

'A miracle in a time of war and hostility'

More than 70 years on there are still so many untold stories of the Occupation in the islands, especially from the point of view of those who were part of the occupying forces. One of those stories belongs to Georg-August Ast, who was stationed in Guernsey during the war. His son **Hans-Werner Ast** tells of his time in Guernsey and how he came to forge a lifelong bond with his Guernsey 'war parents'

A MIXED group of German and British soldiers from the Allied Rapid Reaction Corps, organised by the Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge (the German War Graves Commission) and supported by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, is currently working at the Fort George Garrison Cemetery, repairing and cleaning the gravestones of those buried there, including 111 German soldiers. This is the first time since the Occupation that uniformed German soldiers have worked in the island and reflects the positivity of cooperation between military forces. This trip follows a recent visit to Guernsey by 30 visitors from Biberach, Germany, who spent a week in the island at the end of May. The group included Hans-Werner Ast and his sister, Marie-Luise Casselmann, who had a poignant story linked to the military cemetery and, in particular, the grave of one fallen soldier. Hans-Werner and Marie-Luise's father, Georg-August Ast, was stationed in Guernsey throughout the Occupation and forged a life-changing bond with an older Guernsey couple, Frank and Beatrice Cochrane, whom he regarded as his 'war parents'. While in Guernsey Hans-Werner wanted to see the many places he'd heard about all his younger life from his father. He also wanted to see the grave of his father's former comrade and good friend, Gustav Saur, who died in Guernsey in February 1943. With the help of a local guide, however, it happened the other way around. Hans-Werner was standing directly in front of his father's friend's grave, his back to the stone, when he told the guide the moving story and of his wish to find the grave. The guide then said to Hans-Werner: 'Turn around. It looks like Gustav found you.' This was an emotional reunion for Hans-Werner and his sister, whose trip was

Frank and Beatrice ('Kid') Cochrane, who lived at Langtoft, Rouge Huis Avenue, St Peter Port.

a pilgrimage to the island – the island that they believed had saved their father's life. This is Georg-August Ast's story, as written by his son, Hans-Werner.

Guernsey – the name is part of my childhood memory, as well as the chocolate, the tinned corned beef and the other delicacies that my family received from the island in the post-war years as much-longed-for parcels. Even as a young boy, the names of the generous senders, Beatrice ('Kid') and Frank Cochrane of St Peter Port, Guernsey, were familiar to me. My father often mentioned these names. After having been a PoW in England, he came home in 1946. I, born in 1944, could not realise then who the senders with these strange names were. During later years, when a regular exchange of letters between my father and the Cochranes took place, I heard from my father what the relationship was about. It is the somehow marvellous war story between a German occupying soldier and occupied inhabitants of the island. My father, Georg-August Ast, 1911-1993, was drafted into the German army and arrived in Jersey at Easter 1941. On 21 June 1941, he crossed over to Guernsey with his unit. He then stayed in Guernsey for the rest of the war. 'A blessing for me,' he often said, for in this way he did not have to take part in the fighting and he did not have to live through the terror of this murderous war, which Guernsey was spared. He experienced the nearing end of the war when he saw the planes of the Allies flying across the Channel towards the Continent. For his comment, 'This may very well be the end of the war', he was nearly court-martialed, he told me. After the war ended my father, like the other German occupying soldiers, was taken to England by boat. As a PoW, with the status of an interpreter,

Clockwise from top left: Helga Reiser, chairwoman of the Biberach Friends of Guernsey, Mrs Ast, Marie-Luise Casselmann and Hans-Werner Ast. (Picture by Chris Betley)

he spent his time in Leicester. They were treated correctly by the English, especially the food was very good (after all, the soldiers, as well as the islanders, had been starving during the blockade – nutritional deficits were common). After his release in 1946, my father could return to his family and for the first time take me into his arms. He kept saying that it was due to Guernsey and the islanders that he did not lose his life in the war. Of course he had to act as a German occupier, but there had also been the order: 'No inappropriate behaviour towards the civilian population'. Therefore he could become really friendly with the Cochranes. In his photograph album he describes them as my 'wartime parents'. To me this sounds like a miracle in a time of war and hostility. In 1969 and again in 1977 my father, together with my mother, visited the family in Guernsey again. This is documented by a photograph in the Foulton Cemetery at the grave of Beatrice and Frank Cochrane. Now/today – 2018 – my father has long since passed away and two photograph albums from the time of the Occupation, as well as holiday photographs of Guernsey – now also more than 40 years old – and letters from the Channel Islands, have rested in the family archive almost untouched. All of a sudden I heard on German radio another of those quiz questions and it raised my attention: Is there a twinning between Biberach and Guernsey? And the answer was: Yes, there is. Biberach and Guernsey. So close to my home, Neu-Ulm. I immediately remembered the chocolate from Guernsey and my father's stories and photographs. So I got into contact with the Biberach Friends of Guernsey through the internet. A few days later my wife and I went to Biberach for our first meeting with the members of the Guernsey Friends, who welcomed us warmly. Of course we were

'[My father always said] that it was due to Guernsey and the islanders that he did not lose his life in the war'

Georg-August's son Hans-Werner Ast

interested to hear what the connection was between Biberach and Guernsey. We were told that during the German Occupation of the island 2,000 islanders of English origin were deported to France and Germany – an act of reprisal after Germans in Iran had been interned by the English. In Germany the camps were located in Biberach, Liebenau and Laufen, near Salzburg. In an intensive talk, we learned about the whole context and how much later there developed a kind of twinning between Guernsey and Biberach – another example for international relations, which luckily is continuing to this day. This dark chapter of the German Occupation was new to me and had never been mentioned by my father. Did he not know about this or was he ashamed to mention it? Unfortunately I will never hear the truth. The story of my father's 'war parents' and the friendship between Guernsey and Biberach were and still are proof that our British neighbours have shown greatness: they could forgive us Germans. Thank you, Guernsey.

◆ The Guernsey Press would like to thank the German Honorary Consul to Guernsey Chris Betley and Paul Bourgaize of Festung Guernsey.

Right: Captioned 'fahrt von Granville' – 'journey from Granville'.

Right: Georg-August's diary. (Picture by Chris Betley)

Below: Georg-August Ast in Guernsey. The picture is captioned 'In meinem stuebchen' – 'In my little room'. (Pictures from Georg-August's albums unless indicated)



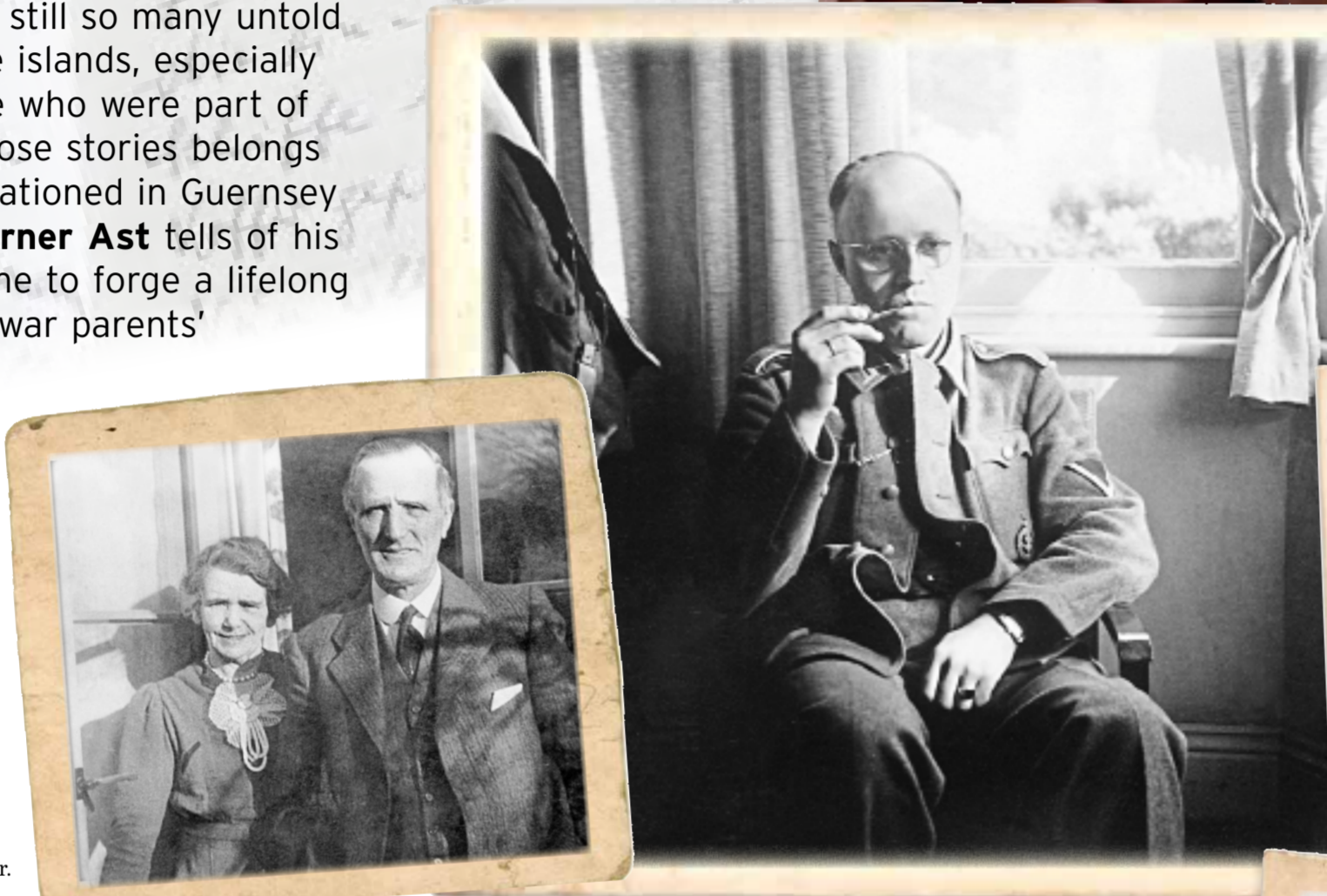
The grave of Georg-August's friend, Gustav Saur, who died during the Occupation and is buried in the Fort George Garrison Cemetery. (Picture by Chris Betley)



Georg-August's 'dienstwagen' – staff car.



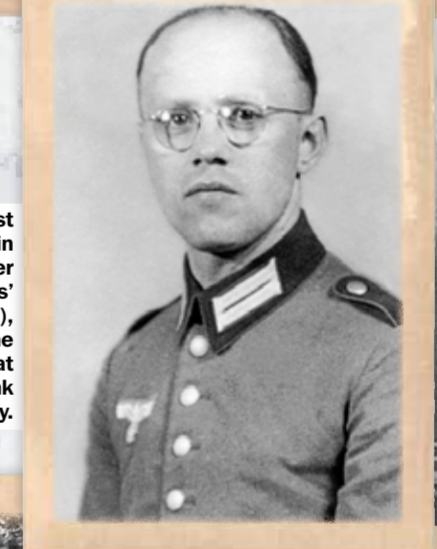
Below: Panzerjäger – quite possibly at the Intermediate School. Dummy tanks like this, which were usually built on a car chassis, were used for training troops in anti-tank tactics.



Winter 1942. Taken from Rouge Huis Ave, looking towards the Intermediate School.



Left: 'Auf der Schreibstude' – 'In the scriptorium' – quite possibly at the Intermediate School.



Georg-August Ast, who was in the Panzerjäger ('armour-hunters' or 'tank-hunters'), a branch of the Wehrmacht that operated anti-tank artillery.



Japanese prayer-house in Saumarez Park.



'Unsere truppe' – 'our troupe'.



Below: 'Gartenfest' – garden party.

Right: At Candie Gardens (Georg-August is furthest right).



Captioned 'Kirche', meaning church, this is the Intermediate School on Brock Road.

Brock Road.

