

La Société Sercquaise

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



Summer News 2019

Keeping in touch

Offers to help in the Room, with sorting or maintenance, or with winter conservation projects, or suggestions for future activities of the Society will be welcomed by the Secretary (jo.birch@cwgsy.net) or the Editor (raxton@guernsey.net). RA 18/9/19

Archaeology

Thanks to the generosity of the Friends of Sark Archaeology, excavations continued this spring from 25th May to 8th June. This was earlier than usual but conditions were good, not too hot and with occasional light rains to dampen the exposed soil. The same teams as last year from Oxford and Guernsey were joined by Shakira, Andrew, and Richard who helped with re-turfing. Susan Synnott led the local sherd-washers, the youngest of them Robin Scott six years old. Kirsty Grant again generously provided accommodation at Le Clos de Vin.

Barry Cunliffe reports:

This year we decided to continue to explore two sites which we had begun to excavate previously, the Little Sark Standing Stone site and Le Manoir, and to trial-trench an enigmatic feature on Gouliot Headland.

The Little Sark Standing Stone site was used on two occasions in prehistoric times, first as a farming settlement in the Neolithic period c.4800 BC, and later for a burial, marked by the standing stone, in the Beaker period about three thousand years later. Our reason

for returning to the site was to obtain further samples from the Neolithic ditches to provide more radiocarbon dates and more carbonised grain to help us better understand the crops grown by Sark's first farmers.

The ditches were found and samples taken (they are still being processed) but to our surprise we also found a sector of a ditch belonging to



Emma at work at the Manoir

the Beaker period that seems to have enclosed a circular area about 7m in diameter. It probably defines the site of another burial. If so, the actual deposit would be beneath a substantial field bank! The new discovery suggests that the Beaker period archer, whose burial was marked by the standing stone, may not be alone but may be surrounded by his ancestors, adding another level of fascination to this remarkable site.

Returning to Le Manoir again this year, our main aim was to learn more of the puzzling medieval building found previously and to try to define its relationship to the cemetery. The building, well constructed of stone slabs bonded by clay, proved to be a substantial structure about 9m wide and in excess of 10m long. We can now show that it was contemporary with the cemetery, the graves clustering tightly up to its north and south walls. There can be little doubt, therefore, that it was a church or chapel around which the cemetery developed. It may, indeed, have been one of the ruined buildings mentioned in the Chronicle of Helier de Carteret's arrival. Not long afterwards it was demolished to make way for the house that later became the Cider Barn. The discovery of the medieval church and the cemetery are of great interest to the early history of Sark. We have a radiocarbon date of about AD 1200 for one of the later, better preserved, burials but we do not yet know when the church was built – in all possibility it goes back many centuries earlier, possibly even to as early as the sixth or seventh centuries. It may be possible to date some more of the tooth and bone fragments to get an idea of when and how long the cemetery was used. The boundaries of the cemetery have been established on the north, west and (approximately) on the south sides but how far it extended to the east and whether there are more church buildings to be found are open questions.

To explore the Manoir site further, three trial trenches were cut close to the eastern boundary. There had been much dumping of soil in the nineteenth century and more dumping of rubbish during the German occupation obscuring what earlier features may have survived. The nature



Shakira washing the finds

and extent of the Roman settlement at Le Manoir still have to be examined.

Finally, Gouliot Headland. During field walking we had noticed a circular hollow about 17m in diameter on the ridge leading to the headland. Some prehistoric flints had been discovered in the area including a fine barbed-and-tanged arrowhead so there was a possibility that it represented a prehistoric hut circle. Other possibilities were a lookout post of the Napoleonic period or a World War 2 emplacement. In the event, a small trial trench quickly established a World War 2 date and uncovered a nearby slit trench into which scrap ironwork had been thrown when the site was cleared at the end of the war. Not prehistoric, then, but another paragraph in Sark's long history.

Our grateful thanks to everyone who took part in the work and made the digging team so welcome and to the owners of the sites who gave us permission to dig, Philip and Elizabeth Perree (Little Sark), Sally Ward-Jones (Le Manoir), and Sark Estate Management (Gouliot Headland).

Barry Cunliffe 1.ix.19

Sark – a Sacred Island

Page proofs of the monograph were finished by May. We expect the final tranche of funding to be in place by September, so that copies can be printed, bound and distributed. With luck we may be able to have a book launch before Christmas.

The Heritage Room and Exhibitions

The Heritage Room opened mid-April, and the dedicated volunteers have kept it open from 11.00-13.00 Mon to Fri with some extra out of hours at weekends. Numbers have been similar to previous years (1250 to date, mid-Sept). Short-run exhibitions of Sark Artists, Wildflowers, and Sark's Deportees in WWII have been followed by Sark in Bloom - a richly documented record of the community's work, co-ordinated by Jan Guy, in preparation for the visit of the RHS judges in August. This continues till the close of season.

In the Cider Barn Jane Norwich's attractive miniature display of Mervyn Peake's drawings had many- but unrecorded - visitors. People's willingness to 'Peake in the Barn' seems to have depended largely on whether the door was invitingly ajar. This summer's unprecedented influx of dogs into the island has made this policy hazardous – something to be thought about

for next season's arrangements. Several open sessions of tapestry weaving were held, led by Amanda and Shakira. A Creative Sark evening combining handcrafts with a potluck supper and singing round the log burner was well attended and enjoyed.

At the end of August members of Mervyn Peake's family joined us to commemorate the artist's time in Sark. On 29th Stephen Foote gave an illustrated talk about Peake's time on Sark. The audience that had packed into the Heritage Room crossed to the Cider Barn where Stephen signed copies of his attractive new book, Mervyn Peake, Son of Sark and we toasted its success. The following day a crowd of 80 or so gathered outside the Gallery for the unveiling of a blue plaque by the Seigneur. After lunch, many of them made a guided tour of places where Peake lived and worked.

Creux Belet and the Eperquerie

Our mowing contract with Adrian and Olivia Guille has been much appreciated and has resulted in greater use of Creux Belet path and small increase in orchids spotted. Congratulations to Adrian and Olivia on the birth of their daughter Sophie. The pasture at La Tour through which the path is reached was not grazed this year, resulting in a very rich crop of wildflowers. But to date it has not been cut. The patch of blackthorn cleared in winter 2017-18 produced – as hoped for - a greater variety of wildflowers in its second spring, notably vetches and yarrow. Blackthorn shoots from roots left in the ground will need to be pulled up in the winter. In the various patches where the Conservation Commandos tackled gorse during the late winter, heather has done

well. Butterfly numbers and variety of species have been encouraging. It has been a good summer for butterflies (the first raft of Painted ladies making landfall in April) and bees.



Creux Belet in May

History

Turing on Sark, by Jane Norwich

Over the centuries many visitors have come to Sark. Some of these have been famous in their own lifetimes, others became famous many years later and some were already famous when they visited our island. Recently it has come to light that someone responsible for saving millions of lives, including some in the Channel Islands, who shortened WW2 by at least two years and is also regarded as the founding father of modern computers visited Sark twice. That man was Alan Turing. He came to Sark with his housemaster from Sherborne School, Geoffrey O'Hanlon, and several friends. His first visit was just before he went up to King's College Cambridge in 1931 and the second the following September.

Sherborne School still has the photo albums belonging to Mr O'Hanlon, which include photographs from the visits from 1927 to 1932. Mr O'Hanlon and his newly married wife returned in 1934 and again in 1936. Their son confirms his parents great love of Sark. It is clear from the photo album that the party had a great time visiting all the usual sights on Sark including bathing trips to Adonis and Venus pools.

The group stayed each time at La Ville with the Baker family at La Moinerie. Mrs 'LouLou'

Baker was known for her hospitality and took in 'paying guests' every summer until the outbreak of WW2. Her daughter Phyllis, born 1924, would have been of an age to have met Alan Turing, her third daughter Isabel being born in late September 1931. Alfie Adam's mother Mary, née Hamon, worked at La Ville, helping Mrs Baker look after the guests.

Alan Turing would have been well aware of the Occupation of the Channel Islands. I wonder if he thought about those carefree holidays when he was 'cracking the code' of the Kriegsmarine Enigma machine. I wonder too if he knew that one of those machines was used during the Occupation at the radio transmitter station at Les Sapins.



La Ville 1931, Alan Turing (R)

Richard Axton pursued two projects in Sark history that were published in Sark Life Spring and Summer issues. The first was about a wreck on Valentine's Night 1817 that led to the naming of 'la boue Americaine' off Brennière in Little Sark. The Sapor was a 300-ton brig from New York carrying a cargo of Mahogany wood and fine American wheat flour. Seigneur Pierre Le Pelley laid claim to the Mahogany while the men of Little Sark scooped up watertight barrels of flour and quarrelled over them. Details come from Sark's Church Register and Court Records, and from the accounts printed in St Peter Port in four separate Saturday newspapers.

The other topic has puzzled me for years: a pamphlet titled 'News from the Channel or the Discovery and perfect Description of the Isle of Serke' and claiming to be published from a London coffee house in 1673. Details from it

have been cited in books about Sark, but the jocular tone of the piece and the fact that it is known locally in a Victorian facsimile have led to a widespread sense that it may have been a fake and it hasn't been taken seriously by historians. After all, its date is almost two hundred years before the first serious dedicated monograph on Sark (Dr James in 1845). A great delight, then, to be able to prove its authenticity, place it within a tradition of jaunty Utopian journalism and verify its detailed picture of Sark society during the mid-seventeenth century. Its author, though a little hyperbolic from ale and coffee by the time of publication, reveals himself as an ex-army man who had been stationed in Sark with English Parliamentarian soldiers following Guernsey's confiscation of the fief in 1643 and during the Commonwealth. A copy of the Victorian facsimile is in our library.

Postscript

It is very sad to report that Eve Cook died earlier in September in England. She was 93.