

Sark

By Ben Johnson (Historic UK)

The smallest of the four main Channel Islands, Sark is located some 80 miles from the south coast of England and only 24 miles from the north coast of France. Not part of the United Kingdom nor the European Union, Sark is reputed to be the smallest independent feudal state in Europe and to have the last feudal constitution in the western world.

Whilst not strictly speaking a sovereign state, under a unique status the Seigneur of Sark, the head of the feudal government, holds the island for the English monarch.

The strategic importance of Sark's location in the Channel meant that over the next few hundred years it was always the subject of close attention, a fact that was particularly influenced by the status of Anglo-French relations at that time. In 1549 a French naval force of 400 men landed on the island and established fortifications: they were eventually expelled.

The fear of further French occupation led to Sark being permanently settled again in 1565 by the Seigneur of St Ouen from nearby Jersey, Helier de Carteret. Together with his wife and several of their St Ouen tenants, the Heliers moved onto the island.

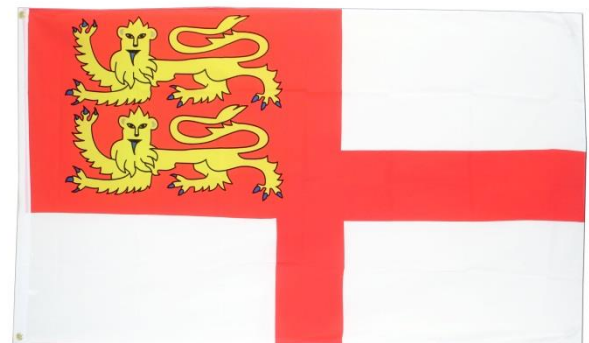


Figure 1. Queen Elizabeth I

Helier's role was to ensure that Sark would never again become depopulated and could rise, when required, to defend itself. To achieve this he parcelled the land up into sections, each large enough to support a family and charging a peppercorn rent, he leased each parcel. Strict tenancy agreements stipulated that a house must be erected on each parcel of land and each tenant was required to provide a man, armed with a musket and ammunition, to defend the island when called to do so.

In 1565 Queen Elizabeth I rewarded Helier by granting him the feudal title of fief, with an obligation to maintain 40 households and men with arms to defend the island and to pay the Crown the twentieth part of a knight's fee annually for the privilege – in today's money that is about £1.79! This royal recognition formally established the constitutional basis which survives on Sark to this present day.

The first forty tenants came mainly from Jersey, many were either friends or family, but all were united by the strict Presbyterian faith. Helier's settlers brought with them Jersey laws and customs and Sark's first parliament, known as the **Chief Pleas**, met in November 1579.

The Chief Pleas is composed of the inheritors of the original 40 parcels of land who were titled 'deputies' and 12 'people's deputies' chosen by islanders. The leader of the Chief Pleas is the 'Seigneur of Sark.'



The Seigneur of Sark had many interesting rights on the island:

- the sole right to keep pigeons and unspayed female dogs
- and all debris washed up between the high and low tide lines was his
- the right to sleep with any bride on her wedding night
- the privilege of granting the Sarkees permission to buy and sell their houses
- and he is also entitled to collect a treizieme - one-thirteenth of every land transaction
- right of veto over the Chief Pleas

One ancient right all Sarkees can invoke if they believe their property is being threatened is the Clameur de Haro. By falling to their knees in front of witnesses, they can recite the Lord's Prayer in French then cry out for justice: "Haro, Haro, Haro! A mon aide mon Prince, on me fait tort!" (Help me, my prince, I have been wronged). If the Clameur is registered with the Greffe (court), the alleged wrong must stop until it is dealt with by the court.