

**Smuggling in the 1700s was a desperate business . . .**

TWO men carrying shrimp nets down the beach at West Parade would hardly attract a glance nowadays, but 160 years ago the sight would cause heads to turn . . . away.

As the ruffianly pair strolled past everyone knew they were in league with smugglers. And no sensible cottager wanted to be known as an informer.

In the 1700s, smuggling at Bexhill and along the nearby coast was rife, and it had not died out when the new century dawned. In fact, "contrabandism" revived during the 1820s and only ended finally about 1830. The last Bexhill smuggler is thought to have been a Mr Daw, of Little Common, who died aged 94 at Battle workhouse.

A few early editions of the Bexhill Observer provide rare glimpses of life in the smugglers' heyday — their bloody cutlass battles with the hated revenue man and their legendary (if exaggerated) cunning and bravado.

In 1927, for instance, an elderly man called Mr J. Dineen visited Bexhill, where he had grown up, for the first time in 75 years. He recounted some tales of those early days when the present-day town was no more than a village to a local reporter.

"Years ago smuggling was very rife at Veness Gap, a great place for landing contraband. The men with shrimp nets . . . were suspected of being in league with smugglers and carts and wagons were taken from farms to carry the booty inland."

Mr Dineen had not witnessed the smugglers' activities at first hand but could remember when a vessel carrying tobacco was wrecked — the precious cargo was washed ashore and the natives rushed down to help themselves before an order came for it to be collected and burnt.

# Darkest deeds veiled in silence

**Report by  
Jim Soar**

He also recalled that in those days Bexhill "must have been a very temperate place" because the only houses selling alcohol (legally anyway) were Dewdney's, Plumley's and "a house called Lane's-End kept by a man called Simons and his daughter Lucy." The village had not spread far westwards and there were few houses before Bulverhythe.

According to an Observer report in February 1897, numbers of smugglers were dwindling by the late 1820s, the collapse of the Hawkhurst gang being a major

**and Bexhill had its fair share of ruthless 'contrabandists'**



factor in their demise.

The last big battle between contrabandists and men of the Coast Blockade took place at Sidley on January 3 1828 and was related to an Observer reporter by one of the survivors.

The cargo — tubs of spirits — was landed at a place called 'Mr Brook's forty-acre point.' It was almost a full moon and the rough, armed men carrying tubs on their shoulders or loading them on to farm carts were clearly visible to the Coast Blockade from Galley Hill Tower.

The smugglers were led by a native of Bexhill and well-known contrabandist who was captaining the boat, helped by some 16 or 18 batmen. The Coast Blockade raised around 40 men and followed their sworn enemies inland until they were confronted, at Sidley by a line of armed ruffians.

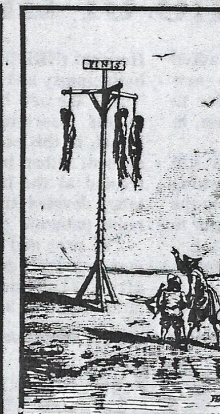
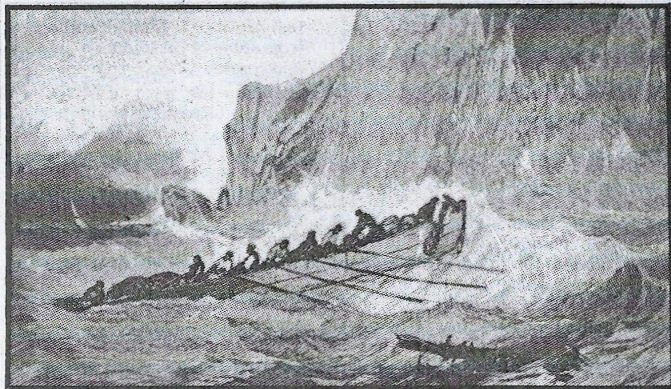
A desperate and bloodthirsty fight followed in which three men were killed at the first onset. One smuggler called Simhurst was "almost cut to pieces" by the cutlasses of his antagonists and another was crippled.

The battle turned into a running fight and it was said one wounded man was taken into the yard of what is now the Bell Hotel.

Another report from the same year relates that the smugglers' captain was very daring and had twice escaped the authorities, once leaping to freedom from a window of Winchelsea Town Hall and losing himself in the crowd before shots could be fired.

Another time, when he and a smuggler called Spinner were in custody in Bopeep Tower, his mother (who evidently doted on her outlaw son) smuggled a rope to him. He slid down it from the roof and made for a nearby public house where a horse and cart were waiting to take him to freedom.

How much of the handed-down smugglers' tales are fact and how much fiction it would be impossible to say — but they make lively reading and prove that peaceful Bexhill-on-Sea was not always so quiet.



● Pictures from left: Heading on to the rocks; 'Smugglers' etching by J A Atkinson, 1808; wool smugglers or 'owlers' chase customs officers into Rye; smugglers' end.