

## Shooting at l'Eperquerie

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The story of l'Eperquerie relates to its geology, to its providing Sark's best defensible lookout, and to its having a landing place near good fishing grounds. From the cliffs by the landing, bands of hard dolerite lie across the island, originally protruding like ribs. This fine-grained dark stone, flecked with pale green 'porphyrs', was prized by Sark's neolithic peoples, who quarried it, fashioning axes and hammers for trade. 3000 years later French soldiers protected the landing place and built a promontory fort overlooking it, along the spine of l'Eperquerie, using blocks of the same dolerite. And 300 years later the same stone was used to build St Peter's Church.

Aerial photos reveal a few small rectangular field boundaries, probably dating from the Middle Ages. But the soil is shallow, favouring heathland vegetation. Apart from grazing sheep and harvesting bracken this wind-swept area was used for drying fish, particularly congers; these were split open and hung on stakes ('perques') to cure. The medieval Latin word *Esperkeria* denotes a market where fish were sold and taxed. The community of about 400 seems to have been prosperous up to the mid-14<sup>th</sup> century, after which Sark became a 'waste' and 'nest of pirates', a danger to France as well as to the other islands. Between 1549 and 1552 a promontory fort was built by a couple of hundred soldiers under Captain Bruel, sent to secure Sark for the French king. Francois I's passion for new-fangled architecture may account for this particular design, apparently Italian in style. By the time the dispirited French were chased out by Adrian Crole, a Flemish corsair, they had also constructed three 'Star forts' (at La Tour, Vermandaye, and the Hogsback). In 1562, when Helier De Carteret made his reconnaissance, the forts had already been vandalised by Guernseymen and English troops.

The Seigneur of St Ouen probably landed at Dixcart Bay and looked for a harbour more convenient for Jersey than Guernsey. The Creux was opened up and its gated tunnel was completed by 1588 - Armada year – and was used by the fishermen. The landing at l'Eperquerie continued to be used for trips to Guernsey, while the common itself supported rabbit warrens and a small flock of the Seigneur's sheep. The landing was always vulnerable to a French invasion from the east and in 1628 Minister Elie Brevint notes that Abraham Guille was paid to repair the wall on l'Eperquerie. Brevint also records that in the same year Seigneur Philippe De Carteret, fighting for Buckingham's English force, was taken prisoner by the French at Ile de Rey.

During the English Civil War, the royalist Seigneur's fief was confiscated and Sark was occupied by English and Guernsey Parliamentary forces. It is likely that the billeted soldiers used l'Eperquerie for their military exercises under Captain Clarke. After the Restoration of the King and the Seigneur's return, Charles II issued a licence dated 1675 for building a new harbour at L'Eperquerie for defence, but nothing came of it. In 1680 Colonel Legge's *Report on the State of Guernsey and Jersey* shows the planned harbour. It also shows the 'old wall' along the spine of l'Eperquerie, with a square bastion at the north end, where the long cannon now lies.

Renewed fear of French invasion came to a head a century later at the time of the Revolution. In 1794 Seigneur Le Pelley was ordered to mobilize a Sark militia, to review his armoury, and to observe signals from Guernsey in case of invasion. He reported that three Sark cannon were usable, including one recently dredged up from

the wreck of the merchant ship Valentine (the cannon now outside the Visitor Centre). Also in 1794 the old island Granary was leased to the Government as a Magazine or powder store (i.e. the Arsenal). To close the arch above the Eperquerie landing a huge wooden door was constructed and Chief Pleas set fines for non-observation of defence drill. At least four guardhouses were built (or rebuilt in the case of the one above the Eperquerie landing) and four or five men kept night watch in each. At each Michaelmas for the next fifteen years, Chief Pleas renewed provision for coal and whale oil, to keep the men warm and lighted during these winter watches. It is probable that the Butts half-round tower was built at this time.

In 1815, a few weeks after the Battle of Waterloo, Sark received 83 'new' muskets. These appear to have lasted them till after the Crimean War. By this time, Sark Militia had, like those of the other islands, become 'Royal'. The Seigneur held the rank of Lieutenant Colonel and commanded a regiment of about 100. In 1859 Seigneur W.T. Collings received 96 'rifled muskets, with bayonets and scabbards'. He kept the receipt and made careful record of the cartridges and balls, tunics, great coats, badges, buttons, and lace trim that were sent to Sark from Fort St George. Collings's returns give a detailed picture of Sark's militia in this Victorian period. In 1866 Sark's Regiment of Light Infantry consisted of two companies (north and south), one Lieutenant Colonel, one Captain, one Adjutant of Musketry, one surgeon and his assistant, one unpaid staff sergeant, 6 sergeants, 2 buglers, 8 corporals, and 75 privates. Recruits at 17 underwent a year's training. Men between 45 and 60 were 'reserves'. Parade drills were often held on summer evenings; rifle practice was also out of working hours – often on a Sunday – on the Eperquerie and in winter.

Thanks to Collings's carefully copied quarterly returns we can work out how this shooting practice took place. In 1866 Collings inventoried '8 Iron Targets', 1 Red Flag six-foot square and 3 others, 900 yards of cord. These targets would have been slotted into holes in the granite parapet at the north end of the Eperquerie. The Adjutant of Musketry then waved his huge red flag and withdrew to the safety of the Butts tower. Moveable iron shelters to protect the target man were known on the inventories as 'mantlets'. WTC notes with some pride: 'No iron mantlets. The marker's Butt is built of strong granite masonry.'

Up to 8 riflemen under command of the Sergeant Major took up various positions, using tripod rests on high ground from which they could see the targets. The scorecards tell us that they shot from 150, 200, 250, 300, 400, 500, 550 and 600 yards, the distances measured out with the stretched cord. Amazingly, the post-Crimean 'rifled muskets' known as Service 53s, were sighted to 900 yards! But where, on L'Eperquerie, could they have fired from at these distances? With the help of Digimap software the puzzle can be solved: from the target parapet to the square footprint of the old French bastion (where the unmounted cannon lies) is exactly 200 yards; to the 'Trig. Point' (highest central point on the Eperquerie) is 400 yards. To shoot 600 yards the men would have to stand on the eastern ridge of the present-day shooting range. Not many of the Sark men hit the target at 600 yards, but their Sergeant Major, 32 year-old William Hamon did.

To encourage good marksmanship the British government gave £80 prize money to the CI militias and in 1869 Guernsey States added £50. In 1866 Sark's share was £2.13s.6d. First prize was ¼ the total, 2<sup>nd</sup> was ¼ of the remainder and so forth.

These cash prizes were not to be sniffed at (even though one non-contestant infuriated the commanding officer by insolently discharging his musket and ‘setting fire to a furze bush’). On 23 November 1867 John Le Feuvre of Nord company and Simon De Carteret of Sud company each won 7 shillings – twice a day’s wages. It seems to have been winter work. In December 1875 shooting took place on 24<sup>th</sup>, 27<sup>th</sup>, 28<sup>th</sup>, 31<sup>st</sup>, and on 1<sup>st</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> January 1876. Using a printed form, William Hamon writes down the strength and direction of the wind, the distances, standing or prone, and the men’s scores for bull’s eyes, centres and outers. Sergeant Major Hamon was also the winner.

It looks as if the Royal Sark Militia had its best days under W.T.Collings. In 1875 he requested the appointment of his son William F. Collings as Acting Adjutant and Instructor of Musketry. It was a struggle to maintain the equipment (the Seigneur’s bailiff Rowe, who was also Quartermaster Sergeant, reported that rats at the Arsenal gnawed the militia belts) and the rifles became obsolete. The Crimean 53s had 39 inch barrels and had to be muzzle loaded, which made them slow to use and not much good in a fight, which was mostly done with bayonets. Sark’s armoury contained also some ‘Short rifles’ more suited for combat, but in 1881 these were pronounced ‘unserviceable and perfectly worthless through neglect’ by the Commissary General in Guernsey. Seigneur Collings patiently explained: ‘The 7 Sergeants Short Rifles were sent by SW Steamer ‘Havre’ which was wrecked off Guernsey in 1876. The Chest of arms was fished up from the bottom of the sea and subsequently they were repaired and reported serviceable; but have since been a source of complaint the men finding it impossible to keep them from rust.’ At the same inspection 47 of the ‘Pattern 53’ rifles were also found useless, mostly having honey-combed barrels and damaged foresights. After a lengthy correspondence W.T.Collings succeeded in persuading Guernsey Ordinance Office that all these weapons be written off.

The next year Collings died. His son W.F. liked shooting but was no record keeper: his scrawled notebook is confined to listing how many woodcock and thrushes he shot each day. Conservation work going on at the Butts and around the old French fort is linking up different chapters of Sark’s military history. There are musket balls still to be found on l’Eperquerie.