

# Border Force National Museum

Known as Seized! The Border & Customs Uncovered

## Maritime Archives and Library Information Sheet 73

### History of Rummage

Historically a tax on a product was ample incentive to smuggle. To smuggle meant concealing the product from the prying eyes of the customs official. There are numerous accounts of hidden contraband in official departmental reports from the 1700s. Contraband was often hidden in vessels with false bulkheads, hollow spars, and adapted cavities between decks.

The search of vessels has taken place for centuries. Early instructions to Customs officers before 1673 indicate ships were being searched for concealed goods. The master faced a penalty of £100 if goods were found. After 1760 officers were employed exclusively on 'Waterguard' duties with job titles such as *Inspector of the River, Tide Waiter, and Waterman*. By 1809 a 'preventive waterguard' was established to patrol the coast by boat during the day, and on foot at night. This body takes on life saving duties and become the Coastguard of today. A Waterguard still existed at the port. By 1891 the specialist unit dedicated to searching or rummaging was established and was known as the Waterguard. The specialist rummage officer retained this title until reorganisation in 1972 when the unit was absorbed into the Customs & Excise Department.

An early written manuscript describing smuggling method was produced by a Lieutenant Rawstone. The manuscript now held at the museum, is one of the few surviving early accounts produced by an officer in the field. He was a Royal Naval officer and a chief officer in the Coast Guard. From 1830-1837, he produced detailed description of vessels involved in smuggling accompanied by fine intricate drawings of concealment methods.

The equivalent in the 20th century was the *copycat* drawings. Produced by officers, these drawings were then circulated to Waterguard stations around the coast. First appearing around 1955, the copycat drawing became the accepted method of sharing intelligence. The museum holds copies produced well into the late 1960s covering a broad sweep of subjects. Everything from ship bulkheads, engine room, inner wing of a car, instrument panel of an aircraft, and adapted lining in a man's jacket.

Historically it was the Waterguard Training Centre which played a key role in training of new recruits. Established after World War 2 in Gravesend and Southend it provided classroom based learning delivered by experts in the field. The trainers were often Chief Preventive Officers with long experience of preventive work. The students included new recruits to the Waterguard and overseas students often from Britain's former colonies. They were given hands on experience which included visits to the London Docks and its shipping and London's airports. The training was intensive and could include examination to qualify as an APO (Assistant Preventive Officer) or PO (Preventive Officer).

Although now long disbanded, the Waterguard history and traditions are still remembered and celebrated by retired officers. Officers often have reunions around the country and have a dedicated website to celebrate its history.