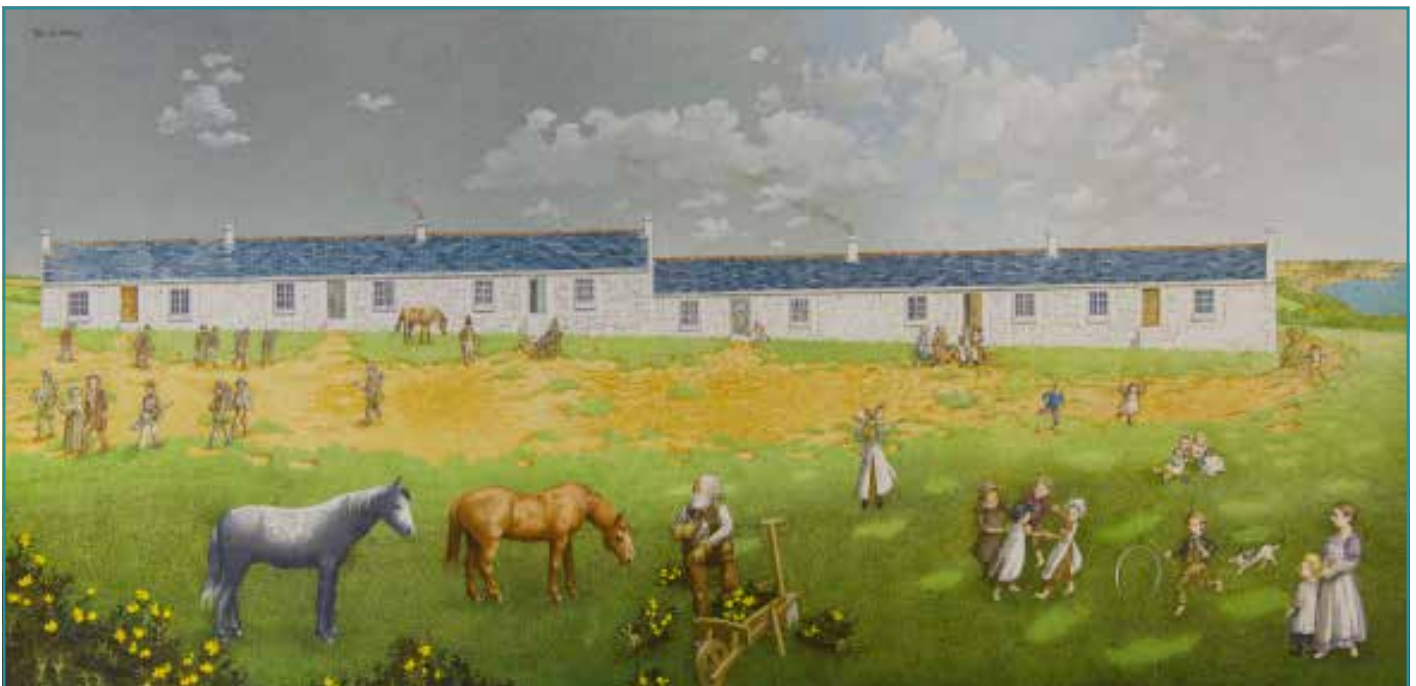
work, and to the work of his wife Susan, whose beautiful photographs illustrate the exhibition. On behalf of the Channel Islands as a whole and of Sark, I would like to thank them both for their work. Sark is truly in their debt.

I would also like to thank all the many friends of Sark who have helped David with his work, who have pointed him to old records, explored the mine shafts and recovered artefacts. I want to thank both Elizabeth Perrée and her brother Philip Perrée whose wise stewardship of land in Little Sark has helped preserve the Silver Mine. Thanks are due as well to La Société Sercquaise for hosting this exhibition.

There are two things which I would like to see in the future. The first is possible. The second is probably not. The first is that La Société Sercquaise should put this exhibition in its entirety on its website; both the text and the photographs. This would need David and Susan's consent but I very much hope that would be forthcoming. It will then be a source of information for generations to come. My second ambition, which is much harder to achieve, relates to the tea and coffee set made from Sark silver in the 1830's by the Sark and Herm Mining Company to encourage Guernsey shareholders to invest in the mines. It has been long lost but I do so hope it can be found and can be displayed in Sark.

I hope that you will take the opportunity to study this exhibition closely; the more time you give to reading David's text the more you will be rewarded. It is a privilege to declare this exhibition open. Thank you.

A modern painting of the miners' barracks on Little Sark as it might have been on a summer day in 1839



Archaeology

Members and friends donated £10,000 to make it possible for Sir Barry Cunliffe's Oxford-based team to excavate for another fortnight – their twelfth dig. The familiar team arrived on 11 June and got to work at once on the new site, a re-sown field southeast of Plaisance, where Andrew Prevel's winter walking had revealed large quantities of worked flint. Two parallel trenches 15m x 2m revealed surprising variations in the depth of the loess, and regular signs of primitive agriculture. Soil samples taken are being sifted and washed by a SocSercq group under Philippa's direction: Jane Norwich, Susan Synnott and Shakira Christodoulou.

The site near Plaisance



Simultaneously, the menhir site in Little Sark (that last year yielded a Beaker cyst on the north side) was opened on the south side of the stone. A complex excavation (due in part to the work of rabbits in the sand) finally revealed parallel trenching with spade marks similar to those on the Plaisance site, some fragments of early Neolithic pottery and an extensive hearth area. Substantial charcoal samples are being radio carbon dated at the Oxford Lab and the potsherds will be sectioned and studied by a ceramic petrologist. (The thin sections will become part of our reference library for use with the polarizing microscope). Our Archaeology Fund makes it possible for the Society to fund these important technical analyses. Positive



The team at work by the Little Sark menhir

results will confirm Barry's hunch that the site shows occupation by early Neolithic farmers, perhaps as early as 5500 BC – and therefore 3000 years earlier than the Beaker burial a few feet away on the other side of the standing stone.

The third excavation continued to explore and map the medieval buildings found at La Seigneurie last year (between the 'Chapel' and the southeast corner of the house) and to find any ancient foundations to the Great Wall. This colossal structure continues to look – archaeologically – like a folly, and challenges the logic of history and usage. After two days of backfilling in the rain the deep trench behind the wall was left open so that Andrew and Richard can follow out some interesting (but still relatively modern!) features in what remains of the summer.

A fourth excavation was mooted beside the Manoir, just south of the Cider Barn. This is the likeliest site for the manorial church or chapel known to have existed in the 12th century. The manor itself may well be on the site of a major building that is far earlier and the whole area – if not too disturbed - is the likeliest to yield evidence from the Roman and early Christian period. But it will have to wait till next year. Plans are afoot already!

With best wishes to all our members for the rest of the season

Richard Axton

27/8/15