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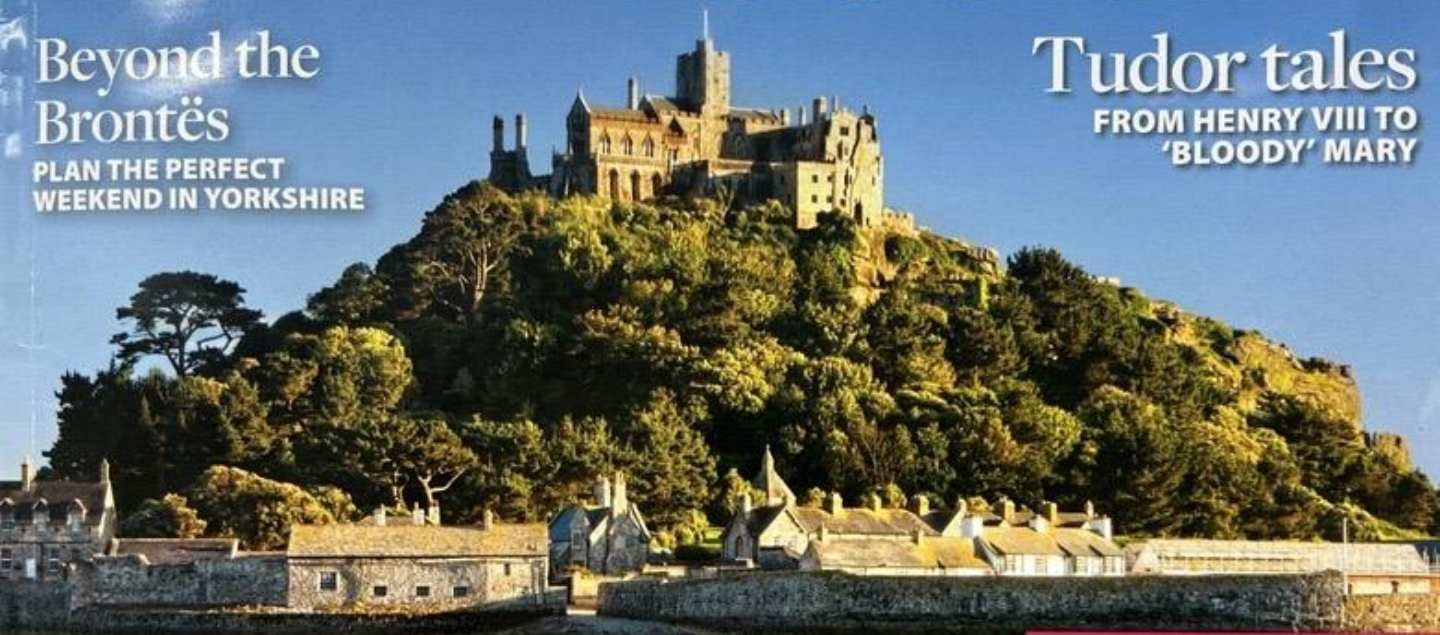
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Left to right:
The German
Underground
Hospital; this year's
cavalcade was
particularly jubilant.

Liberation celebrations

Henrietta Easton visits Guernsey, the most fortified island in the world, 80 years on from the end of German Occupation



It's a strange feeling to be driving around an idyllic island, with cows grazing, heather blowing on cliffsides and children playing on the beach, to see grey, concrete bunkers almost every few minutes, hidden in hillsides and looming on cliffs. This is life on Guernsey, the second largest of the Channel Islands, where stark reminders of five harrowing years of Nazi occupation during the Second World War blend hauntingly with modern-day life.

Though in his famous speech of 7 May 1945 declaring the end of the Second World War, Winston Churchill said '...our dear Channel Islands are also to be freed today', it wasn't until 9 May 1945 that HMS *Bulldog* sailed into St Peter Port, Guernsey's capital, to crowds of cheering islanders. And so, while Victory in Europe Day is celebrated on 8 May, in Guernsey and Jersey, Liberation Day is celebrated on 9 May (Liberation Day

in Alderney didn't come until 16 May 1945).

This year, which marks the 80th anniversary of the liberation of Guernsey, I was lucky enough to be invited along. I wanted to join in the festivities, but also witness for myself the added poignancy because it is probably the last big liberation anniversary to include islanders who lived through the occupation.

Now in their 80s and 90s, many of these people would have been evacuated off the island and sent to Britain – as most school children were. Others were away fighting, or among the 24,000 islanders that stayed on the island and endured Nazi rule.

Regardless of where they spent those years, 9 May 1945 marked the return of their liberty and would have been the most important day of their lives.

I arrived in St Peter Port's harbour bright and early ahead of this year's celebrations to see the town



Clockwise from left: HRH The Princess Royal in St Peter Port for Liberation Day 2025; observation post Marine Peilstand 4 is one of hundreds of defences built by the Germans on Guernsey; the annual Liberation Day parade

St Peter Port celebrates Liberation Day with a cavalcade of British military vehicles, vintage cars and some impressive vintage tractors

already abuzz with crowds beginning to line the promenade. They were readying themselves for the military parade, led by the Band of HM Royal Marines, and hoping to catch a glimpse of this year's royal visitor, HRH The Princess Royal.

Amid a sea of waving Guernsey flags and excitable crowds dressed patriotically in red, white and blue, the atmosphere was electric, however as soon as the military parade began, the solemnity of this section of commemorations became evident.

The crowd showed their respect with proud applause; a thank you to the brave soldiers who fought to free the island, and Europe, from Hitler's forces. Princess Anne made her way down the parade and inspected the troops, and delivered a powerful speech that included a message from her brother, His Majesty The King.

Her Royal Highness spent time with veterans and islanders who had been present on Liberation Day 1945, as well as guests from Biberach in Germany – the location of the civilian internment camp, Camp Lindele, where over 1,000 Guernsey and Sark deportees were held during the occupation. The two communities have now formed a friendship that marks a peaceful future.

Each year, St Peter Port celebrates Liberation Day with a colourful and lively cavalcade of British military vehicles and vintage cars (and some impressive vintage

tractors!). This year, more than 70 vehicles took part and the crowds were exuberant all along the seafront – you had to shout to be heard above the noise.

This spectacle was joined by a flyover from a fleet of Second World War aircraft, including the US-based R4D – a DC-3 built in 1944 – a 1940 Hawker Hurricane that flew in the Battle of Britain, and a 1942 Harvard. All eyes looked up in delight as they flew over, and the roar from the crowd was spine-tingling.

The day's conclusion was a spectacular drone show above the sea, which told the story of the occupation and liberation using lights, art and music, with voiceovers from islanders who lived through it. This was an unbelievably moving way to end such a joyous day, and I experienced real chills, and a lump in my throat, when the drones became the outline of Guernsey itself.

The day after the celebrations, I set off on a tour of some of the island's wartime sites with Amanda Johns, a silver-accredited tour guide born and raised in Guernsey, who was able to weave her family's own personal stories into our journey.

The tour included visits to the German Occupation Museum, the German Underground Hospital and Ammunition Store, and Batterie Mirus – the largest gun battery in the whole of the Channel Islands – which sits unassuming down a quiet country lane.





Left: A little used but massive gun emplacement at Batterie Mirus on the island

Below: The airborne light show was well received by the crowds

Despite the effort to build and guard the fortifications, the guns at Batterie Mirus were fired less than 15 times



Amanda is an active member of Festung Guernsey, which works to preserve as many of the fortifications across the island as possible, including Mirus, which once held four 30.5cm gun placements, each with their own ammunition stores, plant rooms and crew accommodation for 72 men.

The most haunting part of the battery is seeing for yourself the rooms where German soldiers lived, slept and bathed – the shower cubicles and toilets are still there inside the battery. Doodles on the walls include terrifying Nazi insignia and the words 'Wir fahren gegen England' – we go against England.

Despite the effort and the slave labour required to both build and guard the fortifications, the guns at Batterie Mirus were fired less than 15 times.

What struck me the most is the way the island treats this difficult period in its history. It's hard to ignore the Nazi structures across the island, which number almost 900, but today they have often been reclaimed, as if to say 'we won't be defined by this dark period'.

There's a school with a gun battery in its playground that's been made into an amphitheatre; a lady who has made one into a vegetable garden; numerous forts have been transformed into luxury modern houses, selling for millions; plus the many bunkers which have been made accessible to the public thanks to Festung Guernsey's tireless work.

I left Guernsey thinking that if we choose to forget what is difficult, we risk denying the experiences of all those who lived through it. Their stories must be remembered while life on this beautiful island goes on and we relish the freedom that was so hard-won. ■