

THIS week Offa's People takes Bexhill's history into the 18th century when smugglers thrived and bloody battles raged.

A SMUGGLER, wrote Dr Samuel Johnson in his famous dictionary, is "a wretch who imports or exports goods without payment of customs." Excise tax, he defined earlier in the dictionary as "a hateful tax."

Economist Adam Smith was less ambivalent:

"To pretend to have any scruple about buying smuggled goods would in most countries be regarded as one of those pedantic pieces of hypocrisy which, instead of gaining credit with anybody, serve only to expose the person who affects to practice them to the suspicion of being a greater knave than the rest of his neighbours."

Bexhill's attitude, in common with many Sussex and Kent towns, came closer to Smith's view than to Johnson's.

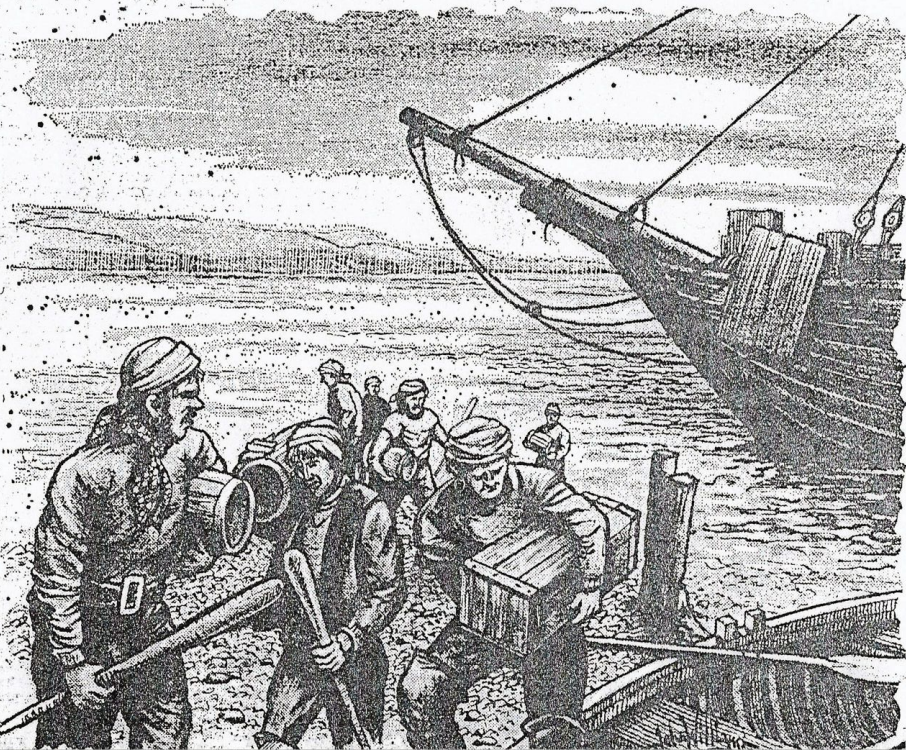
From the 18th century onwards a local gang of about 30 well-organised and determined men worked full-time at smuggling, fighting any number of bloody — and usually successful — around Norman's Bay, battles with customs men.

Their success, despite mostly using wooden clubs and staves against the customs men's cutlasses, was frequently thanks to the hundreds of locals who would turn out to help them.

The gang owned two mockingly named queen Charlotte — after King George III's wife, the other The Long Boat. They were kept at Willow Pot, a stone's throw from the Star Inn, Norman's Bay, isolated as it was from Bexhill village itself, remained a smugglers' haven up to 1850, well after wholesale smuggling had been wiped out on the rest of Sussex.

Throughout the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, The Sussex Advertiser somehow

Day the Vulture swooped at sea



managed to carry stories about smugglers, and smuggling — a feat of resolute journalism, as anyone caught talking to the Press was booking themselves the contemporary equivalent of a concrete overcoat.

The fiercest battles were fought in the nineteenth century, initially with Preventive Service, and the Coast Blockade, established in 1817 of dra-

goons and royal naval officers and seamen. Later they fought the Board of Customs' Coast-guard Service, who took over completely from the Coast Blockade in Sussex in 1831.

The Coastguard were formed in 1822, when the government also reduced the Excise tax on spirits in a dual bid to make smuggling unprofitable. In their first two years of operation, the Coastguards captured a total of 52 ships and 385 boats around England's coast — at a cost of maintaining the service of over half a million pounds each year.

Even before the Coast Blockade and the Coastguards offered smugglers a real challenge, Bexhill smugglers had met their match in Captain John Clark, commander of HM Revenue Cutter Vulture, operating out of Newhaven.

Clark believed that three-quarters of the contraband landed between Hastings and Newhaven came ashore at the Isolated Star Inn. His Vulture, a fast boat armed with a cannon in its bows, could easily outstrip the square-sailed luggers, weighed down to the gunwales with brandy casks, operated by the smugglers.

On October 21, 1805 — while the Battle of Trafalgar was being fought Clark did just that.

Patrolling off Beachy Head he spotted a heavily-laden lugger headed for Norman's Bay. He gave chase, caught it, and captured the crew and 540 casks of brandy.

On January 6 the following year he caught a lugger a mile out from

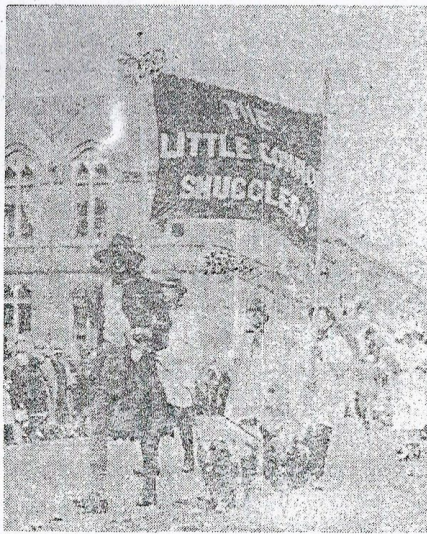
Norman's Bay, carrying 500 parcels of tea, costing a massive £1 8s a lb in England at the time (compared to brandy at only 5s a gallon).

A decade later customs men aboard the frigate Osprey ordered a lugger off the coast of Bexhill to heave-to. When it failed to obey, the Osprey fired on it, and the lugger dashed for the beach, where the crew dispersed and escaped. One of them was a wanted outlaw, who had sold information to the French about the state of the British Navy.

Some 300 smugglers, armed with cudgels and poles (six foot long, made of ash gathered in front of The Star Inn on February 13, 1822, to unload contraband from the Queen Charlotte, stood close inshore. The Queen Charlotte flashed a recognition light — but —

happily for the boat and its crew — before the onshore smugglers could flash the all clear reply, customs men armed with carbines challenged them. The smugglers advanced, one was shot — but the Charlotte, and a coach and six waiting to load the cargo, escaped. (There is a theory that the coach had a lady passenger and was waiting to carry military or diplomatic secrets conveyed by a spy on the Queen Charlotte).

Two years later, in September, seven smugglers were captured along with a hundred casks of spirits. But a customs man named Welch, who jumped into the unloading boat, was in turn captured when the boat escaped. His mauled corpse was discovered in the sands the following morning.



● BETWEEN the Wars, Little Common residents staged a procession of smugglers in the Bexhill Pageant.

Hospital cash cuts threat

A ONE million pound back-log of essential maintenance work threatens local hospitals.

The district management team is becoming concerned about the condition of its buildings, many of which are old.

Cash for maintenance work has been limited for years.

"Clearly, it is not practical to recover quickly from that position," the management team told authority members yesterday.

The opening of the new district general hospital may make some of the work unnecessary. But that will not be much before the turn of the century.

In some cases a cash cure is the only answer.

This year Hastings was allocated only £270,000 for capital projects. Next year the figure is likely to remain the same.

Estimates show that this year the money could be £25,420 overspent.

Now Hastings is asking the regional health authority for permission to swap over some cash revenue underspent last year plus a proportion of its general contingency fund.

This would cover the overspending and still leave some cash for priority capital building and engineering schemes.

News briefs

Elderly home

A LARGE detached house in Flenmont Gardens, standing in a quarter-acre of land, can be converted into a residential home for the elderly. Rother planning committee recommended on Thursday, despite Chamber of Commerce and neighbours' objections.

All change

PENLAND House in Penland Road is suitable for conversion into a residential home for the elderly, says Rother planning committee. Councillors also gave permission for a new kitchen and porch.

'Scrap the UN'

"SHOULDN'T We Scrap the United Nations?" is the title of an address to be given by Malcolm Harper, director of the United Nations Association, at the De La Warr Pavilion on November 26.

Office space

MORE offices are needed in the town centre. Thorne Properties Ltd, of The Thorne, Ninfeld Road, is seeking planning permission to convert flats into offices at Eversley Road.

Open air mass

LOCAL members of the United Reformed Church were among 3,500 people who gathered on Eastbourne sea front for a Provincial Day open-air mass on Saturday.

Store move

F. FORTE Developments Ltd gained Rother planning permission this week to convert a janitor's store at the former Devonshire Hotel into an office.

Car stolen

A DARK blue Cortina valued at £200 was stolen from Jubilee Road recently. The registration number is OJG 825E.

NO

Bugs · Rotting · Warping
Stripping · Sanding · Filling
Puttying · Painting · Draughts
Noise · Compromises · Obligation

SCOTT JAMES'

SuperWindows

IT'S WHAT YOU DON'T GET THAT MAKES THEM SUPER

HW/2934/982

CGF

CONTACT US NOW AND WE'LL TELL YOU MORE

SCOTT JAMES'

LOWER SOUTH ROAD, ST LEONARDS
HASTINGS AS14 2ZT/AS15 2ZT

Well worth
looking
through!