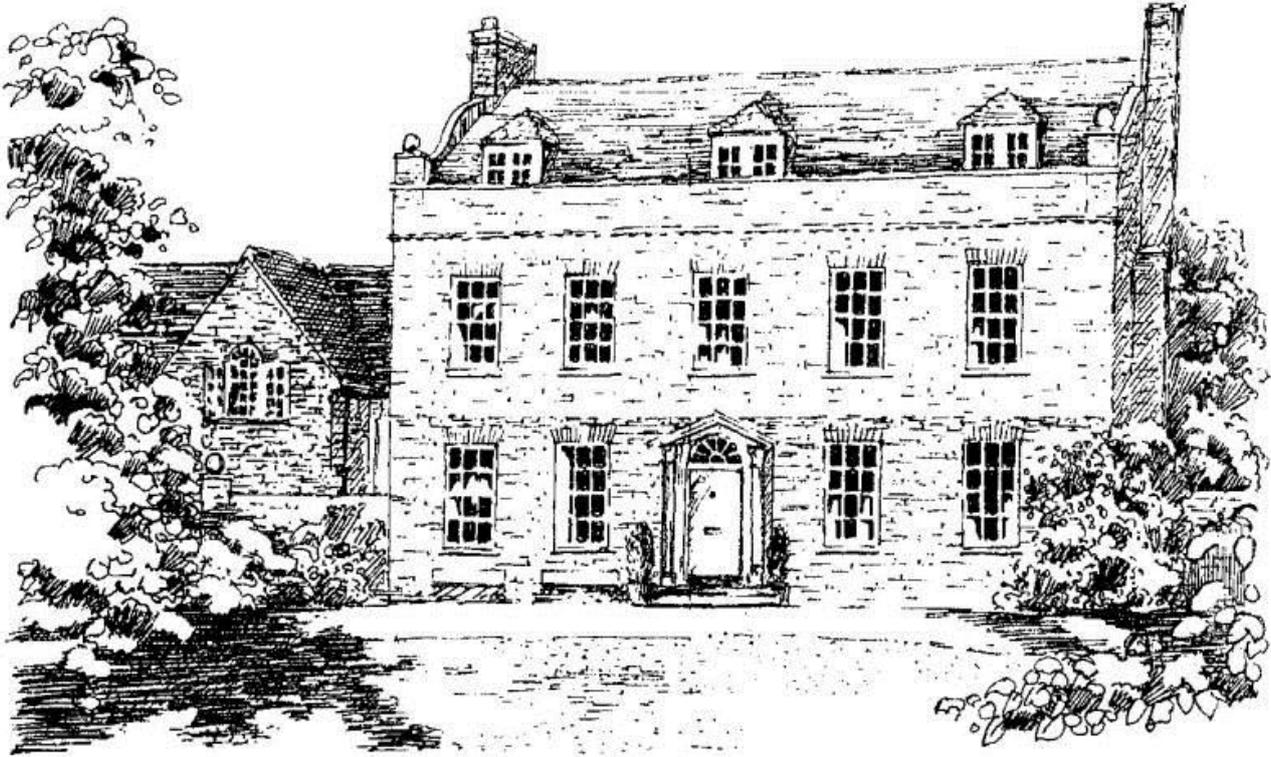


ROPLEY IN THE AGE OF SMUGGLING

by

Peter Hogarth.



I suppose few people today can appreciate the vast scale of smuggling into Britain during the period from 1730 to 1830.

From about 1700 Britain was waging war in some part of the world almost continuously. We fought France, Holland, Spain, and eventually the American Colonies, More revenue was required and more items were taxed. New commodities appeared as trade expanded in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries The proliferation of large estates increased the demand for luxuries such as silk, lace, spices, wine, spirits, fruit, perfumes, chocolate and sugar. By 1760 there were 800 items taxed at. import and a further 1300 were added in the next 50 years. The difficulty of levying productive taxes on income and wealth meant that import duties had to take a large part of the burden Apart from the public's strong demand for contraband other factors encouraged tax evasion. The Customs Service, was weak and under-staffed whilst; the second line or defence, the Revenue Service of Riding Officers and Dragoons, set up to seize smuggled goods once they had been landed clandestinely was far from efficient. Even when offenders were brought before the courts, local magistrates who themselves may have benefited from smuggling, were often lenient.

During the eighteenth century smuggling craft grew larger up to maximum of 300 tons with 30 carriage guns and a crew of 100 men. Revenue cruisers grew in size but the Revenue always lagged behind the smuggler, perhaps because of a reluctance on the part of the Treasury to provide adequate funds. Smuggling became a huge business: spirit kegs were made specifically for smugglers and stored on the Continent. Funds were provided by many people in syndicates; squires and landowners being well represented. Smuggling was so profitable that one

undiscovered run in three was regarded as a good success rate. Severe penalties (in 1736 smuggling was made a felony and carrying firearms was a capital offence) had no deterrent effect.

After the conclusion of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815 the Royal Navy played a more important part in the war against the smuggler. In 1816 370,000 gallons of gin and brandy were seized as well as 4200 yards silk. In addition, 875 smuggling ships of all sizes were seized. Stricter customs control compelled the smugglers to use more sophisticated methods. Smuggled goods were imported in innocent looking merchant vessels. Forbidden goods were hidden inside legitimate goods. Casks in ships' boats became elongated brandy casks and hams were hollowed out, lined with calico and filled with compressed silk. Weird forms of clothing were evolved.

With the coming of peace many items were freed from duty, culminating in the repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846, after which Britain entered the free trade era. In 1842 Peel reintroduced Income Tax which foreshadowed less reliance on import duties for revenue.

Hampshire and Dorset, across the Channel from France, were by their very situation the greatest smuggling counties. France was also the producer of many smuggled items such as spirits, wines and silks, and the French Government often encouraged the illicit trade. The Isle of Wight offered a back door escape route, and other coastal areas favoured by the smuggler included Langstone and Chichester Harbours, as well as Lyrnington and Beaulieu creeks. Ropley, in mid Hampshire, was well placed because of its remoteness, to become a centre for the disposal of smuggled goods, mainly spices, but possibly also luxuries such as silk, brought from the south coast by cart or pack horse. Goods were stored in cottages and farms and in the extensive beech woods of Monkwood. In nearby Medstead contraband was sometimes stored in the church tower and in Preston Candover, two wells were used as dumps. In case Alresford feels out of it there is a "Brandy Mount" off East Street.

It is easier to describe the general activities of smugglers than to illustrate by specific cases; smuggling is a clandestine activity. We are dependent on stories passed down by word of mouth and eventually put to paper, and I am much indebted to Miss Hagen's book "Annals of Old Ropley" published in 1929 and Sir Frederick Mason's "Ropley Past and Present" published in 1989.

One relic of the past is a house called "Smugglers" in Smugglers Lane, Ropley, off the Petersfield Road. Another relic is Ropley Grove off the Petersfield Road. In 1928 the owner of this house, an Admiral Henderson, found during the course of alterations to his dining room a brick lined chamber 7 feet deep and 7 feet square, most probably a storage place for contraband. The story goes that at the end of the eighteenth century the owner of the house, a Major Lavender, much respected as a Justice of the Peace and a churchwarden, was involved in smuggling. At noon one day, Revenue Officers arrived requesting him (as a J.P.) to sign a search warrant for a cottage in Monkwood ("Smugglers") where contraband was thought to be concealed. The squire, wishing to delay the Officers, offered them dinner first, which they accepted. Meanwhile the Squire's groom was sent post haste to warn the cottagers, and the goods were safely lowered into a deep well. When the Revenue Officers arrived at the cottage they found "nothing for the Service" the official phrase in their journal for a fruitless search. As Miss Hagen put it "the Excise Officers little knew that they were dining right on top of some of the stuff they had come to seize."

Ropley House may also have seen illicit activities. Young Mr. Duthy of Ropley House may have used his father's horses to assist smugglers. Captain Duthy is said to have ordered his son out of the house on hearing of these activities, but the story is that his sisters helped him with money and other things let down at night from a bedroom window. Another story concerns a remarkable local worthy. Henry Price of Monkwood who is said to have collected a cart load of contraband spirits at Portsmouth and to have galloped to Ropley eluding his Revenue Service, pursuers.

It is believed that Ropley was generally a hot-bed of smuggling and all classes joined in. On Sunday evenings after the service at the local church villagers went to Monkwood to buy smuggled goods openly on sale.



In those days many people did not regard smuggling as a serious offence. Prices during the wars were high and many goods were heavily taxed. Indeed smugglers claimed they were the true "free traders". Not everybody took this relaxed attitude however. The Reverend Samuel Haddock was vicar of Ropley from 1818 to 1871, Early in his incumbency he became unpopular because of his outspoken condemnation of wrong doing; his opposition to the local trade in smuggled goods, and his disapproval of the drinking habits of those times. He and his family were the victims of much petty persecution, some of it very cruel. Later he won respect and admiration and a road in Ropley is named after him.

© Peter Hoggarth 1993.

Sources:-

Annals of Old Ropley Marianna A. Hagen 1929 Ropley Past and Present Sir Frederick Mason 1989

Smuggling in Hampshire and Dorset 1700-1850 -Geoffrey Morley
H.M. Customs and Excise records.