

# Sarnia-Cherie

The only British territories to endure Nazi occupation, the Channel Islands became a symbol of stoic resilience, says Adam Hay-Nicholls, as he celebrates the 80th anniversary of Guernsey's liberation

On the afternoon of June 28, 1940, the Luftwaffe bombed and strafed lines of lorries parked on St Peter Port's harbourside. The Germans thought these were British troops sent to fortify the island, but they were, in fact, delivery lorries stacked high with tomatoes waiting to be exported to the mainland. Fifty-one vehicles were destroyed and 33 innocent people were killed, with another 36 seriously injured in the hour-long attack. The islanders hoped it was a random strike, but, within a couple of days, the enemy had quietly landed on Guernsey—the Channel Islands became the only British territories to fall into Hitler's hands. The situation was initially presented as a 'model occupation'. German High Command sought to project a message that the British mainland had nothing to fear from occupation by the Reich and it would also serve as a propaganda tool in the Fatherland.

As the war ground on, however, the islanders suffered; first came curfews, then requisitioning of many homes and all forms of transport, the severing of outside communications, restrictions on fishing and a ban on swimming. More than 66,000 mines were laid on the beaches and those breaking the rules or resisting occupation could receive a death warrant.

In the days leading up to the occupation, many families waved goodbye to their young children, who were among the islanders shipped to the mainland out of harm's way, unsure as to whether they would ever reunite. There was also strict rationing and once supply lines were cut following D-Day in June 1944, many of the islanders and their occupiers began to starve, resorting to eating dogs, sea-gulls and stinging nettles to survive. Those were the lucky ones. More than 800 Guernsey islanders—most of them non-island-born men—were deported to the internment camp at Biberach in southern Germany.

The people of Guernsey endured Nazi occupation for five long years. On May 8,

1945, Churchill announced the end of the war in Europe—and Guernsey and Jersey would be freed the following day. Surrender was completed by Maj-Gen Heine and Capt Lt Zimmerman aboard B-class destroyer HMS *Bulldog*, championed by the sound of exuberant, but malnourished crowds along the seafront of St Peter Port.

Eighty years later, an island-wide siren blasted at 8.50am to signal the start of the 80th anniversary of Liberation Day. Thousands descended upon St Peter Port's North Esplanade to admire the uniforms of serving British armed forces, reserves and cadets, hear the band of the Royal Marines and catch a glimpse of Second World War veterans, islanders who lived through the occupation and The Princess Royal, who delivered an address on behalf of The King.

**'As the war ground on, the islanders suffered'**

Another guest of honour (of significantly smaller stature) was a tortoise called Timothy. Born in 1940 and still going strong, Timothy was honoured from the confines of a cage strapped to a Fiat 500. His 85-year-old owner, Maggie Cull, revealed they both lived in Guernsey during the war: 'My godmother gave me a tiny tortoise as a christening present. It took 25 years to be told by a vet that she was a female, but, 85 years on, we still call her Timothy.'

Following The Princess Royal's address, Allied air power new and old took to the sky; a quad-engine Airbus A400M transporter and Boeing P-8A Poseidon maritime patrol aircraft impressed with their size, as a Hawker Hurricane fighter, a Harvard and a C-47 demonstrated that, 80 years ago, beauty went with bravery.

A cavalcade of nearly 30 floats, some depicting notable ships such as SS *Vega*, a Red Cross vessel that distributed vital food packages in the last six months of the war, and HMS *Bulldog*, adorned with sunflowers—a symbol →

**Free at last: islanders in St Peter Port celebrate liberty in May 1945 following five hard years under Nazi occupation**





of Ukraine—brought the streets to life, complemented by more than 200 military and pre-war automobiles; khaki British and American hardware through to Rolls-Royces, Bentleys, a Citroën Traction Avant bearing the resistant Free France's Croix de Lorraine and one Volkswagen Kübelwagen 'under new management' trundled along the route.

Force 135 was the British military task force assigned to recapture Guernsey and reenactors arrived in the harbour on two period Royal Navy motor launches, HMS *Medusa* and HMS *Flycatcher*. Quayside, big-band brass and swing classics from the 1940s encouraged boogie-woogie toes to tap. In the Albion, possibly the closest pub in the world to a church, a young woman produced an accordion and started playing as the barflies waved their Union Flags. The day was capped by a crescendo of fireworks, a joyous and respectful nod to the sacrifices made and the stoicism exhibited by the islanders 80 years ago. 🇬🇧



Churchill looks on as the stoic Guernsey donkey is freed from the shackles of Nazi rule

### *Festung*, but not forgotten: memories of the occupation

• **Pleinmont Tower** A six-storey MP3 German naval observation tower near Guernsey's south-west tip is an extraordinary example of Brutalist architecture and a symbol of the Nazi's occupation of the island. The original rangefinders remain in working order and the Batterie Dolmen gun site is located a short walk away.

• **Fort Hommet (below)** The Nazis adapted this Martello tower to include concrete bunkers and several coastal-defence and anti-tank guns, together with machine-gun pits. Tours of Guernsey (<https://toursofguernsey.com>) is offering exclusive access to the bunkers on August 17 and historic-interest group Festung Guernsey (<https://festungguernsey.org/gg>) is hosting an open day here on September 13 featuring uniformed re-enactors

• **German Underground Hospital** The largest Second World War structure in the Channel Islands, this hospital and ammunition store comprises more than 75,000sq ft of subterranean tunnels almost invisible from above, built under a low hill in the heart of the island's countryside. It was excavated by slaves under the command of Organisation Todt over the course of 3½ years. The hospital catered for 500 Wehrmacht patients, but was only used for a matter of months.

• **Batterie Mirus** The largest gun emplacement in the Channel Islands, Batterie Mirus boasted four 12in guns capable of firing 30 miles out to sea and each had its own ammunition store, plant rooms and accommodation for 72 men. To prevent detection from Allied aircraft, it was disguised as a house. Within the labyrinthine tunnels are eerie murals daubed by the Wehrmacht soldiers that

remain on the peeling 83-year-old paintwork, including one that reads 'We march towards England'. Tours of Guernsey can arrange access by appointment.

• **Wn Schonbucht-Mitte** This anti-tank bunker formed part of a small resistance nest defending the centre of Bailegreve Bay. It consisted of a single room and a captured Czech gun. The bunker was buried in the 1970s, but was unearthed in 2011 and is remarkably well-preserved with many of its original features in situ. Festung Guernsey will host an open evening here on August 19.

• **German Occupation Museum** Established in 1966, this museum is the life's work of Richard Heaume, who began collecting items related to the occupation as a schoolboy. Among the museum's more unusual items is an equine gas mask, used to defend German horses from chemical attack.

