



RICHARD DOUBELL A SMUGGLER'S TALE

We believe Richard Doubell was born on 2nd December 1711 in Lingfield. His father was also Richard (spelled 'Double').

Although we know very little about his life in Lingfield we do know that he was a yeoman farmer and landowner. He has also been described as a carrier. We also know that at some time in his life he got involved with the Hawkhurst Gang, a notorious band of smugglers who specialised in the smuggling of tea, which was heavily taxed.

The tea would be landed at various points along the south coast and transported by pack horse up to London where there was a ready market. On a map of 1870 (a copy of which is in Lingfield Library) a lane to the north of Dry Hill is marked as 'Old Smuggling Lane' and was part of a network of lanes running up from the Sussex coast, through such places as Ashdown Forest, Starborough Castle, Dwelly Lane and north over the Downs to London.

Most gang members had nicknames and Richard Doubell apparently went by the alias of 'The Ensign'. In 1740 on the evidence of John Boxall, a gang member who turned King's Evidence, Doubell was implicated in the murder of a customs officer named Thomas Carswell at Silver Hill near Hurst Green in Sussex. John Boxall was later convicted of sheep stealing and transported to Australia.

On the evening of Christmas Day 1740 the gang had been involved in smuggling a large amount of tea which they had landed on a beach between Hastings and Bulverhythe. The tea, which apparently weighed in the region of 15 cwt (762 kilos), was transported to a barn near Hurst Green in Sussex. While the gang rested in a nearby public house (the Bull at Hurst Green) they were informed that soldiers were in hot pursuit, but before they could return to the barn, they saw the soldiers pass by. It was then decided that some of the gang would make their way to Hawkhurst to collect firearms and more men. They offered anybody who would come with them a reward of a large parcel of tea or 20 guineas. When they returned with about 30 men together with guns and horses they discovered that the soldiers had already found and seized the tea.

The gang then stripped to their shirts and, with handkerchiefs bound round their heads, drank brandy 'wishing damnation on anyone who returned before they had retrieved the tea.' They then went by horseback to try and get it back. They overtook

the wagon of tea with its guard of dragoons at Silver Hill. On the evidence of John Boxall, Richard Doubell was seen to fire and kill the Excise Officer Thomas Carswell. The dragoons appear to have been heavily outnumbered and the gang soon rescued the tea and drove the wagon back to Hurst Green where they offloaded it onto horses and paid off the people they had hired at Hawkhurst.

Richard Doubell was finally caught nine years later in 1749, and although he produced two witnesses to say he was drinking in the pub at the time, he was found guilty. He was condemned to death and sentenced to be hanged on 19th August at Horsham, along with George Chapman who was also indicted for the murder. For some reason, Doubell was given a two months reprieve and the sentence was then changed to transportation. He was later pardoned when it turned out that a horse dealer from Hurstmonceaux called Thomas Carey (otherwise known as ‘Jockey Tom’ or ‘Lame Jockey’) had fired the fatal shot. In the meantime George Chapman had been hanged and his body then hung in chains at Hurst Green. He had maintained his innocence right up to the end.

Richard Doubell continued to live in Lingfield and finally died on 11th August 1793 at the aged of 82.

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Sources:

Goodwood MS/156 – West Sussex Record Office
The Sussex Weekly Advertiser – East Sussex Record Office
Lingfield library
Smuggling in Kent & Sussex 1700 – 1840 by Mary Waugh
Janet Bateson