

La Société Sercquaise

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



Summer News 2017

The fine dry spring and summer in Sark have bustled with activity and there is much to report. At the AGM (27th March) the new Seigneur, Christopher Beaumont, agreed to be our President. Wendy Kiernan became our Treasurer and Shakira Cristodoulou joined the Council.

La Société is hosting this year's Inter-Island Environment Meeting Thursday and Friday 21/22 September in Sark

Jane Norwich is principal organiser and writes: This year's broad theme is habitat management allowing for presentations, discussions and visits covering the seabed to the skies above! We have a range of field trips provisionally planned to include a visit to the Gouliot Caves - subject to weather- via boat and on foot, a Gouliot Headland walk to look at the plants, rock-pooling on the L'Eperquerie, a wet valley walk and - subject to cloud cover - star-gazing in the new observatory. Exhibitions on coastal erosion and landscape changes through the centuries are also in the pipeline. Currently we have confirmed speakers on managing habitats (including the use of grazing animals), insect and bee habitats, freshwater areas, the activities of Sark Watch Group and marine habitats. There is a poster competition for the children.

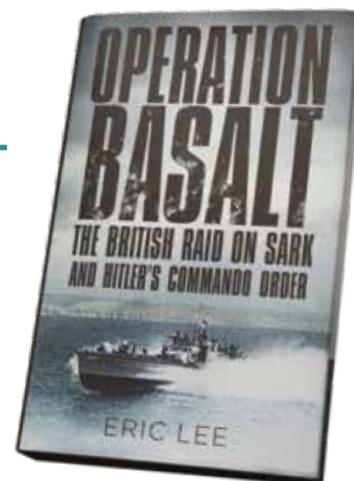
Our main venue is the Island Hall for talks and discussions, display of posters, and meals. Additional displays will be in the Heritage Room and Cider Barn.

For delegates from the other islands arriving on Wednesday or Thursday there will be supper at the Hall. For those staying over Friday night there will be informal fish and chips and the possibility of star-gazing.

On Saturday morning there will be a meeting, organised by Alderney Wildlife Trust, to initiate a Channel Island Ramsar Group, so that we can share resources and data, and learn from one another's experiences of monitoring the CI sites.

Operation Basalt

Last year the Society hosted the launch of Eric Lee's book on the celebrated commando raid, which took place during the night of 3-4 October 1942. The 75th anniversary of the raid is being marked by Sark British Legion with a walk to the Hogsback leaving the Visitor Centre at 11.15 am on 4th October. Further details on www.sark.co.uk/events



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

Richard Axton, August 2017

Archaeology

Preparations for Sir Barry Cunliffe and the Oxford-based members of the team to return on 10th June began early in spring with a visit by Emma Durham to list potsherds and small finds, and scout out accommodation. Thanks to donations from a dozen Friends of Sark Archaeology, £10,000 was raised to fund travel, lodgings and meals, carting and tool hire. Expenses were kept down thanks to Kirsty Grant's generosity in lending her spacious and gracious house at Clos du Vin. This means that we should be able to fund some carbon dating and bone analysis of the exciting new discoveries. Warm thanks to all those who have provided support in many different ways to drive forward the exploration of Sark's pre-history. Over forty people gathered to hear Barry's extempore talk beside the Barn on 22nd June when he pulled together the strands of research together in masterly fashion. He has sent a preliminary write-up of the fortnight's work that follows below.



Sir Barry Cunliffe

Fieldwork & Excavation on Sark 2017: a summary by Sir Barry Cunliffe

This year's fieldwork and excavation took place between 11 and 23 June and involved a team of eight volunteers from Oxford, three from Guernsey and three from Sark. Two sites were excavated, Le Manoir and Little Sark Site 3, four large fields were surveyed using a proton magnetometer and fieldwork was undertaken on Little Sark, Eperquerie and Gouliot Headland.

Le Manoir

Le Manoir is situated in a prime location in the centre of Sark commanding one of the best natural springs of the island. Casual finds made over the past few years suggest that it was in this general area that occupation concentrated in the Roman period, while skeletons, discovered when the Girls School was built in 1840/41, indicate the presence of the medieval cemetery. Antiquarian references also record that the remains of a church – presumably the medieval parish church of St. Mary – stood somewhere north of the School and were not finally removed until 1822. To add to this there is also the well-known tradition that Helier de Carteret made use of ruined medieval buildings as shelter for his family when he first came to Sark in 1565 before constructing Le Manoir nearby. Taken together these scraps of evidence raise the possibility that here, in the centre of the island, lay the main medieval settlement – the equivalent of le bourg in the French scheme of landscape

allotment. A further possibility worth bearing in mind is that there may have been continuity of settlement from Roman into medieval times.

To begin to explore these interesting questions four trenches were excavated in the grounds of Le Manoir by kind permission of Sally Ward-Jones and her family. Two trenches (Trs 1 and 4) were dug in the garden to the east of the north-south range of Le Manoir, opposite the west end of the Information Office, one trench (Tr 2) was dug against the south wall of the Cider Barn and one trench (Tr 3) was dug in the orchard immediately to the north of the Cider Barn.

All four trenches encountered human burials. In total, 17 graves were identified within the 28 square metres excavated. One of the graves had been used for two burials, one above the other, and another of the graves had been opened to take a further burial on two subsequent occasions. The re-use of graves suggests that the burials had been marked. This would also explain why there was no intercutting of graves.

The extremely acid soil of Sark has destroyed most of the skeletons almost completely, in some cases leaving only the enamel of the teeth or a few very friable fragments of the major long bones. The extent of decay was directly influenced by the degree of ossification of the skeletons, depending

on age at death, and how long the body has been in the soil. The cemetery clearly belongs to the medieval period, dating to between the sixth and fourteenth centuries. Radiocarbon dating may help to work out how the cemetery developed. The few scraps of human bone that survive will be studied by experts in Guernsey. We would hope to date some of the samples and to test the teeth for isotopes which may help to identify individuals who may have migrated to the island in later life.

Trenches 1 and 4 produced evidence of the western limit of the cemetery in the form of a boundary ditch that had been recut on several occasions. Immediately to the west of the ditch was an area of metalling which may represent a road outside the cemetery. From the results of the excavation and from the records of burials found when the Girls School was built in 1840/41 we know that the cemetery must have extended for more than 35 m from east-west and a similar distance from north-south. Given the density of the burials in the excavated sample, the part of the cemetery as at present known would have accommodated at least 750 bodies. The entire cemetery would have contained very many more. This is not surprising given the fact that the burial ground would have been in use for many centuries and that a tax return of 1274 suggests that the population of the island at this time was about 300.

Medieval graves beneath Danny Gale's garden at Le Manoir.



Barry explaining a trench beside the Cider Barn.

The discovery of the cemetery raises many questions. It would be interesting to define its spacial limits and to test whether a village had grown up around it. It would also be fascinating to discover when burials first began – could it be as early as the sixth century? Then there is the question of the parish church of St. Mary. An account of 1822 implies that it lay north of the Girls School (the present Visitor Centre) in which case it may have been surrounded by its cemetery. The Chronicle account or the first settlement of Helier de Carteret does, however, imply that there were at least two ecclesiastical buildings in ruins at the time. Clearly there is much still to be learned.

And what of the Romans? All four trenches produced sherds of Roman pottery but the medieval graves and boundary ditch will have destroyed any Roman layers or structures that may have existed except in trench 2 where a ditch was encountered running partially beneath the Cider Barn in an east-west direction. It was one metre deep and over two metres wide. The exact age of the ditch is still to be defined but after it had partially silted up the upper part appears to have been cut away to create a sunken floor upon which sherds of freshly broken Roman pottery were found. How extensive was the floor and to what kind of building it belonged remain to be defined. The ditch itself is a substantial topographical feature within the Roman or late Iron Age settlement. These are all tantalizing hints of what is to come.

Le Manoir and its immediate surroundings have amply demonstrated their archaeological potential but it will take several more seasons before the full true nature of the Roman and medieval settlements becomes clear.



Andrew and Simon excavating the south side of the Sablonnerie menhir.

Little Sark, Site 3

Excavations at Site 3 began in 2015 and concluded this year. The attraction of the site in the first instance was the large menhir (standing stone) that occupies the field corner. Elizabeth and Philip Perrée kindly agreed to let us carry out an excavation to explore the date and function of the stone. The first excavation in 2015 showed that the menhir was part of a Beaker period monument dating to about 2000 BC and that a stone cist had been built against its northern face to contain the body of a member of the elite. The body had been totally eroded by the highly acid soil over the last 4000 years but a fine stone bracer – a rectangular plaque of black stone intended for attachment to the inside of the left wrist to stop the sting of the bow string – was found in position on the floor. Archers bracers of this kind are found with elite Beaker-period burials over much of western Europe. We also found a length of ditch preceding the Beaker burial showing that the site had been occupied in the previous, Neolithic, period.

The next year, 2016, we explored part of the south side of the menhir and an area extending to the south of it which exposed more of the Neolithic settlement. The aim of the 2017 excavation was to complete the excavation of the Beaker period

monument (requiring the removal of the corner post of the field!) and to uncover a further sample of the Neolithic settlement.

The main question to be answered about the Beaker period monument was whether there was a second burial, matching the north cist, attached to the south face of the menhir. In the event we could show conclusively that there was none. Indeed, the south face of the stone had been left untrimmed. The huge effort of selecting and dragging the great slab of granite to the site, probably from the cliff edge, trimming it and then erecting it, was to commemorate a single individual – the archer – who was buried in the cist. His body was covered by a low mound of turves leaving the projecting part of the menhir to mark his grave – a reminder to future generations of the massive effort his contemporaries was prepared to lavish to honour the archer of Little Sark.

The Neolithic settlement dates back to the fifth millennium BC, long preceding the Beaker period burial. It was probably established by the first farmers who set out from the mainland of Normandy to settle the Channel Islands. They would have brought with them their domesticated animals – cattle, sheep and pigs – as well as their seed grain of wheat and barley. They also brought distinctive pottery decorated with small bosses sherds of which were recovered from one of the ditches. One of the great surprises of this year's dig was the discovery of two well-preserved mud-bricks in one of the ditches. The bricks were made from the local loess clay. They were about 30 cms long and about 15 cms wide, rather like a flattish loaf of bread. The excitement of these rather unprepossessing objects is that mud-bricks are excessively rare in western Europe. Indeed, the only convincing Neolithic examples previously known were found near Dol on the north Breton coast in 2015. The bricks were probably used by the first farmers to build the walls of their houses. Since they were unfired they would have quickly weathered and dissolved into mud leaving no recognizable trace. But here, on Sark, a mud-brick wall seems to have been demolished and some of the complete bricks were thrown into a ditch where they were preserved by washed-in silt. It is a notable discovery and adds significantly to our knowledge of the first farmers who colonized the Atlantic coasts and islands.

Little Sark has much more to offer and next year we hope to explore some of the enigmatic mounds which may be the burial places of the early farmers.

Fieldwork

In addition to the two excavations we carried out a magnetometer survey of four fields in the central part of the island to see if any archaeological traces survive to be recorded. The survey was undertaken by William Wintle and a separate report will be produced. We also explored some of the uncultivated areas of Little Sark and Gouliot Headland discovering several hitherto unknown earthworks. In the north, at the Eperquerie, a full photographic record was made of the sixteenth century French military defences. Altogether it was a highly productive two weeks!

Barry Cunliffe, Oxford
5th July 2017



Some of the Medieval pottery discovered this year.

The Neolithic site where the sun-baked bricks were found.



Conservation Work

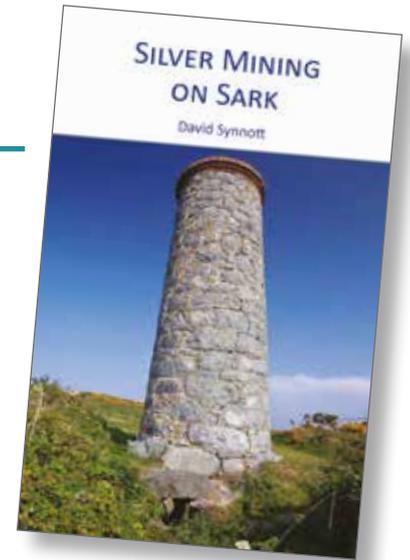
Many members have been engaged in 'The Bloomers' landscaping activities around the island. Some gorse bushes have been removed from the areas around the Butts and below Pilcher monument, to encourage the heather. The area around the guard house above Eperquerie Landing, cleared by our work parties four years ago, is now maintained by the Island path cutters. Work on the Wet Valley to Creux Belet (reported

in Winter News) has continued, pushing back first the Hemlock water-dropwort and later the bracken. The rewards included finding a two-foot eel in the fontaine in March and two dozen Heath spotted-orchids flowering in June. Thanks to the co-operation and generosity of landowner Sébastien Moerman, a plan is taking shape for the long-term maintenance of the path as part of a circular walk.

Book Launch *Silver Mining on Sark* by David Synnott

Join us on **Tuesday 26th September at 5pm** to celebrate the publication of David Synnott's book on Silver Mining on Sark. David became interested in this fascinating period of Sark's history when he lived on Little Sark close to the mine site. Since then he has spent several years researching the subject both here and overseas. The book is based on an exhibition he designed for the Société last year. The book also includes an A3 map of Sark's Hope mine site.

The launch will be held in the Cider Barn and David will be on hand to sign copies of the book that will be for sale priced £10.



Some of the Cider Barn events so far this year



Jersey Medieval Musicians at the Sark Folk Festival.



Sark Tapestry Weavers. Amanda Petrie's two-day workshop in July.



Cleaning and sorting of pottery fragments from excavations round Le Manoir.



Willow lanterns made for an April parade took refuge in the Barn and remained as mobiles hanging for a month.