

COMMERCE AND CONSERVATION IN SARK

Much of this talk was written in Singapore where we have been staying recently – the contrast between the two islands couldn't be more extreme. Singapore is a dynamic modern city constantly reinventing itself, organised and highly controlled by its government. It is also fiercely protective of its heritage and places great emphasis on conserving its wild areas of jungle and its historic buildings and enhancing the environment with tree planting and flowers. It is also a shoppers' paradise –where a firm hand is needed on cheque book or credit card and the wife has to be kept firmly under control!

It is important to point out that in Sark, in contrast, we do not have a controlling central government which can dictate policy. The committees of Chief Pleas work independently of each other and are jealous of their autonomy and although Committee chairmen now meet on a regular basis this is not to form policy but merely to let us all know what other committees are working on. I am not on DCC and the views expressed in this talk are my own for which I take full responsibility. I hope that it will spark discussion and debate, because without it we cannot have a full and vibrant democracy. Sark is very much at a cross roads.

I have chosen this subject because I have had a lifelong interest in old buildings and conservation generally having restored and lived in a wide variety of listed historic houses in the UK. This was our last house in England, an 18th century cottage ornee in Sidmouth, East Devon. It was very shabby when we bought it and we had to replant the gardens and restore the house. Unfortunately, I don't seem to have much time for gardening these days. I have also been involved in Commerce for much of my life, from shops through to Nursing homes. Although I trained as a lawyer I found it really boring and was much more stimulated by the world of business.

I have greatly enjoyed the challenge of turning the crumbling tumbledown barn at the Seigneurie into Hathaways. This project in a way illustrates the difficulties of combining the restoration of an historic building with commercial activity. You don't know what horrors you are going to uncover or what the eventual cost is going to be when you start out. It would of course have been cheaper to have bull dozed the barn and started again. But Sark would have lost one of its original 16th Century Tenement houses as a result. Underneath the changes of 5 centuries, was the ghost of the original building. It required careful sensitive restoration taking one step as a time. I should like to pay tribute here to the great wealth of craftsmanship and skills that exist on Sark- Carl who did a lot of the masonry, Eric Rogers who did a wonderful job on the doors, and Ewan de Carteret who brought the interior to life. It was also heartening to see such skills in the younger generation as reflected by Ben Perree's joinery.

Before continuing, what do we mean by Commerce and Conservation? For a project to be commercial there has to be an intention to make a profit. In the context of Sark, this an important point which I will deal with later.

Conservation, according to my dictionary has three elements which are all important here.

1. It involves the preservation or restoration of the natural environment.
2. the preservation and repair of historic buildings
3. the careful use of resources – really important in the context of this island.

What makes Sark so special? And why do people come back year after year for relaxation and refreshment? Believe me if you haven't lived anywhere else, Sark is a very precious gem. Not a tough hard creation but something that is fragile and all too easily destroyed. It has to be looked at as a whole: the old field boundaries, the narrow cliff paths and dusty roads, the really beautiful dry stone walling...add the wild flowers, the wild dramatic cliffs and sea, and birds, to a warm inclusive community and you have something very special. There is a peace and stillness here which has all but disappeared in mainstream Europe. No constant rumbling of distant motor ways. And at night there is a deep darkness with the brilliance of the stars which should be relished and enjoyed. Sark is good for the soul.

It is interesting to note that there is a move for Sark to become accredited with the status of a "Dark Sky Community" as part of the international campaign for dark skies which began in 1989. We are too small to be a dark sky park (as Galloway in Scotland has become recently) but we could become the world's first "Dark Sky Island". It would be a useful marketing tool to help attract would be astronomers to Sark where we have little background light and lots of safe cliff tops and fields to star gaze from.

Sark has come about NOT because of money but the LACK of it. People made do with what was available using local resources and ingenuity. The island must for a long time have been fairly treeless, furze was used for cooking and the fields were enclosed by earth banks topped with the local black thorn. Change happened very slowly, if at all. At times, there were individuals with money as evidenced by the Victorian additions to the Seigneurie by the first Collings Seigneur in the mid nineteenth Century and the farm buildings that date from this time. He made his mark with an enthusiastic building programme. Later generations had to make do and mend. Sometimes, there wasn't much mending. There are a smattering of beautiful old farmhouses on the island that point to individual times of prosperity, all must have been complete with their old farm buildings, piggeries and outhouses. Not many of the latter remain unfortunately. Just as important to our landscape are the traditional wooden houses with tin roofs (the old Sark thatch) such as this one in the Avenue.

So the picture has been of an island that has been caught in its own time warp. For the last century or so it has attracted particularly English settlers who have come to experience this unique way of life. The feudal system that prevailed, helped to give the impression of a different way of life, as did the system of land holding that came with it. Eldest sons of Tenants inherited everything which encouraged other siblings to find a life outside the island. Over the centuries, the population has remained remarkably constant at between 5 – 600.

Chief Pleas was on the whole controlled by the tenants who had a definite interest in resisting change. This was fully illustrated by the fact that although in 1966 Chief Pleas agreed to appoint Geoffrey Jellicoe (Later Sir Geoffrey) to look at future development on Sark and how it would affect the landscape, when he presented the island with his report the following year, it was thrown out by Chief Pleas because various tenants felt that their ancient rights and privileges would be threatened. As it happens, the Jellicoe Plan has unofficially been used by a succession of Development Control Committees to provide a basis for their decisions. By a strange coincidence, Sir Geoffrey spent the last two years of his life at our nursing home in Devon and I knew him well. Although well into his nineties his mind was as sharp as ever and by then he had made his name as one of the world's foremost landscape architects. Still, Sark knew best and wasn't going to be told by anyone, no matter how eminent, how it should run its affairs.

Looking at Sark today, one option would be to make the whole island a Conservation Area. This would mean that the main aim of the planning laws would be biased in favour of the maintenance of the natural beauty of the Island. Because of its small size, the impact of any development can have a disproportionate effect on the island as a whole. Go down to Little Sark and you will find a blue print for sustainable development. Life continues in its unhurried fashion with its traditional farming methods and herd of Guernseys grazing contentedly. Produce is grown for La Sablonnerie which has developed sympathetically to meet demand over the years. It is a winning formula that attracts visitors from around the world because the hotel is not too large and still has that feeling of intimacy and personal service that comes with a family owned business where the family is passionate about what it does. And of course there is Miss Elizabeth – what a winning combination!

Making the whole island a Conservation Area would not mean that there could be no development, but the priority would be the protection and promotion of the traditional Sark landscape. Many of our planning and other laws depend on the old Sark way of cooperation rather than confrontation. It is a sad state of affairs that this is not enough in this day and age and our laws need to be strengthened. One might also question whether is appropriate for planning laws to have criminal penalties. It means that the Island does not have control over enforcement issues as we have to rely on the Law Officers in Guernsey and the decision of the Procureur on whether to prosecute or not. I think that it would be much more appropriate if DCC was able to apply to the Court for relief without initially involving criminal law issues.

It is also essential that planning fees reflect the amount of work that should go into considering planning applications. We should expect the fees for a large hotel development to be in the thousands of pounds based on the square footage involved rather than the new rate of just £140. Only then could the committee get professional advice to properly consider applications. We have to face the fact that committees of Chief Pleas are filled by Conseillers who are doing their very best to serve the community without pay and at considerable expense in time and effort to themselves. We have no civil service here and I personally have never worked so hard. It is easy to criticise and recently the harassment of Conseillers has reached a totally

unacceptable level, but planning issues have certainly got more complex and difficult. When I looked at the scale of the new Stocks Hotel staff block once building had got underway, I too was shocked at how massive it looked in the context of the site, although I am prepared to concede that by the time the building is finished and greenery has grown up round it, we shall forget what all the fuss was about. It is not always easy to get a proper view of things by just looking at plans and poles and strings. Independent, professional advice could be very valuable in dealing with this sort of complicated application involving a sensitive site. And let's face it, because of the small scale of the island, all sites are sensitive. I am talking here about large commercial developments, not the single family home application that would be charged at a very much lower rate per square foot. Independent advice would also help protect the Committee from charges of bias.

Back in the UK, I was involved in two large extensions to an existing Grade 11 listed building which we had converted to a Nursing Home. Because of the sensitivity of the site – perched in a very prominent position on the top of cliffs with gardens going down to the beach – and the importance of the original house which was 1860s Gothic, the planning stages for both wings took years not months and the cost per application involved many thousands of pounds. This is the last wing completed about five years ago and for which we won a national design award for the best extension to an existing nursing home. We built the wings because of the pressure on us to provide more beds – our waiting list had kept on growing.

Committees must not feel pressurised into making decisions without proper consideration and consultation. We should expect all major applications to be accompanied by environmental assessments to show how the development will affect the landscape, water use, waste disposal, tractor movements to name but a few issues. As a rule we should avoid unnecessary red tape, but in planning matters it cannot be avoided. The mistakes that we make today will come back to haunt future generations. Just look at the ribbon development of bungalows in Guernsey that wrecked a rural landscape for ever.

It is also a concern that a number of important houses on the island are presently unoccupied or in a derelict state. Perhaps we should consider doubling the property tax for unoccupied houses? Just a thought. Any unoccupied house involves a loss of revenue to the island. I see that new plans have been submitted for the rebuilding of La Jaspellerie . It now sits roofless and open to the elements with the original walls encased in concrete blocking. Because of its prominent position looking out to sea, its rebuilding will be welcomed, although – and you might say I am being ultra critical, I feel that the preferred option would have been the restoration of the old house which is what the original permission was given for, rather than a total rebuild. Could perhaps the Soc Serqu produce a Register of houses at risk?

The present hotel developments at Dixcart and La Moinerie will add a further approximately 40 -50 beds to Sark's hotel stock, an increase of roughly 20%. Stocks is being refurbished without a great increase in its number of beds. This is without the new Beauregard Hotel. Don't get me wrong, I am not against such developments and having stayed at Dixcart some years ago, there was a definite need for investment. Providently for Sark this investment is happening at a time of recession and rising

unemployment elsewhere and it certainly has to be welcomed just as the improvements to the Avenue by Sark Estates must be applauded. I am however saddened by the loss of family run hotels which are more suited to Sark's small scale and by their replacement by larger more impersonal ones. Managed hotels by their very nature always have to be larger with more beds in order to be profitable.

There are some questions to be asked about the impact of these extra beds on Sark's infrastructure. There is also going to be a greater need for extra staff – all of which will put additional strain on island facilities and housing. An increase in the population beyond present levels will add to the strain on our educational and medical facilities. There is a need for further work to research the optimum sustainable level for Sark's population in view of all these concerns. We need a new Jellicoe Plan for Sark.

One can only presume that the developer of these hotels has worked out a strategy on how these extra rooms are to be filled. Certainly I cannot see that winter opening can be anything but a loss making exercise. Gordon Brown boasted that he would banish boom and bust for ever in the UK and I rather view the forecast of permanent year round employment on Sark with the same scepticism. It depends of course whether some of these businesses are true businesses in the meaning of the word – ie where profit has to be the main aim – or whether they are vehicles for employing as many people as possible regardless of cost or commercial viability. In this case one has to wonder for how long the recent flood of money into Sark can be sustained. In view of the closures of just over a year ago, it might also be relevant to ask whether future funding (I hesitate to use the word investment in this context) is dependent on how the electorate chooses to vote. There is also a concern that other Sark businesses that have to make profits in order to survive might find it difficult to compete and could easily be undercut by their non commercial competitors. Certainly, full employment on Sark is leading to a rapid inflation of wage costs for many businesses.

The last few years has seen an enormous increase in the non agricultural use of tractors. I know that the Traffic Committee is wrestling with this thorny problem but judging from comments made by visitors and residents alike this is a problem that is a concern to many. Somehow, we have got to reclaim peace and tranquillity and restore Sark's claim to be a traffic free island. Which brings me to the industrial site which has grown up at Clos de Pegan and attracts tractors like bees round a honey pot. This is an extremely sensitive part of the Island, close to La Seigneurie and Port du Moulin, and the positioning of this facility in such a prominent position with noise and sometimes smoke polluting a wide area, is totally unacceptable. Hopefully, it can be moved elsewhere before visitors begin to arrive to enjoy the honeysuckle walk and Port du Moulin beach this summer. Perhaps this where the new vegetable garden is going to be? It would be great if we could have further information on this.

So, taking the importance of maintaining Sark's unique heritage as read, how do we go about unlocking the Island's commercial potential?

Land Reform has to be a priority. A post feudal society has at present a feudal system of land holding. When Tenements came with an automatic seat in Chief Pleas, there was a good reason to continue with their indivisibility and not allow any changes. With land reform, in return for the granting of freehold titles to all tenants,

leaseholders would be given the automatic right to buy their freehold or extend their leases. It happened in London and it can certainly happen here. Obviously, the details of which leases should be capable of enfranchisement and the payments involved are finer points which will have to be looked into. At the same time, for the first time, it will be possible for owners of property to borrow against its value and to use their equity to fund businesses and provide working capital. Welcome to the 21st century! Back in the UK, we would never been able to get our nursing home business off the ground without borrowing money from the bank and using the building as security for the loan. Sark's commercial potential is being really hampered by the present system of landholding where even the Tenants are unable to use their property as security.

Sark's government would receive a windfall from the Property Transfer Tax as a result of Land Reform which might fund a simple computerised land registry. Land owners could dispose of unwanted property and farmers could for instance, increase their holdings of land. There is a case here to look at a proper system of agricultural tenancies as well. Provided there was a determination in Sark that development should be kept strictly under control, land reform would have a galvanising effect on the island. Young families could invest in the future and obtain cheaper mortgages in the knowledge that they were building up assets for future generations. Tenements could be split up and the deadening effect of the leasehold system where leaseholders are left holding assets which are falling in value would be avoided. The present system of local and open market houses would have to be maintained otherwise local families would find themselves priced out of the market.

I applaud such initiatives as the establishment of the Rondellerie vineyard and totally agree with the Sark Newsletter (is this a first!) that there is great scope for other such initiatives that would lead to the Island growing, producing and consuming as much local produce as possible. There is a lot of underused agricultural land on the island and it would be good to see local yogurt and free range eating chickens being produced for example, (this one of my hens, definitely not for eating,) as well as honey and a wider range of fruit and veg. And of course, at present we all enjoy delicious local lamb. And shouldn't the island have a label for marketing quality products? So much the better if these were locally owned small businesses and the Island began to produce a new generation of young entrepreneurs.

Looking ahead it would be foolish if Sark did not investigate its potential for tidal energy. The Channel Islands as a whole have been pin pointed as having some of the sites with the greatest potential in the whole of the UK. There is also scope for all the islands to work together in the development of the tidal energy potential and the marketing of the eventual electricity. It might not make commercial sense to bring such electricity ashore for Sark's use, but perhaps some of the revenue could be used to bring down the cost of electricity on the Island which again would have a positive effect on businesses in Sark.

Again, looking at the cost of freight in and out of Sark, the latest results from Sark Shipping which show a net profit of £262,000 for the year 2009 as opposed to a loss of over £113,000 the previous year, an improvement of a colossal £375,000, must be greatly welcomed and applauded by everyone. I always look to see how much cash a business has in the bank and this time last year, Sark Shipping had an overdraft of well over £100,000. In contrast, as of last week the Company had £100,000 on deposit,

£68,000 in its current account and a further 27,000 Euros put aside to pay for the work being done on the Sark Venture. The point has to be made that if all of Sark's businesses fully supported the Island's wholly owned shipping company, greater future profits might lead to a reduction in ticket and freight costs for all. Lower freight costs would benefit all Sark's businesses but must go hand in hand with a profitable shipping company. With the present building projects, there is an opportunity for Sark Shipping to make large profits in the next few years which will give the Company reserves for the years ahead. This building boom won't last forever.

A successful future for Sark will be one where commerce works hand in hand with the preservation of the Island's unique heritage and natural attractions. We have to work hard to preserve the Island's peace and beauty, and not allow the commercial aspects of life to gain the upper hand. Marvellous new hotels will not in themselves attract new visitors to Sark if in the process we destroy the very thing that people are looking for. There is also great scope for environmental improvements - we should be looking at how we manage our rubbish more effectively, even the replacement of our plastic milk bottles with greener versions would be a step forward. There is much to be done and in a small community such as ours, everyone has a part to play.

Before, opening the floor to questions, I should like to give some publicity to the Guernsey Environmental Awards – the official title of this scheme being the Insurance Corporation Conservation Awards. There is still time to enter for these awards and judging will take place in Sark on the 11th May. We have entered the Seigneurie Gardens and have been asked to encourage as many entrants from Sark as possible. I am sure that Jo Birch would be happy to let any interested parties know how they can enter and give them further details.