The Islands Pre-War

If there are two qualities upon which Channel Islanders pride themselves it is their loyalty and their independence. These qualities they possess in common with all the British race.
– Nos Isles, A Symposium on the Channel Islands, March 1944

The Channel Islands are situated off the north-west coast of France, being around 60 miles from the most northern point to the nearest part of England, and only 9 miles from Alderney to the Cap de la Hague on the French coast. The four best-known Islands are Jersey, which has been affectionately described as a pile of pink granite, approximately 12 miles long and 5 miles wide; Guernsey, described as not so pink but with 25 square miles of granite rock; Alderney, the ‘Cinderella’ of the Islands, only about 4 miles long by one and a quarter miles wide; and Sark, a hereditary Seigneurie, which has an even smaller land mass, and which is rather intriguingly described by Peter Rivett as being ‘like a hall of mirrors where nothing is quite what it seems to be’. Lesser islets are Herm, Brechou, Jethou and Lihou, which are all to be found amongst a labyrinth of various rocks and reefs.

Before the Norman invasion of England in 1066, Les Iles Normandes, as they were then known, formed part of the Duchy of Normandy, and thus when Duke William of Normandy also became King of England, they naturally became attached to the English Crown. However, they were never annexed to William’s new realm, and so, although they may be described as part of the British Isles, they are not part of the United Kingdom. Differences are still in evidence today as many of the ancient institutions of government, which were in place in each of the Islands when the final separation of France and England occurred, retain their separateness and individuality together with many of their ancient laws and privileges, dating back to ancient charters granted by King John and King Edward III.

Apart from a brief seven-year period during which Jersey was recaptured by an invading force sent by the Seneschal of Normandy in 1461, which was subsequently expelled by the English, the Channel Islands retained their
allegiance, and even when the rest of Normandy had become part of France early in the thirteenth century, they remained loyal dependencies of the English Crown.

Over the centuries, both Jersey and Guernsey have lived in fear of further invasions by the French. As a consequence, many castles and Martello towers were built to serve in their defence, and as late as 1781, Baron Rullecourt reclaimed Jersey in the name of France. His landing was unsuccessful however, and after a battle in St Helier’s Royal Square, both Rullecourt and the British commander, Major Pierson were killed. The Islands, described by J. Le Pelley in his article which appeared in *The Trident* in February 1944 as ‘the Malta of Britain’s French wars’, have proved their gallantry and patriotism many times. As the author points out:

not a fleet has sailed, not an army gone overseas in all these centuries without an Islander, many Islanders in it. Of their blood were General Brock, who saved Canada for the Empire in 1812; General Le Marchant, founder of our military academy and hero of Salamanca; Nelson’s Hardy; Admiral de Saumarez, whose name-ship, HMS Saumarez, was in at the kill of the Scharnhorst; and a host of Navy men . . . soldiers and colonists.

The reputation of the Islanders for marksmanship before the World Wars was also a matter of pride. For many decades in the Islands, every male from 16 to 60 was liable to serve in the Royal Militias of the Islands. Musketry was particularly encouraged by the States and local officers, who provided trophies and cash prizes, and both compulsory and voluntary training courses ensured that a very high proportion of Island men learned and loved to shoot.

As Jerseyman Lord Portsea explained in the House of Lords on 7 March 1944, during the course of one of his many wartime speeches to raise awareness of conditions in the Channel Islands, the Royal Militias of Jersey and Guernsey were unique. Service was obligatory, universal and unpaid. Their title had been won for gallant deeds performed for the Crown, and before 1920 they were the only Royal Militias in the Empire. However, arrangements for conscription into His Majesty’s Forces were not in place by September 1939, and ancient charters clearly stated that no man should be required to serve outside the Islands, ‘unless the body of the King was in the hands of his enemies’. Notwithstanding this lack of compulsion, the Islanders reacted as they had done at the outbreak of war in 1914, when the whole youth of the Islands – 17 per cent of the population – had volunteered and gone to France. Again in 1939, about the same percentage also volunteered and fought in all those battles which culminated at Dunkirk, after which time defence of the Islands was left primarily, as it had been for centuries, to the Island forces. They had arms, guns and munitions, and also the great rock fortress, Fort Regent, which had been built at a cost of 1 million pounds