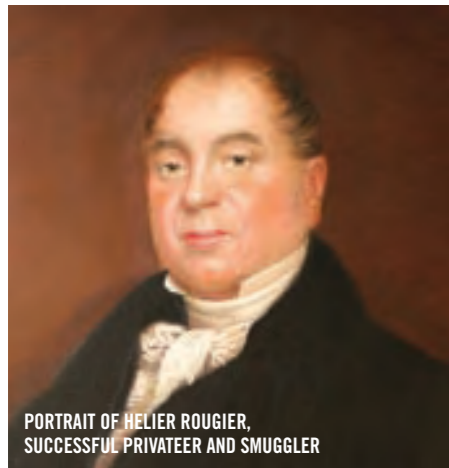


# THE GUERNSEY PRIVATEERS



PORTRAIT OF HELIER ROUGIER, SUCCESSFUL PRIVATEER AND SMUGGLER

St Peter Port is a beautiful town. Ancient cobbled streets meander between pretty granite buildings that tumble lazily into the sea. Superb seafood restaurants snuggle up to exclusive boutiques overlooking marinas packed with yachts bobbing gently in the morning sun.

It's a perfect, peaceful seaside scene, but its very fabric contains a dark secret. Many of the finest hotels and homes were built on the spoils of a violent and warlike past – the booty of the Guernsey privateers.

Described as “One of the naval powers of the world” and the “despair of France”, Guernsey's privateer fleet preyed on enemy ships from the late 1600s to the early 1800s and brought vast sums as captured prizes into the island – much of which was spent on the flagship buildings of St Peter Port.

## Swashbuckling heroes

These swashbuckling heroes – or nothing short of pirates, depending on whose side you were on – fought bravely for the crown and ushered in a golden era for Guernsey.

The island was soon awash with wines and brandies taken from French ships fresh from

the vineyards of Bayonne and Bordeaux and tar and timber on the way to the shipyards of Brest, Nantes, La Rochelle and St Malo.

But this was just small beer compared with the sugar, coffee and cotton vessels returning fully laden from the West Indies captured in daring raids by the Guernseymen.

Ship followed ship into St Peter Port, and according to James Marr in his book *The History of Guernsey*: “The audacity of Guernsey's seamen had brought to the island prosperity as never known before.”

And it wasn't just commercial success. They played a major part in the wars with France in the 16th century, such a big part in fact that Queen Elizabeth I herself, who in 1598 gave permission for the Privateers to attack the French, said she had three navies: the Royal Navy, the Merchant Navy and the Guernsey Privateers.

It was no surprise that the French were particularly outraged, and the Governor of Cherbourg lamented: “These two islands are the despair of France at the beginning of every war by their privateering, which at once proceeds to seize a large number of vessels and cut all communications.”

## Legalised piracy?

Privateering is basically legalised piracy. In the late 1600s, the High Court of Admiralty in London issued letters of Marque, authorisations granted by the sovereign, to enable Guernsey ships to pursue and capture enemy merchant vessels during wartime, and they didn't need to be asked twice.

At the outbreak of the War of the Spanish Succession in 1701, and following the earlier example of Sir Francis Drake, the most famous privateer of all and the scourge of Spanish treasure ships, Guernsey crews threw themselves into the fray.

Feared and applauded in equal measure, Guernsey's privateers were once a mainstay of the island's economy. Their derring-do as they undertook what amounted to Crown sanctioned piracy won the admiration of royalty and provided the means to build many of St Peter Port's grandest buildings. **Jon Crocker** finds out more.

Elizabeth had not been exaggerating when she praised the Guernsey 'navy'. Marr says: “By the end of the war in 1713 Guernsey had 115 privateers in action, which thanks to boarding operations with small arms and cutlasses, brought in 608 prizes to a total value of £100,000.”

And as the wars continued, the numbers increased. From 1803 to 1814 alone 232 Guernsey captains were issued letters of Marque.

## Muskets and cutlasses

It was also a war fought over a huge area, not just in Guernsey's briny backyard. The privateers plundered over hundreds of miles, sailing down into the Bay of Biscay as far as La Rochelle and beyond to harry the French coastal trade.

But it wasn't Hollywood broadsides and ships of the line. A privateer was most often a smallish brig, cutter or schooner that had only a couple of cannons or a crew heavily armed with muskets and cutlasses.

They played the percentage game, attacking smaller ships, or a similar size and unarmed, who often surrendered without a fight. A quick chase and a shot across the bows was usually enough.



THE ROYAL COURT HOUSE



ST PETER PORT – BUILT ON THE SPOILS OF PRIVATEERING

The privateers in turn were quick to escape from larger and more heavily armed ships, using their superb seamanship and local knowledge to flee through the shallow rocks and reefs.

One of Guernsey's most famous sons, Sir James Saumarez, is said to have fled from pursuing French ships with a daring manoeuvre on the island's west coast. As he sailed through a narrow passage, he asked his Guernsey pilot, Jean Breton, how he knew about such a narrow escape route.

Breton replied that if Saumarez looked ashore he would see their houses on Guernsey in a direct line and this was his marker. The value of local knowledge!

Others were not so lucky, and an inscription in the Town Church pays testament to Captain Nicholas Le Messurier of the privateer *Belladonna*, who was killed in 1759 after engaging a large French East India ship.

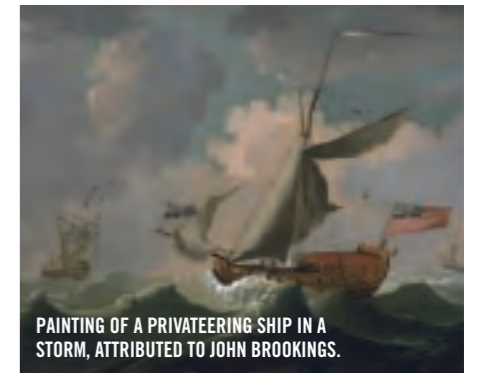
## Staggering sums

War has been the cause of the island's greatest difficulties, but also some of its greatest successes. The Occupation was a very lean time, but the privateering era was very fat indeed.

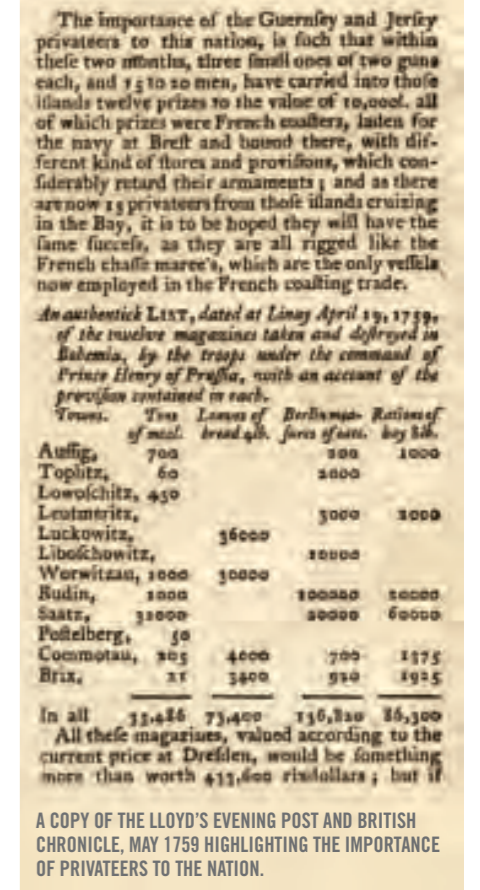
“The defeat of Napoleon brought peace to Europe, a peace which marked the end of what can justly be described as the most memorable age in the history of the islands,” says historian R. Meyer.

The sums involved in privateering were staggering and many people became very rich, often the great families of the time who owned the ships. Names such as Priaulx and Mainguy, Lihou and Brock are all still well known today.

Alderney's Le Mesurier family are said to have amassed £212,000 (approximately £12m today) in 1789 alone from the capture of eight enemy ships, and with it built the warehouses at The Braye (now Alderney's superb Braye Beach Hotel).



PAINTING OF A PRIVATEERING SHIP IN A STORM, ATTRIBUTED TO JOHN BROOKINGS.



In Guernsey, this was also a time of great building in St Peter Port, and together with money from trade and smuggling, transformed the town.

These landmarks include some of the island's public buildings and homes of privateers, now converted to large hotels.

They include the Royal Court, the Workhouse (now the Police Station) the Priaulx Library, the Old Government House and Moore's Hotels and the Constable's office which were all privateers' homes, as was the home of Jean Briard, one of the first privateers, who lived on what is now the High Street.

In fact, everywhere you look in St Peter Port is some testimony to the privateers, which is a suitably impressive and fitting monument to a group of men who played such a great part in the town's history.