

La Société Sercquaise

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



Winter News 2021-22

Dr Richard Axton MBE – farewell to a great friend of Sark

It is with very great sadness that we announce the passing of Dr Richard Axton, Hon Director of the Museum and Archive, and leader of La Société since 2005. For forty years, Richard worked tirelessly to preserve Sark's history, environment, heritage and way of life, for which he was awarded an MBE in the Queen's birthday honours list on July 7th 2021.

On working holidays from 1980 until 2002, Richard and his beloved late wife Marie documented the Seigneurie archives, preserving an invaluable resource on Anglo-Norman law and life from Elizabethan times through to the German Occupation. An epic project, thankfully, for which the Axtons' academic language and history specialisms were perfectly fitted. In latter years, Richard continued this interest in Sark language, assisting Martin Neudörfel to come to Sark to document Sarkese with our last surviving speakers.

Fundraising was his particular forte, and he collectively raised more than £300,000 for restoration projects, including founding the Isle of Sark Brewery, and his last and biggest drive, the Sark Community Dairy. For 14 years, he raised annual funds for Sir Barry Cunliffe's archaeological excavations, and enabled publication of 12 years of discoveries. The monograph is available from La Société, and please do get in touch if you would like to support this year's archaeological work.

Much of Sark's public heritage survives due to Richard's determined efforts. He started off securing the old girls' school, seeing it transformed into the Tourist office and Heritage Room. A hands-on builder and curator, he actively helped restore the 1571 Mill, the Cider Barn, and the Eperquerie Star Fort. Sark Henge was his design for the 450th Anniversary of the 1565 Sark Charter in 2015, and again, he was never happier than with his sleeves rolled up. Putting younger conservationists to shame, he

was often out on the Eperquerie or in Creux Belet valley, to push back aggressive plant species and let rarities thrive. And he'd readily join in with Conservation Commandos and Sark Community Blooms, thermos in hand.

He had a gift for bringing people together, smoothing over differing opinions to get the best outcome for the community, such as the creation of the Société's Charter, the designation of the Gouliot Caves as Ramsar Wetlands of International Importance, and establishing the Observatory to consolidate Sark as the world's first Dark Sky Island. As the Lieutenant Governor said at his MBE conferral, the citation of everything Richard had done for Sark read more like a novel; it was the most extensive he'd seen.

It only skimmed the surface. Richard and his daughter Lucy kindly worked on a whole-island map of the many projects he worked so hard to maintain; we certainly have boat-sized shoes to fill to continue his legacy. La Société, and Sark, miss him terribly.

Richard at work on the renovation of the Cider Barn



Exhibition 'Post-war - Sark Gets Back on its Feet' by Susan Synnott

Sark Exhibitions on the period of World War II have mostly concentrated on the Occupation, the Liberation or the Deportees. But the focus of the 2021 exhibition was the decade after 1945 under the title **Post-war – Sark gets back on its feet**. From materials in the Société's collection, including many newspaper articles, and from photographs and information contributed by members and other residents, a very comprehensive picture of Sark life was exhibited.

Liberation Day on Sark was 10th May and before the end of that month mine clearing had started with the help of The Royal Engineers and the Prisoners of War. This was followed by the reconstruction of the road surface and the railings on La Coupée. Financial claims for damages, notably to housing, and for thefts of such items as wireless and guns were progressed towards settlements. Overseas *Friends of Sark* donated money for various projects. Entertainments returned with football matches between the Sark team and The Royal Artillery and The Royal Engineers, who temporarily remained on the island, film shows and variety shows were held and the Sark Dramatic Group, known then as The Draffig Lads produced *Whitsuntide Revels*. By mid July 1945 a Cattle Show was held in a field belonging to the Dame of Sark.

Although at first the ferry service was less than fully reliable, with the boat the *White Heather*, by early 1946 Sark was definitely open for visitors with hotels, guesthouses and tearooms advertising in the Sark brochure. Work was resumed on the new Maseline Harbour which was opened by the then Princess Elizabeth and Prince Philip in June 1949. Perhaps the highlight of the exhibition was the model of the 1940s crane hoisting model concrete blocks, all constructed by Bobby Dewe.

During the war years there had been a minimal electricity service run by "Silverlight" gas, but this closed down after the war. The Sark



Bobby Dewe's working model of the crane used to build Maseline Harbour.

Electricity Co began its long career at the request of Chief Pleas in 1948. In 1950-'51 there was a new distraction with the making of the film *Appointment with Venus*, and politics embarked on a new course with the Reform Law of 1951. During the same period Sark returned to a normal banking service and obtained a new doctor, ambulance service and post office. After the perils and privations of the war years the Sark people certainly put their best foot forward and got down to returning to normal as soon as they could. The exhibition shone a light on all this activity.

Notice of AGM

Our AGM will be held on Thursday 7th April 2022 at 5.15 pm in the Cider Barn if weather permits. Please would section leaders send their reports to Jo.birch@cwgsy.net as a Word document by Monday, 7th March. We also welcome any items for inclusion in the Agenda. After some years as Botany leader, Susan Synnott would like to find a replacement, so please, come forward if you'd like to be our botanist.

Sark Spring Nature Week

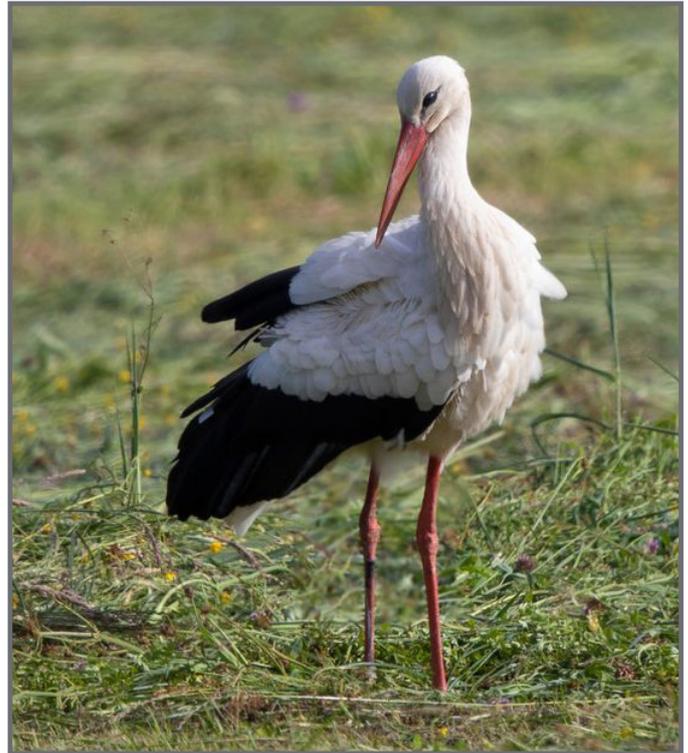
Trevor and Lesley Bourgaize and Julie Davis, from Nature Guernsey, joined us again for a week at the end of April. Bird ringing demonstrations were held for Sark schoolchildren and Société Sercquaise members, as well as a series of bird and wildflower walks. The bird ringing results were disappointing because the weather was still and very cold. Only forty birds were ringed. Highlights were the Grasshopper Warbler and Sedge Warbler.

One of the firecrests ringed here in Sark on 23rd October 2020 was found in Crozet, Ain, France on 19th April. Unfortunately he had died. It is incredible to think that this tiny creature had flown the equivalent of London to Aberdeen (715 km/444 miles) to spend the winter 14.5 km/9 miles from Geneva.

Rarities

This year has been a good year for rarities. Jeremy La Trobe Bateman reported seeing a Dartford Warbler at Le Platon on 4th April. A Nightjar was heard calling and seen flying up the meadow at Le Vallon d'Or on 22nd May. A turtle dove spent quite a bit of time in trees

Sedge Warbler



White Stork photographed by Darren Dewe

at the Vicarage from late May onwards but it is unclear whether there was a breeding pair. A male Eurasian Golden Oriole dropped into June Higham's garden for a rest on 15th May; much to her delight. There were a number of sightings in May, June and July of a Red Kite in Dixcart, La Seigneurie, La Rondellerie and Port a la Jument. In June Darren Dewe saw a white stork in the field next to the Millenium Field. Darren was able to take a record photograph. White storks were last seen in Sark on 25th May 1990. The sighting was reported to Knepp Estate in West Sussex who confirmed that it was one of their reintroduced birds. At the end of July hundreds of Manx and Balearic Shearwaters were seen rafting off Bec du Nez. More recently three Common Gulls were seen at Banquette for several days in September and a Purple Sandpiper was seen at Rouge Terrier in mid-November.

Subscriptions

Reminders will be sent out with Reports and AGM papers, as usual. For simplicity, the subscription year coincides with our accounting year, at the end of February. Subscriptions are technically due on 1st March and before 30th April. *Please note that there are a considerable number of members who have been remiss in paying their dues and some are only paying the old rate. Present subscription rates are £20 for family membership and £15 for a single.*

Events in the Cider Barn *by Shakira Christodoulou*



Getting creative in the Cider barn, above, with writer A. L. Kennedy and, below, some of the local books that were read from. Pictures by Susan Synnott & Caragh Rose Bailey.



This atmospheric Heritage treasure was busy over 2021, despite the vagaries of lockdown and unpredictable visitorship. It's always a cheering venue with the stove alight and a bring-and-share supper, and the acoustics are great for music or spoken word. On Old Midsummer, a St John's Day veillie included mediaeval summer songs sung in four parts, poems, readings, and mulled cider, since it was (still!) chilly.

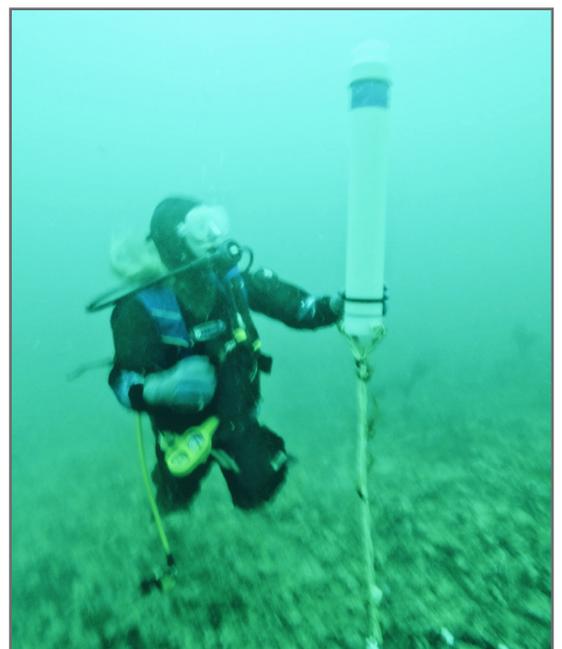
In September, La Société kindly let Creative Sark take over for Sark's first Literary Weekend. A songwriting workshop from Kiya Ashton (plus a surprise appearance from James Dumbelton and friends), a writing workshop, and an evening around the fire for writers to read new work and find supportive ears kept participants busy. The star attraction was a wonderful evening of readings led by A. L. Kennedy, with welcome additions from several Sark authors. And mulled cider again – Autumn's chilly too.

As Christmas sped in, Creative Sark filled the space with a bustling craft market, where artisans displayed an ever-impressive array of sweets, pottery, silverware, woollens, jams and homeware. Decorated in a rustic Mediaeval style for Christmas, the Barn showed off everyone's talent beautifully. Mulled wine, this time. What else!

Fish Intel - Underwater Monitoring Project *by Sue Day*

Sark was approached, through Sue Daly, to ask whether we would like to take part in a scheme to monitor key tagged species in local waters. The project, Fish Intel, is part of a cross-Channel partnership, which includes France and the UK, and would entail funding an innovative underwater acoustic receiver to record tagged species of Bass, Pollack, Bream, Crawfish and Atlantic Blue Fin Tuna as well as cetaceans over a three year period. The project is being led in the Channel Islands by the Jersey Marine Resources Unit who will deploy and monitor the receivers.

The receiver will cost £1,174 per annum for the 3-year project. The Société Sercquaise and Sark's Agriculture, Environment and Sea Fisheries Committee have committed to fund this between them, both paying 50% of the annual cost. Our receiver will be sited off the east coast of Sark in early spring this year and it is hoped that it will contribute important data to help retain the sustainability of our fish stocks.



The acoustic receiver seen underwater



A Scaly Cricket photographed by Sue Daly in Dixcart Bay

Scaly Cricket Survey

Eleven members of Sark Watch Group (junior section of Société Sercquaise) carried out important conservation work on 24th September. A colony of the endangered Scaly Cricket was found on Dixcart beach in 1998 which provided the first evidence that it was in fact a native British species. It had previously only been found on Chesil beach in Dorset and was thought to have been introduced in imported shingle from Madeira and Portugal. This rare creature has been found in Guernsey Sark Herm (2019) and Alderney (2020) and at three UK sites in Devon Dorset and Wales.

A survey was carried out on 30th April when Trevor and Lesley Bourgaize and Julie Davis visited from Nature Guernsey. A total of one adult female and 365 nymphs were found. In September the survey was replicated following a presentation about habitat and lifecycle of Scaly Crickets. The children also learned about the importance of conservation and about the threatened colony at Spur Point in Guernsey. There was great excitement as the traps were opened because of the numbers found. The children set about recording their findings very enthusiastically and with great accuracy. A total of 756 (432 adults and 324 nymphs) were found in 14 pitfall traps laced with cat food and chicken nuggets which is a very healthy population indeed. The Scaly Crickets were safely returned to the areas where they were found.

Some of the new trees



Plant a Tree for Climate Change

Sark Watch Group (Years 2 & 3) have been learning how trees can help stop climate change by removing carbon dioxide from the air, storing carbon in the trees and soil and releasing oxygen into the atmosphere to improve air quality. Trees also help stop soil erosion and flooding and are good for wildlife too. An Oak tree *Quercus robur* can support 423 different species of insects. A total of 2,300 species of birds, animals, insects and lichen live on or near an Oak tree.

Of course on its own planting trees won't solve all the problems of Climate Change and World Leaders have been meeting in Glasgow, at the COP26 Conference to discuss what actions need to be taken to avert Climate Change and hopefully they will come up with some solutions. Good news is that over 100 of them have signed an agreement to stop deforestation by 2030. This will reduce carbon emissions by 10%.

Sark Watch Group did their bit for Climate Change in November by planting trees, including the mighty Oak.

Conservation Commandos *by Shakira Christodoulou*

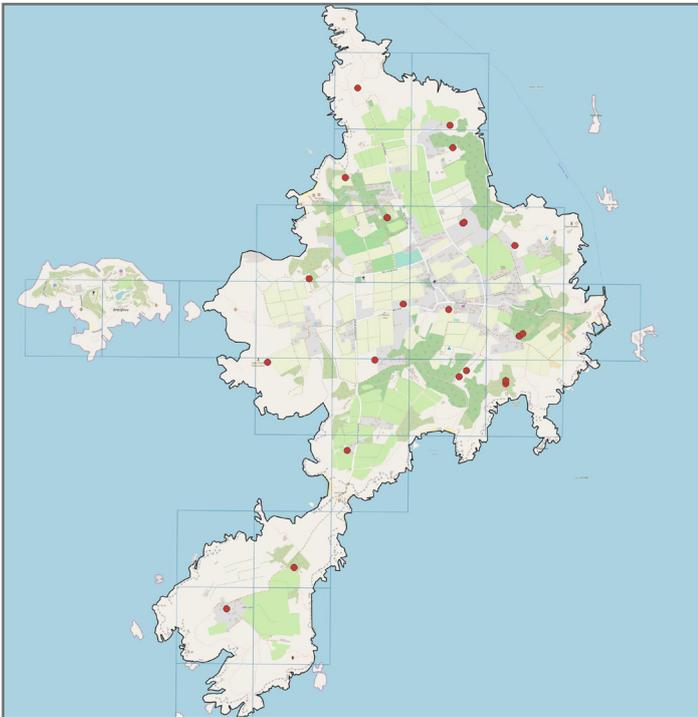
After two difficult years, when storms whipped away every weekend overwinter in 2019-2020, and then lockdown pinched the crucial 2021 post-Christmas months, the Conservation Commandos have already made a start this season, taking advantage of November's unusually beautiful weather to tackle invasive gorse at Pilcher Monument. Many years of Susan Synnott's hard work here is really paying off, with a sloped expanse of Bell and Ling Heather flowering well during the crucial butterfly breeding season for species like the rare Silver-Studded Blue. There's hope to open a corridor to another heather patch very nearby.

Other annual projects, including the bluebell meadow on Harbour Hill, the 'Heather Fortress' out at L'Éperquerie, and the inter-island Big Beach Clean are all coming up. 2021's Beach Clean was more successful than ever, with nine beaches litter-picked by separate households braving February rain to collect a total of 42kg of rubbish. If anyone would like to join our work-parties on dry Sunday afternoons, do get in touch. There may well be cake!



Ling Heather

The Bailiwick Bat Survey *by Lynda Higgins*



Sark bat survey locations

The Société Sercquaise took part in the Bailiwick Bat Survey this Summer. With the help of volunteers 18 out of the 23 mapped areas (500 meter squares) had at least one recording taken over 3 to 4 nights between April and October which resulted in almost 80% coverage. The data is currently being analysed. Early results suggest that 95% of the records are Common Pipistrelle and these are our most common species. Three other species of Pipistrelle bats are also present, as well as Daubenton's (the water bat), Natterer's and Brown and Grey Long Eared Bats. Rarer species such as Greater and Lesser Horseshoe, Brant's and Noctule bats also appeared in the data. A total of twelve species of bats were identified which is currently being verified. Recordings of the Lesser White-toothed Shrew which is unique to Sark and Jersey also appeared on the data which will help us map their locations. Results

from 2021 will be released in 2022. The research is being run by Professor Philip Atkinson (Head of International Research at BTO) in conjunction with States of Guernsey and is part of a four year study so if you want to be involved next year please contact Lynda Higgins.



Brown Argus photographed by Andy Smith

Pollinator Project

The Société Sercquaise has been taking part in the research for the Pollinator Project for a second year. Insect data was gathered from Charles Maitland's garden and also from the meadow site at Le Vallon d'Or. The Covid Pandemic has thwarted the research but when the data is analysed it is hoped that it will identify not only which species are found in Sark but also their DNA profile and reveal how that may differ from the other islands. Early indications are that we have a very healthy insect population compared to Guernsey and even Alderney.

We enjoyed visits from Dr Miranda Bane (Head of Pollinator Research) and Andy Smith in August. Miranda gave her talk *Counting on the Bees* on 11th August and Andy Smith led a butterfly walk. During their visit the Brown Argus was recorded as well as the Queen of Spain Fritillary found at Vallon d'Or. It is hoped following an earlier sighting of a mating pair at La Seigneurie Gardens by Sue Daly in

August 2020 that they may have bred successfully. Andy Smith completed a full butterfly survey at the end of August. Barry Wells one of the founders of the Pollinator Project also visited in October and entranced the Sark Watch Group (Year 7 & 8) with his slow motion films of bees and gave a further talk on the work of the Pollinator Project to Société members.

It is hoped that Miranda can return to Sark in the Summer of 2022 with her results and to arrange further visits by Barry Wells and Andy Smith.

Tales from the Moth Trap

The Heath Actinic moth trap donated by Roger Long of Société Jersiaise has been running at a garden site for the last twelve months to re-establish moth records in Sark. Surveys have been taken twice a week, when weather permits, between sunset and sunrise from 31st March to 17th November 2021. Moths are then photographed, recorded and set free. Many of the moths caught were as expected throughout the year and reflected the food plants found in the garden and surrounding woodlands.

March/April – Hebrew Character,

May – Buff Ermine, Pale Tussock

June – Light Rmeralf, Cream Spot Tiger Moth

July – Hawk Moths/Jersey Tiger Moth

August – Rosy Footman, Herald

September – Small Magpie, Flamed Shoulder

October/November – Great Oak Beauty, Flame Brocade, Radford's Flame Shoulder.

Once in a while expert moth trappers are rewarded with a rare specimen. In April a Streamer Moth was caught by Trevor Bourgaize during the Spring Nature Week and this is believed to be the first record for Sark. On the 24th October what is described as the Holy Grail of moth trapping was caught; a Clifden Nonpareil or Blue Underwing. Considering that I have only been running the trap for just over a year that was a magnificent result indeed. My thanks go to Trevor Bourgaize from Nature Guernsey, and Andy Smith, Andy Marquis and Janey Cleal from the Pollinator Project for their help in identifying difficult species. I will be running the trap again next year and results are posted on the Sark Entomology Facebook page.



A Clifden Nonpareil or Blue Underwing