

Escape through Hampshire of the Future Charles II

When a place in history hung on the turning of the tide

In May each year the Sussex Yacht Club holds the Royal Escape Race, commemorating the escape of Charles II from Shoreham following his defeat at the Battle of Worcester. So what, other than the sailing interest, has that race got to do with Emsworth? The answer lies in the state of the tide on 8th October, 1651.

The story of Charles' escape, and the part played by local people, is a real adventure story. Who were they and what was the Emsworth connection?

In 1649, following the defeat of the Royalist forces, Charles I was tried and executed; England became a Republic. The following year his son, Charles II, landed in Scotland and in 1651 marched south at the head of a Scottish army. Although some English Royalists joined Charles, they did not rally in large numbers and on 3rd September Parliamentary forces defeated Charles at the Battle of Worcester. Charles' escape and his adventures hiding in an oak tree, riding into Bristol disguised as the servant of the courageous Jane Lane, and various escape attempts via West Country ports are well known. Less well known is the successful escape via Shoreham, planned and executed by a local man, George Gunter of Racton House.

Demolished in the 19th Century, Racton House stood in the now empty fields on the south side of the River Ems, opposite Racton Church. The story of Gunter's involvement in Charles' escape comes from a manuscript found in Racton House, and it is generally accepted that Gunter dictated the information shortly before his death. The manuscript is now in the British Library.

During the Civil War Gunter had commanded a cavalry troop in the Royalist Army. As a result of this involvement he received a summons to appear in court in London in September 1651 to pay a fine of £200. He travelled to London but, as Gunter puts it:

my credit being so shaken, the current running then so hard against the King I could not borrow the money in all London and was forced with all speed to repair to the country privately to my usurer who had security of my whole estate.

Meanwhile, unbeknown to Gunter, Charles and another fugitive from the Battle of Worcester, Lord Wilmot, were being hidden by members of his family in Wiltshire. Gunter had fought under Wilmot in the western campaigns and Wilmot now rode to Racton to seek his help.

When, late on 7th October, Gunter returned to Racton *"having stayed longer with friends than he intended"*, he found his wife in the parlour entertaining a Mr Barlow with *"bottles of sack and a cold collation"*. He immediately recognised Mr Barlow as Lord Wilmot *"the noble lord being but meanly disguised"*. Wilmot had a reputation for refusing to disguise himself properly and for travelling on foot or without a manservant. Not the best of travelling companions when trying to get a young Prince with a price on his head out of a hostile country!

Mrs Gunter by this time had become suspicious. She confronted her husband, who assured her *"be satisfied it is nothing to do with her or that could in any way damage her"*. Mrs Gunter was not so easily fobbed off; Gunter tells us that she retorted saying *"there is more to it than that and enough to ruin him and all his family"*.

Gunter and Wilmot then agreed that she should be party to the dangerous knowledge of Charles' whereabouts and the plans to try to get him out of the country. Despite the dangers to her family Mrs Gunter gave her husband her blessing, saying *"go then and prosper, yet I fear you will hardly do it"*. Gunter is full of praise for his wife, recording that *"she departed herself during the whole business with so much discretion, courage and fidelity that she seemed, her danger considered, to outgo her sex"*. Meaning she behaved with a courage not then normally expected of the gentle sex.

Picture the scene. The conspirators sit in the old mansion beside the Ems making plans. Gunter tells us that the weather was *boisterous*, in other words a typical windy, wet October night. One of the staff in the Gunter household, John Day, had cousins who had ships at Emsworth. John

Day was taken into the Gunter's confidence and the next morning he and Gunter rode to Emsworth to try to arrange passage to France for three men, Charles, Wilmot and Wilmot's manservant, John Swann. The cover story that Gunter later used was that a friend had killed an opponent in a duel and needed to flee the country, accompanied by his two male servants, one of whom would of course be Charles in disguise. It is likely that this cover story was one of the things agreed on that stormy night in Racton.

When John Day and Gunter arrived in Emsworth the tide was out and with it John Day's cousins and their ships. Riding back to Racton via Westbourne they encountered Wilmot and John Swann. They then rode to Langstone to try there but, having "*tempted all but in vain*", they settled instead for "*oysters and wine*" at the inn. Wilmot then rode back to Salisbury leaving Gunter to continue with the task of securing a passage.

A Chichester merchant, Francis Mansell, was persuaded by Gunter "*over a bottle or two of Mansell's French wines and a pipe of his Spanish tobacco*", to arrange a passage with Captain Nicholas Tattersall of Brighton. Tattersall was to be paid £60. Arrangements could not be completed immediately because it was Sloe Fair, a busy trading time for Mansell. Gunter used the time to plan, reconnoitre the route, and ride to Wiltshire to keep Wilmot informed of progress.

On 12th October all was ready. Gunter, pretending to be going hunting, took his greyhounds and rode from Racton to Broad Halfpenny Down near Hambledon, where he met Wilmot and Charles. Maintaining the pretence of gentlemen and servants out hunting, they stayed the night with Gunter's sister and set out from Broad Halfpenny early the next morning, intending to leave Shoreham on the 8 a.m. tide on the 14th.

Legend has it that Charles slept in what is now King Charles Cottage, next to Racton Church. The various members of the party had ridden long distances on the 12th. They had approximately 24 hours to get from Broad Halfpenny to Brighton to meet Tattersall, then back to Shoreham to catch the tide. They must have changed horses en route. Racton is the obvious place; anywhere else would mean more people had an opportunity to recognize Charles. Disguised as a servant, the logical place for Charles to rest and hide while the horses were changed would be the house of a servant. The combination of the evidence and the legend points to John Day, that senior and trusted member of the Gunter household. Did he live at the cottage and shelter/hide Charles during that brief break in the journey?

The ride to Brighton was too eventful to detail here, but late that night they reached the George Inn in Brighton and met Tattersall and Mansell. Here luck ran out. During the Civil War the Royalists had briefly seized Tattersall's ship and Charles had sailed in it. Tattersall recognized him and refused to carry the passengers. Only now did Mansell realize that he was involved in dangerous politics. Several hours of argument followed, and finally Tattersall agreed, provided the price was increased from £60 to £100 + £200 insurance against the loss of his vessel. At 2 a.m. the party left Brighton for Shoreham. Wilmot, Charles and John Swann boarded the *Surprise* and sailed on the 8 a.m. tide. Gunter watched until the ship was out of sight, and then rode home.

Wilmot returned to England to organize further uprisings. Again he called on Gunter to help him escape, but this time Gunter too had to flee the country, and both he and Wilmot died in exile. There is no memorial to George Gunter among the many Gunter family memorials in Racton Church. Mrs Gunter was left with a mortgaged estate and eight small children. Only years later, after several petitions to the King supported by the Lords Chancellor and Treasurer, who confirmed she was "*in a desperate plight with £5000 of debts incurred in the King's service and creditors daily wanting to seize her land*", did Charles grant her a pension of £200 per annum for 21 years.

As word spread of Mansell's involvement in the escape people ceased to do business with him, and he was forced to sell his house and possessions. Finally he too was granted a pension. Years later Samuel Pepys met him by chance in London and recorded that the pension had not been paid for 4 years but, because it was a Royal pension, he was taxed as if he received it and was so poor he was "*ready to starve almost*".

At the Restoration Tattersall sailed the *Surprise* up the Thames, moored opposite Charles' palace and invited visitors to look around the 'ship that had saved the King'. He was rewarded with a lucrative position in the Navy, and the *Surprise* was purchased and renamed *The Royal Escape*. He died a wealthy man.

But what of John Day and who were his shipowning Emsworth cousins who so narrowly missed carrying Charles across to France? It would be very interesting to find out more about them.

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Sources: Gunter Mss, Pepys Diary.

Note: All dates shown are Julian Calendar.

Editor's Note: If anyone has information or ideas about the last paragraph, please let us know.