

SMUGGLING IN CORNWALL

(extracts from an essay awarded the Legonna Prize in the 1994 Gorsedd Competition)

by Sharon Patrick

CONTRABAND ... what and how much?

Between 1700 and 1850 the running of contraband became more concerned with imports than exports, as opposed to the previous export, illegal or otherwise, of wool; although export was never abandoned and became sufficiently important to earn West Country smugglers the name of "free traders".

The south coast of Cornwall was always more closely watched than the north – it was, after all, closer to the Continent.

Tin and copper were smuggled out of Cornwall in pilchard boats – some say as much as 75% of the total production!

In 1597 contraband landed in Mount's Bay and St. Ives included: "Portingalles salt and earthen pottery and Buttes of Canary wyne called Muskadelle".

By the 17th century the emphasis had changed. James I loathed tobacco, considering it "*abomination of the Devil*". In an effort to stamp out smoking, he raised the import duty to 6s.6d. a pound from 2d. a pound, making smuggling very worthwhile.

Tobacco and brandy are the best known items of contraband, followed by "laces for a lady" and "letters for a spy", from Rudyard Kipling's verse.

During the heyday of smuggling, from 1700 to 1850, the duty on various items varied considerably, and when it was high it paid to smuggle. When it was low, it was more profitable to choose another line of goods. For example, at the end of the 18th century, when the duty on tobacco was 2s.10d. a pound, you could buy it from a smuggler for 1s.3d., because he bought it on the Continent for 3d. a pound. In 1784 the country as a whole lost £3,000,000 in unpaid duty on tobacco alone!

Brandy found a ready market; smugglers bought it in France for 5s. a gallon, sold it for 25s. a gallon and saved 7s. on duty. At one time smugglers tried bringing in extra strength brandy and letting it down to the right alcoholic content here. This saved space on ship.

It was estimated that 470,000 gallons of "Cousin Jack", as brandy was called by free-traders was smuggled into Cornwall alone. "Cousin Jack" may possibly have been rhyming slang for cognac. It became a nickname applied to all Cornishmen, (presumably through their smuggling activities!) and was taken by Cornish miners to America.

As well as salt, pepper, coffee, cocoa, sugar, cardamon, turmeric, mace, sesame and cloves, tea was also smuggled, and became hugely popular

during the 18th century, making it the largest item of contraband. In 1763 three East Indiamen sold £20,000 worth of China tea direct to inhabitants, from their ship, lying in Falmouth harbour, without anything going through Customs.

With smuggling continuing on such a huge scale, you can understand the report from Newquay in 1775 that it was normal for 100 horses to be waiting for contraband every day of the week!

Smuggling reached such formidable proportions that I wonder what the Revenue Service and Customs officers were doing!

After the end of the Napoleonic wars, Revenue operations improved. Beach ambushes, better intelligence

sources, more manpower and other factors meant that it was no longer easy or safe to run a vessel into a secluded cove and unload directly without fear of discovery.

The list of seizures in the period 1822-24 shows the variety and quantity of contraband goods also the greater success of the measures taken to prevent smuggling.

Tobacco	902,684½ lbs.
Snuff	3,000 lbs.
Brandy	130,000 gallons
Rum	253 gallons
Gin	227,900 gallons
Tea	19,000 lbs.
Silk	42,000 yards
Handkerchiefs	2,400
Playing cards	3,600 packs
Leghorn hats	23

POLPERRO CRAFT

Polperro was one of the great centres of smuggling in Cornwall. The harbour and the type of fast boats built there were eminently suitable for the smuggling trade.

"The Unity"

... was one of the most famous of Polperro craft which was claimed to have made 500 successful trips. It was captured in 1802, with 170 casks of spirit and a large supply of tobacco on board. "The Unity" was the first victim of a squadron of frigates patrolling the coast due to the Government's decision to stamp out armed Cornish smuggling boats.

"The Lottery"

... was the most notorious

Polperro craft. In 1798 she was spotted by a revenue cutter while waiting in Whitesand Bay. Certain of an easy capture, the revenue men came out in their boat. The determined crew of "The Lottery" opened fire and killed one of the officers, before raising the anchor and flying out to sea at speed.

"The Lottery" was captured on May 18th 1799, and taken to Plymouth, having thrown away 200 ankers of spirits in the effort to get away.

The crew were tried and sentenced, but the killer of the revenue officer was yet to be found. Roger Toms, one of the crew, revealed that Tom Potter had fired the shot. Potter was arrested, but his trial was delayed because fellow

smugglers had kidnapped Roger Toms. Toms escaped and gave evidence leading to the execution of Potter. Needless to say, the disloyal Tomas never dared to even set foot in his native Cornwall again, rejected by friends and family.

It was the custom in those days to cut up and destroy all smuggling craft when caught. "The Lottery", however, was taken into customs service and, in an ironic twist, operated off Polperro. Its first prize was the smuggler "Assistance" from Guernsey.

"A CORNISH JURY WILL NEVER CONVICT A SMUGGLER"

That's how the old saying runs, and although it wasn't always true, there was more than one incident that illustrated its general validity.

One case of this was on the night of 28th March, 1835, when Richard Stevens of the Coastguard Station at Fowey, went to Lantic Hill with another coastguard, Walter Harper, acting on information received.

On sighting a crew of smugglers, Stevens sent Harper for help, which arrived in the form of five men. On challenging the smugglers, a violent struggle ensued in which Stevens was knocked out. The Coastguards took five prisoners.

The prisoners were brought to trial and charged with "*assisting others in landing and carrying away prohibited goods, some being armed with offensive weapons.*"

In 1802 the "Expedition", the "Providence" and "The Three Friends", all from Polperro, were captured. "The Three Friends" resisted capture and the helmsman, Robert Mark, was killed by fire from the revenue cutter. He was buried in Talland churchyard, and his epitaph can still be seen there.

"ROBERT MARK

late of Polperro who unfortunately was shot at sea on the 24th day of January in the year of our Lord God 1802 in the 40th Year of his Age."

The defence tried to persuade Harper and the other Preventative men that the thick sticks carried by the smugglers were the same as those used by country people as walking sticks, but they refused to credit this. Several local farmers testified to the good character of the smugglers.

Finally, the "impartial" Cornish jury, disregarding all the evidence laid before them, returned a verdict of "not guilty", adding that the sticks were not "offensive weapons". The lucky prisoners were discharged — fortunate not to have faced the terror of **Launceston gaol** — a name to strike fear into the hearts of any smuggler.