

Alderney

Archaeologist **Matt Leonard** takes a critical look at the Second World War 'conflict landscape' of Alderney in the Channel Islands.

As the Second World War raged in the Pacific, on the vast steppes of Russia, and in the skies over Germany, the conflict was also being fought in smaller communities, where it was felt in claustrophobic and intimate ways. Perhaps this was nowhere more so than in the Channel Islands, where the war was played out in microcosm.

The Channel Islands hold a unique place in the history of the Second World War, as they were the only piece of British territory to be occupied by the Germans. The islands had varying experiences of the conflict, and the subject of their occupation is still extremely contentious. It was severe and harsh, and was experienced at a very personal level. Throughout the entire occupation, the islanders fought hard to retain their identity, despite the forbidding circumstances.

Often, the Germans would use natives of the places they conquered as slave labour for their war-machine, but this did not happen in the Channel Islands. Instead, workers were imported from places like Russia, Poland, France, and Belgium, and put to work on the defences, altering the landscape of the islands in numerous ways.



Above A sea view from inside one of the bunkers on the Alderney coast, one of the many military scars remaining from the German occupation.

Inset The Germans march in. Alderney, 1940.

Conversely, many of the islands' inhabitants were deported to camps in Europe. Some 2,200 were sent to civilian internment camps, where conditions were bearable, but hardly appealing. There were, however, many political prisoners incarcerated for acts of resistance in places where the conditions were far worse.

Resistance

The suffering the Channel Islanders experienced cannot be underestimated. Hunger, virtual imprisonment, and the apparent abandonment by mainland Britain all meant that the inhabitants of these small islands required a huge reserve of will and determination to survive. Unlike many other occupied areas, the ratio of troops to civilians was very high (one soldier to every three inhabitants, whereas in France it was one to every 100). This meant that any sort of overt resistance was virtually impossible.

Unarmed and symbolic resistance was rife, however, and islanders often showed incredible resourcefulness and ingenuity. In June 1942, for example, the Germans banned radios to prevent the islanders listening to propaganda being broadcast by the BBC. In response, crystal radios were used, often hidden in everyday items such as hollowed-out books. Despite the penalties for this sort of defiance, their use was widespread, enabling the islanders to contest the power of their oppressors, as well as helping them maintain their own sense of identity – something

Left An idyllic shot of Alderney before the German invasion.

Right and bottom The Germans attempted to turn the Channel Islands into a fortress by constructing underground shelters and massive bunkers such as these two still standing in Alderney.

vital to surviving an occupation.

Alderney's experience of the Second World War differs from that of Jersey, Guernsey, and Sark, in that almost the entire population was evacuated before the Germans' arrival. Within a week of their departure, the island was taken over, and it was not surrendered until 10 May 1945. The war experience of Alderney's population was one of living on the mainland, and it was the landscape that bore the full effects of the war until the inhabitants returned to a shattered land – barely recognizable as the one they had left behind.

Bunkers and slave-labour camps

During the five years of occupation, the Germans attempted to turn the Channel Islands into a fortress. Coastal defenses, underground shelters, massive bunkers, and other military features, still visible today, were constructed all over the islands. But it was on Alderney that the most sinister side of the war was seen. The Germans built three slave-labour camps (Borkum, Helgoland, and Norderney) and one concentration camp (Sylt) on the small, three-square-mile island.


The three slave-labour camps were used by the notorious Organisation Todt to house the workers who built the island's defences. The concentration camp was not a death camp, so it did not contain the gas chambers or crematoria that are associated with camps such as Auschwitz. But as Gilly Carr of Cambridge University notes, investigations into Sylt's wartime history are still continuing. And irrespective of the Alderney camps' nature, many people still lost their lives. Figures vary, but it is estimated that between 600 and 700 people perished.

Alderney still bears the scars of the occupation, and many concrete fortifications are still visible. Although many other remains are today covered in thick undergrowth, the island was strewn with the detritus of war when the islanders first returned. A surprising amount of land is still unusable for agriculture due to the sub-surface defence-works, and from time to time, bombs and mines are uncovered.

The Germans did their best to destroy the camps as the end of the war approached, although if the visitor knows where to look, remnants can still be found. Helgoland went in March 1944, Norderney in July, and Sylt soon followed.

Remembrance

In 2008, some former inmates erected a memorial plaque at Sylt, the only one to be displayed at any of the camp sites on the island. The remnants of the concentration camp can today be seen at the end of the island's runway; sentry posts, barrack-hut floors, and an air-raid shelter all remain to bear witness to the island's traumatic experience. Borkum remained after the war and was used to house German POWs. It was later renamed Minerva and used by British forces. The original concrete entrance posts to the camp are now used to mark the entrance to the island's rubbish-tip.

On 9 May every year, the people of Jersey and Guernsey celebrate Liberation Day. The people of Alderney do not. Reflecting the differing experience of occupation in the Channel Islands, they instead celebrate Homecoming Day on 15 December. This was the day in 1945 when most of the population returned to their ravaged homeland, to begin the long and traumatic process of rebuilding their cherished community. 



Further information

See Gilly Carr's articles, 'The Politics of Forgetting on the Island of Alderney' in the *Archaeological Review from Cambridge* (2007), and 'The Archaeology of Occupation, 1940-2009' in *Antiquity* (2010).