

## Offa's People

THERE were many savage and bloody skirmishes between the smugglers and Blockade men.

In his diary of 1884, Dr J. P. Willis, a young general practitioner who later became a public figure in Bexhill, recounted conversations with local men who remembered the days of smuggling.

One old man, whose father helped build the Martello towers, was quoted last week. He told of one Good Friday when the smugglers ran a cargo in broad daylight "down New Town (St Leonard's)."

"We got 10s for two kegs; there wasn't no going back up with the kegs and off to go and put them in the carts.

"Twas a pound for the batsmen. There wasn't never batsmen enough. 'Twas always a pound for they," said the old man.

"Ah! There was some stout little chaps, hearty little chaps, I can tell 'ee.

"Nothing but a bat agen firearms and they wouldn't let none of us get touched if they could help it, but lor' Sir! They could stop the balls. Why I've often known six or seven get wounded in one night wi' slugs and such

"We used to run spirits in kegs, and silks and tea in bags. A keg of brandy cost 13s and was worth £4 to £5, and you could water it too.

"All the chief men have come to nothing; some o' 'em died in the workhouse.

"Ah, 'twas bad work, but lor', the people was all wild in those days.

"One night we was lying

# Ambushed at Wrest wood

RUSSELL CLAUGHTON continues his story of Bexhill smugglers.

up in Wrest Wood and the kegs was just got up from the hollow down below Galley Hill, where the boat came in, when along comes such a rate our chaps they cut and run and left 30 kegs or so in the middle of the road.

"Well, I went home and changed my trousers and frock (coat), they were all wet though and comed back again just as day was breaking to see what was up.

"Up jumps one of the men

— he was the quartermaster — and ketches hold of me and put my frock where 'twas wet in his mouth. 'Hullo', says he, 'you're one of them, you've been in salt water'.

"Why," says I, 'I'm just the Blockade men, firing at come along to see what's up you're making such a jolly row up here, I live just along over here'.

"Presently, he looks at me and says, 'Why, it's our tally merchant'.

"Of course it be', says I.

"Go and get your horse and cart', says he, 'in the name of King William (IV), putting his hand on my shoulder.

"So I goes and gets it and we loaded up the kegs. 'Take them to the Hastings Custom House', says he.

"Just then I see'd some o' our chaps peering about they'd run as far as Crowhurst, but comed back to see, so I sings out to 'em to come along and the Blockade men they begun firing away — there was only two of them, but they'd made such a row in the night we thought they was a lot — and I gives the mare a smack as I lay down in the kegs and away she gallops right up home and off to Westfield.

"Then I left the mare up there and comed home and 'spected to be took, but after

a fortnight I fetched the mare and went off to Hastings 'cos I was 'bliged to be looking after my business, which was carrying things to and fro Hastings.

"Well, as I comes along by Bulverhythe out comes the Blockade man and 'Hold hard', says he. 'What do you mean by leading me into that trap the other night'?

"Why', says I, 'what did you mean running away and leaving me all alone with them chaps? I'm going to Hastings to tell the officer and get my money for the night'.

"Then he got in a funk and, says he, 'Come along up to the Bull and we'll make it all right'."

It has the ring of a story well polished, even embellished, by time, but it is nonetheless a rarity; few are the tales of that close-mouthed breed, the 19th century smuggler.