JERSEY ISLANDNESS:

A reflection on space, place and linguistic heritage

[Received May 29th 2026; accepted August 7th 2026 – DOI: 10.21463/shima.302]

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ABSTRACT: This article is a reflection on Jersey islandness through the themes of space, place and linguistic heritage. Drawing on personal experience and engagement with Island Studies scholarship, I examine ideas that have been central to my research on Jersey, while reflecting on my own understandings of islandness. The first section concerns notions of space and place. As a small island, Jersey is often defined by its size, 9 by 5 miles (14.5 by 8 kilometres), but this framing can be extended not only to nearshore and offshore islets and reefs within the jurisdiction of the Bailiwick of Jersey, but also the marine environment and intertidal zones that expand islanders' sense of space and place. The second area of focus is on Jersey's linguistic heritage, centring on Jèrriais, the island's endangered language. Jèrriais has shifted from a lingua franca with several dialects to a present-day symbol of island heritage, sustained through linguistic activism and promoted by organisations and governmental intervention in education, competition and festivals. Through these themes, I explore Jersey islandness through disciplinary and personal reflection.

KEYWORDS: Heritage, islandness, Jèrriais, Jersey, language, place, space

Introduction

Many aspects of my research have been on so-called ‘small’ islands. This includes fieldwork in Japan, a nation of 6852 islands with a circumference of 0.1 km or more (Nihon no Shima e Ikō, 2026), particularly in the Nansei islands in the southwest of the nation, Ogasawara, which is a small group of islands about 1000 km south of Tokyo (and a 24-hour ferry ride away) yet administered as a sub-prefecture and village within Tokyo Metropolis (Tōkyō-to), and the Seto Inland Sea (Seto Naikai). This research agenda drew me to organisations and publications with islands at their core, including the Small Island Cultures Research Initiative (SICRI), which was formed in 2004 “to facilitate communication and collaboration between researchers and cultural practitioners working with small island communities" (SICRI Network, 2026a). With its international conferences held annually (apart from 2020 and 2021 because of COVID-19 restrictions), SICRI has provided a platform for study of not only Japan (three of its conferences have there), but also many other small island cultures across five continents, expanding my knowledge of place, theory and method in the field of Island Studies. Although islands vary greatly in size across the world, the question remains: how small is "small," and how do space and place contribute to our understanding of islandness? Moreover, are there cultural characteristics of small islands that both arise from and reflect their scale? These questions frame the following research-informed personal journey, a survey of my interest on the British Crown Dependency of Jersey, the largest of the Channel Islands (Figure 1), through research conducted at home and reflection from afar.

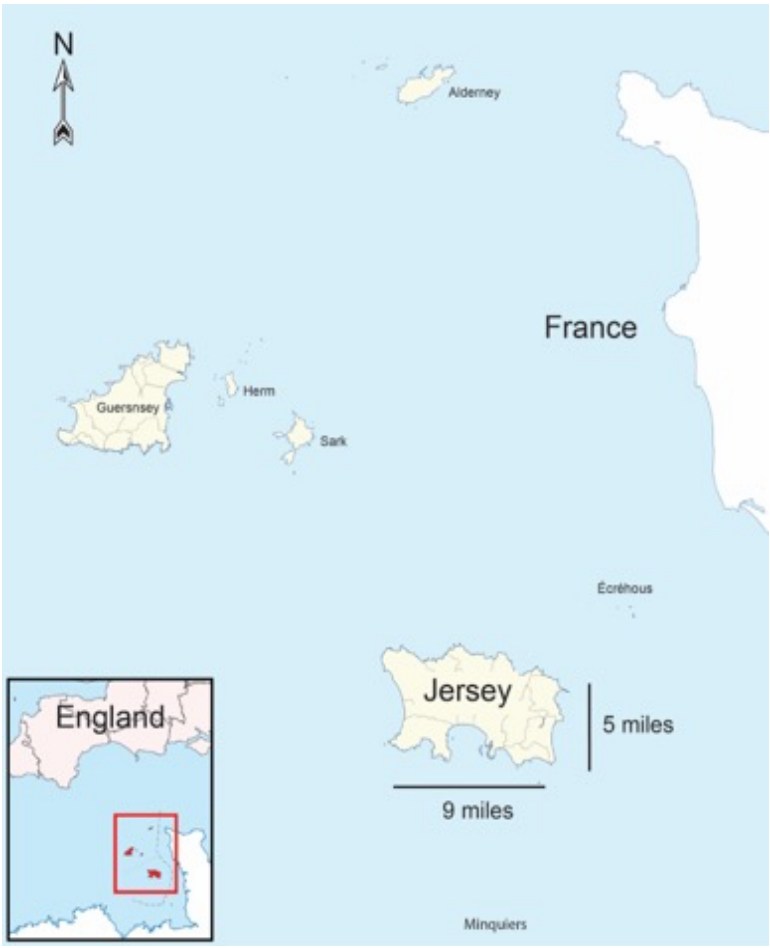


Figure 1 - Map of Jersey showing approximate dimensions of 9 by 5 miles. (Wikimedia Commons, 2022[1]).

The field of Island Studies (Nissology) emerged in the late 20th century and began to receive cross-disciplinary interest with the founding of several journals, including *Island Studies Journal* (2006), *Shima* (2007) and *Journal of Marine and Island Cultures* (2012).[2] The many multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary articles that have been published in these journals offer a range of island locations, research methods, theories and interpretations (Grydehøj, 2023; Hayward, 2016). While my own research has drawn inspiration from the articles appearing in these and related journals, my engagement with Island Studies has allowed me to consolidate and develop new research on Jersey.

[1] Wikimedia Commons. This file is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported license. Edited, April 2026.
https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/1/12/Channel_Islands_locator_skeleton_map.svg

[2] On the scope of journals and organisations in Island Studies, see Brinklow (2011) and SICRI Network, 2026b).

Being born and raised on the island of Jersey has been a core part of my perception of space and place: hometown, family, friends, schools, climate, politics, culture, society and many other factors. This has also influenced how I perceive small islands in other locations, a point that scholars in the field inherently address (Foley, et al., 2023; Taglioni, 2011; Whitehead & Jones, 1968). As one pertinent explanation notes:

> *An island is deemed to be small when each individual living there is aware of living within a territory circumscribed by the sea. An island is deemed to be "big" when the society in general is aware of its insularity, while individuals may be unaware or forget that they live on an island.* (Péron, 1993, p.3 – translation by Taglioni, 2011, p. 46)

My reflection was always linked to my experience of island size, primarily walkable within a day. This was most notably experienced when walking around the island during charity walks, at least walking for as long as possible at the time. There have been several island walks, public and school events, and the current version, which is known as "Island Walk", was founded in 1991 and has around 1000 walkers covering 48.1 miles within the 3am-11.45pm pm time frame (Island Walk, 2026). The walk follows a land route around the island's coast, covering roads and paths and positioned close to the coast. It is with such a route that a sense of islandness is strengthened, particularly the circular route, with almost constant sea views and reinforcing a sense of living on an island.

This is a study of Jersey islandness. I offer a reflection on Jersey in terms of island spatiality (space and place) and linguistic heritage (language and song), presenting Jersey through a narrative and reflection. This is not an analysis per se, but a foregrounding of two features relevant for Jersey that help explain some aspects of islandness. In writing and reflecting on my scholarly and personal engagement with Jersey, I draw on two qualitative and interpretive research approaches that help when reflecting on islandness. That is, considering the island not only as a place, but as a way of being. A reflexive approach is considered in terms of the ways it can help unpack the positionality that has shaped my understanding of the island (Adams, Holman Jones & Ellis, 2015; Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011; Grydehøj, 2024; Hong, 2023). As Tedlock articulates, authors working in the genre of autoethnography "attempt to heal the split between public and private realms by connecting the autobiographical impulse (the gaze inward) with the ethnographic impulse (the gaze outward)" (2005, p. 467).

Consideration is also given to a phenomenological approach that aims to identify key structures of lived island experience (Graziadei *et al*., 2017; Hay, 2006; Sutton, 2020; see also Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 2014). That is, "phenomenological investigation lays stress upon vernacular constructions of meaning and their attendant technologies, beliefs, value codes and myth structures via a process of multi-sensorial receptivity" (Hay, 2006, p. 33). Insular and linguistic themes are introduced and are representative in documenting perceptions of space and place that have become apparent during my fieldwork and personal reflection on Jersey, linking to the ideas of distinct island space and island culture. These points have been identified as island experiences, key to comprehending aspects of Jersey that inform the field of Island Studies. As Hay notes, in its "stress upon the particularity of identity and experience, phenomenology of place makes common cause with the central concerns of Island Studies" (2006, p. 33). Such approaches help in the exploration of Jersey islandness as a construction of knowledge (He, *et al.*, 2023).

As a way of expressing these points, I have structured this article in two main parts: (1) Space and Place; and (2) Linguistic Heritage. This first part concerns island dimensions and

spatiality, evoking shorelines, boundaries and liminal spaces. The second theme concerns Jèrriais as linguistic island heritage, particularly its modern-day transformation. Existing in a culture of linguistic change and contestation, Jèrriais has emerged as an icon of place-making, politically manifested and negotiated in a setting of dominant and minority voices. It is with the significance of the language as an icon of Jersey that helps it define Jersey islandness.

Space and Place

Discourse around Jersey's territory across land and sea highlights its islandness as one of the British Islands (Policy Centre Jersey, 2025). This sense of identity is often expressed through tropes referring to the Norman conquest of England in 1066. While this relates to Jersey being a part of the Duchy of Normandy, it also expresses an island-centric perspective. In particular, it shows how Jersey defines itself in contrast to its larger neighbours, France and the UK. The idea is so deeply engrained in Jersey's identity that during the Second World War, when the island was occupied by Nazi Germany for five years, it took on a particular poignancy. For example, this is illustrated in one account of an exchange between a Jersey resident and an occupying officer: "He asked me how long the British had occupied the Island. I replied that we conquered England in 1066. He smiled" (Mollet, 1945, p. 28).

The idea of Jersey being part of the Norman Conquest creates a sense of difference and historical importance with a small island claiming authority over a much larger kingdom with which it shares a British Crown, despite remaining constitutionally distinct from the UK (Bois, 1970). In this sense, Jersey is aligning itself closely with its Norman history and its subsequent jurisdictional position as a Crown Dependency, maintaining its allegiance with the Duke of Normandy, thereafter the English monarch. Such positionality is further strengthened with other markers of local identity, including law, taxes, stamps, and currency. Indeed, while Jersey's laws follow closely those of the UK, the island's legislature has adopted an approach that supports the development of financial services. While accepting the conquest trope as part of my own Jersey enculturation, the idea has appeared more broadly in public discourse. For example, it is found being expressed by prominent Jersey figures, such as painter Sir John Everett Millais (1829-1896), who commented during an interview that "Jersey conquered England!" (in Low, 1896, p. 605). Summarising such sentiment around this trope, one Jersey writer notes that "Channel Islanders take pleasure in teasing their English friends by telling them that the Channel Islands conquered England" (Lemprière, 1971, p. 262). The point of noting this idea, based on my personal experiences alongside those of others, is that it highlights Jersey's islandness and historical identity: a small island close to France that claims to have exerted authority over the country to which it owes its British allegiance.

Jersey's proximity to France has meant that its sovereignty has been challenged on many occasions since the early 13th century when King John lost mainland Normandy to the French and the Channel Islands maintained their allegiance to their monarch (the Duke of Normandy who was now the English King). Thereafter, the islands were bestowed a unique identity with the Crown, one that continues to this day. Being situated just 22 km from France and 139 km from England, Jersey has historically held a key geographic position. Both within easy reach of the French mainland, and a point for British defense, the island, along with the other nearby Channel Islands, has many fortifications showing its military history over many centuries. With various French incursions and threats in historical times, for Island Studies, Jersey is an example that helps point out how small islands can hold much

geopolitical importance. Jersey's historical fortifications, both British and German, occupy many strategic points around the island, and are nowadays markers of island identity. Transformed from forts and towers to historical landmarks in the tourism and heritage industries, these sites have some other associations for islanders. That is, they sometimes take on other meaning, such as the holding of performances or festivals. Further, German bunkers are scattered around the island and have been the playgrounds of several generations, although with many nowadays closed or with restricted access. Such locations contribute to island place-making. Their prominence in coastal locations reinforces a sense of islandness, a perception that has also shaped my own understanding of Jersey.

Jersey is a jurisdiction that includes several nearshore (tidal) islets and offshore reefs (Figure 1). Those near to the shoreline include La Motte (Green Island; Figure 2), Île au Guerdain (home to Portelet tower; Figure. 3) and Île Agois (a steep sea stack just a few metres from the cliffs on the north coast), along with Elizabeth Castle and St Aubin's Castle that were built on existing rocks and with some reclamation. Regarding the offshore reefs, the largest of these are the Écréhous and Minquiers, each lying between Jersey and France. With a large tidal flow, at low tide not only does Jersey's land area expand considerably, but the two main reefs also expand to form very large areas, albeit experiencing four tidal flows over 24 hours.

Jersey's jurisdiction of the offshore reefs has been challenged more recently, which reflects the aquapelagic space that is an inherent sphere of Island Studies (Hayward, 2012; Hayward & Joseph, 2025). In 1953, a case was brought by France to the International Court of Justice, primarily over fishing rights (Fleury, 2011). Through the UK, Jersey won the case, with a degree of shared fishing rights continuing until the UK's departure from the European Union, which brought about a new era of contestation (Fleury & Johnson, 2015; 2025). The Écréhous and Minquiers extend Jersey's territory across sea and land. From Jersey, the Écréhous, for instance, are often in view, and a location that helps mark a sense of bridging Jersey and France, extending Jersey's jurisdiction beyond the island of Jersey, and offering a place within reach for fishers, kayakers, day-trippers, and those who maintain properties (huts) on the reef. Jersey divides into 12 parishes, each of which has its own honorary policing system, amongst other spheres of autonomy, and an elected voice in the island's government (Hargreaves, 2023). The Écréhous are part of the Parish of Saint Martin, and the Minquiers a part of Grouville. As such, the land mass of each parish is extended to the respective reef, particularly at low tide when the reefs have an extensive low-water land mass, even if only temporarily in any day.



Figure 2 - Green Island, a tidal island in the southeast (photo by Henry Johnson, 2018).



Figure 3 - Portelet Tower, on the tidal island of Île au Guerdain in Portelet Bay (photo by Henry Johnson, 2018).

Depending on the size of their population, 'small' islands like Jersey may have limited space for providing many aspects of everyday living, including housing, food and water resources (Boleat, 2022, pp. 11–12; Johnson, 2016; 2018). Size has much significance for islands, and local economies, culture and society are influenced much by island spatiality (Johnson, 2018; Vale, 2017). For such reasons, islands utilise space according to their own conditions and understand space on island terms (McCall, 1994). Islands might also connect to other islands or mainlands by building bridges or tunnels, which has been a contested area over the decades (Policy Centre Jersey, 2024) or extend island space into surrounding waters through reclamation (Figure 4). It has only been through my study of Jersey more broadly, and especially through historical photos and texts, that I came to recognise land reclamation as a significant theme in my understanding of Jersey islandness. Indeed, reclamation has made an impact on the shape of some parts of Jersey, along with the amount of accessible and usable land within these areas. While ports such as Gorey and St Aubin have experienced smaller amounts of reclamation, Jersey's capital, St Helier, has had much reclamation around the harbour area. While St Helier's foreshore was once close to the town church, the current coastline now extends several hundred metres from this point. Further, as a way of providing more land to cater for a growing population and modern-day needs, the town has seen further reclamation, additional harbours and new land that is used for residential and commercial activities.

A frequently heard trope concerning Jersey's spatiality is that the island is 9 by 5 miles (14.5 x 8 kms), suggesting a more-or-less rectangular shape. Such reference is a reminder of the island's relatively limited space, implying a comparison to larger land masses such as the mainlands of continental Europe or the island of Great Britain. In its archipelagic setting, Jersey is larger than the other Channel Islands, slightly more so than Guernsey and much more than of Alderney, Sark and Herm. Visiting these other islands on a frequent basis has helped engender a notion of island spatiality from a comparative perspective. This was especially so because island hopping in this most southerly part of the British Islands was

part of my enculturation into Island Studies, especially through day-tripping to other parts of the Channel Islands.

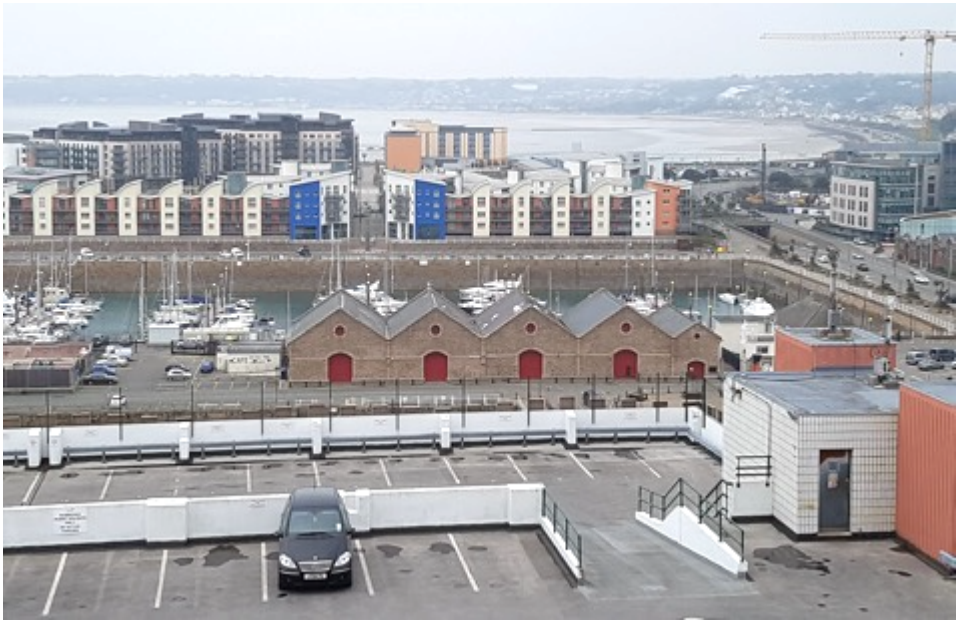


Figure 4 - Part of the harbour area of St Helier with reclaimed residential and commercial sites in the background (photo by Henry Johnson, 2017).

But Jersey's spatiality is complex and the island is not exactly 9 by 5 miles: it has a coastline characterised by significant embayment of various size; there are several nearshore islets and off-shore reefs; Jersey has a large tidal range of nearly 12 metres; and, as noted, the island has extended some urban areas with reclamation. As such, Jersey's intertidal area is large (States of Jersey Planning and Environmental Committee, 1999, p. 201). Such points reflect a complex shoreline defined by tidal and coastal movement and beyond perceived terrestrial limits. These are all points of local reference that contribute to notions of islandness, an inescapable part of living on and being Jersey.

The 9 by 5 miles notion is embedded in much discourse on Jersey. For example, the island's government stresses island size with its facts about Jersey, noting: "Jersey is only 5 miles (8 kilometres) long [longitudinal] and 9 miles (14.5 kilometres) wide [latitudinal]" (States of Jersey, 2016).[3] Visit Jersey (the government's visitor information centre) reinforces the 9 by 5 miles theme, noting that "[d]espite its compact size – just 9 miles by 5 miles (14.5 kms by 8 kms) – Jersey boasts a rich and varied landscape" (Visit Jersey, 2026). Even in song, as found in Hedley Le Maistre's (2007) entertaining entry to choose a Jersey anthem, the 9 by 5 miles trope is stressed, referring to the island as a "rock that's 9 square miles by 5". However, the idea of 9 by 5 miles hasn't always been so uniform, including other descriptions of Jersey's size with an extreme length of 12 miles and largest width of 7 miles (Ward, Lock & Co., 1913–

[3] In geographical terms, the perception of length and width varies with some sources noting the island as "9 miles long by 5 miles wide" (Jersey Uncovered, 2026), which is how I would normally describe Jersey.

14, p. 12). Another description even mentions Jersey's length as about 20 miles and a width of 5 to 6 miles (Clarke, 1879, p. 24). Adding to conflicting definitions, one source offers the slightly different measurements of 11 by 7 miles, although noting its average as 9 by 5 miles (Ward, Lock & Co., 1921, p. 25). Such definitions help show the complexity of size, reinforcing Jersey as an island entity and implying smallness.

Using Google Maps, and with approximate measurements, Jersey's most distant points at hightide run southeast to northwest at 11.8 miles. The island's narrowest width runs east to west at 8.6 miles from Grouville Bay in the east to St Ouen's Bay in the west. However, when measured across the approximate central axis of the island, Jersey has a width of about 9 miles and a length of about 4 miles. The longest point is about 6 miles. The narrowest length is about 3.8 miles. Therefore, the 9 by 5 miles perception is an approximate measurement used to describe a complex island shape with dimensions that can be defined in different ways, and not necessarily rectangular around its open-to-interpretation 90 km coastline (States of Jersey Planning and Environmental Committee, 1999, p. 199).

Jersey's tidal flows affect the size of the island and add to the complexities of the island's connection with the sea. While the high water mark might be a recognised point for measuring an island land mass, when considering Jersey's space, a large area of seabed surfaces twice a day, particularly to the southeast of the island, and one that does much to cater for the island's aquatic cultures, tourism and lifestyle. The walk to Seymour Tower in the Royal Bay of Grouville (Figure 5) is a good example for reflecting on such islandness.



Figure 5 - Seymour Tower in the southeast intertidal zone (photo by Henry Johnson, 2018).

This expanse of sand, sea and rocks is a site that helps define islandness through land and sea connections. As a marine environment, such spaces have received much attention in Island Studies and also helped shape my own perspective within the field. For example, walking to the low water mark has been a multi-sensory experience where parts of Jersey can be viewed in various ways. As well as offering distinct smells, tastes and tactile experiences, the marine environment provides distant views of the island that invite new perspectives of space and place. Further, the sounds from both the sea and the distant shoreline carry across the space, creating a distinctly memorable island soundscape.

Linguistic Heritage

My research focus is on Jersey's linguistic heritage, language revitalisation and its connection with song. In Jersey, English has become the dominant language and Jèrriais an icon of the islands' linguistic heritage (Figure 6). As well as English, more recent social flows include the important linguistic presence of other prominent languages on the island, including Polish and Portuguese. As a result of Jèrriais' decline in use due to increased migration from the UK, and sometimes negative attitudes towards the language in education, Jèrriais has become endangered and, nowadays, an object of debate. It exists as a language, characterised by local varieties and regional influence, and foregrounded as an emblem of Jersey heritage and identity through ground-up activism and top-down intervention. My interest in Jèrriais has focused on its revitalisation through the use of song, along with the rise of festivals in which the language is often performed in spoken, written and musical forms.



Figure 6 - Bilingual signage in English and Jèrriais at Jersey Airport (photo by Henry Johnson, 2008).

My interest in Jèrriais stems not as a speaker of the language but being aware of its rapid decline and increasing use of song as a means to help its revitalisation. Jèrriais has been a part of my island life, hearing the language through family friends, acquaintances and in the public sphere, often spoken by an older generation who would have distinct accents particular to the island. I perceived Jèrriais as part of Jersey: a part of island heritage that was known to some locals but needing support from organisations to help stem its decline in everyday use. We could hear the language in competition once a year in the Jersey Eisteddfod, see it in writing in the local newspaper in a short column once a week, or take an evening class to learn from experts. In this setting, and from a musico-linguistic perspective, my own engagement with Jèrriais and song began during fieldwork as part of a Master's degree in ethnomusicology from the University of London, which involved collaboration with Jèrriais speakers, educators and singers, and drawing on the repertoire of local folk songs – primarily traditional songs and modern songs with lyrics translated into Jèrriais (Davy, 2018 et. al.; L'Office du Jèrriais, 2012; Kennedy, nd a–d, 1975a–c). In the decades since, as Jèrriais has increasingly been consolidated as a linguistic emblem of identity and heritage preservation, its musical expression has undergone recontextualisation and

transformation (Johnson, 2008; 2015a, b). Such emerging settings not only introduce the language to new listeners but also contribute to its consolidation as an island language, increasingly separated from earlier parish-based variation.

Jèrriais has linguistic traits directly connected to the Norman language as spoken in Normandy in northern France. But it also has other connections:

> • *Even in English, people in Jersey use some Jèrriais words like* côtil *[steep field],* brancage *[hedge cutting and inspection],* bachîn *[large metal bowl] and* vraic *[seaweed].*
> • *Lots of Jersey's history has only been written down in Jèrriais - not in French or English.*
> • *Many English words have come into Jèrriais over the centuries. But sometimes the pronunciation and spelling have been adapted.*
> • *Some of our Jèrriais words came from the Norsemen - such as* mielle *[sand dune] and* hougue *[mound].* (L'Office du Jèrriais, 2026)

These words helped form part of my own vocabulary of place-making, along with a plethora of place names that were either in French or Jèrriais (or sometimes mixed) and having to explain them when I used such words outside of Jersey. There is possibly no escaping, wherever I might be, the notion of *brancage* or sight and use of *vraic*.

The Norman language is an important influence on Jèrriais because of the island being a part of the Duchy of Normandy. In geographical terms, mainland Normandy is just 22 km from Jersey (Brittany is 53 km away), making this part of France an important trading point that had social and cultural flows to the island. As such, Jèrriais was not only the lingua franca of the island, albeit with several parish-centred dialects, but was also a means of communication with the Norman mainland. Even after 1204, when the English Crown lost its Normandy territories to the French, Jersey continued to have strong links with France, notwithstanding the wars between England and France with Jersey standing as an island fortress for English defence (Grimsley, 1988). The connection was maintained for many centuries, particularly with French held as an official island language and with many locals with French ancestry speaking French (Island Identity, 2026).

Community, or parish, differences have had much influence on Jèrriais, allowing for the consolidation of dialects that signify place, both island-based and parish-centred. That is, "although the dialect of Jersey has often been treated as a unit, it must be borne in mind that there are some dozen local *parlers* spoken on the island" (Liddicoat, 2011, p. 1). Such is the spoken signification of place, that difference in Jèrriais can be both reflexive and geographically designative of parish identity. Indeed, speakers are "evidently aware of regional features in their own speech and in that of others" (Jones, 2024, p. 487).[4] What is important to note here is that while Jèrriais has received much attention in recent years as a heritage island language, it has a diverse history, dynamic existence and different forms, even though Jèrriais activists and educators nowadays have adopted a standard version of the language:

[4] Some of the local differences between dialects is expressed in the poem by Jèrriais activist, Philippe Langlois (1817–1884), whose "Le Jerriais" offers a humorous look at different language and cultural traits (Les Pages Jèrriaises, 2026).

> *As far as Jèrriais is concerned, the changes over the centuries have been considerable, even within the Island, as those listening to a Saint Martinais and a Saint Ouennais can hear for themselves. Serquiais is phonetically rather different from Jèrriais, but it is only four centuries since Sark was colonized by Jèrriais-speakers.* (Spence, 1999, p. 452)

This brings to mind a series of differences based on community, geography and politics. There are *vingtaines* (historically, a group of 20 households, but nowadays including many more) in each of the islands 12 parishes (*vingtaines* are known as *cueillettes* in the Parish of St Ouen), along with other honorary officials: *centeniers* and constables (see Comité des Connétables, 2026a; b). These administrative units form part of the voluntary honorary police system, of which there are 12 on the island (there is also the States of Jersey Police, which covers the island and with close connections to the UK police). Self-identification based on a parish is often heard in everyday speech, moving to finer levels of location such as *vingtaine*, street name or other location. Jersey islandness may be represented broadly, but small units concerning place making help in defining that islandness. After all, islands are "places – special places, paradigmatic places, topographies of meaning in which the qualities that construct place are dramatically distilled" (Hay, 2006, p. 31).

The political dimension of Jèrriais is a distinct aspect of how Jersey's island language is nowadays maintained as an endangered and heritage language (Jones, 2000; 2001). Building on the points about parish difference above, one parish's version of Jèrriais has achieved a dominant place on the island in part because of its larger number of Jèrriais speakers but also based on the linguistic activism of native speakers at a time when the language was reaching new lows in its existence. The Jèrriais dialect that has achieved dominance is Saint Ouennais, with the following contextualisation helping to point out key points that have led to interventions and heritagisation with both top-down and bottom-up linguistic influences (Figure 6) (L'Office du Jèrriais, 2022; States of Jersey, 2017):

> *Each parish has its own variant words in Jèrriais, and pronunciation tends to differ between west and east. Both variant words and different pronunciation are characteristics of St Ouen - and there is a pronounced 'lisp' in St Ouennais. (Jèrriais speakers from other parishes claim that St Ouennais cannot open their mouths properly because if they do, the wind blows their teeth away.) Following the publication of the Dictionnaire Jersiais-Français by St Ouennais Dr Frank Le Maistre [1966], the parish form of Jèrriais is fast becoming the 'received pronunciation' of the Island dialect, as reputedly Oxford is to English, or Touraine is to French (say parishioners). Dr Le Maistre, who describes himself as 'un vier têtu' (an old and obstinate man), has said that at home even the cat speaks St Ouennais… St Ouen was a colonial power. In 1565 Queen Elizabeth I granted a charter to Hélier de Carteret, Seigneur de St Ouen, authorising him to colonise the then deserted island of Sark, He did so, bringing with him as settlers neighbours and tenants from St Ouen. Sark's traditional dialect is still akin to St Ouennais.* (*Jersey Evening Post,* 2001)

Even with several parish dialects, a decline in the number of Jèrriais speakers has led to a general acceptance of a modern-day, educational and actively encouraged version of the language, Saint Ouennais (Birt, 1985, p. 2). This version has its home in the western parish of St Ouen, Jersey's largest parish by land size yet sparsely populated. Another prominent parish dialect is Saint Martinais in the northeast of the island. One Jèrriais educator who has long been a key participant in my work noted that they were brought up speaking Saint

Martinais but for a long time have acknowledged that if Jèrriais is to survive, then the prominent Saint Ouennais version should be encouraged. This same person has also adopted teaching practices to focus on Saint Ouennais, while pointing out differences with other parish dialects. Translating between local dialects is also known with one Jèrriais project involving the indexing of over 1,000 poems, noting that "some poems had been republished in different years, under different titles or even transcribed, for example, from St Ouennais to St Martinais" (Jennings, 1997).

My study on Jersey and of Jèrriais has mostly concerned the use of song in language revitalisation. The island has a number of organisations and bodies that have done much to promote Jèrriais, including L'Office du Jèrriais, L'Assembliée d'Jèrriais, La Société Jersiaise, La Section de la Langue Jèrriaise, Les Pages Jèrriaises, and La Lettre Jèrriaise. There are also school and adult classes in the language, a language competition as part of the Eisteddfod, along with a small number of bands and singers who perform using the language. As well as choruses that sing on festive occasions, over the past decade several bands and language activists have done much to promote Jèrriais through song. These include the pop folk band Badlabecques (Figure 7),[5] the virtual band La Dgaîngue (Channel Eye, 2025), and death-metal band Head of Helier.[6] The first of these was formed in 2012 as a 10-piece (often varying in number) band led by Kit Ashton, who wrote his PhD on Jèrriais and song. As the band notes, its "ethos… is to promote our indigenous but endangered language of Jèrriais as a positive part of Jersey's cultural identity, not just as 'heritage', but as something we can enjoy and be proud of as we move forwards into the future" (Badlabecques, 2017). What is distinct about Badlabecques is their recontextualising of so-called traditional Jèrriais songs into a more pop-centred sound, aiming to capture the imagination of a younger audience and help preserve Jèrriais (Badlabecques, 2012; Hanby, 2022). They also incorporate some original materials. It is musical performers such as these that have provided a way of recontextualising island heritage through music.



Figure 7 - Members of Badlabecques (photo by Henry Johnson, 2014).

[5] See https://badlabecques.bandcamp.com/

[6] See https://theheadofhelier.bandcamp.com/album/the-head-of-helier

Conclusion

This article has reflected on several key themes relating to my interpretation of Jersey islandness that continue to shape my scholarly orientations from afar. This relates especially to immersive experiences such as coastal walking or whole-island exploration, particularly links between land and sea. Such an approach resonates with broader theoretical framings of island-becoming where identity is not anchored solely within a space, but emerges through relational encounters across place, whether island, archipelagic, aquapelagic, or further afield. Circumnavigating a small island can become a physical and symbolic act of knowing. This compressing of size is complemented by cultural symbols such as language, stamps or currency. Such objects offer a means of representing territoriality and identity-making, part of an assemblage, foregrounding historical, political and cultural elements. For my own Jersey islandness, distance has strengthened a sense of identity, bringing personal and professional paths closer together.

The field of Island Studies explores islands of all shapes and sizes, including island-related areas. My work in Island Studies has focused on the music and cultures of small islands, whether in New Zealand, Japan, the Channel Islands, or elsewhere, and I draw on my own island experiences and reflections when interpreting island life. Exploring Jersey islandness, whether through personal experience, scholarly research or reflexive practice, has helped in my own understanding of islands as lived and relational places, shaped by environmental conditions and cultural practices. These reflections suggest that Jersey islandness is less a condition than a practice: it is performed, contested and imagined.

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