

MARITIME ARCHIVES & LIBRARY

INFORMATION SHEET 24

SMUGGLING

Smuggling started in the reign of Edward I, in the 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 during 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. During the 17th and 18th centuries, however, illegal trade increased. From the previously small-scale evasion of duties, smuggling had now developed into an industry. It has been suggested that at certain times within this period more illicit spirits were being smuggled into the country, than entering legally into the London Docks.

In 1614, the export of any wool was made officially 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 exporting of wool was made punishable by death. Smugglers therefore began arming themselves and, in turn, were faced with armed prevention in the form of the British Army. In 1671 Charles II created the Board of Customs, as an official body responsible for the collection of customs. In the 1680s Revenue Officers were provided with customs cutters to enable them to patrol the coast, in order to apprehend smugglers.

In the 18th century 'customs' was not the only taxation on goods. *Excise* was a type of duty that had its origins in the English Civil War and was a tax on domestic consumption. During the years of the Civil War it covered many different items, but was reduced ten years later to cover just chocolate, coffee, tea, beer and spirits. However, as it was an effective way of raising tax revenue, successive governments re-introduced and repealed excise duty on various items, including essentials such as salt, leather and soap.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. The Scilly Isles, for example, faced starvation when prevention was increased in the area in the late 1700s.

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 the 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 so became the preventive force that we know today. The Coastguard drove smuggling underground, but economics finally ended the smuggling era. Britain's adoption of a free-trade policy in the 1840s reduced import duties significantly, making smuggling no longer a viable occupation.

Records

The Maritime Archives & Library does not hold any records on smuggling or HM Customs & Excise staff. Some library books on the subject are available.

The National Archives (PRO)

The National Archives holds all HM Customs & Excise records, under the reference CUST. Contact this repository if interested in researching any records relating to Customs Officers or Excisemen as follows:

The National Archives (PRO)
Ruskin Avenue
Kew, Richmond
Surrey TW9 4DU
Tel: 020 8392 5200
Fax: 020 8878 8905
Email: enquiry@nationalarchives.gov.uk
Website: www.nationalarchives.gov.uk

Local Authority Record Offices

Contact the Local Authority Record Offices, in the relevant area, when researching official and newspaper reports, enquiries or court records relating to cases of smuggling.

General Study

If you are interested in further study into the history of smuggling, please contact the:

HM Customs & Excise National Museum
Albert Dock
Liverpool L3 4AQ
Tel: 0151 478 4999

HM Customs & Excise's departmental library holds a good selection of books on the history of smuggling. **The library is available for use by appointment only.**

Bibliography

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