

When 'free trade' was all the rage



BEXHILL had its share in what amounted to a major maritime industry from the middle of the 18th century to the end of the first half of the 19th century—smuggling.

For smuggling, or the free trade as its participants and



ham with his great-great-grandfather's smuggling lantern.

defenders called it, could point to the Cooden gang, together with the Ruxley gang, from Hastings, and the much bigger Hawkhurst gang, whose activities ranged over a far wider area, as the scourge of the Customs in this part of the county.

The attraction of the free trade can be appreciated when it is stated that for example a 4½ gallon tub of spirits could be bought in France for ten shillings and sixpence to 15 shillings and sold in this country at three or four guineas and thus yield a profit of between 400 and 500 per cent.

Apart from spirits, tobacco, snuff, tea and silk would all yield a handsome profit after the evasion of duty.

The lowering of duties by Pitt and Gladstone about the middle of the nineteenth century did more to diminish smuggling than all the custom house officials, coastal blockades preventive men and coastguards put together.

A large proportion of the population had an easy conscience as far as smuggling was concerned and no less a person than Adam Smith called a smuggler: "A person, who though no doubt highly blameable for violating the laws of the country is frequently incapable of violating those of natural justice and would have been in every respect an excellent citizen had not the laws of his country made that a

by Rex Salter

crime which nature never meant to be."

Romantic a figure as the smuggler appears today the simple fact is that he was often a pirate and wrecker as well.

The poet Congreve wrote: Sussex men that dwell upon the shore,

Look out when storms arise and billows roar, Devoutly praying with uplifted hands,

That some well-laden ship may strike the sands, To whose rich cargoes they may make pretence, And fatten on the spoils of providence.

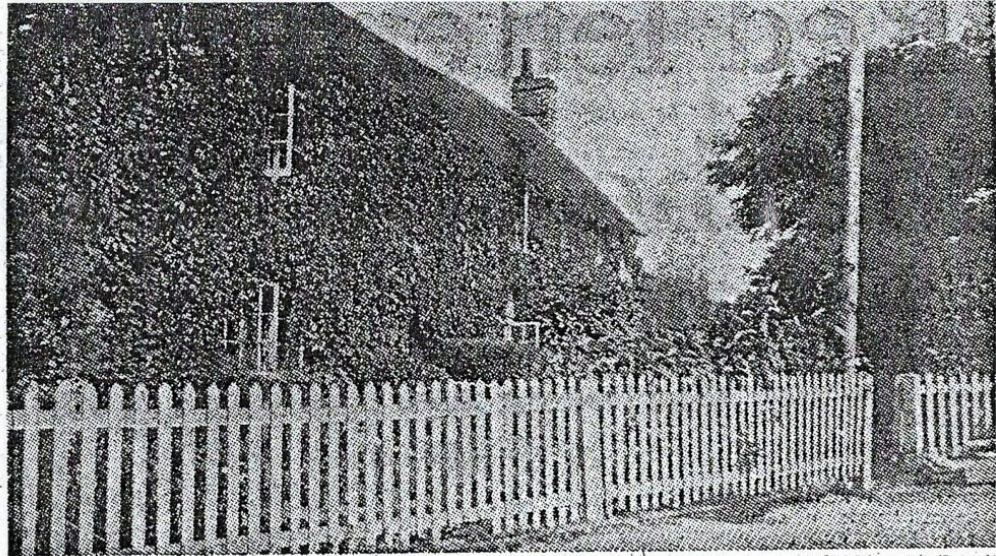
Members of the Ruxley gang were actually tried for piracy at the Admiralty Sessions and hanged at Execution Dock.

It is pleasing to report that our own Cooden gang appear to have confined themselves purely to smuggling.

Head of the gang was George Gilham senior, known as "Smack," a builder who lived at Peach Cottage, Little Common, still standing in the village.

Five other members of the Gilham family were members, George Gilham junior, Thomas, nicknamed "Peckham" who lived with his father, Richard and John.

There were three members of the Bennett family,



Peach Cottage, the home of the founder of the Cooden gang, still standing at Little Common.

"Ducky," who was the sexton at Little Common Church and died in 1877, "Sham," and "Harlequin."

According to George senior's account book, still believed to be in existence, each member of the gang was paid sums varying from two shillings to seventeen

'Smuggled goods were hidden in the marsh'

and sixpence according to the value of a cargo landed.

Another smuggler rejoiced under the nickname of "Boathook" and surnames such as Vitler, Britt, Winham, Smith, Beeching, Carter, Beney, Stubberfield, Sinding and Miller have a familiar Little Common ring about them.

The gang possessed two boats. The Long Boat and the Princess Charlotte and contraband was often hidden in two tubs, which boxed trees and stood in front of the door of Peach Cottage.

There is little doubt that smuggled goods were secreted in the marsh and the underground passage to the Red Lion Inn, at Hooe, was frequently utilised.

It was not unknown for the East Indians to be waylaid on their way up the Channel and tea purchased and subsequently resold at a substantial profit. There was a duty of twenty shillings a pound on tea.

On one occasion members of the gang escaped, when trapped by excisemen after removing bricks from a Martello tower.

Mr Fred Gilham, who lives at High Street, Old Town, is a great, great, great-grandson of the founder of the Cooden gang and still possesses a lantern used by his ancestor. The light was provided by a candle and the holder with remnants of wax can still be seen in the lantern.

In an interview with the Observer, in 1969, Fred stated that he owns a record book kept by a riding officer, but would like to know the whereabouts of the account book for 1825-27 kept by George Gilham.

The nearest customs house was at Hastings and many interesting references to the

activities of the staff at Bexhill are contained in the records.

The value of seizures for one quarter at the end of the 18th century was £3,317 14s 11d and a certain Thomas Pumphrey, a riding officer stationed at Bexhill records the seizure of one cargo of 21 gallons of gin 18 gallons of rum and 13 gallons of brandy, which he found hidden on the beach.

George Gilham senior died in the 1830's and it was a little more than a decade later before the usefulness of the free trade started its decline.

A year or two before George's death a House of Commons report estimated that smuggling was costing the country £1½ million a year in lost revenue and expenses.

The Hastings Custom House report refers to one occasion when a party of 15 labourers was helping the gang with a landing at Bexhill.

As a labourer could earn as much as a pound a week—normally a week's wages—for his assistance, the end of the Cooden gang must have been bitterly regretted by many an "honest" working fellow.