

**Text for the President, Policy & Resources Committee**

**Special States Meeting on 8<sup>th</sup> May, 2025**

Thank you Sir

I will not attempt to summarise everything that happened in the island during the Second World War but will touch on some of the experiences of people from Guernsey's community and in Guernsey at that time to give some context for the relief, reflection and jubilation that Liberation brought in May 1945.

As German invasion loomed in June 1940, an urgent order was issued by Guernsey's government to evacuate the children. Parents were asked to prepare and report to the harbour by 8 the next morning. Around 5,000 children set off for towns across mainland Britain. Amongst those children were my own parents. My father's family was evacuated to Huddersfield, and my mother's family to Stafford, two of the many towns that welcomed and sheltered our islanders. The children, although evacuated to the relative safety of mainland Britain, faced challenges being relocated to unfamiliar surroundings, often away from other family members. In all, around 17,000 civilians were evacuated from Guernsey in the days before the invasion.

On Friday 28th June, German aircraft, mistaking tomato trucks for military vehicles, bombed the White Rock and fruit export sheds. The attack claimed the lives of 33 islanders and injured 67 others.

The Occupation began on Sunday 30th June, more German troops arrived the next day, and the Swastika flag was raised. Eventually there was one soldier for every two of the remaining islanders.

Life for the 25,000 people remaining in Guernsey changed dramatically. Curfews, censorship, and restricted movement became the norm, while essential supplies like food, fuel, and medicine grew increasingly scarce. Both civilians and the occupying forces faced severe shortages, leading to widespread hardship and starvation.

The States of Deliberation delegated their authority to a Controlling Committee which was tasked with managing the island's affairs, albeit under the watchful eye of the German military authorities.

Hitler saw the Channel Islands as a potential stepping stone for an invasion of the United Kingdom. The Nazis quickly set about transforming Guernsey into a fortress. Thousands of forced labourers were brought to the island by Organisation Todt including prisoners of war, political prisoners, and enslaved workers. They toiled under brutal conditions, living in overcrowded camps with little in the way of food or medical care. An unknown number of these people lived, suffered, and died in our island. Many of the concrete fortifications endure across the Channel Islands, often built on and into our beautiful coastlines.

From September 1942, around 1,000 British citizens residing in Guernsey were deported to be held in a civilian internment camp in the German town of Biberach. Guernsey people were also held at Compiègne, Dorsten and other camps. The wartime experience for Guernsey's

deportees was incredibly hard as daily life was defined by fear, silence, and deprivation. Many died due to their internment.

Three Jewish women were deported from Guernsey to Auschwitz. They did not survive, and their tragic fate stands as a stark reminder of the far-reaching cruelty of the Holocaust.

The Occupation tested the fabric of Guernsey's community. Many of us will know stories of our families' experiences during this period, and I expect that most of them are not publicly known. Although Guernsey's government, institutions and courts continued to operate, they did so under the influence of the occupying forces, who controlled much of the island's legislation and legal processes. Some individuals, including some local police officers who were convicted of crimes of theft, received sentences that, particularly when viewed through modern standards, appear harsh or unjust. I can only express sincere regret for any injustices suffered during that period. In doing that, I honour the resilience and dignity of those affected and acknowledge the pain and sense of injustice that some families still carry.

In some of the darkest days of the Occupation, in the winter of 1944/45, the International Red Cross ship SS Vega brought vital food parcels, medical supplies and messages from loved ones. It brought more than sustenance; it brought hope.

On the 8th of May 1945, the guns fell silent across mainland Europe and the Nazis finally surrendered. As we reflect on this 80th anniversary, I pay tribute to the bravery of all who fought and those who died in the Second World War to secure peace. I know that islanders today are grateful to the members of Guernsey's community who fought or otherwise contributed to the war effort.

As the Presiding Officer has already reminded us, there was a Proclamation and a special States Meeting on 8th May to announce that the Occupation was ended.

Local diarist Reverend R. Douglas Ord captured the sentiments of islanders, when he wrote: "As the afternoon wore on, the streets filled with citizens whose expression was that of people awakening from a long nightmare sleep to find themselves in a world of reality unbeset by evil dreams."

Miriam Leale, another Occupation diarist, wrote: "The weather is glorious, the birds have never sung so beautifully, and the daisies have never twinkled so happily."

For many islanders, returning to Guernsey after the Occupation was both deeply emotional and bittersweet. Logistically it took time for many people to return and some did not return at all. Although they faced damaged homes, lost possessions, and a changed island, there was relief and gratitude in simply being home. Despite the hardships, the chance to rebuild their lives on familiar soil brought hope and a renewed sense of belonging. But there were bereavements to be mourned, and there were gaps to bridge too. When my own father returned home at the age of eight, after five formative years spent in Huddersfield, he could no longer speak nor understand Guernésiais and came home with a broad Yorkshire accent. He had to be introduced to his own father, who had been serving in the British forces during the war.

Liberation Day remains a cornerstone of our community's identity. It is a day to celebrate and preserve our history, our culture, and our shared values. It reminds us of the dangers of conflict, war, and fascism. It teaches us that freedom, democracy, and justice are never guaranteed. They must be protected, nurtured and passed on for future generations.

And as time moves forward, we must take care not to let the memories of the Occupation fade. Those who lived through the occupation survive as 'the Liberation Generation' but are gradually passing, and with them, the direct memories of that chapter in our history. It is our duty to remember, to keep their stories alive, to teach the next generation, and to ensure that the lessons of our past are not lost nor forgotten.

Today, we are mindful that conflict still touches Europe and other places. For example, people in and from Ukraine face a struggle that painfully echoes our own history. As a community which has experienced occupation and evacuation, we stand in solidarity with those defending their right to peace, to be sovereign, and free from tyranny. We respond with compassion and courage when others face injustice.

As we mark the 80th anniversary of our Liberation, let us do so with pride, with reverence, and with a renewed commitment to the values that have shaped Guernsey's community, in the spirit of unity, peace and reconciliation. Liberation Day is not only about the past—it is about who we are today, and the strength we carry forward into the future.