

THE  
**VIKINGS**  
AND THE CHANNEL ISLANDS



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**‘Islands’ played an important role during the Viking age. Whether it be Gotland (Sweden) or Rosala (Finland) in the Baltic Sea for the Varangians trading east towards Constantinople and the Silk Road or Shetland and Faroe as stepping stones to the Norse colonies of Iceland, Greenland and Newfoundland in the wild North Atlantic. Safe havens, raiding bases, trading posts or colonies they were in many ways the linchpins of the Viking world. Nestled perfectly on the western flank of the English Channel with the Atlantic Ocean to the west, the archipelago of the Channel Islands provided a safe haven for Viking raiders and traders travelling south towards the Atlantic coast of France, Ireland and the Iberian Peninsula.**

## **First contact**

The Channel Islands would have certainly caught the attention of the first recorded Viking raiding party on ‘Francia’ in 799 AD on route to attack Noirmoutier island off the coast of Vendee (western Atlantic coast of France) and then in 820 AD when the raiders were repulsed from the Seine estuary, continuing on to attack the coast of Aquitaine once again. The infamous Viking warlord Hastein “the most wicked of all the pagans” as described by the Norman chronicler Dudo of St Quentin may have used the islands as a base in his attack on the Cathedral of Coutance (mainland Normandy) in 836 AD. Hastein was active along the Channel coast for over fifty years and the Channel Islands would have provided him with a safe haven for his raids on the western Carolingian empire until he met

his end in the ill-fated attack on King Alfred's Kingdom of Wessex (England) in 893 AD.

On the southern coast of Jersey in the Parish of St Laurence the district of the "Vingtaine du Coin Hâtain" derives from his name.

During this period the monastery of St Magloire on the island of Sark was ransacked by Viking raiders. According to the 'Miracles of St Magloire' the Saint's relics were saved and eventually made their way to Paris where Count Hugh

'the Great' had them interned in the L'église Saint-Barthélemy. Another site of interest is Castel church on the island of Guernsey. It is believed that the church of Ste Marie du Castro is built on the site of a fortified Viking stronghold. Known locally as the

'Chateau du Grand Sarrasin' (Castle of the great raider). In 1967 a rare Viking gaming piece was discovered during an archeological excavation at Cobo on the western coast of the island. Another Viking connection may be the recent discovery of a fabled navigational sunstone (Icelandic spar)

found in the wreck of an Elizabethan warship which sank off the island of Alderney in 1592 AD. The solarsteinn or sunstone is described in the 'Hrafn's Saga' when King Olaf raises it to the sky and checks the sun's position by studying the light in the stone.



Viking gaming piece found in Cobo, Guernsey  
© Guernsey Museum



Ste. Marie du Castel, Guernsey





Map of the Viking routes with the Channel Islands highlighted © Destination Viking Association



## From Vikings to Normans

The islands were brought under the authority of the newly created Viking colony of Normandy “land of the North-men” by the Roujarl (Count of Rouen) William I ‘Long sword’ in 933 AD during his annexation of the Contentin and Bessin regions of modern day lower Normandy. In 1066 AD the islands became linked with England when Duke William II of Normandy invaded the Anglo-Saxon kingdom and defeated King Harold II ‘Godwinsson’ at the battle of Hastings. They would remain part of the Duchy of Normandy even after King John lost the mainland to the French King Philip II “Augustus” in 1204 AD. Queen Elisabeth II still holds the title ‘Duke of Normandy’ through the Channels Islands and when toasting a drink on the islands it is custom to say “a notre Duc, la Reine” (to our Duke, the Queen).



The Plantagenet lions/leopards of England and Normandy (including the Channel Islands)



Tomb of William I ‘Longsword’ Roujarl of Rouen



## Place names

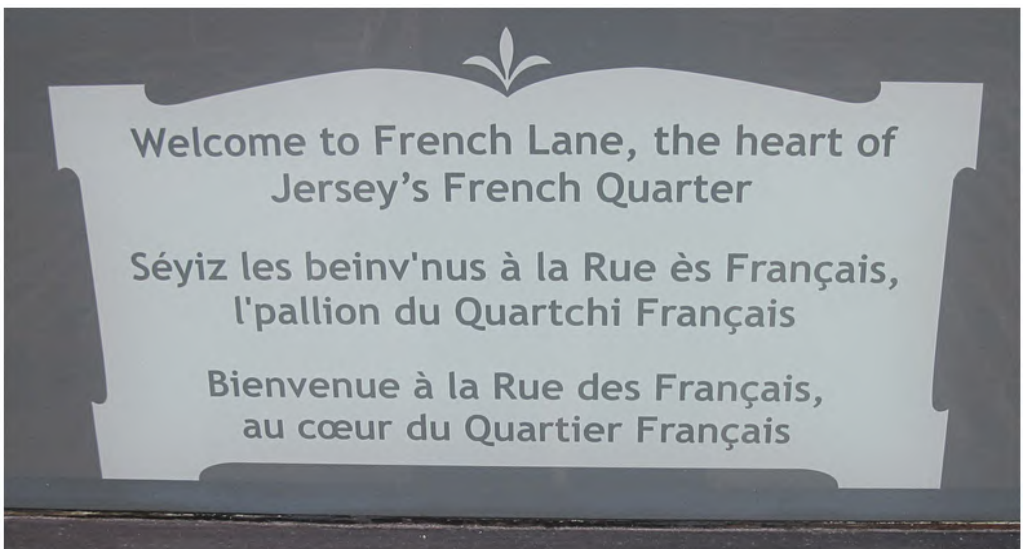
One of the enduring influences of the Vikings can be found in the islands place names. Most island groups around the British Isles take their names from Scandinavian origin and the Channel Islands are no exception. The three main islands of Jersey, Guernsey and Alderney all end with the Norse suffix –ey meaning island. Jersey possibly means ‘the grassy island’ or Geirr’s island. Alderney may be either a corruption of Old Norse ‘Adreni ‘island near to the coast’ or ‘Adlarennna’ meaning the strong current island. Guernsey may be derived from a personal name ‘Warinn’ or from the Old Norse ‘Grön’ for green or pine. This may be further corroborated with the Gaulish/Celtic word for Oak. Possibly referring to the island covered with trees. The Scandinavian etymology of some of the well less know islands and reefs include Jethou ‘the small island or small hill’. This contains the Norman –hou suffix taken from the Old Norse ‘holm’. Other Channel Islands with this suffix include, Lihou, Burhou, Brecqhou and Les Houmets. The island of Herm also derives from Old Norse meaning ‘the arm island’ due to its shape representing that of an arm.



**Coastline of Jersey ‘the grassy island’ © Visit Jersey**

## The Language

Perhaps one of the most important legacies of the Vikings on the islands is the local dialects. On Jersey it is 'Jèrriais' on Guernsey it is known as 'Dgèrnésiais' and on the smaller island of Sark it is 'Sercquiais'. They have been spoken on the islands for over a thousand years and have been influenced by the Celtic, Gallo-Roman, Frankish and Old Norse languages. The islands dialects are part of the Norman language commonly known as Norman-French which was the language created by the second and third generation of Vikings who settled down in Normandy, giving up the sword and taking up the plough after the Treaty of St Clair sur Epte in 911 AD. The Vikings quickly assimilated with the Gallo-Roman population and became 'Normans'. They also introduced a large vocabulary of Old Norse words into the 'Norman' dialects. The vocabulary of Old Norse words in the dialects are heavily influenced by maritime practices from the fact that the Vikings were a seafaring people and they include species of fish, ships and navigation, but also everyday objects such as a jug/can (Kanna, Old Norse) and Canne, Jèrriais.



Welcome sign to French Lane, Jersey. English (top) Jèrriais (middle) French (bottom)



## Examples of some Old Norse words in the Jèrriais dialect

English	Jèrriais	Old Norse
sand dune	mielle	mellr
sea bird	mauve	már, mávar (pl.)
lobster	honmard	humarr
to chop	hadgi	hagga (Old Danish)
mound, hill	hougue	haugr
mast	mât	mastr
cape	nez	nes
bag	pouque	poki
kind of thin and long fish	horfi	hornfiskr
tinder	tondre	tundr
haven	hâvre	höfn; hafn
open meadow	hague	hagi
flock	fliotchet	flokkr
crab	crabe	krabbi
board	bord	bord

## Conclusion

The Channel Islands have a rich and vibrant cultural history that through the Vikings has formed an everlasting and close link between mainland Normandy and the British Isles. The Vikings influenced the place names of the islands and also the language which is now in revival. Symbolizing a true testament to the Scandinavian people that settled down on these sun drenched islands over 1000 years ago and called home.

