

In reply to Miss Daisy Belfield's article in The Guardian, 24th April 2008

Daisy Belfield's picture of life on Sark published in The Guardian newspaper's "Response Column" of Thursday 24th April, fanciful as it is, is for the greater part inaccurate. To fully appreciate the context in which her piece is set, the reader needs at first to be aware that despite claims that her family have been on Sark for 50 years and that she is "infected by a sense of freedom there", Miss Belfield chooses not to live and work here, but merely makes the occasional visit. One cannot help but wonder why, "as one who has been in love with Sark all my life", Miss Belfield feels unable to come and join the island's community. Could it be that she fears that it would be impossible to find suitably financially rewarding work on Sark to fund a lifestyle that would allow her the luxury of being able to travel to and from the island as and when she wishes? Given the grave lack of investment in the island's economy over the preceding decades she would, were she to move here, find that life on Sark for anybody other than the truly financially independent is a far cry from the idyllic carefree existence that she alludes to in her letter.

I should declare that I have more than a passing interest in the issues raised by Miss Belfield. I have been associated with Sir David and Sir Frederick Barclay for over twenty years, having during that time managed numerous building projects for them in the UK and the Channel Islands. Following their purchase of several properties and tracts of land early last year, I moved to Sark and set about implementing the considerable investment programme, some £3,5 million per year, that they were proposing to undertake within the island.

Nine months on and the early benefits of this investment programme are evident for all to see. However I should point out that any prospective golfers travelling to the island to enjoy a round or two on the island's golf courses may be disappointed to find that such facilities exist only in the mind of Miss Belfield. Valleys carpeted with bluebells, rugged cliffs, and quite leafy lanes? Yes. Golf courses? No. Eager shoppers should also be aware that the "shopping malls" that Daisy visualises are similarly nowhere to be found. Could it be that she is slightly over-egging the creation of six small craft units within an old wool shop which have been established to allow artisans an opportunity to work and display their goods? Perhaps a more balanced view of our work on Sark is called for.

Upon my arrival many of the shops along the Avenue, Sark's principal thoroughfare, were boarded up and in a derelict, hazardous condition. Over the following months, utilising principally local labour, the properties have been

refurbished and are now opening for business in anticipation of the up and coming tourist season. A village green bordering the Avenue has been created where previously a dumping ground for all kinds of unsightly waste existed. The Avenue has retained all of its unique charm and quirky buildings whilst rediscovering a pride in its appearance that has been sadly lacking in recent years. The much loved Moinerie Hotel with its famous seafood restaurant and bar is now open and doing a healthy trade having sat empty and boarded up throughout the preceding eighteen months. The existing bedrooms have been refurbished to reflect the expectations of the modern day traveller whilst the unique charm of the property remains intact.

A single helicopter landing pad, built exclusively for use as an emergency medical evacuation facility, has been offered to the island by Sir David and Sir Frederick. This would see a casualty airlifted off of Sark and into the hands of the Guernsey medical services in under ten minutes. Compare this with the prospect of a 40 minute sea crossing in anything up to a force ten gale and the merits of such a facility speak for themselves.

Daisy's portrayal of the Seigneur, Michael Beaumont, as a "humble, decent man" is undoubtedly borne of a great affection and respect. However the belief that he is "dedicated to the welfare of the island" is a concept rather difficult for many to grasp given that little seems to have been achieved in recent times to halt the steady decline in the island's visible economy. "Sark has stood firm against a tide of modernisation" Miss Belfield proudly declares. Presumably the irony of this assertion will not be lost on Michael Beaumont's "devoted friends," who are in her words, "more likely to carry a mobile than a musket".

She records that "40 small farms are still managed by families who have been on the island for 400 years". An enchanting concept spoilt only by the inconvenient intrusion of fact. Only one family is farming land that has been in its possession since the early settlers arrived on Sark in the mid seventeenth century. Undoubtedly, several of the remaining old Sark families can proudly trace their ancestry back to the arrival of these early settlers, but the idea that 40 families arrived in 1665 and continue to manage 40 farms today is unfortunately a mere figment of Miss Belfield's imagination. Indeed, the present Seigneur, Michael Beaumont, readily acknowledges that his family's arrival on Sark was as late as 1852 when the fiefdom was granted to them in collection of an unpaid debt. In reality many of the 40 farms, or tenements as they are known as here on Sark, have over the years been owned by an eclectic mix of businessmen, solicitors, accountants and other professionals whose success in their various fields of work

off island has allowed them to purchase a tenement and, under the present feudal system, take their place as members of Sark's Parliament, the Chief Pleas.

Miss Belfield should understand that despite her obvious hostility to the idea, Sark will witness a gentle evolutionary benefit from Sir David & Sir Frederick Barclay's investment. The principal beneficiaries are the working men and women who for so long have had to endure the vagaries of a feast or famine economy where work is plentiful in the short tourist season but often desperately hard to come by during the remaining seven months of the year. There is a now spring in the step of so many people as they go about their daily lives, and who can blame them? At last the decline in the island's fortunes is to be halted and the building blocks of a sustainable economy that will benefit not only today's but also future generations of islanders are one by one being carefully laid into place.

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