Smuggling in Langstone and Chichester Harbours

Mrs Jewell, in her Memories of Emsworth written in October 1898, says:

> Emsworth was, of course, a great place for smuggling — I can remember some of it, at least being offered some of their goods. An old navy ship was stationed near the mouth of the harbour, the *Griper,* to prevent goods being brought in, now, the officer and men of the coastguard live at Langstone, two miles off, and they still find tobacco in the smacks which fish off the French coast for oysters and scallops.

Smuggling did not become a great problem to the Revenue authorities until the 17th century. In the reign of William and Mary the war with France was financed by taxes, including heavy duties on tea and on spirits, as a result of which smuggling became a highly profitable business and one not unpopular with the general public. Mrs Jewell talks about 'being offered some of their goods' and Longcroft in *The Hundred of Bosmere* says that many old inhabitants of Emsworth still remembered the odd keg in the barn, left to reward those who turned a blind eye to the activities of the smugglers.

The Coastguard Station referred to by Mrs Jewell was established at Langstone in 1860. The Admiralty bought a plot of land between the *Ship* and the main road and built nine terraced cottages and a watchtower (now part of the house called *The Lookout).* The Coastguards were posted to Langstone before the cottages were completed: the census of 1861 shows a chief officer with four men living in different houses in the village. In July 1860, the Collector of Customs Portsmouth, wrote to his superiors:

> We have the satisfaction of informing your Honours that an additional Coast Guard Station with a force of nine men has recently been established at Havant, which we consider a most important step towards putting a stop to the contraband trade carried on by Mitchell and his gang locally.

The Coastguards at the Hayling Bridge Station manned two look-out posts, one at Emsworth and one at Langstone. They were equipped with a Naval type whaler (the *Griper*), and revolvers. The Langstone Gang, made up mainly of fishermen, was one of the most successful gangs of smugglers. It is said that they would tow a cargo, floating just beneath the surface of the water, so that they could sink it if the excise men appeared. The members of the gang are said to have met in the *Royal Oak* and at the Mill. At least some of the ghost stories told about the *Royal Oak* were probably devised by the smugglers to discourage visits from strangers.

The Coastguards at Langstone were not welcomed by the locals. An early incident of the local population backing the smugglers took place in 1760, when a certain John Andrew was caught smuggling wine into Langstone Village. From

Winchester Gaol Andrew sent a petition to the Board of Commissioners of Customs in London, saying that he was a poor man with a large family and had not been a principal in the incident, 'having been tempted to this act by a small gratuity'. This appeal was signed by the Rector of Warblington and 24 residents of the area.

John Andrew was not the only one to be tempted by a 'small gratuity' from the smugglers. After the Napoleonic Wars smuggling flourished with a ready supply of labour for the free-traders, from both soldiers and sailors returning home to a life of poverty, and from farm labourers, whose long days of toil brought in a miserably low wage. The *Topographical and Historical Account of Hayling Island* published in 1826 by I. Skelton of Havant[1], estimates that the average wage of agricultural workers on the island was 12 shillings per week, while the smugglers offered a guinea a night to those willing to hump casks for them.

The unloading and dispersal of smuggled goods was the responsibility of the Lander, in the employ of the *Venturer*, who provided financial backing for the operation. It was the Lander's responsibility to arrange a reception committee at the right time and place. In *The Topographical and Historical Account of Hayling Island*, the author describes how the approach of the smugglers' boat would be signalled by the smugglers waiting on Hayling by means of 'Emblems', well known to the initiated, signifying who and what approached. These emblems were dispersed throughout the Island and the boat would be met on landing by a gang of men, armed with guns and cutlasses. As each man arrived at the appointed place, he would lie down:

> within the folds of his dark frieze coat, and keeping his ear to the ground, like the wild Indian who listens for the approach of his prey, he waited in breathless silence for the signal which commanded him to rush to the vessel and assist in unfreighting of her cargo.

The contraband was concealed on Hayling in 'many subterraneous caverns on the south beach'. The more delicate articles of contraband, such as lace, were hidden in various cottages and the stocks of smuggled goods were replenished about five times a year. Rumours of underground passages abound in the vicinity of Havant and Emsworth and terraced houses in South Street, Emsworth, were said to have adjoining loft spaces for the easy transfer of smuggled goods during searches by the revenue men. Pook Lane at Warblington provided a sheltered route inland and the large grave-watchers' huts in Warblington Churchyard may also have played their part in providing temporary shelter. The important thing was to get the cargo of contraband away from the landing area as quickly as possible.

The *Hampshire Telegraph and Sussex Chronicle* for 12 February 1858 contained a report of a seizure of contraband from a small cottage to the East of Farlington Church, within the parish of Bedhampton. A suspicious police constable found 21 kegs of brandy in the cottage. When a police sergeant arrived to help the constable, they forced open a door and found more brandy, a still, empty kegs and 'colouring matter', all of which were removed to Havant Police Station. The only occupant of the cottage at the time was a woman called Mary Cole who said that the room in which the kegs were found was occupied by her lodger, whose name she did not know. The newspaper report said that it was believed that many people in Havant and Bedhampton were involved in the incident. The woman stated that:

> someone knocked at her door and asked to leave something, to which she consented, and not having a candle the light was insufficient for her to recognise them. It certainly seems strange that a lone woman should open her house to strangers at 4.20 on a dark morning.

This seizure of contraband goods was a lucky chance for the authorities. Throughout the 18th century the customs force had been totally inadequate to deal with smuggling, which had become big business. The smugglers had better boats and better guns. The revenue men were also at a disadvantage because they had less detailed local knowledge than the smugglers, since it was the policy of the Customs service to recruit men who came from at least 20 miles away from the place where they were to be stationed. This was to prevent fraternisation between the revenue men and the smugglers. For the same reason, the customs men were frequently changed from one place to another; the census returns for Langstone for 1861, 1871 and 1881 show complete changes of personnel at the Coastguard station.

It is easy to see why the poorly paid customs officials might be tempted by the huge bribes offered by the smugglers. In March 1792 Thomas Gloge, Chief Boatman (Customs Officer) on Hayling Island, reported that Mr Morgan Waters, Boatswain of *The Fortune* convict ship, tried to persuade him to allow smuggled goods to come into the harbour, telling him that:

> 'if I would agree with him to lay at home he would make a signal on board the ship in the daytime for me to stay at home and not look out and I should be paid Fifty Pounds a year or name my sum and it should be made agreeable to me.'

Gloge's annual salary at the time was £35 but he resisted the temptation to do a deal with the smugglers, asserting that, 'I would sooner have my right arm cut off.'[2]

Thomas Gloge continued as chief boatman at Hayling for a number of years and was involved in many incidents with smugglers, which he reported to the Commissioners in London. It needed great courage and physical toughness to stand up to the smugglers, who could be ruthless and dangerous when crossed and also enjoyed support from the local community. In 1785, on the night of 14/15 June, the crew of the *Roebuck* cutter saw a small vessel between Langstone and Chichester harbours standing in for the land. They gave chase and, when it looked as if the vessel might escape, fired a warning shot and then three more. The smuggling vessel then slackened sail, and the customs officers saw that the Master of the boat had been shot dead. Conscientiously, they stayed to retrieve 30 casks of Geneva and 38 of Brandy, which had been thrown overboard, and some tea, but the Master of the *Roebuck* reported that 'on so melancholy occasion [he] did not think it right to seize the vessel, which afterwards proceeded with the dead body to Ryde.' The Portsmouth Collector of Customs sent the crew of the *Roebuck* on a cruise 'to prevent their being immediately apprehended and committed to gaol, expecting that the verdict of Men living on the Isle of Wight (a notorious place for smuggling) will be nothing less than Wilful Murder'.[3]

The formation of the new Coastguard Service in 1821 gradually reduced the amount of smuggling, but as late as 1899 two customs officers came across a gang of about 30 smugglers on the beach at Bedhampton attempting to carry away in carts and on horses about 300 casks. The smugglers were armed with sticks, and threatened 'beating [the customs officers] brains out if they attempted to touch the goods'. The two officers sent to Havant for military assistance and Captain Butler, Commandant of the Havant Volunteers, sent a sergeant and 20 men. Not surprisingly, by the time these reinforcements arrived the smugglers had removed all but 67 of the casks. A search of Portsdown Hill recovered 67 more casks of spirits and 17 bales of tobacco. In their report of this incident, the customs officers had to affirm that 'they considered the Assistance of the Soldiers necessary and that Collusive Agreement was made with them'.[4]

Incidentally, no members of the notorious Langstone Gang of smugglers were ever caught. The Hayling Bridge Coastguard Station was closed in 1924.

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[1] Republished in 1976 by Frank Westwood of the Petersfield Bookshop.
[2] The Portsmouth Papers No. 22, Smugglers and Revenue Officers in the Portsmouth area in the Eighteenth Century — as shown in Customs Records by Edward Carson, p. 18.
[3] *ibid.*
[4] *ibid.,p.20.*