



SMUGGLING

When one considers smugglers and smuggling it is important not to think of them as romantic. Kipling's five and twenty ponies trotting through the dark suggested that these were people trying to earn a living in spite of the heavy hand of authority. Many of the people involved made no bones about using violence and local people were frightened into silence. Also there are many tales about smuggling and smuggling haunts that are often romantic dreams. Because of the nature of the trade there is little written evidence except where cases came to court.

There is an adage that smuggling follows taxes. Over the years the imposition of duty has been on tea, chocolate, spirits, tobacco, perfume and wool. Edward III put a tax on imported wine in 1275. On top of goods the smugglers also transported spies in both directions. Napoleon ruined the French economy and he needed gold to buy essentials from neutral countries, so British gold was smuggled out. Blow the patriotism where's the profit?

The size of the trade can only be estimated from the goods seized. For the ten years from 1723 Customs seized 192,550 gallons of brandy, 1,610,268lbs of tobacco and 1,022,041lbs of tea. You only have to multiply that by probably 5 times to appreciate the size of the trade. The Customs Service was underfunded and the local officers had to live in the community so that they were known, ignored or frightened. If they took a case to court the jury could well be friends and relations of the accused.

There were 3 major gangs operating in the middle of the 18th century - The Mayfield, Groombridge and Hawkhurst Gangs. They were arrogant, insolent and made no bones about using fear and violence. The Hawkhurst Gang were particularly bad and were hated by the local people. In 1747 George Sturt was discharged from the army and, on returning home to Goudhurst, set up a militia to defend the village. This so enraged the Gang that they sent notice that on 20th April 1747 they would attack and destroy Goudhurst. In the ensuing battle victory for the militia led to several of the Gang being captured and handed over to the authorities and hanged.

Locally we know that goods were moved up what is now the A22. There were safe stores on Ashdown Forest where the goods could be held before being moved through East Grinstead to Godstone for the London merchants who came down to buy. From the records of smugglers being caught, we know there were other safe havens in Sheffield Park, Nutley, Gravetye Manor, Tandridge and Oxted. There is a record of a fight with the excisemen at the Swann Inn in Reigate and another in Bletchingley.

There is no doubt that smuggling was rife all over the South East as a labourer could earn more in a night helping move cargoes than from a week labouring. Most inns had a connection with smugglers if only to provide spirits to the local gentry.

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