

The remote island you're going to want to visit after watching 'The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society'

By [Amy Kaufman](#)

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A cliff walk on the island of Guernsey. ([Visit Guernsey](#))

She had traveled to Guernsey on a whim, and now she was stuck there.

Mary Ann Shaffer had known nothing about the Channel Island before she visited in 1980 — just that the enclave off the northwest coast of France looked like a relaxing place to spend a weekend. Now a thick fog had settled over the island, shutting down the airport. Stranded in the terminal, Shaffer bought a stack of books from the gift shop and camped out under the hand dryer in the men's restroom to keep warm.

She cracked open one of the books about the history of Guernsey to pass the time. She learned that during World War II, as France fell to Germany, the islands between British and French shores were left unprotected. About 17,000 Guernsey residents fled, but the 25,000 left behind were subject to German occupation. Resistance was futile — there was one soldier for every two islanders — and the few who fought back were sent to prison camps, with three Jewish women later perishing at Auschwitz.

“She was just outraged that all this suffering had been unknown to her,” recalled Shaffer’s niece, Annie Barrows. “It really galled her so much so that she embarked on a 20-year journey to research this occupation.”

Shaffer never again returned to the island, but “she was totally romantic about it,” said her niece, constantly recounting tales to her family of how the islanders had subsisted on so little. Decades on, her obsession was finally realized in “The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society,” the 2008 novel that shot to the top of the New York Times bestseller list. (Shaffer became ill and died just months before the book was published, leaving Barrows to complete the final rewrites.)

For Brits who recognized Guernsey largely as an idyllic vacation spot of windswept cliffs and charming shops, the novel was eye-opening. And while the book brought a trickle of curious readers to the island, the Guernsey tourism board has seen a fresh crop of travelers visiting the historic spot thanks to a new film adaptation.

St. Peter Port on Guernsey is a reminder of the island's wartime past. ([VisitGuernsey](#))

Directed by Mike Newell (“Four Weddings and a Funeral”), “The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society” stars Lily James as a writer who strikes up pen-pal correspondence with a pig farmer (Michiel Huisman) from Guernsey in the mid-1940s. In his poetic letters, he describes how he and his neighbors founded a book club as an antidote to war. She is so taken with his story that she decides to travel to Guernsey herself, hoping to write about the struggle the islanders have faced.

The film opened theatrically in the United Kingdom in May and has since collected about \$16 million from 10 foreign territories, according to Box Office Mojo. Last Friday, however, Netflix launched the movie — which has earned [mostly positive reviews](#) from critics on its streaming platform in multiple territories worldwide, including the U.S. and Canada.

Guernsey — population: 63,026 — was prepared.

The local government has spent about \$700,000 to market the film, devoting the majority of its website to interactive features tied to the movie. The homepage of [VisitGuernsey.com](#) features a large image of James and Huisman from the movie, prompting visitors to take a virtual tour to "discover the island that inspired the film."

Lily James and Michiel Huisman in a scene from "The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society," which was actually shot in Bude, a county of England. (Kerry Brown / Netflix)

"Hotels, tour companies, restaurants, attractions and plenty of other tourism suppliers [are] creating new products that are themed around the film," said Mike Hopkins, director of marketing and tourism for VisitGuernsey. "Feedback on the film has been extremely positive, and islanders are proud to be associated with it, as well as have the story of their island told to an international audience."

Hopkins cited a [two-hour private walking tour](#) of St. Peter Port, which delves into the history of the occupation; a [two-night hotel package](#) offering an "occupation-themed dinner" and a copy of the novel; and a [Pork, Walk and Talk Tour](#) at a local farm for a charcuterie tasting and two-course dinner.

So far, the push has worked. This week, VisitGuernsey said its website has seen a 45% increase in traffic, and 20% of visitors to the island in May and June said they were there because of the movie.

The Little Chapel on the island of Guernsey, which was conceived by Brother Déodat in 1914. (VisitGuernsey)

It's unclear, however, if those tourists were aware that the Guernsey they visited was not actually the place depicted in the new film.

That's right, "The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society" was not actually shot in Guernsey; it was mostly filmed in Bude, a picturesque seaside town in north Cornwall, England.

"We were very, very keen to go there, but Guernsey has changed a great deal," explained Newell. "It's much more prosperous, it's modernized and cleaned up. To put it back to where it was in 1946 would have been endlessly difficult and enormously expensive. We decided that we had to be in a place where you could truck stuff in instead of ship it in or fly it in."

Newell worked closely with the islanders, relying on their extensive library of wartime photography to recreate important historic landmarks like the concrete observation towers. After touring Guernsey extensively, he began hunting for an oceanside location with a harbor "that wasn't filled with pleasure yachts."

"There had to be a sense of community that was modest and inward-looking where everybody knew everybody," he said. "At that time on Guernsey, there hadn't been a lick of new paint since the early '30s,

so things were supposed to look very shabby. But we found very little of that in Guernsey itself. It's now a prosperous, optimistic holiday island, and it absolutely wasn't back then."

Kit Connor and Lily James in a scene from "The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society." (Kerry Brown / Netflix)

James wasn't able to visit Guernsey before shooting began, traveling there only after production wrapped for a local premiere on the island. Hundreds of islanders gathered in black tie for the launch, and they "absolutely lapped it up," said Newell -- a relief to the director, who knew the locals "felt very possessive of the story."

"It was a whole other world, and it's so close to home," added James, who lives in London. "The water is so blue and the cliff walks are lovely and the air felt clean. It made me want to live by the sea. The whole thing just got under my skin — I lived and breathed Juliet's story. I found the whole idea that Guernsey was occupied so rich it was this bleak, awful time where they had no contact with the outside world, but these unique, mythic people managed to find some hope."

Barrows said she's encountered countless readers like the actress who've been transfixed by the island's story since her aunt's book was published a decade ago.

"I got this one letter years ago from someone who said, 'Well, that's it. I'm moving to Guernsey to find a poetical pig farmer to marry,'" Shaffer's niece said with a laugh. "I think a lot of people have been inspired to go to the island because of the book, especially Americans. And now with the movie, it will only increase."

Tourists enjoy the view during a walk on Guernsey, one of the Channel Islands. (VisitGuernsey)

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