

The Most Powerful Politician on Alderney

Or

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There was fog in the channel and I was marooned on a small island.

There was nowhere to go and little to do. My fellow islanders wandered around bearing the haunted expressions of those who had seen too much. A tetchy, claustrophobic atmosphere threatened to explode at any moment. With no clear notion of when escape would be possible we were forced to look inward - and what we saw wasn't pretty.

And my £20 meals voucher barely covered a room service sandwich.

During the 18 hours I spent at the Radisson Blu Hotel at Stanstead Airport, I felt cut off from the world on an island of bland hospitality. No amount of free wifi and no free meals voucher could compensate from that sense of being in a non-place that existed outside of time.

I longed for Alderney, the tiny island in the English channel that was my abortive destination. But my flight from London Stanstead to Guernsey, from which I'd planned to connect onto a small plane for the flight to Alderney, had been endlessly delayed and finally cancelled as the mid-October fog refused to lift. There was nothing to do but accept Aurigny airlines' bounteous hospitality and wait for tomorrow.

Frustrated though I was, I had options. I could leave the island, hop on a train and go back to London or anywhere in the country. I could even take a plane to a non-fog-bound destination if I wanted to. The UK may be an island, but it's a big one and we're never really ever cut off. The world comes to us, physically or virtually, attracted like moths to our bright shining node in today's networked planet. A possibly apocryphal English newspaper headline from the 1930s proclaimed 'Fog in the channel, continent cut off' and for all its hilarious parochialism, it had a point - the world flocks to us, we are never alone.

But what's it like to be really cut off? In my hotel room at Stanstead I devoured Charles McLean's *Island At the Edge of the World: The Story of St Kilda*. St Kilda, a tiny archipelago 40 miles west of the outer Hebrides - now that really was isolated. Until it was finally evacuated in the 1930s, the few dozen island residents, subsisting mainly on sea birds, were rarely if ever visited by boats and were sometimes cut off for years at a time. It was a harsh life on a windswept island in which little could grow, but it was an honest, proud life. St Kilda life was egalitarian, rich in stories and

¹ This is a Norman French approximate translation. Auregnais, the Norman French dialect traditionally spoken on Alderney, is now extinct. My thanks to Royston Raymond for his assistance with the translation.

myths. It was only when the outside world intruded more forcefully in the nineteenth century, when well-meaning and not-so-well-meaning missionaries, tourists and philanthropists tried to 'improve' their lot, that the islanders descended into indolence and despair.

Even if few places on the globe today are as isolated as St Kilda was, from my Olympian vantage point as a resident of London, almost any small island seems remote. My life is never claustrophobic, I can always lose myself in the anonymity of the city whenever I need to. Sometimes I live a parochial life in the close confines of my family, my friends and the tight-knit Jewish community in which I grew up. Sometimes I am a world citizen, a cosmopolitan *flaneur* who can roam at will.

So what would it be like to live somewhere where options are more limited? That's why small islands fascinate me. And Alderney is certainly small. Barely 3 miles by 1 mile and with a population of around 2000, it's everything London isn't. Even its bigger neighbour Guernsey is only 24 square miles with a population of 66,000.

So as I struggled to fall asleep in my overheated hotel room it began to dawn on me that my small island experience had already begun. Not that the airport looked anything like the Alderney I'd seen in pictures. But Stansted, like airports throughout the world, proudly turn its back on the local environment, constructing a global transport hub in the middle of the plains of south east England. Airports might display a globalised architectural vernacular – Stansted has its ubiquitous Norman Foster-designed terminal – but the jarring contrast to their surroundings makes them feel like islands..

If my delay was frustrating, how much more so would it be if I was desperate to get off Alderney? Although I hadn't yet set foot in the place, Alderney was starting to feel like the Alcatraz of the channel. For all its smothering blandness, no one was forcing me to stay at the Radisson Blu Stanstead Airport, not even the weather.

But when I finally got to Alderney the next day it didn't feel claustrophobic. A new day had dawned and the channel glistened in the sunlight as I flew over from London to Guernsey. I boarded a propeller-driven trilandar for the 15 minute hop to Alderney. It was packed full of yesterday's delayed passengers and my knees nearly hit my chin as I struggled to fit into the tiny cabin. Yet as soon as we took off, I forgot the cramped conditions and revelled in the views: Guernsey was all swimming pools, mansions, forts and narrow roads, Herm was a tiny jewel of an island surrounded by golden beaches, the channel up to Alderney was broken with treacherous-looking rocks and reefs, the blue sea traversed by ferries and cargo ships going to France. Then a sharp descent, a brief view of cliffs and a bird-filled rock stack, a glimpse of green fields and we were down.

The trilandrer disgorged us onto the tarmac of Alderney airport. There was no noise from other planes, only the soft howl of the winds that strafe the island. I could see past the airport boundary where the island dropped suddenly into the sea, revealing an immense sky. No queues and tedious formalities detained me. The run-down terminal was little more than a couple of huts into which luggage was dropped without ceremony down a chute.

In the arrivals lounge was the man from Braye Car Hire. I collected the key to my car and off I sped. No seatbelt confined my swollen middle aged midriff (they aren't compulsory on the island). No traffic jams barred my way. No complex one-way systems restrained me. Actually the last bit wasn't true...

I hit St Anne, Alderney's 'capital' about 30 seconds after leaving the airport. I only saw one road sign, a delightfully minimalist one marked 'Town', and I couldn't see any street names. I had a map of sorts, but it only named some of the streets. Still, I knew the rough direction I was going and ploughed on, the wind in my hair (or it would have been had I been driving a convertible) and a song in my heart ('Cadaveric Incubator of Endo-Parasites' by Carcass – no time is not a good time for death metal). I soon found Victoria Street, St Anne's main drag and turned triumphantly down it. There was more traffic here and as I passed them, other drivers smiled, waved and even laughed. I smiled and waved back - how wonderful to be somewhere where strangers were friendly! It was only after the first few cars that it dawned on me that this was a one-way street. The other island drivers weren't just being friendly - they were warning me.

Still, I reached the bottom of Victoria Street uninjured, my pride only slightly bruised. I soon found my hotel, just off Braye beach down at the bottom of the hill leading to St Anne's. I looked at my watch. The entire journey had taken less than 10 minutes.

I collected my key from the bar of the hotel. There, a jovial man in his 60s, propping up the bar with a foaming tankard of something or other, pointed out with some delight 'You don't need one of those! I've lived here for 4 years and haven't locked my front door once!'

I never got over the habit of locking my hotel and car doors while on Alderney, despite hearing from almost everyone I met that there was no crime on the island. A lifetime of city-living has ingrained in me a suspicion of everyone and everything. My preconceptions of Alderney as a kind of prison hadn't prevented me from bringing my own prison of mild paranoia with me. But it was immediately clear that for some islanders, like the man at the bar, Alderney represented freedom, even liberation, from at least some of the stresses of civilization. Alderney means safety, community, clean air and clean skies.

Still, who needs all that? As a Londoner I have excitement, stimulation, opportunity, possibility. Alderney certainly wasn't cosmopolitan. Other than the people who ran the Thai

restaurant, I didn't see a single non-white face during my entire visit. Was Alderney a living reproach to mainland Britain's contemporary cosmopolitanism? Was Alderney like England in the 1950s, a place where white people leave their doors open and where the worst thing that happens is rosy-cheeked young scallywags getting caught scrumping? I steeled myself for locals lecturing me in not-so-coded racist language on where the mainland had gone wrong.

Yet while my multicultural antennae remained on high alert, for a few days I was happy to leave the exhausting excitement of city-life behind. On my first evening I walked down to Braye beach. There was little sound, little traffic, little light. As the sea lapped softly against the shore I was seized by the desire to spend my visit pottering around and decompressing. But I knew I couldn't. I was, after all, here on a mission. I was here to find Alderney's top politician, to find out where the power lay on the island, to immerse myself in debate and controversy. While right now I wanted nothing more than to immerse myself in a pint in a cosy island pub, I had to focus on my quest - a quest that was to prove frustrating and surprisingly stressful.

Power! That's what I was in search of: who has it, who doesn't have it and how it is wielded. All over the world, power is embodied in bricks and mortar - in the White House, the Palace of Westminster, the Great Hall of the People. The architecture of power looms over and inspires awe and fear in the population. And on Alderney the power rests in Island Hall, a three story stone-clad building - built in 1790 from the profits of privateering - looming over the Georgian cobbled-streets of Connaught Square in St Anne. This is the belly of the beast. If indeed it is a beast.

Island Hall is no mere parish council. Alderney, despite its diminutive size, has its own government. It's not a part of the UK, but a 'Crown Dependency'. The queen is still the monarch, and defence and foreign policy are run from London, but almost everything else is run locally. Islanders elect 10 members to the States of Alderney, the island's parliament. Island Hall is the home of the States' offices and where its committee meetings are held.

On my first morning in Alderney, I parked my car on Connaught Square and strode into Island Hall. It was a spacious place, its walls filled with notices on applications for planning permission and booklets on how to claim benefits, a warren of offices in which islanders queued up to have their needs attended to by efficient-looking civil servants.

I wanted to start from the top and I had booked an appointment with Stuart Trought, the President of the States of Alderney. Stuart welcomed me into his spacious office and set about answering my questions with an unassuming directness.

Originally from Lincolnshire, the President had been based on the island since his parents moved there when he was 17. He'd been away for long periods though, as a sailor in the merchant

navy, a salvage pilot in the Iran-Iraq war and a manager for a multinational operator of oil and gas terminals based in the UAE. Moving permanently back to Alderney in his fifties he'd punctuated semi-retirement with setting up a charter angling business and running Alderney Renewable Energy. Now in his early 60s, he'd been elected president in May 2011, getting more votes than the other two candidates put together.

'I wanted to put something back into the community', Stuart explained, 'the island, its people and what it stands for means a tremendous amount to me.'

Fair play, there was no doubt that Stuart loved the island and his global career meant he was far from parochial. But what did the President actually do? It turned out that it was the equivalent to the Speaker of the UK House of Commons, chairing the States. On top of that, the President is the island's ambassador, the one wheeled out to meet visiting dignitaries. 'We recently had Charles and Camilla over - your job is to meet people like that.'

My heart sank a little. This didn't sound like a political job.

'You're right, it's not a political position. It's not up to me to influence the States - my job is to ensure correct constitutional procedures are followed.' Still, it's not purely ceremonial. As he pointed out, the role isn't precisely defined.' You can make of the job as much or as little as you want.'

So Stuart wasn't the most powerful politician in Alderney. My quest wasn't going to be that simple. But maybe he'd be able to give me a feel for the political divisions on the island? There are no political parties on Alderney, but 'if you have 10 elected members they all have different views. That's good and healthy.'

Aren't there arguments sometimes?

'I'd say they behave very well most of the time,' Stuart deadpanned.

But where does the power lie?

'It's fluid, there's no cohort that holds sway. People join together in different ways on different issues. There are no voting blocs.'

If there was dirt on Alderney, Stuart Trought was clearly not going to be the one to dish it. He was polite, serious and courteous. This is pretty much what you want in a President whose job it is to help the political process run smoothly. Had he gossiped to me - a stranger whose agenda wasn't entirely clear, even to himself - he'd have been a disaster in his job, albeit an entertaining disaster.

Clearly, if I wanted to know who the most powerful politician was, I'd have to work bit harder. I had to immerse myself in the island, find out what was at stake in island politics and who the players were.

So I went for a drive.

It only took me 20 minutes or so. In that time I managed to circumvent Alderney, even including a couple of leisurely wrong turns. God was it small! Staring in Connaught Square I trundled east through the cobbled maze of streets in St Anne, out past the suburban bungalows and mansions to the airport where I took an unpaved road circumventing the perimeter towards the cliffs of the south end of the island. I rejoined High Street in St Anne and pootled along past the few open fields, past the golf course, past Longis common and its beach and on to the lighthouse and quarries at the north east end of the island. I turned back west skirting the knobbly bays and beaches on the north end of the island, past my hotel before ending up at the harbour, just down the hill from St Anne.

Tiny though it was, there was ample evidence that Alderney had been significant at some point in its history. The coastline (and given that Alderney is so narrow, that includes much of the 'inland') is studded with forts, castles, gun emplacements, bunkers and unidentifiable fortifications. They date back as far as Roman times, but much of what remains today dates from the nineteenth century onward. The British went through a manic phase of building during the time that France was the great enemy. They constructed amongst other things an absurdly long breakwater for the tiny harbour. But it was the Nazis who went fortification-crazy. They occupied Alderney, along with the rest of the Channel Islands, from 1940-45 and proceeded to turn the island into a giant citadel, filling every inlet and promontory with giant slabs of concrete. They were 'assisted' by thousands of slave labourers, housed in brutal conditions in four camps, one of which was run by the SS. At least 700 died. Try telling them that Alderney was insignificant.

With France nine miles away and Cherbourg just round the coast, the strategic importance of Alderney is pretty clear. In the end though, the fortifications of Alderney - and the deaths of those built them - were a waste of time. The British were deterred from invading, but when D Day came they just ignored Alderney. In fact, the German garrison on Alderney was one of the last to surrender in Europe, their magnificent redoubt a monumental folly.

Still, the fortifications, most of which still stand, make for a dramatic landscape. There's even one large bunker, known as the 'Odeon' by residents, that has attractive art-deco design. Later in my stay I would explore bunkers and clamber around sections of the coast on foot, enjoying the heathland, cliffs and majestic views towards France and the other Channel Island. For now though, I'd seen enough to understand the key issue in Alderney politics - space. There simply isn't very much of it. Once you've taken out the concrete bunkers, the airport which takes up most of the south east of the island, the golf course (only 9 holes but still large) and St Anne, there isn't much left to build on without concreting over precious heathland, nature reserves and clifftops. Planning

decisions, the meat and drink of local councils in most places, can seem hopelessly parochial to outsiders, but in a place like Alderney they can be fateful in their consequences. From the looks of the *Alderney Journal*, that august publication that I'd subscribed to weeks before arriving on the island, much of the debates on the island are to do with whether or not to build stuff.

Space also impacts on the island economy. The tourist trade requires peace, quiet and unspoiled scenery. But tourism can't employ enough people year round to make a permanent population of 2000 viable. There's precious little farmland, channel fishing is hardly a boom industry these days and what manufacturing industry would locate to an island with such tenuous transport links?

In order to understand how Alderney survives, I had to understand its complicated historical and constitutional position. In my brief stop in Guernsey on the way to Alderney, I managed to meet with Jo Reeve, the 'Principal External Affairs Officer' for the States of Guernsey. He drilled me on the constitutional position of Alderney and Guernsey. It isn't a simple affair and he wasn't done by the time I had to go and catch the plane, leaving me with a stack of briefing papers and books. What I learned was this:

The Channel Islands – Jersey, Guernsey, Alderney, Sark, Herm and a number of smaller islets – are what's known as 'Crown Dependencies' (along with the Isle of Man). This means that the Queen is the head of state, but they are not part of the United Kingdom (or the EU in fact). The islands were originally owned by the Dukes of Normandy, even before 1066, and they retained their distinctive nature after the Norman conquest. They have their own legislatures and executives but they are not independent states and technically all legislation has to be approved by the Crown and legislation can even be imposed on them. The Crown has sole responsibility for defence and foreign relations. In practice, the Crown (i.e. the British government) has 'ruled' with a light touch and even on issues like foreign relations there is a fair amount of negotiation. The Channel Islands have many of the trappings of independence, such as their own notes and coins (which circulate alongside British money and are equal in value to it), their own internet domains and their own distinctive forms of government. Crucially, they levy their own taxes.

The situation is even more complicated in that there is no one Channel Islands government. Jersey and Guernsey are both 'Bailiwicks', territories administered since medieval times by a 'Bailiff'. Jersey stands alone but Alderney, Sark and Herm are part of the Bailiwick of Guernsey. This doesn't mean though that Guernsey runs the lot. Alderney and Sark (Herm is a possession of Guernsey) have their own systems of government. Legislation can be passed Bailiwick-wide but it requires all three legislature's approval to do so.

So Alderney is a largely independent part of a largely independent Bailiwick. That gives it considerable freedom – and leaves it vulnerable to considerable risks. In most of rest of the Channel Islands, the economy revolves around rich people and tax benefits, leavened with tourism, tomatoes and milk. You can't legally settle on Sark, Jersey or Guernsey without having a substantial wodge of cash. The islands are engaged in a constant cat and mouse game with the British government and global institutions over its low taxes and lenient company law. The many adverts for banks in the arrival hall in Guernsey airport demonstrate that the financial services industry isn't leaving anytime soon.

Alderney is different. Alone among the Channel Islands, anyone from the UK can settle there, although they still have to apply for work permits. That means a steady trickle of retirees settle on the island, but not necessarily wealthy retirees. They still benefit though from the same tax advantages that you get in Alderney - no sales tax and 20% income tax (with higher personal allowances than the UK).

While the financial services industry and super rich tax exiles have largely passed Alderney by, the island has carved out a niche as home and registry for internet gambling companies. This doesn't employ many people but it does bring in hundreds of thousands of pounds a year in registration fees. This windfall paid for a new water system on the island, which is hardly glamorous but apparently before the system was replaced, tap water often used to run brown. Gambling can't support the island on its own though. Alderney is partially dependent on the support of its bigger neighbour Guernsey, which collects Alderney's tax revenues and runs certain 'transferred services', such as education, police, health and the airport. The Alderney taxes go into the Guernsey pot (although the gambling revenue stays on Alderney) and are more than returned, effectively subsidising the island. Alderney has a voice on Guernsey by choosing two States members to sit on their States.

This situation, in which Alderney's near-independence has been much reduced, has only been the case since 1948. To understand what happened in 1948, you have to understand what happened in 1940-1945. 1945 was a kind of year zero for Alderney. Uniquely among the Channel Islands, Alderney's population chose to evacuate the island just before the invasion. This gave the Germans carte blanche to turn the island into a slave-labour driven fortress. When the islanders began to return in 1945 onwards - and at one stage it wasn't certain that the UK government wouldn't allow them to - they found Alderney in a terrible state. The intricate divisions between patches of farmland had been erased, the island bristled with bunkers, hundreds of POWs were stuck on the island, houses taken over by the Germans had had their possessions stolen and

redistributed. Not everyone decided to come back from the mainland UK or the other Channel Islands. Depopulation and economic collapse were a strong possibility.

Alderney's government was not up to the challenges it faced. The constitution, a hodge-podge of ancient offices with more recent democratic bolt-ons, gave disproportionate power to the 'Judge', from 1938 a man called Frederick French. Judge French, who had helped fly the flag for Alderney during the years of evacuation, was out of his depth in the years of resettlement. At one point, his bright idea for redistributing possessions taken by the Germans, was to put all of it in a pile and then at an appointed time let residents race to pick out what was theirs on a first-come-first-served basis. Needless to say, French was not the one to usher in a bright new dawn for Alderney. With some prodding from the UK government, which didn't want to support the island anymore, that new dawn came at the end of 1948. Most of the antique offices of state were swept away and a rationalized, all-democratic States of Alderney was ushered in. The agreement with Guernsey was brokered and Alderney began to recover from the war, growing in prosperity with its bigger sister island.

Alderney's recovery came at a cost. While its constitutional position as a crown dependency within the Bailiwick of Guernsey remains unchanged, Alderney has inevitably lost some of its ability to control its own destiny. The 1948 agreement ensures Guernsey will always ensure essential services on the island, but Alderney has to continually negotiate to ensure it gets a fair deal. If the States voted for it, Alderney could impose trade sanctions on Bolivia tomorrow, as this power is retained on the island. But when in November 2012 Guernsey, which runs Alderney's airport, mooted closing one of its grass runways, there was uproar on the island and the proposal was only dropped after some forceful disagreements.

Today's islanders didn't seem to spend all their time worrying about Alderney's constitutional arrangements. The island hummed with life. It was far from a sleepy backwater. Cars constantly passed me on the road. Where they were all going I couldn't work out, but they seemed to be in a hurry to get there. Victoria Street, Alderney's Champs Elysees, was full of customers popping in and out of the shops and chatting with the shopkeepers. Children walked to and from school, free from the threat of marauding drug traffickers. There was a cinema and regular music and theatre performances. There were the full range of small town clubs and societies, from Alcoholics Anonymous (probably not that anonymous given the size of the island) to Rotarians and five churches. Most of all there was the great outdoors. Lots of islanders sail and fish. There's golf, tennis, riding, cycling and a thriving flying club. One woman told me that Alderney was 'boy heaven'.

Do I sound as though I am desperately, defending Alderney against accusations that it is boring? I have to admit that I'd probably find it boring after a while. With my big city ways I can't function without Paraguayan film festivals and Kandinsky retrospectives. But the people who live on Alderney certainly didn't seem bored; island life was in its own way vibrant.

Nowhere was this more true than in the pubs and restaurants, of which Alderney has an inordinate number. The joke I heard countless times was that Alderney was 'two thousand alcoholics clinging to a rock' (I guess Alcoholics Anonymous do a roaring trade then). While I saw no one drinking Special Brew and pissing in the street, every pub I went into - and I went into quite a few - was busy at night, even on rainy midweek October nights. In the summer, the island's young people organise raves in World War Two bunkers.

The pubs weren't just busy, they were friendly too. I only had to spend a couple of evenings propping up a bar or two to conduct an informal vox pop. One ruddy-faced man told me 'The great thing about Alderney is that there's no crime - I can leave my door unlocked without worrying'. Another man, this one with a face tinged with red, offered the opinion that 'I never lock my door on Alderney - it's great that there's no crime.' A number of other men I met also ventured to say that Alderney was a good place to live and was crime-free - and they didn't even have to lock their doors!

I'm being unfair, it wasn't just the lack of crime that made Alderney a good place to live (although interestingly, as several people told me, they didn't have to lock their doors). It really did seem to be boy heaven. One man told me 'My commute is five minutes. I've got a boat and I go out fishing all the time. I'd never be able to do that on my salary if I lived in England.' Many people told me that the island was 'classless', not that there weren't rich and poor people, but that putting on airs and graces was frowned upon. 'You can have a labourer and a millionaire standing next to each other in the pub and you'd never know which was which' marvelled one man I met.

It's all very well for Alderney to be boy heaven but where does that leave the women? All the States members at the time of my visit were male (although there have been female members in the past) and there's never been a female President. Women on the Alderney don't only cook and clean, they run business and do important jobs like the men, just rarely politics it seems. Some of the most barbed comments about Alderney that I heard during my visit were from women. Two told me - totally independently from each other - that the problem with the Alderney was men coming to settle on the island and immediately seizing the opportunity to be big fish in small ponds (my book title struck a nerve). Another single young woman told me that the gossip was terrible, particularly about women like her.

The States of Alderney seemed to be the subject of a fair amount of grumbling, from men and women, but definitely not bitterness and anger. I met up with Alderney native Nigel Dupont

(surname pronounced 'Dipo' in the traditional island dialect of Auregnais), Alderney's only blogger. He didn't hesitate to criticise the States on a whole host of issues for their inefficiency, their slow and faulty decision-making and their lack of transparency. He wasn't a revolutionary though, he didn't want everything swept away. He seemed to get on okay with most of the States members. His critical and cheeky voice was simply part of the chorus of friendlyish disapproval that should be part and parcel of any democracy.

On the whole, people seemed to rub along well enough on Alderney. One woman I met likened the island to a 'big squabbling family', which suggests that rows when they happen tend to be kept in proportion. After all, the size of the place makes it almost impossible to avoid people. I found this out when I visited in quick succession the editors of the Alderney Journal and of the Alderney Press, the bi-weekly island newspapers. The Press was set up by the only printer on the island, when the Alderney Journal took its custom away and began printing in Guernsey. There could have been a blood-curdling rivalry here, but Emma at the Journal and Norman at the Press said they got on fine and it was good to have some healthy competition.

The sheer number of settlers and retirees, together with the common practice of native Alderney people living 'abroad' for years at a time before coming back to raise a family, means that the island remains outward looking. Maybe it's not a cosmopolitan place, but it was certainly not homogeneous and it's almost always friendly to outsiders. It was far from twee and wholesome - the rugged scenery and the Nazi remains makes sure of that - but it was *nice*. Everyone was nice to me on my trip. Even the police were nice. On my last day I accidentally parked on a double yellow line. Instead of getting a ticket, I got a friendly call to my hotel asking me to move the car and be more careful in future.

The niceness made for an easy stay, but the longer I remained on the island the more frustrated I became. Nobody volunteered a name for the most powerful politician. People tended to refer to 'the States' rather than to individual members. Where were the big men, the dominant figures, the political colossi bestriding the island? Where was the controversy and notoriety?

Before my trip, I'd got excited when I stumbled upon the Wikipedia page for States member Peter Allen. The entry explained that 'He has been ejected from two meetings (something that is frowned upon greatly), after shouting in the first and being shouted at in the second respective incidents.' It was heartening though to see that Alderney politics could be as fretful as politics anywhere else. That meant that there was some passion to be found - and where there was passion, there was probably power (or the lack thereof). So I was excited to meet Peter Allen over a pint at the Braye Beach Hotel. The first regular States member I met, I anticipated plenty of gossip and strong feelings.

Peter didn't come across as a difficult or angry man. In fact he was friendly and eager to help me. He laughed when I mention his ejection from the States and without any embarrassment explained what had happened. At the end of a States meeting a politician is allowed to make a report, but it can't be 'political', it has to be fact-based. Another States member, Colin Williams reported that holes had been found under the harbour quay. Peter wasn't having any of it:

'I've dived under the quay for years and I knew there were holes there. My Dad, who was the harbour master for years knew there were holes there. And Colin was going on that we could have never known there were holes there. I said well we did know, he said no we didn't and I said well you're now starting to drift into politics as you're stating something that isn't true.'

Peter appealed to the then President, Sir Norman Browse to stop the report while the members debated whether Colin was being political. This he refused to do.

'So every time I tried to ask a question he said I couldn't speak. And then they hoofed me out. They said 'Sergeant at arms take him away' and I said 'I'm not going, you'll have to fight me' '

This was the kind of thing I expected before I went to Alderney, bitter conflict over an issue that outsiders would find trivial. But there was a smile on Peter's face as he continued:

'I wasn't really dragged out. I know Chris, the sergeant at arms, really well. He'd been nodding off in the chair and suddenly heard what I said and thought 'hang on a minute!' But I just winked at him and walked out.'

In any case, there was no bad blood in the long term between Peter and Colin Williams:

'He's not on the States anymore but I still talk to Colin. He's a lovely man. You couldn't imagine a better person. He nursed his wife through a sickness that I couldn't even imagine. But when it came to politics I could have quite happily have stabbed him in the heart!'

On reflection, I realised that the issue Peter was ejected over wasn't trivial either. The state of the quay is a crucial issue for a small island. So what we had here wasn't a horrendous fight over a trivial issue, but a not-as-serious-as-it-seems fight over an important issue. The same was true for the other time Peter Allen got kicked out. The States members were discussing giving money to a society on the island and he was disturbed that they hadn't seen any accounts.

'I'd heard some shocking rumours on how they got given the money. I said we needed to see accounts. I was told no and I said hang on, no I won't leave it. And that got out of hand as well. Richard Wilmott started shouting at me. So I was told to leave.'

Again, this wasn't trivial - how a democracy apportions money is an issue that has to be taken very seriously. And again, Peter did try and patch things up:

‘With Richard it was very difficult as again and again I was butting heads with him. But I found him nice enough and if he walked in right now I’d go over and chat to him and we’d probably have a beer.’

Peter took pride in his plain speaking - ‘I’m very robust. People voted for me because I would say what I think’ - and plain-speakers can sometimes be divisive figures. But as a native islander (one of very few that I met) he may well have a natural-born ability to pull off that essential and difficult trick that is so necessary for small communities - being able to have rows and being able to patch them up.

Branches of Peter’s can be traced back to Alderney since the sixteenth century. Peter was born and raised on the island, leaving school at 15 and doing an apprenticeship in electrical engineering. He left the island as a young adult to join the army. For seven years he was posted all around the world before settling in York and marrying. He returned when he had kids ‘because I could see they were missing out on what I had - the freedom here is unbelievable.’ He now works for the local electricity board and clearly loves living in boy heaven: ‘I’m on the lifeboat crew, which is fantastic - best thing I’ve ever done. I go diving. I go fishing. I’ve got a motorbike. We’ve got no helmet laws so you can just get on and ride. I’ve got a little bit of land, I’ve got a tractor and grow all my own veg. We raise animals. I have a really good life here. My life is rammed full of good things.’

It was Peter Allen’s love of Alderney that led him to stand for the States in 2008, when he came top of the poll. His biggest concern has been for greater openness. ‘When I stood originally I was very upset with the States as they were’, he explained, ‘they didn’t seem to listen to the public and everything happened behind close doors. There were big changes in the island, we’d just had the influx of gambling money and I thought, well, I just want to know what’s going on.’

Although he didn’t say so, Peter doesn’t seem to have made a great deal of headway on this during his time in office. The main States meetings are open to the public but Peter said that ‘they are really a rubber stamping thing - it’s the committees that do the work and they’re completely closed.’

At this, my antennae bristled. Was I getting closer to a dark heart of politics on Alderney. Was Alderney politics controlled by cliques in secret committee meetings? Peter affirmed that this could happen as ‘if you get the chairmanship of the Policy and Finance committee plus two or three others on your side, you can carry anything.’

As I was to find out, the Policy and Finance committee, on which all the States members sit, is the nucleus of Alderney politics. So when I asked Peter who was the most powerful politician, he had no hesitation in replying that it was the chair of Policy and Finance. ‘Historically, we’ve had some very strong politicians as chairs of P and F, who’ve had a group around them who can carry

most things. When I joined the States there were five of them, and everything they wanted to do they did. So Richard Wilmott was a very powerful man.'

The current chair was John Beaman, was he the most powerful politician on Alderney?
Apparently not:

'John Beaman is much more straight. He'll bring things to P and F and he won't try and drive anything through, there's none of this big time cajoling and meetings outside. He's like, 'this is what you want guys, this is what we'll do'. I take my hat off to him for that. He's a proper democrat. *But he could be* [the most powerful politician].'

Well what was I supposed to do with that? I left my meeting with Peter with mixed feelings. I liked him and enjoyed chatting with him. Off the record, he was fascinating about some of the behind the scenes tensions on the island. But he didn't hand me the most powerful politician on a platter. It certainly wasn't Peter, he was too independent-minded for the subtle art of accruing power.

I had to keep moving, meeting more States members and taking the political temperature of the island.

It didn't take long to confirm the Geoff Sargent was not the most powerful politician on Alderney. A States member since 2008, he chairs the Building Development and Control committee, dealing with the often thorny planning issues that come up on the island. Diffident and modest, I met Geoff in his diffident and modest home. Guarded, taciturn and careful with his words, Geoff was certainly no charismatic politician hungry for power. An accountant by profession, he worked all over the world before settling in Alderney in the early 1990s. His motivation for getting onto the States didn't seem to be a burning sense of mission, rather that 'I felt I had something to offer given my financial background and there were vacancies coming up.'

In his quiet way, Geoff helps keep the States ticking along. He trusts in the process. When I asked whether being on the building committee led to some difficult relations with other islanders, he simply stated that 'decisions are made on planning grounds alone and there is an appeal process for people who've been turned down.' Fair enough. He has no major complaints about the States: 'The States works quite well, given its limitations. The relationship with Guernsey also works well given that Guernsey has thirty times the population.' Again, fair enough. So it wasn't a surprise how Geoff answered my question as to where the power lay: 'The power lies with the elected States members and with Guernsey. Democracy works very well here.'

Fair enough [sighs deeply]. But Geoff's clear preference for quiet, modest democracy did contain a small barb:

‘I think the only time you get divisions is when someone comes on with excessive political ambitions and wants to make a career for himself. We have one person at the moment who could be described as strongly politically ambitious and tends to see the way forward as pulling other people down, rather than doing anything that makes a contribution to the States.’

Geoff wouldn’t say who it was, I needed to dig deeper.

Boyd Kelly was a more likely candidate for the most powerful politician. Boyd was one of the two States members who simultaneously sits on the Guernsey States of Deliberation and by definition that gives him a much bigger political platform. Although I had been told that Boyd didn’t like talking to the media, he seemed to have no problem talking to me when I met him at Island Hall.

With his unmistakable West Midlands accent, Boyd was another non-native States member. A policeman for 28 years in Walsall, he’d lived on Alderney since 1999 when he accompanied his wife Sarah to take up the post of Greffier (the clerk of the court) on the island. He immersed himself in island life, working for the Gambling Control Committee, the Post Office and other businesses as well as volunteering for the lifeboat crew- ‘people will ring me and say ‘hey Boyd do you want a job?’’. Standing for the States in 2008 was a logical next step in his involvement in the island.

‘I’ve never been a spectator. I didn’t need a job but I needed something to do as I’m too young to do nothing. I’ve got something to contribute. I’ve got no local allegiances - I’m fairly broad church in who I mix with.’

But standing for the States isn’t like standing for political office elsewhere. You have to show a certain *lack* of enthusiasm.

‘I didn’t go in with a burning cross and go ‘I want to do this!’ If you campaign in this island you’d lose votes. It’s a very informal island and it wouldn’t fit in.’

In 2010 Boyd’s political career entered another phase when he was elected from amongst the States members to serve on the States of Guernsey. Boyd and the other Alderney representative, Paul Arditti, go together once a month for States meetings plus separately on other occasions to sit on various committees. Boyd sees his job as not simply fighting for Alderney since ‘We need to be seen to be active members in order to have influence.’ Still, as he points out ‘We have to keep banging on about Alderney. When they say ‘Guernsey’ we have to say hang on, remind them ‘Guernsey and Alderney’.’

But even though Boyd’s position means he is at the heart of Alderney’s vital relationship with Guernsey, that doesn’t make him a powerful politician. Indeed, he kept emphasising that you have to be down to earth to succeed on Alderney.

‘The culture of the island wouldn’t stand for any one person dominating the island. If you’re too dominant you’ll quickly get put out on your metaphorical backside. When I go into one particular

pub people will take the mickey and go 'hello senator'. It's good-natured banter and that happens to anyone who's on the States.'

Like Peter Allen, Boyd agreed that the chair of Policy and Finance was potentially the most powerful politician on Alderney, but John Beaman was more collegial than his predecessors. In any case, even if there was a most powerful politician on Alderney, Boyd wouldn't see it as the end of the world.

'At the end of the day if someone wants to have a powerbase on the island then the world will keep turning. If you want to have a powerbase among ten people in an island of 2000 then that's pretty sad I think!'

All very sensible, all very reasonable, but this wasn't what I was looking for. The longer my visit to Alderney carried on the more I felt a vague sense of dejection. Not only was it becoming unlikely that there was a most powerful politician on Alderney, but John Beaman, the best candidate for the title wasn't even on the island. I had been due to meet him on the day I was due to arrive, but then my plane was cancelled. Once I got to Alderney, he'd already left to go on holiday, leaving on a plane that left a few minutes before my rescheduled flight arrived. But over and above John Beaman's absence, there was a feeling of disappointment that I just couldn't shake. Its source only became clear on my final evening in Alderney.

Lying in bed, having spent my final evening nursing a pint and a locally-sourced burger in a pub thronged with jovial islanders, I started reading a book on Alderney I'd picked up in the bookshop in St Anne. In the miniscule canon of Alderney literature, *Alderney: The Devil's Rock* by the (undoubtedly pseudonymous) Ulysses Black and Lazarus Ravenscroft stands out a mile. The book is a rich concoction of Alderney folktales and myths, tied together in an archaic, hyperbolic style. The island is depicted as a place of dark mysteries and obscure stories, a palimpsest in which layer upon layer of historical esoterica has built up over time. Every corner, every stone, every turning of this tiny rock is a repository of secrets. For Black and Ravenscroft, the Alderney that today appears to be a beautiful backwater full of retirees and holiday-makers, is but a thin veneer that hides the devilish purposes that are the true purpose of the island.

I was enjoying the book, but I didn't see that it had much relevance to my own quest. Then, as sleep was beginning to overtake me, I stumbled on the story of 'The Gentlemen':

According to myth and tradition, there is a group of twelve or thirteen (depending on who is telling the tale) individuals (usually men) who sit in positions of influence or respect amongst the Island community. These individuals allegedly meet at a location in the Island's network of tunnels...where they collectively plot, before an image of a gigantic maggot or worm. Furthermore, according to the legends on one extreme they are accused of human sacrifice,

whilst at the other it is believed they simply conspire to aid each other in business matters, or more specifically, they meet to consider how they might redirect the Island towards their vision of an infernal utopia, whatever that might be.

Yes! This was what I was looking for! I wanted my quest to uncover a foul conspiracy, an occult oligarchy, an unholy union. Had the decency of the States members that I had met been a smokescreen for something much more sinister? Or maybe 'The Gentlemen' were separate from the States, a cabal that *really* ran Alderney?

Well of course not. It was patently clear that the States was exactly what it appeared. Of course there was certain to be secrets and dodgy-dealings that I would never find out about - that's pretty much par for the course anywhere in the world - but they were unlikely to be anything that terrible. Certainly, there were no giant maggots.

Yet reading *Alderney: The Devil's Rock* it dawned on me that, while I never seriously expected the States of Alderney to be a Satanic coven, I did have other expectations. I had to admit to myself that what I had been looking for on my quest was oligarchy, was incestuous conflict, was parochialism. I *wanted* the States of Alderney to be a squabbling nest of mutually-suspicious, power-crazed fools (all of whom would use me to score points against their rivals). I wanted Alderney's politicians to be puffed up with themselves, to be absurd oligarchs and wannabe-oligarchs. When I walked into a pub I wanted it to fall silent as inbred locals with bad teeth and only one eye stared at me in suspicion. I wanted someone to warn me, in an impenetrable accent 'we don't take kindly to strangers in these parts.' I wanted Alderney to be pathetically unimportant. I wanted the stakes in Alderney politics to be so low as to be non-existent.

Well it wasn't like that. Perhaps in the past Alderney had been more parochial and its leaders more oligarchical, but now it was an island open to the world run by democratically-elected leaders from all walks of life. And this is of course a good thing.

While it's a good thing for Alderney that my black desires for intrigue and conspiracy could not be satisfied, it wasn't unreasonable to yearn for a bit of passion among Alderney's politicians, some sense that all of this meant something. True, Peter Allen had some of that, but his overriding decency and contentment meant that Alderney politics wasn't the centre of his life. Where were the people who lived and breathed Alderney politics? Where was the drive and dynamism that motivated politics elsewhere in the world?

On my last night in Alderney I went to sleep thinking that this passion didn't really exist on the island. But finally, on my last morning, I finally found it in States member Paul Arditti.

Paul Arditti wasn't the most powerful politician on Alderney, but he was the most politician-like politician on Alderney. A big personality, full of verve and up for a good fight, even his house made a statement. A large nineteenth century residence, located halfway up Victoria Street, it was the home of someone who took pleasure in being at the heart of things.

As we settled down to chat in his rambling kitchen-cum-living room, Paul explained his background. He had worked as a lawyer for 40 years, 25 of them as a partner in an international firm of litigators in the City of London. He'd combined this with raising pedigree Hereford cows and 4 children on a farm just outside Guildford. Retiring at the splendidly early age of 52 - City lawyers can do this - he and his wife had initially moved to an estate in the Highlands of Scotland. As he explained, 'we're small communities people'. But nearly 6 years ago, they made the decision to leave Scotland for Alderney. Why?

Paul laughed and said 'You're certainly not going to believe this! We had some friends who'd moved to the island and we came to visit. We arrived on Thursday, bought the house on the Saturday, rented an office on the Sunday, got back home on Monday and reached for the atlas to find out where Alderney was!'

Paul hasn't regretted the decision.

'We still love it - the people as much as the island. They're slightly bolshy, they question, they don't accept things just because this is how things have always been and they're sincere people by and large.'

Perhaps Paul finds in the islanders the mirror image of his own personality, which appears to be similarly bolshy, questioning and sincere. While he came across as something of a Tory squire, with his ebullience and his 'manor house' overlooking the Island nerve centre of Victoria Street, he was far from conservative on island politics and certainly sees his task as a States member to shake things up.

Paul had served on the States for 3 years. He was motivated to stand partly from a kind of *noblesse oblige* and partly from a desire to change things.

'I've been extremely lucky in life and that left me with a feeling that I'm able to do something about the things that I think are wrong, and because I'm in a fortunate position I should bloody well do something about it.'

So what was wrong with the island? Paul answered immediately.

'Process. Culture. The States had and regrettably still has a dreadful culture about it. It's very defensive, covers everything up. It's the wooden cross you hold up to the vampire - that's how they treat the public. Never ask the public, never consult and never tell them what you're doing. Zero transparency and zero accountability - that's the objective of the States of Alderney.'

Strong words. And they got stronger. Paul started talking about the upcoming elections in November. There are no general elections in Alderney, rather, every two years half the States are put up for election for a four year terms.

'I live for the November elections! I have to believe that half the States members will be thrown out. The planets are aligned in an extraordinary way. Never have 100% of the rotten apples been up for the election at the same time.'

Paul was getting passionate now.

'It's a bit like child abuse - '

Crikey!

' - I used to live next door to someone who used to counsel doctors whose patients were child abuse victims. And she told me that one of the things about child abuse is that the abused often become the abusers. In Alderney politics the abused become the abusers.'

So who were the abused-turned-abusers? It was the States members that Paul delighted in calling 'the frightful four', the other four members elected at the same time as him. 'They were outspoken in their rage about the lack of transparency and accountability when they joined but now they are in their second 2 years they've forgotten all about it. You get this infection, because of the half up for election every two years and you only need one to carry on to infect the next ones and carry the whole thing on.' With all of the frightful four up for election at the same time, Paul had high hopes that the 'infection' could be healed.

At first Paul was relatively discreet about the frightful four, avoiding naming names.

'One of them I like to think I get on well with. He's an intelligent man - but bone idle. Another one I think is just incapable of ever making a decision, but you can't really condemn him for that. The other 2 though are a toxic combination of ignorance and arrogance. Now I have no problem with ignorance, we're all ignorant in many respects. And I have no problem with arrogance where it's justifiable. What I have never had to deal with is the toxic combination of ignorance and arrogance.'

It wasn't difficult to work out who the frightful four were, given that their terms in office were all ending in November: Peter Allen, John Beaman, Boyd Kelly, Geoff Sargent and Bill Walden. Paul confirmed that John Beaman could be the top politician on the island if he wanted to be. In fact, he'd probably like John to be more ambitious.

'The chair of P and F should be the most powerful politician and as I say, I do like him, but, well I don't want to hurt him...So that position is there if someone wanted to make use of it in the right way.'

One thing there was no doubt about was that for Paul, Boyd Kelly was the most frightful of the bunch. Paul was the other Guernsey representative on the States of Alderney so the two of them were closely bound together. I'd heard from elsewhere that Paul and Boyd hated each other, but Boyd never said anything about Paul when we met. Paul was much less discreet as I found out when we were talking about making the States meetings more transparent. He argued – as other States members also had – that it was ridiculous that all 10 members sit on Policy and Finance, since it means that everything is decided in private before the public States meeting. But how to change the situation? Paul's nostrils flared as he explained Boyd's suggestion:

'Now the thick, idiot other Alderney representative called Kelly that you've spoken to says make P and F public. That is daft! It simply perpetuates the process of starving States Meetings of any reasonable purpose. And we all know what he's up to. We all know that local councils in the UK made a great play of making their cabinet meetings open to the public - and that means they meet the day before in private to make the real decisions!'

While evil Keith was enjoying Paul's entertaining vituperativeness, good Keith felt it necessary to ask Paul whether he wanted his comments on Boyd off the record. Paul was in no doubt:

'I don't mind what you say about Kelly! He's an absolute...well anyway.'

I didn't want to take sides in the Kelly-Arditti war, although I did agree with Paul that making P and F public was not the way to achieve more transparency. I also found in an issue of the *Alderney Journal* from a few weeks before my meeting an article which reported that Boyd Kelly was accused of stifling discussion at a 'People's Meeting' (these are open meetings attended by States members at which the public can ask questions).

It was likely though that Paul and Boyd's their hatred/rivalry probably had more to do with personality than anything ideological. Certainly you couldn't think of two people less likely to get on than an affable former West Midlands police officer and a wealthy, determined Home Counties solicitor. As Alderney representatives on Guernsey, they probably saw more of each other than was healthy. Paul used to fly his own helicopter to Guernsey States meetings, presumably without offering Boyd a lift. Having recently sold it Paul was back on the triland and I had visions of him and Boyd stuck in the same small cabin, forced to cohabit for the greater good of Alderney.

Paul seemed to be critical not so much of the States structure, although he did want some reforms, but of the States culture. The trouble is that improving 'culture' is like nailing jelly to a wall. It's easy enough for Paul to hope that the frightful four get voted out, much more difficult to ensure that the 'right' people (in his view) stand and don't turn from abused to abuser (in his terms). When I

asked him about the lack of women on the States, he sighed and seemed to admit the intractability of the problems.

'I wish we had a minimum of two ladies standing. It's difficult enough to get anyone to stand for the States. It is such a dysfunctional States and has such an appalling reputation that it is very difficult to get the right people to stand - honest, simple people like myself, with no ego, no axe to grind. Women being the more intelligent people, it's not surprising they refuse to stand!'

As much as he loved the people of Alderney, Paul was also frustrated with some of them. 'You get some extraordinary people who say things like 'Paul I don't want you to make things better, because if you make things better the island will change and I'm very comfortable thank you very much.' I've come close many times to resigning. But you go to bed thinking you'll chuck it in but then you're letting down the people who voted for you and also I feel that's running away.'

I've no doubt that Paul's detractors, and the frightful four most of all, would find his comments outrageous. My own feeling was that, whether he was right or wrong, you need at least one Paul Arditti in any parliament. You need someone to shake things up and get passionate about change.

Soon after meeting Paul Arditti, my short time on Alderney came to an end. I drove round the island one last time, stopping at Longis Bay for a bracing walk on the sands. As I walked, I tried to work out whether I had succeeded in my quest. I had gone from knowing nothing about Alderney politics to knowing a fair bit in a very short time. I had some sense of the key issues and the key people. I had met a number of States members and uncovered the feud between two of them. Not too shabby. Nobody I knew back in London could challenge me - I was and am *the* expert on Alderney politics in my social circle. I could wear that uncontested crown with pride.

But as I dropped off the car and hopped on the plane to Guernsey, the frustration and disappointment that I had felt the night before still lingered. Even if Paul Arditti had shown me that Alderney politics could be passionate and even exciting, there was a most powerful politician shaped void at the heart of my quest.

A couple of weeks after getting back to London, I managed to speak to John Beaman on the phone. As far as I could tell without meeting him face to face, he seemed to be as I had expected, a palpably decent man. A Yorkshireman by upbringing, he had been a social worker in Stoke for most of his career, working on adoption and fostering. Like Paul Arditti, he also had a small farm. He and his wife had always wanted to live in an island and after touring the Scilly Isles, Holy Island and various other places they finally settled on Alderney. They moved in 2005 after John took early retirement.

It didn't seem to have been burning political ambition that led him to the dizzy heights of chair of Policy and Finance. He says he was 'persuaded' to stand for the States in 2008. True to his Yorkshire heritage, he explains that 'I'm a pretty straight up guy, I'm as you find me - and I get on well with people.' He didn't think he'd get on as he didn't know many people. He didn't even go to the count. John scraped in, tying for the last of the 5 spots and was finally elected by drawing lots. He seems to have acquitted himself well in his first two years in office as in January 2011 he was elected by his fellow States members to chair Policy and Finance, again after a narrow vote.

John confirmed the importance that the chair of Policy and Finance has in Alderney politics.

'If a visiting dignitary comes to the island person then the 'first couple' as it's called tends to be the President and the head of Policy and Finance. When the Duke and Duchess of Cornwall came, the President took Charles round and I took Camilla round.'

While the position is important, 'powerful isn't the right word.' Rather, he has a casting vote in P and F and is central to keeping the whole legislative process chugging along. He doesn't seem to be ambitious, as he says 'I'm not trying to run Alderney, I'm trying to share out the work.'

This was exactly what others had told me - and all credit to John, it seems to work. States members, at least according to John, seem to behave themselves.

'I have no complaints about the behaviour of any of the States members. Yes people to disagree in committee but once a decision is made, generally people fall in line and support it.'

Even Boyd Kelly and Paul Arditti?

'They tend to vote on what's the best thing - and sometimes they agree and sometimes they disagree. They put their grievances to one side when they're making decisions.'

So even the deepest feud in Alderney politics doesn't seem to disable the smooth functioning of democracy. Perhaps it's not as transparent and accountable as Paul would wish, but the States seems to *work*.

John wasn't planning to stand in the November 2012 elections, but not because he hated the job.

'I want more free time, I want to go away when I want to. It's not to do with the job, which I found very enjoyable. Time to move on and do something different.'

Fair enough.

Yet again - fair enough.

So this is where my quest ended: with - as was almost always the case in my experience of Alderney - a reasonable man making a reasonable decision. As I put the phone down on John Beaman I reflected ruefully that I would probably have to amend the title of my quest to 'The Former Alderney Politician Who Could Have Possibly Been The Most Powerful On The Island Had He Wanted To Be.'

In November 2012 the elections were held. Along with John, Peter Allen and Geoff Sargent didn't stand again. Boyd Kelly did, but neither he nor Bill Walden - the only other States member standing again and one of Paul Arditti's frightful four - were re-elected. Paul had got his wish; an entirely new cohort of five members were elected to the States. Once again, none of them were women, although three women did at least stand.

I hadn't met any of the new members and I had no idea whether they will change the character of the States. Still, there was one immediate change. In December, the *Alderney Journal* reported that, following a plan put together by Paul Arditti and others, Policy and Finance will be abolished, replaced by a Policy committee (with Paul being proposed as chair) and a Finance committee, each with less than 10 members. Ironically, given Paul's commitment to transparency, some States members were unhappy at the lack of discussion about the change. Maybe Paul had overplayed his hand and was in danger of becoming the abused-turned-abuser that he so rightly criticised.

It wasn't long before Arditti's bright new dawn was obscured by the clouds of conflict. In May 2013 I opened the plastic wrapper of the latest issue of the *Alderney Journal* to find a grim-faced Arditti staring at me on the cover, under the headline 'Arditti: Tell Me What I've Done Wrong!' What had happened? Apparently there had been an attempt to oust him from the Policy committee following a vote of no confidence in early May. The committee had offered to let Arditti resign quietly, something that he angrily rejected. The ostensible reasons for the coup were arcane in the extreme. It all had to do with the relationship of the States to Alderney Electric Limited (AEL). The relationship between the two bodies had – for reasons that I freely admit I do not understand – been building to some kind of crisis in March and April. As chair of Policy, Arditti had refused to let the committee take a vote on the issue (whatever it was) during April and at a crucial point had left to go on holiday.

While I was unable to tell whether Arditti was in the right or not on the AEL issue, there was no doubting the fact that Alderney politics had lost the delicate equilibrium that I had found on my visit. Angry and packed People's Meetings, criticism from the island's Chamber of Commerce and a petition circulated calling for the dissolution of the States – all these were a measure of the public concern about what was happening. As far as I could see, while Arditti himself had encouraged the petition, the anger seemed to be addressed at the States as a whole. As Andrew Eggleston of the Chamber of Commerce commented: 'This seems like a cry from the electorate to confirm that it is not happy; grow up and work as one and do it for the island.'

Arditti was formally removed from the Policy committee at the May States meeting. Strong words were spoken against him. Neil Harvey argued that '...quite frankly Mr Arditti is frequently

blinded by his own self-importance and is quite, quite unable to see any fault in himself.' Arditti soldiered on the States, without a committee to chair but remaining one of the Alderney representatives on the States of Guernsey. He appears to have his supporters, including at least one Alderney States member, Louis Jean. What is clear though was that Arditti's great hopes for reform had badly rebounded on him. If the removal of his frightful four had been an opportunity for change, then it was change that he himself would not see the benefit of.

I am too ill-informed to come down on one side or other of the Arditti wars. What I do know is that even if he was absolutely correct in his assessment of the events that led to the coup against him and even if he was absolutely correct in his assessment of how the States needed to be run and even if he was absolutely correct in his long-term vision for Alderney, in small world politics and in politics in general it is never enough to be right. The way you conduct yourself, build alliances and communicate with people – all this counts. I had very much enjoyed meeting Paul Arditti but it was clear that someone with such a big personality and such emphatic views could divide a small island that could ill-use such division. I felt bad for him though. Political humiliation is cruel at the best of times, but when the people you humiliate walk directly in front of your door on a daily basis – that must be excruciating.

So I eventually found the conflict I had been looking for on Alderney. But it wasn't the conflict I had hoped for in my fantasies. This wasn't an entertaining clash of pompous oligarchs but the excruciating tussles of a bunch of people desperately trying to keep a small island a viable place to live.

The players in Alderney's game of thrones were ultimately well-intentioned and more or less down to earth. What would Alderney be like if it was the snakepit of malicious forces of my fantasies? You only have to look a few miles across the water find out. The Channel Island of Sark is even smaller than Alderney with an area of two square miles, a population of about 600 and no cars to spoil its idyllic charm. It is even more independent than Alderney, with no 1948 agreement and only the loosest of ties to Guernsey.

Sark was always known as quaint backwater, kept afloat by tourism, a small number of incredibly wealthy residents and the infamous 'Sark lark', in which companies notionally relocated to the island -and its low corporation taxes - with local residents acting as 'directors' (the lark was ended in 1999). Its semi-feudal political system was even more archaic than anywhere else in the Channel Islands. Sark was run by a 'Seigneur', together with a 'Senechal' who presided over a 'Chief Pleas' made up of 'tenants' and 'deputies'.

In 1993, the tycoons brothers David and Frederick Barclay, who made their money through retail, shipping and newspapers (they bought the Telegraph group in 2004), purchased the islet of Brecqhou, just off the coast of Sark. Highly reclusive (there are few known photos of them) they proceeded to build a giant castle on the island. Brecqhou is constitutionally part of Sark and throughout their residence on the island they have engaged in continuous series of battles with the authorities on the bigger island. In a stream of legal actions they have, amongst other things, managed to amend Sark's inheritance law and property taxes to their liking. Challenging Sark's part-feudal part-democratic constitution in the European Court of Human Rights, the Barclays also forced the island to change its government to a more democratic system in 2008. However they were still not satisfied as the new constitution still allowed two unelected members to sit and they have continued to challenge the government in the courts.

Not all the changes that the Barclays have demanded are objectionable in and of themselves. But the way they have gone about it has alienated a large portion of Sark. The Barclays have purchased land, property and hotels on the island, making them a significant economic power. The islanders showed their displeasure in the December 2008 election, the first under the new system. Of the 28 elected members, only 5 were Barclays-approved. In a staggering fit of pique they announced they were shutting down their businesses on Sark, threatening a significant portion of the island with unemployment. While they later partially rowed back from this decision, the island is now split between supporters and detractors of the Barclays, with the latter complaining about bullying and intimidation.

To his great credit, Paul Arditti has acted as lawyer for Sarkese residents against the Barclays. However much he might have been criticised for seeking to dominate the States of Alderney, he understands full well the damage that really powerful people like the Barclays can do. As he told me with a shudder, 'Thank God we don't have the equivalent of those dreadful, dreadful people.' Paul may be relatively wealthy, but neither he nor anyone else on Alderney has the financial muscle - and the desire to use it - that could tear the place apart. The case of Sark shows how toxic island politics can get when it becomes mixed up in the desires of powerful men.

Alderney hasn't had an equivalent of the Barclays, at least in recent decades. But they came close. Several islanders told me the story of the mysterious 'man in black' who made waves on Alderney in the mid to late 1990s. An Australian Internet tycoon whose real name was Christopher J Dawes, he turned up on the island in his yacht in 1994 and fell in love with the place. In 1998 he bought a home and three hotels on the island and apparently had big plans to develop the island as a destination for high rollers. He charmed some - the money he threw around on fine food and drink helped - but bemused others. Dressed all in black, with a black car with blacked-out windows and

accompanied by black-clad bodyguards, he was an intimidating presence, utterly at odds with Alderney's down-to-earth feel.

The man in black could have caused a lot of strife had he continued to buy up and 'develop' the island. As things turned out, he didn't get the chance. In 1999 he was charged with cocaine possession on Alderney. He returned to England on bail and before he could face trial he was killed when he crashed his sports car. Had he lived, he would have likely been charged by the police on Alderney for raping a model and forcing her to take crack cocaine.

Alderney, like other small islands, has a fragile social ecosystem, alongside its fragile natural ecosystem. The Arditti wars may have caused some short-term turmoil, but the States are now returning to normal. With no truly powerful people, no real factions and a shared commitment to keep the island going, Alderney politics more or less works. That's not to say that it couldn't be improved or that the island doesn't face enormous challenges. Alderney is suffering from the recession and facing the real threat of depopulation. A 2013 census showed a 50% drop in children on the island since 2001 and an overall drop in population from 2,294 to 1,903 in the previous 12 years. As an open island, Alderney lacks the kind of super-rich niche that, rightly or wrongly, Guernsey, Jersey and Sark have built for themselves. Too small to have much of an economy, too big to survive as a tiny afterthought, Alderney faces a constant struggle to remain viable and independent. So far, thanks in part to their wide life experience off island, Alderney's politicians seem to be just about keeping the island balanced and afloat.

One day though, someone or something may come along to throw Alderney off balance. It may be a billionaire seeking to buy up the island's land and its government, it may be a poor financial decision by the States members, or it may simply be a personal feud that grinds the machinery of the States to a halt. When that happens, the island, together with its resilient and open people, will be tested to the limits. That may be great news to a writer looking for a gimmicky topic for a book, but it won't be good news for the islanders. And ultimately it's the islanders that matter.

So there is no most powerful politician in Alderney.

And that's great.

Deal with it.