Discover the Occupation of Guernsey

Guernsey is one of the Channel Islands, a group of islands in the English Channel (the narrow body of water between Britain and France). This text explains how Guernsey was affected by the Second World War (1939-1945), a conflict where Britain fought against Germany.

Discover the Occupation of Guernsey

One of the most significant and fascinating periods of Guernsey's history was when German forces occupied the island during the Second World War. The Channel Islands were the only part of the British Isles under German control during the conflict, and there remains plenty of evidence of their stay; coastlines are dotted with well-preserved fortifications built by German soldiers, and museums recreate those dark days with gripping exhibits.

The occupation began on the 19th of June, 1940, when the British Government decided to demilitarise* the Channel Islands, effectively leaving them undefended. [...] As a result, a quarter of the island's population, including thousands of school children, were evacuated* to the UK.

Unaware of Guernsey's demilitarised status, the Germans bombed St Peter Port harbour on the 28th of June, killing 33 and injuring 67 more — they had mistaken a group of tomato lorries for a convoy of troop carriers. Two days later, German troops began to arrive at the island's airport until there were about as many soldiers as there were civilians, and their flag was raised.

The soldiers built and reinforced fortifications, loading them with an array of light and heavy guns, some of which have since been restored and are accessible for public viewing. For almost five years, the island was in a chokehold. Food was extremely short, and extreme rationing* was in place. In fact, many islanders and troops were just days from starvation when the Red Cross* ship SS Vega delivered lifesaving supplies to Guernsey.

Finally, on the 9th of May 1945, the Germans departed the island at the end of the war, and evacuees and soldiers were reunited with their families at home in Guernsey. Each year, residents celebrate Liberation Day, commemorating the occasion with parades, parties, fireworks and more.

Those interested in history and the occupation are in luck; the island's heritage, including those five tempestuous years, is depicted in stunning detail through a whole host of museums.

The German Military Underground Hospital is the largest construction in the Channel Islands, built by slave workers during the occupation. Also used to store ammunition, it was built underground to remain undetected by planes. You can explore the tunnels and experience the eerie atmosphere for yourself.

Near Guernsey Airport lies the German Occupation Museum, which provides great insight into everyday life during the occupation, complete with a recreation of an occupation-era street. It is also home to a number of Second World War vehicles and fortifications.

An abridged extract from www.visitguernsey.com

Glossary

demilitarise — remove all military forces

evacuated — moved to a safer place

rationing — limits on food

the Red Cross — an organisation that gives people aid