

Border Force National Museum

Known as *Seized! The Border & Customs Uncovered*

Maritime Archives and Library Information Sheet 24

History of Smuggling

Customs duties on imported (eg wine) and exported goods (eg wool) were well known as far back as the Magna Carta (1215), when they were referred to as 'ancient'. The length of time these taxes had been in place meant that they did not raise a great deal of hostility. However Excise was regarded as "a hateful tax" (Dr Johnson). Taxes known as Excise were placed on goods made in this country (eg beer and candles) and were introduced in England during the Civil War (1642-7) to pay for Cromwell's army. In 1660 when the monarchy was restored (King Charles II), and they paid for the expenses of both the government and King.

When taxes were high (as during war time) smuggling levels increased in violence and scale. To meet the armed and violent gangs of smugglers the revenue men were also armed, and had the support of mounted and armed soldiers. Or if they were at sea they could call on the Royal Navy.

Smuggling started in the reign of Edward I (late 13th century) when a Customs duty was placed on the export of wool, which was in great demand in Europe. The initial duties were small, but as the Hundred Years War progressed in the 14th century, so the tax increased in order to fund troops and further fighting.

Initially the Customs Service existed only to collect the duties at the ports, and not to prevent smuggling. However during the 17th and 18th centuries illegal trade increased. From the previously small-scale evasion of duties, smuggling had now developed into an industry. It has been suggested that at times more illicit spirits were being smuggled into the country, than entered legally into London Docks.

In 1614 the export of wool was made illegal. Smuggling of wool was known as *owling* (after the owl like noises made by the smugglers to communicate with each other). In 1661 the illegal export of wool was made punishable by death. Smugglers therefore began arming themselves. In turn they were faced with armed prevention in the form of the British Army. In 1671 Charles II created the Board of Customs - an official body responsible for the collection of Customs duties. In the 1680s Revenue Officers were provided with customs cutters to enable them to patrol the coast to catch smugglers.

In the 18th century 'Customs' was not the only taxation on goods. *Excise* was a type of tax on domestic consumption. During the years of the Civil War it covered many different items. But it was reduced ten years later to cover just chocolate, coffee, tea, beer and spirits. However it was an effective way of raising tax revenue, so successive governments re-introduced and repealed Excise duty on various items including essentials such as salt, leather and soap. The difference between these two taxes was of little interest to the people, who cared only that what they bought was becoming increasingly expensive.

In the 18th century extraordinary quantities of goods were smuggled into Britain. In some areas whole communities were dependant on smuggling. Many communities in the late 1700s (such as the Scilly Isles), were in league with the smugglers who could provide contraband goods (like tea or tobacco) which they could not otherwise afford.

The hey-day of smuggling was during the wars against France and Napoleon. It has been said that the last skirmish when shots were fired was on Romney Marsh in 1821.

Smuggling continued throughout the early 19th century, but declined after the conclusion of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815 when the preventive effort was stepped up with the introduction of coastal

blockades, blockademen and Coastguard. By the late 1820s the effectiveness of the two forces was apparent. In 1831 the Coastguard Service became responsible for the entire coastline and ultimately becoming the preventive force. The Coastguard drove smuggling underground, but economics finally ended the smuggling era. Britain adopted a free-trade policy in the 1840s reducing import duties significantly, so made smuggling no longer a viable occupation.

Further information

Records

The Maritime Archives & Library do not hold any public records on smuggling or HM Customs & Excise staff.

General study

The Border Force National Museum library does not hold any public records on smuggling or HM Customs & Excise staff.

However we do hold a selection of published material on the history of smuggling. **The library is available during normal office hours, by appointment only.** If you are interested in further study into the history of smuggling, please contact –

Border Force National Museum
Albert Dock
Liverpool L3 4AX
Tel: 0151 478 4507
Email: seized@liverpoolmuseums.org.uk
Website: www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/seized/

Downloadable information sheets

- History of smuggling – information sheet 24
- Tracing your ancestors - information sheet 44
- Book list – information sheet 72
- History of rummage - information sheet 73
- Useful publications for researchers - information sheet 74
- Useful websites for researchers - information sheet 75

The National Archives (PRO)

Any HM Customs & Excise records that still exist may be held at the National Archives, under the reference *CUST*. Contact this public repository if you interested in researching any records relating to Customs Officers or Excise men at the following contact details –

The National Archives
Ruskin Avenue
Kew
Richmond
Surrey TW9 4DU
Tel: 020 8876 3444
Minicom 0208 392 9198
Fax: 020 8878 8905
Email: enquiry@nationalarchives.gov.uk
Website: www.nationalarchives.gov.uk

Local Records Office

You may find further documents in the relevant Local Records Office. They may be able to help with researching official and newspaper reports, enquiries or court records relating to cases of smuggling.