

# The island of Guernsey

BY ROB &amp; WENDY LINDSAY



The island that inspired the bestselling novel *The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society* celebrates its 70<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Liberation

A popular choice for book clubs in many countries, especially Canada, *The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society*, enlightened many of us to the German occupation of the Channel Islands in WWII and the suffering of the Islanders. Although the story is fiction, it is based on fact and it made us want to learn more about the Channel Islands. Guernsey is one of the two largest in a group of five small islands located in the English Channel, closer to France than England.

This April and May would be a joyful time to visit for Guernsey's indomitable spirit will flourish in the first Channel Islands Heritage Festival that celebrates the 70<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Island's Liberation. We got a preview during a visit last fall.

We arrived aboard a "joey", the local nickname for the yellow Trislander aircraft operated by Aurigny Air Services. We had read the island is a triangular shape approximately seven miles long

and six-and-a-half miles wide, but it appeared much bigger from the air. We exited the friendly little airport into brilliant sunshine and wonderfully fresh air escorted by our local guide, Gill.

On the way to our first hike we passed a field of the famous Guernsey cattle. In the days ahead we came to appreciate the incomparable Guernsey butter and the creamy flavour it added to every dish, especially croissants or a slice of local fruit bread called "Guernsey Gache". We also found the seafood was wonderfully fresh and the vegetables very flavourful. With such temptations at mealtime, it was good that Guernsey is also known for its scenic hiking trails.

The first glimpse of the island that Gill showed us was the cliffs of Le Gouffre with the sea crashing below. After 18 hours of travel from Ontario, the fresh, crisp ocean breeze was just the refresher we needed. We tramped the well-worn hiking path to an overlook and gazed down on a picturesque little fisherman's harbour

at the base of the steep cliffs. Author Victor Hugo called this area "The Port on the Fourth Floor" because of a rocky ledge above the water where fishermen winch up their boats in the winter.

Guernsey has always been a magnet for writers and artists. Victor Hugo was living in Guernsey in a large white house overlooking St Peter Port when he wrote the novel *Jean Val Jean*, on which the musical *Les Miserables* was based. Another of Hugo's novels, *Toilers of the Sea*, is about Guernsey. The famous artist Renoir also came to Guernsey to work.

Apparently both Frenchmen enjoyed hiking the coast cliff path from St Peter Port to Fermain Bay – the same route the characters in the Potato Peel Pie book used to walk to St Peter Port.

In the novel, Juliet arrives in 1946 by boat in St Peter Port and describes it thus, "As the boat lurched into the harbour, I saw St Peter Port rising from the sea on terraces, with a church on the top like a cake decoration."

Today, the island's capital city is

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Castle Cornet, a 12<sup>th</sup> century fortress, guards the harbour entrance.

(Far left to right) Friendly Guernsey heifers; the harbour of St Peter Port; entrance to underground German hospital, now a museum.

still an impressive site approached by water or viewed from the fortress of Castle Cornet, built in the 12th century on an islet that has since been attached to the mainland. The large yacht basin full of pleasure boats on St Peter Port waterfront gives a clue to Guernsey's current attraction as a holiday destination.

Like many old cities the best way to see St Peter Port is on foot. Many of the shops along the waterfront were once warehouses but today they are resplendent with colourful window boxes. Gill gave us a glimpse into the care Guernsey takes in its image when she shared that over seven miles of irrigation tubing keep the flowers along the waterfront looking fresh all summer.

On the waterfront, a short walk from the Tourist Office stands the monument erected to mark the 50th anniversary of Guernsey's Liberation. Inspired by prehistoric monoliths Guernsey artist Eric Snell designed a five-metre high obelisk of Guernsey granite that was precisely placed using electronic age technology.

The tip of the shadow of the obelisk falls on a curve of stone seating throughout the day marking the path of the sun on May 9, 1995 and each Liberation Day in the future.

Many remnants of the German occupation still haunt the island. It seemed Hitler planned to turn Guernsey into an impregnable fort and brought to the island over 5,000 slave workers plucked from German-occupied countries. Many perished from starvation and harsh working conditions. But these wartime slaves constructed many ominous concrete gun placement bunkers that still exist along the coastal trails.

They dug miles of immense tunnels into the island to house German command centres and even a German hospital (now a museum). Just outside St Peter Port, near the La Vallette Bathing Pools, a network of tunnels has been turned into a military museum that gives a glimpse of the wartime rules and regulations and the hardships. Among the Liberation displays is a Red Cross relief box from Canada.



St Peter, home church of Canadian 1812 hero, Sir Isaac Brock.

Back in Saint Peter Port, a few steps from the waterfront, is the Parish Church of St Peter, locally referred to as "The Town Church", and well worth a visit. There has been a church on this site since 1135, although the current building dates to a major renovation in 1822.

Inside we discovered a happy surprise – a plaque in the memory of a local boy who became a hero – General Sir Isaac Brock "who saved Canada and fell at Queenstown(sic)

## [TRAVEL]

Heights in 1812.” Brock was born in the building on the High Street that now houses the Boots Drugstore and it too bears a plaque to his memory that credits Brock with “saving Canada for the Empire.”

High Street is always busy, filled with good quality shops and very popular with tourists as Guernsey is a Duty Free Port.

Not far from our hotel, Bella Luce, we wondered if Sausmarez Manor had been the inspiration for Potato Peel Pie author Mary Ann Shaffer to create John Booker, the valet who took over his absent lord’s role as Lord Tobias Penn-Piers.

In the book, Dawsey, Amelia, Isola, Elizabeth and Eben’s houses are set in Saint Martin parish in the southeast corner of the island. However, they could have lived in many of the rural areas within the ten parishes on this verdant island. Much of the island has picturesque granite cottages and farmhouses, flower-filled yards and very narrow lanes.

Trying to navigate the narrow, twisting roads by car you get the impression it was planned for horse-carts and walking, and you would be right. Apparently the tangle of roads with weird names drove the occupying Germans mad trying to find their way around and they attempted to colour-code the road system, much to the glee of the locals.

Guernsey has been inhabited for thousands of years. A Bronze Age dolmen (stone passage grave marker) stands near the northeast tip of the island, a visible reminder of how far back Guernsey’s history can be traced.

In 1066, Guernsey was part of the French Duchy of Normandy governed by William the Conqueror. The island was given independence in 1204 and the choice whether to remain part of Normandy or join England. Word has it the independently minded islanders chose England since it was further away and less likely to bother them. However, on a clear day you can see the French coast and street



names harken back to the old French originally used on the island before the War. The Guernsey flag reflects this blended heritage with the gold cross of the Duke of Normandy and the red cross of St George against a field of white.

Exploring the island we came across a loop-holed tower and mistook it for a remnant of WW II. It turned out to be one of the 15 towers built around 1778 to defend the island against potential invasion by Napoleon and his troops. We read that the late 18th century saw an end to the long war with France and this curtailed Guernsey’s lucrative privateering industry which forced countless locals to find new ways of making a living. Apparently many turned to farming.

Today the warm Gulf Stream moderates the climate giving Guernsey the nickname “The Sunshine Island” and making it a holiday favourite for

Loop-holed tower (circa 1778) a defence against Napoleonic invasion. (Below) Panel 2 of the Guernsey Tapestry, island map of parishes and folklore

both the English and French. The beaches are lovely and the scenery is stunning. Researching the setting for the book it was very difficult to see beyond the present beauty and realize that between June 1940 and May 9, 1945 life was so desperate many starved to death. Our guide Gill showed us her Father-in-law’s diary of the war years and related how he tried to keep the children in his school alive with the help of local islanders who hid vegetables in a pit. Like so many others her maternal grandmother and five children were evacuated to England along with 17,000 others – reducing the island population to almost half.

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The effect of the children’s evacuation was profound in many ways. For five long years there was no communication with England and their evacuated loved ones. Prior to the war the local language on Guernsey was a patois-based French. Most of the children were sheltered for five years in Scotland, Lancashire and Yorkshire – all areas with strong local accents. When they returned to Guernsey communication was a major problem. However, gradually English became the main language and in the 1970s English replaced French in official government documents.

Viewing the Bailiwick of Guernsey Millennium Tapestry is a fine way to end a visit. The 10 panels, hand-stitched by local residents, summarize 1,000 years of island history in a beautiful art form. ■

### IF YOU GO

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Channel Islands Heritage Festival –  
April 3 to May 11