

Smuggling

The Gentlemen's Trade!

John Risdon, local historian and President of Brixham Heritage Museum, tells us of Torbay's involvement in the infamous smuggling trade and highlights a fascinating new exhibit at the museum.

Smuggling! It's a word that immediately conjures up a myriad of thoughts and images and has done for centuries. Throughout that time, the communities of Torbay, large and small, have had an involvement, just as did nearly every coastal settlement around the coast of Devon & Cornwall, but especially along the south coast.

During the 18th & 19th centuries they were recognised as 'smugglers', 'freetraders' or, unbelievably, 'gentlemen'! Any one of these titles referred to that association with smuggling and they describe wonderfully how men from all backgrounds and social classes could end up being involved.

From a modern perspective we often refer to those days as the 'romantic' days of smuggling, totally untrue of course, especially if you happened to be involved. Brandy (or Cousin Jackie as it was known), tobacco (baccy), lace and tea, sound so much more harmless today compared to the modern drug scene.

No one has described so well the mystery and shady dealings of past smuggling and how so many within a community were involved than Rudyard Kipling in his poem 'A Smugglers Song'.

During the early part of the 18th century, those involved in 'the trade' were brazen in their landing of contraband, so ineffectual was the arm of the law. The coastline was long and impossible to guard in totality. The beaches of Torbay


made perfect landing places in those early years and then the innumerable more intimate, isolated coves and inlets became more suitable as state resistance stiffened.

The organisation of successful smuggling depended on two separate activities being successfully carried out, initially to bring the contraband over the Channel and to land it on our shores. Generally, in times of peace, French ports such as Cherbourg were popular as the starting point. However, during our protracted wars with France,

the Channel Islands became the jumping-off point. Having been off-loaded during the hours of darkness, the illicit cargo then became the responsibility of the network of members of the local population to secrete their contraband, firstly to safe hiding places and then on to the relevant customers; "brandy for the parson or baccy for the clerk".

For the crossing of the Channel, together with the ability to evade Revenue Cutters, the smugglers constructed fast, manoeuvrable vessels. The lugger, up to 250 tons in size, often armed, was ideal for the job. They would be crewed by up to 50 men and could carry 10,000 gallons of brandy or 12 tons of tea, or a combination of both. In many circumstances, the smaller smuggling

craft would be crewed by men who would be law-abiding fishermen one day and smugglers the next. The 'war' at sea between smuggler craft and Revenue Cutters intensified through the 18th century with some notable actions taking place within the waters of Torbay.



*If you wake at midnight,
and hear a horse's feet,
Don't go drawing back
the blind, or looking in
the street.
Them that ask no questions
isn't told a lie.
Watch the wall, my darling,
while the Gentlemen go by!
Five and twenty ponies,
Trotting through the dark
Brandy for the Parson,
Baccy for the Clerk,
Laces for a lady, letters for
a spy,
And watch the wall,
my darling, while the
gentlemen go by!*

During May 1783, The Swift, with a crew of fifty, accompanied by a smaller vessel out of Brixham, was brought to action by the Revenue Cutters Spider and Alarm. Even so, they were able to land 4 tons of tea and 9,000 gallons of spirit on one of Torbay's beaches with the assistance of 100 men waiting on shore. The Revenue or Excise men ashore, whose job it was to apprehend smugglers were known as Preventatives. Fascinatingly we still have one very well preserved Preventatives' Station of that period in being at the head of Paignton Harbour, today a public toilet!

During 1784, Prime Minister William Pitt slashed the tax on tea entering the country from 125% to 12.5%. This very much removed tea from being such a profitable commodity to smuggle.

Another line of defence for the Revenue would be Riding Officers. A Riding Officer was responsible for patrolling between 4 and 10 miles of coastline. As an example, in our area, this would be from Berry Head to Froward Point, at the mouth of the Dart. Such a dangerous, lonely job it was, the pay was doubled in 1780. Many officers were known to have "fallen over the cliff" in carrying out their duty!

As the Preventatives and Revenue men, both on land and sea, became more effective, so the smuggling

fraternity had to become more ingenious and secretive as to their activities. Contraband would no longer be brought straight ashore but 'sunk' off shore at a marked position, to be retrieved at a later time when they knew the coast was clear. And then, another ruse, once the contraband was ashore, was for womenfolk to feign pregnancy by carrying a bladder full of brandy hidden beneath their clothing. Even so, there was always the fear of being caught.

Although those involved in smuggling well outnumbered the revenue men there was the dread of the arrival of the dragoons from Exeter with sabres drawn - not to be trifled with! Being caught at sea would mean prison for the majority although you could then 'volunteer' for the Royal Navy as a preference. There were the exceptions to the rule, men like Jack Rattenbury from Beer, who seemed to lead a charmed

life. But then it was often who you knew! For Jack it was Lord Rolle of Exmouth.

Within the small communities ashore, of Brixham, Tormohun, Paignton and Babbacombe, the absolute need was for secrecy, conflicting with jealousies, fear and betrayals. Without that secrecy and local loyalty the gentlemen's trade was doomed to failure. □

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New! Smugglers Exhibit at Brixham Heritage Museum - An Invitation

To find out more about smuggling, which has such relevance locally, I'm delighted to be able to invite you to come and view a brand new fascinating exhibit at Brixham Heritage Museum, and do please bring your children and grandchildren. They will have the opportunity to 'live the part' by momentarily becoming a smuggler, soldier or local girl of the time. The exhibit is for all ages to enjoy and don't forget, entry is FREE.

*Brixham Heritage Museum
The Old Police Station, New Road, Brixham TQ5 8LJ
01803 856267 brixhamheritage.org.uk
Opens for 2017 season on Tuesday 4 April*

