

'In Guernsey, art is part of the conversation'

Inspiration is never far away in an enchanting place that has called to Renoir, Victor Hugo and a host of other creative people, finds **Russell Higham**



DURING Guernsey's five-year occupation in the Second World War, the British lieutenant-governor's residence in St Peter Port, Old Government House, was commandeered by the Nazis to serve first as a headquarters and then as a luxurious *soldatenheim* (barracks) for its troops. Now the island's only five-star hotel (www.theoghhotel.com), this opulent mansion overlooking the harbour contains the remnants of a library that held books Wehrmacht

officers would read, lounging by the swimming pool where guests now sip cocktails.

Two of the volumes on its shelves today—which would have been strictly *verboten* to German soldiers—are by Victor Hugo. The author, political thinker and human-rights advocate lived in the Bailiwick of Guernsey from 1855–70, having been exiled from France for opposing Napoleon. It was at his Georgian home (now a museum: www.maisonsvictorhugo.paris.fr/guernsey) on Hauteville, a street a short walk from Old Government House,

that he completed *Les Misérables* and wrote *Toilers of the Sea*, inspired by the turbulent waters of the Channel below.

The author of *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame*, often considered the French equivalent of Shakespeare, also temporarily turned his pen from writing to drawing there, making hundreds of sketches of Guernsey in scenes both real and imagined, dreamlike and nightmarish. Many of the works, which his contemporary Vincent van Gogh admired as 'astonishing things' (a phrase adopted for the title of a recent exhibition of Hugo's pictures at the Royal Academy, London W1; *Arts & Antiques, March 19*), were made during a period of intense grief over the death by drowning of his daughter Léopoldine, aged only 19.

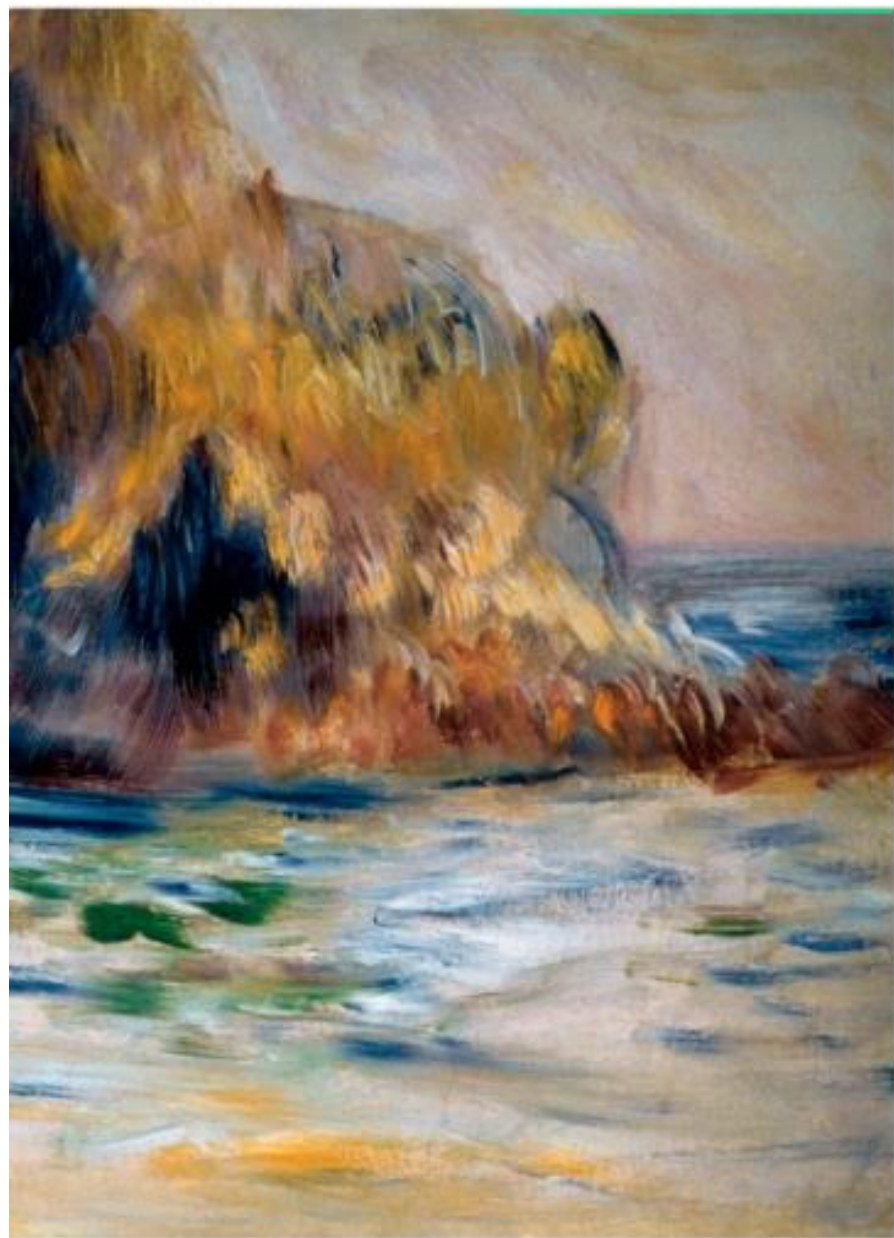
‘Every single islander is a bit artistic, even if they don't realise it’

Hugo wasn't the only creative to find inspiration, as well as refuge, in the group of seven islands (plus many uninhabited islets) that comprise the Bailiwick of Guernsey. A few doors down at No 17, Hauteville, a blue plaque denotes where Peter Le Lievre, born in 1812, spent his entire life, balancing various careers as landscape painter, wine merchant, military officer and designer of two lighthouses for St Peter Port Harbour. The polymath had been a student at nearby Elizabeth College, where later alumni include P. G. Wodehouse and the artist and theatre designer Jean Hugo, Victor's great-grandson. The English composer John Ireland also lived in Guernsey, shortly before the German invasion in June 1940, using the island's Roman name in the title of his composition *Sarnia: An Island Sequence*.

J. M. W. Turner, Britain's favourite artist, according to a 2015 BBC poll, visited in about 1832, recording views from Guernsey and several of its islands in his sketchbook, which is available to view by request at Tate Britain. Over on Sark, he captured Creux Harbour, next to where the boat (www.sarkshipping.gg) arrives after the 45-minute crossing from St Peter Port. He also sketched *La Coupée*, a precipitously high and narrow isthmus connecting Great Sark to Little Sark.

A century later, the illustrator and writer Mervyn Peake arrived on what has since become the world's first Dark Sky Island to help set up an artists' colony, the Sark Group. →

The essence of an idyllic island is captured by Renoir in *Moulin Huet Bay, Guernsey*, one of 15 paintings from the artist's 1883 visit





Mervyn Peake, who penned part of his 'Gormenghast' series in tranquil, traffic-free Sark

and a gallery where the post office now stands. Peake wrote the first instalments of his 'Gormenghast' series here; his eldest son, Sebastian, told a BBC Radio 4 documentary in 2018 the island had a 'very significant impact' on his work.

Sark feels uniquely cosmopolitan, yet egalitarian, perhaps in part due to its transport policy, which is both archaic and Arcadian. Cars are completely banned; tractors (as well as bicycles and the odd mobility scooter, for those whose need can be medically proven) are the only motorised vehicles allowed to traverse the quiet country lanes.

Back in Guernsey, Pierre-Auguste Renoir's 1883 sojourn lasted barely more than a month, yet the Frenchman made a series of 15 paintings and drawings that seem to have eternally captured the essence of the Bailiwick's largest and most populous island.

Korinne Le Page, an accredited tour guide who is available to book through www.visitguernsey.com, offers a three-hour walking tour of Moulin Huet valley, the bay and beach of which the artist depicted. He came to Guernsey, she explains, after reading Hugo, and what he found, as he related to his dealer Paul Durand-Ruel, was 'more like being in a Watteau landscape than in reality'.

The landscape has changed little over the past 140 years, so the 18th-century cottage, depicted in *Fog on Guernsey*, is instantly recognisable. Built originally as a watchhouse against Napoleon's forces, it later became a tea room frequented by Hugo and Renoir. The cottage has been fully restored after the Germans rudely blew off its roof during the war and it is now owned by Miss Le Page's parents, who let it out for holidays (www.renoircottage.com).

Art for Guernsey (www.artforguernsey.com), a gallery and charity founded by immigrant ex-banker David Ummels, has placed ornately decorated frames that celebrate the artist's works along the Renoir Walk. Installed in five of the spots where Renoir stood and sketched Moulin Huet, they allow visitors to view the bay through the eyes of one of the world's most famous Impressionists. The project has had a positive effect in connecting islanders, especially younger ones, to their artistic heritage, according to Mr Ummels. He says it is all part of Art for Guernsey's mission, which also includes promoting contemporary local artists, such as Paul Chambers,



Victor Hugo's pen-and-ink *A Ship in Choppy Seas*, 1864, drawn during his Guernsey exile

What's next for Guernsey?

The Victor Hugo in Guernsey Society regularly hosts events and lectures. On September 6, it will be celebrating the 50th anniversary of François Truffaut's 1975 film *L'Histoire d'Adèle H.*, starring Isabelle Adjani as Hugo's lovelorn daughter and filmed in Guernsey. For further details and tickets, visit www.victorhugoinguernsey.org.

Fundraising is also under way for the Victor Hugo Centre, a cultural centre that will include a museum, learning hub and performance space located in a prominent seafront building in the island's capital. The centre will highlight Hugo's link with Guernsey, celebrate its creative community and encourage young talent. To donate or for more information, visit www.vhc.org.

who recently photographed Jean-Baptiste Hugo, Victor's great-great-grandson (still a regular visitor to the island).

'Shortly after setting up the Renoir Walk in 2019, we, together with a syndicate of local art collectors, acquired at auction one of the 15 [pieces] that Renoir painted here in Guernsey,' explains Mr Ummels. 'We bought it to make sure that every single child on the island has a chance to see it in the flesh.' Art for Guernsey has taken *Rocks of Guernsey with Figures (Beach at Guernsey)*, worth about \$1 million, out on the road to schools around the island, covering the cost of insurance itself. 'It's not something you could do quite so easily in central London or Paris,' laughs Mr Ummels, who originally hails from Belgium. 'But nobody steals here, so premiums are about one-third of what they would be in England or France.'

It's hardly a surprise, then, that Locate Guernsey (www.locateguernsey.com), an initiative that helps property buyers make the move to this favoured isle—which also enjoys a comparatively benign tax system (no capital gains, inheritance or wealth tax)—has reported a 52% surge in the number of enquiries about relocation here in recent months.

'Every single islander is a bit artistic, even if they don't realise it,' states Mr Ummels. 'Everybody has an opinion on the best spot to appreciate the sunset or a certain angle of the light at a certain time each day. In Guernsey, art is part of the conversation, the same way as the weather is in England. There's a hidden artistic sensitivity that pervades the island and those who live here, and it comes from being constantly exposed to such raw and honest beauty.'