

La Société Sercquaise

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



Summer News 2025

La Société's Seabird Project is a Winner!



Michelle Steele, Chair of the judging panel, said it was a very worthy winner. "We're proud to support the Seabird Monitoring Project and thrilled to see guillemot numbers rising around Sark. It's fantastic to see Sark win the Best Conservation Project Award – joining Guernsey, Alderney and Herm in receiving this top honour. The Insurance Corporation felt that, not only does it provide vital data on a key indicator species for ocean health, it also actively involves the local community through education, tourism, and citizen science."

The prize money of £3,000 will be used to continue our programme of conservation projects here on Sark. A report on the project by Lynda can be seen on the following page.

We are very proud to have won the first prize in the 35th annual Bailiwick Conservation Awards. The awards, announced in June this year, recognise those people who undertake projects that display their concern for the environment. The aim of the competition is to bring these efforts to the attention of others and, as a consequence, to highlight the important environmental conservation work that takes place throughout the Channel Islands. Our entry, La Société Sercquaise Seabird Monitoring Project, is an initiative led by Lynda Higgins (pictured above) that uses drone technology to monitor the growing guillemot colonies around Sark.



Sark Seabird Monitoring Project by Lynda Higgins

The main focus of this study is the guillemot colonies at Les Burons, the islets opposite the harbours, and Les Autelets, the rock stacks just north of Port Du Moulin on the west coast. Sark has the largest guillemot colony in the Channel Islands. It is a real success story because in 1968 there were only 76 breeding pairs on Les Autelets, but by 2022 there were 175 breeding pairs. The colony grew so large that a new colony started up at Les Burons in 2019 and by 2022 that had grown to 200 breeding pairs (750 birds on the two colonies). Last year we started using drone surveys. By using drones taking aerial photography and video footage it is possible to gain a more accurate whole colony count than can be gained from observations made from a moving boat when you are dealing with such large numbers. It also takes far less time and potentially has less impact on the feeding habits of the guillemots. The plan is to gather data for five years, but there is no reason why this method could not continue alongside the boat surveys for the other seabirds.

The data for 2025 has been received in the last few days. Comparing colony count numbers with last year, we now have over 1,000 birds spread



Guillemots on the Burons photographed from the drone with dots to mark each bird

over the two colonies. Interestingly taking the mean average at Les Burons there has been an increase of 80% since last year while numbers at Les Autelets have declined by 21%, but overall combined numbers increased by 32%. It will be interesting to see how numbers change over the coming years. These results will also be uploaded to the BTO Seabird Monitoring Programme which monitors seabird colonies throughout Great Britain.

Guillemots on the Burons seen from the sea



The Making of Mr Pye – 40 years on by *Jeremy La Trobe-Bateman*

La Société's *Mr Pye* exhibition of photos and memorabilia in our Heritage Room is proving very popular and much commented on by both those that were there and lovers of the book. A couple of visitors who saw the exhibition earlier this year said that they had been on their honeymoon staying at Dixcart Hotel 40 years ago and had watched the filming. They were delighted to find our exhibition while celebrating their ruby wedding anniversary in Sark.

For me, it brings back a multitude of happy memories, as I had the role of Local Liaison, working closely with crew and actors. Happily, Derek Jacobi, in the title role, and Judy Parfitt are still with us, but it is still nice to recall the likes of Betty Marsden and Pat Hayes, as well as all the characters among the crew. Everyone (except the Director, Michael Darlow, who was constantly in a rage) seems to view their two months on Sark as a joyous holiday. Huge amounts of alcohol were consumed, boosting the Islands economy in an unintended way.

Here are some recollections of mine, regrettably alcohol related:

On one occasion, Bunter, myself and Bill, the props man, struggled to tow the huge rubber

whale round to Port du Moulin for a big shoot. Beached at last, Bill suggested a drink at the nearest hostelry – we indicated La Moinerie. Bill looked up at the path and said, "No, on the level". We went to Herm!

On this same shoot, Betty Marsden was to be lowered in a chair from the top of the Port du Moulin arch. She took one look and declined – blank faces all round until someone asked if anything could be done to change her mind. She suggested a bottle of whiskey to start with; it was produced and she set to. Half way down the bottle she said, "Let's go!" and all went well. My job then was to get her back up the path – no easy task, but eventually she was loaded onto a trailer at the top and taken home – horizontally. Such a delightful person; she regularly gave dinners to those Sark people helping behind the scenes.

So, catch it while you can! They are all there in their glory. Our Heritage Room, next door to the Visitor Centre, is open every weekday during the summer from 11am to 1pm (Our thanks, as always, to Sue Daly for collating and arranging the display.)

Derek Jacobi having his horns fitted by makeup artist Pam Megar with Judy Parfitt (Miss Dredger) watching



Latest Accessions *by Sue Daly*



We have had two lovely gifts this summer to add to our collections. Vanessa Innes has kindly donated three photograph albums created by her great-grandfather George Sang from Scotland who visited Sark with his wife Florence and their daughter Mary in 1928. The family obviously loved the cliffs and climbing as there are many views of Sark's coast and rock pools but there are also some photographs of buildings. The three albums make a wonderful addition to our photographic archive, and we are very grateful to Vanessa, a Guernsey lady now living in Dorest, for her generous gift.

Deryck and Frances Hamon have given us a second batch of Sark items, mostly paintings from artists including Authur Bradbury, Ethel Cheesewright and the Wallers. Some of the framed pieces will be loaned to the Sark Art Gallery in the Avenue and we will be selecting

some of the unframed works to have framed and put on view in our Heritage Room. The Hamons' gift also included some audio tapes of Sark people speaking patois which will add to our audio collection. Once again, we are very grateful to Deryck and Frances for their extremely generous donations.



Swallowtail Butterfly

In 2011 something very special happened. A Swallowtail butterfly *Papilio machaon gorganus* was recorded as breeding for the first time in Sark. Since then they have reached southern counties of the UK. This year has seen a further influx of the species and several larvae were seen chomping their way through fennel in June. It looks as if the timing of the emergence may be very similar. We currently have four caterpillars in Carol Cragoe's garden at Port a la Jument which have gone off to pupate. In the coming weeks we may see the re-emergence of this beautiful butterfly.



The Swallowtail butterfly seen on Sark in July 2011



One of the Swallowtail caterpillars seen this June



One of the Glanville Fritillaries seen this May

Glanville Fritillary Re-emerges After Almost Thirty Years

A rare butterfly that has not been seen in Sark for nearly thirty years has re-emerged this year. Shortly before his death, Charles David told Butterfly Conservation's County Recorder for VC113 Guernsey, Herm and Sark, Andy Smith, that the Glanville Fritillary *Melitaea cinxia* had not been recorded in Sark since about 1997 and was quite probably extinct.

On 1st May I arrived home from work and walked down into the meadow. Sitting with its wings outstretched was a butterfly that I hadn't seen before. I knew immediately that it was a fritillary. Its delicate lace pattern on the wings however shouted that this was something very special. There were two seen that evening dancing in the sunlight. A further two were seen on 14th May and then one on 23rd May at Vallon d'Or. Two fresh Glanville Fritillaries were also seen again on 30th May, and it was at this stage that they were photographed and verified. This is extremely exciting news. Other sightings have been made near La Coupée and in Little Sark so it seems that we have a number of very small colonies. The larvae feed on ribwort plantain and the eggs will be laid at the base of the plant so that the larvae can feed on the leaves before going off to pupate in April and emerging again as adults in May/June. So I have not been cutting my ribwort plantain back in the hope that we see them again next year.

Royal Visit to the Heritage Room *by Jane Norwich*



Photograph above by Sue Daly, below by Chris George





Photograph by Chris George

La Société Sercquaise is 50 years old in October this year. In recognition of this milestone we had the honour of a visit to the Heritage Room by HRH The Princess Royal and her husband Vice Admiral Sir Timothy Lawrence as part of their visit to Sark celebrating the 80th anniversary of Liberation.

The room was packed with photographers and the support team as Her Royal Highness and her husband were led in by Jeremy. Sue Daly, Lynda Higgins and Jane Norwich were then introduced and Jane explained a little of Sark's ancient history using the archaeology exhibits. Her Royal Highness was very interested and asked questions about where our earliest inhabitants came from, what they ate and were the plants the same as nowadays.

Jane then handed over to Lynda to talk about our natural environment. Her Royal Highness had many questions on what makes Sark special and our current projects.

Sue discussed our photographic collection and demonstrated the use of the stereoscopes which both visitors tried out leading to some very striking photographs appearing in the Daily Telegraph within the hour.

Vice Admiral Lawrence was very interested in the explorations and support from Sir Barry Cunliffe. They had worked together for five years at English Heritage.

HRH took particular notice of the Imperial Dagger and scabbard which were handed over at Le Manoir at the time of the surrender on 10th May 1945.

The visit was barely twelve minutes long but was a wonderful way to mark our important milestone.

Photograph by Aaron Chown



This year's six man team of archaeologists focussed on two sites, the L'Ecluse mound and the French fort at La Vermandaye. The dig took two weeks and was sponsored by the Société Sercquaise.

L'Ecluse Mound

This year we set out to complete the exploration of the mound, a project begun in 2023. We are grateful to William and Annabel Raymond for giving permission to work on their land and for their kind hospitality. In previous years we were able to demonstrate that the large mound was part of a dyke of natural dolerite which had been 'sculpted' in the prehistoric period by cutting away bedrock on all sides to create an oval shaped feature 15m by 26m standing to a height of 3m. Once created, the mound had been the focus for several phases of subsequent activity. This year three trenches were dug to establish the nature of the southern end of the monument and it is now possible to define six distinct periods of activity from the Neolithic period to the late nineteenth century.

Period 1 Previous excavation work revealed that there had been an upstanding feature of natural dolerite. This year the south side was examined along a major fault line identified by

Photograph by Emma Durham



the Geological Survey. When the monument was created, in the Neolithic or Early Bronze Age, it is likely that its entire surface was stripped of turf to expose the black dolerite over which was scattered small broken up pieces of bright white quartzite. Clearly, the creation had ritual significance but its exact date and function remain unknown.

Period 2 Later, a shallow quarried area had been cut into the east side of the mound associated with a number of post holes belonging to a timber structure. A radiocarbon date for charcoal associated with the post holes shows the activity to date to c. AD 600, the time when the monks were active in the valley.

Period 3 A little later two large post holes were dug. They may represent a continuation of the Period 2 activity.

Period 4 A large pit 4m by 1m was dug into the bedrock in the centre of the mound to a depth of up to 1 m. Sherds of pottery were found dating to the fifteenth or sixteenth century. Its function is uncertain but one possibility is that it was associated with the French military occupation in the mid sixteenth century.

Period 5 Ploughing around the mound, following the resettlement of the island in the late sixteenth century, created a negative lynchet (earth terrace) clearly visible on all sides.

Period 6 The last identifiable phase of activity is represented by a series of small pits, 0.5m in diameter and c. 0.3m deep, dug into the mound and filled with fine loamy soil. They are most likely to be bedding pits prepared for planting trees and shrubs and may well be ascribed to the work of the Seigneur, William Thomas Collings (1823-82) known for his energetic programme of landscaping.

The work at L'Ecluse has been fascinating and rewarding. It has added another example of the very rare category of prehistoric monuments, carved from solid geology, to the island's collection and has amply demonstrated how, once a monument is created, subsequent generations respond to it in different ways.



Photograph by Ian Cartwright

The French fort at La Vermandaye

The fort, built during the French military occupation of the island (1549-53), occupies the highest point on Little Sark, at 100 m OD. It commands extensive views of the south coast of Great Sark and approaches to the Coupée. It is a classic early star fort, built entirely as an earthwork, with an enclosing rampart strengthened with four bastions at the cardinal corners, all protected by a formidable glacis (bank sloping down from the fort). Permission to carry out the work was given by Lynn Diplock and was facilitated by Jessica Diplock whose warm welcome and hospitality was much appreciated. Before work could begin the approach to the fort and the interior were cleared of blackthorn by Andrew Prevel and Adrian Guille, to whom we are greatly indebted. We are also grateful to Jimmy Martin for scanning the site with his metal detector to make sure that the area was free of WW2 German ordnance.

The work in this first year was limited to two trial trenches set at right angles to explore the stratigraphy western corner of the enclosure and to section the northwest-facing rampart. The work was sufficient to show the earthworks had been created with the minimum amount of effort by making good use of the contours of the hill. Much of the rampart was composed of turf and rubble created by lowering the central area while the material dug out of the ditch was used to enhance the extended corner bastions, the remainder making up the counterscarp banks. No spoil was moved further than it need be. Any attacker who had reached the ditch was confronted by a steep glacis 3 m high. The entire length of the surrounding ditches was fully in sight of defenders commanding the four bastions.

The fort is a masterpiece of efficient design engineered to keep would-be attackers in the optimal killing range.

No structural features of the mid sixteenth century were found in that part of the central area that was examined. We plan to expand the excavation next year to explore other parts in the expectation that traces of barracks and kitchens will be found. It is also intended to examine the entrance once

all the blackthorn has been removed.

As an unexpected bonus we found that the site had been occupied in the Neolithic or Early Bronze Age generating a large quantity of debris from flint working together with a number of stone artefacts including a perforated serpentine disc, a part-finished perforated pebble and the butt end of an axe. Clearly there was much activity on the hill top in the prehistoric period and we look forward to examining the area next year when that part of the site has been cleared of scrub.

And finally.....Two weeks digging passes quickly on Sark, each season adding much that is new to Sark's deep-rooted history. We would like to record our grateful thanks to members of the Société Sercquaise and other islanders for all their help, kindness and hospitality they have shown the digging team and for letting us help them in researching their fascinating island.

Barry also gave a fascinating talk about Sark's archaeological excavations while he was on the island which was very well attended and much enjoyed by all present. Archaeological photographer Ian Cartwright also spoke about his lovely new book 'From the Soil of Sark' and signed copies for people to buy. (It is for sale in the Heritage Room and via our website.)

Photograph by Ian Cartwright



Return of the Octopus by Sue Daly

In 2023 Sark's fishermen were surprised to find the occasional octopus in their pots, a species very rarely seen here since the severe winter of 1962/3. It was so cold then that the edges of the sea froze and the octopus, once abundant, was wiped out. Over the last couple of years though the eight-tentacled mollusc has returned with a vengeance, not just in the Channel Islands but across the whole of south-west England and the nearby coast of France, much to the detriment of crab and lobster fisheries.

This is the Common Octopus *Octopus vulgaris* which can have arms over 3 feet long and weigh over 20 pounds (9kg). It is a formidable hunter able to eat crab, lobsters, scallops and almost anything else it can catch. The only hard part of

its body is the beak so it can easily slip through the netting on a lobster pot, eat the contents and ooze out again. Extremely intelligent with a well-developed brain and nervous system, the octopus lives only for one or two years.

Sudden increases in octopus numbers are nothing new with well recorded blooms in the 1900s and 1950s. There were also plenty around in the 1850s when the French writer Victor Hugo visited Sark. His novel *Toilers of the Sea*, which features a man battling a giant octopus as he tries to raise the engine of a shipwrecked steamer, is said to have been inspired by Hugo's son being attacked by an octopus on Sark.

What exactly has caused the current abundance of octopus is unknown but marine biologists think

that an increase in winter sea temperatures is to blame, and that the octopus will continue to successfully reproduce unless the current upward trend in water temperature changes.

While recreational divers in the Channel Islands have been delighted to see and photograph these fascinating creatures, Sark's pot fishermen and scallop divers have been hit badly with huge decreases in their catch. Local restaurants have taken a few but there's not much of a market for octopus on the menu, particularly since so many of us were charmed by the wonderful film *My Octopus Teacher*. (See it if you haven't already.)

There is a market in France though and one local fisherman, Jordan de Carteret (seen to the left), has worked out how to make pots specifically designed to catch octopus as well as a way of transporting them live to wholesale fishmongers in Carteret. This pragmatic approach may be the way forward because it looks like the octopus is here to stay!





Debbie Guille at work on the tapestry in the Cider Barn, July 2017

The Sark tapestry triptych is complete and is now back on Sark having been professionally mounted to be displayed in the new Sark Art Gallery and Museum from the second half of August. A group of people on Sark have been working on these woven tapestries every winter for the last 6 years. The group are grateful for days in the Cider Barn when people on the island were able to contribute a few stitches or take the first steps with beginners' courses.

The Creative Sark June workshops week offered a large diversity of workshops this year, including Tai Chi and electronic music, Himalayan singing bowl therapy, garden tours, garden sketching, fabric upcycling, macrame, fabric and stitch art, pottery workshops, writing and poetry, chocolate making and a Seigneurie art tour. The Cider Barn was again used for the creative writing courses. Both leaders, morning and afternoon,

thought that the Barn offered a wonderful creative space. Creative Sark hopes to put on a writer's workshop in September this year but are waiting to hear about the writer's availability.

Creative Sark's traditional Veille at the end of the June workshops week was a great success and much fun with a good turn out and a table laden with delicious food, as seen below. Many thanks to our friends from Jersey and to Gemma Seltzer who came from the UK. They came all that way to be with us and entertain us with their poetry and stories, and thanks to everyone else who came, told stories and made it a jolly evening.

Aurigny Airlines published an article about Creative Sark and their June workshops in their recent inflight magazine, *En Voyage*. You can see the article at this link: <https://aurignymedia.com/public/issues/issue40.pdf>

Creative Sark continues to support creative people on the island, by promoting their work and courses throughout the year.

