

Offa's People

Smugglers tales



PRISING stories out of Hastings folk is like trying to open mussels with a toothpick. But Bexhill is less defensive, and a number of people have come forward with tales or relics of their disreputable forebears.

The great-granddaughter of a smuggler who was with the last man to be shot by a Customs officer told the Observer some years ago of her memories.

Mrs Edith Witham was 80 then, and living in Thornton Heath, Surrey. But she still recalled Spider Shoemith ("I cannot remember his Christian name") who was one of the two smugglers killed in the Sidley Green fight of 1828, recounted last week.

"At the age of 88 my great-grandfather could run like a hare.

"In those days there were woods all around the area and so he escaped the Customs squad.

"He was a human telephone, and by laying his ear to the ground he could tell if any were approaching, from what direction, the number, and whether on foot or horseback.

"My great-grandmother sat over a tub of butter

searched her house on another occasion.

"Much valuable lace was up the chimney wrapped in lead, and when the officers called their remark was, 'nothing could be up there with that fire on'.

"The house was near the New Inn at Sidley, and had half a millstone at the front entrance.

"My great-great-grandparents used to smuggle rum from where the Beach Haven now stands in Sea Road up to a cottage near Gunters Lane, and from there the rum was sold.

"From the old post office, near Pocock's the butchers in High Street, down to the beach and out to Galley Hill was a network of underground passages which the smugglers used under cover of darkness."

James Donne, a journalist who wrote about local smugglers and smuggling, discovered that his great-grandfather-in-law, John Mott, was a part-time member of the Little Common gang.

A shepherd boy by day and a smuggler by night, he lived and died in an old cottage atop the north side of Barnhorn Hill. Donne's father-in-law, Jessie Mott, talked about his ancestor.

"Although he had no schoolin' whatever (he was

RUSSELL CLAUGHTON continues his history of Bexhill with some stories of the smugglers themselves and their descendants still in the town.

an oxen-boy at Cooden Farm), Jessie had a remarkable and accurate memory," wrote Donne.

"He told me how his grandfather, John, who was a tub-carrier for the gang, was chased across Pevensey Marsh by a Blockade Man who, with his cutlass, slashed John across the back, cutting it deeply.

"The two tubs fell off and John dived into a stream where he remained hidden until able to crawl home in the dawn.

"He dared not risk calling a doctor and eventually survived, but was a cripple for the rest of his life."

John Mott's son was, of all things, a policeman, stationed at East Dean.

Fred Gillham, who runs a tea shop in the High Street, has a collection of tools of the smugglers' trade passed down to him by his smuggling ancestors.

A pair of ladies' pistols with a powder and shot loader, a signalling lantern (or hantorn, because the

windows are made of thin horn), and a record book kept by Riding Officer Short, listing the duty to be paid on spirits, confectionery and other dutiable goods as well as cures for horse ailments — the 19th century equivalent of a car's handbook — date back to the days when his great-great-great-grandfather George Gillham — along with his five sons — was a member of the Little Common gang.

In his pre-war investigation into smuggling, James Donne found Fred Gillham's father and grandfather unforthcoming about their smuggling ancestors. But other members of the family of their generation told him that one of the early Gillhams built himself a hut in the wood and lived in it — the wood is now called Gil- lam Wood.

The Gillham family home was Peach Cottage in the twitten, its front door flanked by two box trees in tubs. Under the tubs were contraband hidey holes.

Barnhorn Manor, Why-down Farm and Sandhurst Farm all had tub holes for hiding contraband existing well into this century, and Barnhorn Manor also boasted a hidden inner cellar, opened up before the last war by the then owner and found to contain empty wine bins.

Dr J. P. Wills, a young general practitioner in Bexhill in the 1880s who later became a public figure in the town, wrote a diary in 1884 of conversations he had with Bexhill men who remembered the days of smuggling.

One old man, whose father had helped build the Martello towers, was recorded in the diary as saying:

"I've been a smuggler, and then a year in the coast-guard, and I think I ought to have a pension!

"I mind the first night I ever worked the kegs; there was one man took that night. We used to run sometimes two cargoes in a dark (between the two moons). We used to go away right ever so far, up to Crowhurst bridge, ay, and further, cos they should know when we was to land the kegs — then we'd lie by all day and perhaps all night in the woods — ay, we did so.

"Why, one Good Friday we run a cargo right in broad

daylight down New Town (St Leonards)— there wasn't narry a house there then — just where the Conqueror Hotel be (Marina).

"There was an old boat lying there, and Tom Bennet up in the rigging swung a bit of rope round and round 'is head, and in come the boat and down we runs, as we was 'id in the wood up above, then the batsmen they drove the Blockade men right back to Hastings up to the White Rock.

"There'd be eight batsmen with gert bats eight feet long, and they'd get hold o' one of the Blockade men and if he'd be quiet they'd let 'un alone, and when the kegs was all up they'd fire off his pistol if he was, appeared to fire hisself, but if he fired they'd knock 'em down and maybe kill 'un, maybe not.

"We didn't have no batsmen at first, but they got to firing and we was forced to, and afterwards it got worse and worse and we had firearms too.

"We got 10s for two kegs; there wasn't no going back, up with the kegs and off to go and put 'em in the carts. 'Twas a pound for the batsman. There wasn't never batsmen enough. 'twas always a pound for they.

Continued next week.