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Salcombe Maritime History Paper No. 8

Salcombe and the Smuggling Trade

Roger Barrett

Smuggling until 1815

Smugglers
(HM Customs and Excise)

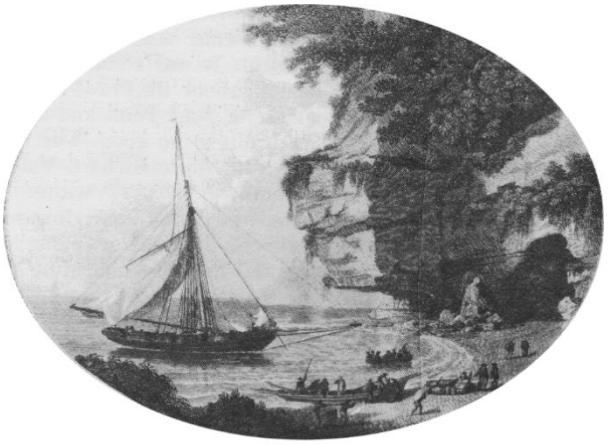
During the 1700s high customs and excise duties on imports, such as tea, tobacco, wine or spirits, led to a huge increase in smuggling along the South Devon coast. With only a handful of Customs officers based between Plymouth and Dartmouth and with big profits to be made, remote fishing communities, such as Salcombe and Hope Cove, were more than ready to run the risks associated with the so-called 'free-trade'

Smuggling was especially profitable around 1740, in the early 1780s and at the end of the Napoleonic Wars when duties were at their highest.[1] At these times the rich rewards to be obtained from smuggling led to the neglect of the fishing trade – the town's principal legitimate activity. In 1819 Abraham Hawkins complained that the fishermen at Salcombe 'are too fond of following contraband communications with the opposite shores of Brittany, and unfortunately prefer visits to Roscoff to the task of dredging the deep or enclosing productive shoals. It is notorious that, at Salcombe and in its vicinity, amidst the plenty and rich variety which the sea offers, no family, owing to this irresistible propensity in the knights of the oar, can be certain of a dish of fish to grace its table'.[2]

The small sloops and luggers used by the fisherman were especially adapted and fitted out for voyages to the Channel Islands, particularly Guernsey, and from 1767 (when

a preventive boat was stationed at Guernsey), to Roscoff in Brittany. Those boats that were built specifically for the trade, were fast and highly manoeuvrable, and often rivalled the Revenue cutters in speed and firepower. 'Off the wind the cutters could catch almost anything they chased, but close-hauled the luggers could keep ahead until darkness saved them.'[3] On moonless nights they would land their contraband cargoes in isolated coves or creeks such as Lannacombe Bay and Rickham Sands to the east, the beaches near Hope Cove and Bantham to the west, and the secluded creeks in Kingsbridge Estuary. Here, they would be met by armed riders, who carried the goods up sunken lanes to inland hiding places such as cellars, tunnels, barns and church towers.

Customs duties date back to the time of King John and, over the centuries a bureaucracy developed to combat smuggling. By 1680 there were customs officers in nearly every port. Dartmouth had an establishment of eight in 1678, whilst Salcombe, as a sub-port of Dartmouth, had a waiter and searcher, named Matthew Bond, and, by 1682, a riding surveyor, Joshua Williamson.[4] From time-to-time purges were made of customs officers suspected of collusion with smugglers or of fraud and, at Salcombe dismissals took place in 1685 (two officers), 1704, 1712 (two officers) and in 1714.[5]



Bringing the contraband ashore, 1785 (internet image, unknown source)

By 1715, when the establishment at Salcombe included two tidesmen (who searched ships at anchor) and two boatmen, John Hodder, the waiter and searcher at Bigbury Bay was transferred to Salcombe and given the command of the boat 'to inspect the several ships that stop there, at the established allowance of £30 per annum... Robert Griffith, the present waiter and searcher at Salcombe, who is not so capable of managing a boat as the said Hodder, to be removed to Bigbury Bay with an additional allowance of £10 per annum, to make his salary £40 per annum, and to keep a horse for the guard of those parts of the coast.[6]

It is impossible to gauge the scale of smuggling activity in South Devon before the 1780s as the written record is largely silent. However, from one rare newspaper reference we learn that in May 1765 the *Prince of Wales* excise cutter captured a sloop, which was lying at anchor in Salcombe River. She was laden with bricks under which were stowed upwards of thirty half ankers (five gallon tubs) of brandy.[7] Mary Waugh, in her book

Guiding the smugglers ashore (Fred Roe)

Smuggling in Devon and Cornwall 1700-1850, states that 'the limited evidence available suggests that in the 1770s the smugglers were operating particularly in the Salcombe, Hope Cove and Bigbury Bay areas. Thereafter the action was concentrated between the Yealm estuary on the east, and Cawsand to the west'[8]

Smuggling was not entirely displaced however, for in 1783, Richard Valentine, the Customs officer at Salcombe, reported that:

> Smuggling had increased greatly in the last three years. Within the neighbourhood of Salcombe, it has been carried on by people who live in little villages along the coast, who are in general poor and assist in unloading the smuggling vessels and bringing the cargo to the shore where the horses are in readiness to carry off the same. The species of ship employed are chiefly fishing craft belonging to Torbay who generally land their cargoes on or near the Start or Prawle, at which places myself and the rest of the officers under my direction have kept a constant look-out at nights when the wind is fair, and in times past have made considerable seizures, but the smugglers have altered their proceedings. They never land any goods before the horses are in readiness on the spot to take the same away, which are seldom less in number than fifty and often times a hundred at a time. Every horse has his rider armed with a loaded whip or a brace of pistols in order to despatch the officers if they attempted to make seizure of the goods...'[9] Richard Valentine had himself been threatened with having his brains blown out, and although he could call on two tidesmen and three extra men, he begged for more help: 'if there was about twelve or fourteen of the horse troop stationed at Kingsbridge ... they'd give a good account of themselves[10]

Richard Valentine was a diligent and enterprising officer who occupied his post in Salcombe for over forty years. He died in 1813, aged 74 years, 'beloved and respected through life for amenity of manners, integrity, and benignity, by all ranks and degrees'.[11] The street in which he lived, now Union Street, was for many years named Valentine Place in his memory. In his 1783 report quoted above, Valentine stated that the smuggling vessels were fishing craft from Torbay. The fact that they were not from Salcombe suggests that he had had some success in curtailing the activities of the

Salcombe free-traders, at least in their own backyard. Some though were operating elsewhere as 'owlers' – smuggling wool from southeast England to France. In 1784 the *Chance* of Salcombe was wrecked on the Normandy coast carrying a cargo of wool and in March 1785 another Salcombe vessel met a similar fate off Dunkirk.[12]

Although Richard Valentine was lucky enough to die of old age, many of his contemporaries in the service met with a violent end. In 1785 the customs officer at Bantham, Richard Cullin was murdered by smugglers at Hope Cove, who threw him over a cliff. His attackers were never found.[13] Three years later, Hope Cove was the scene of further violence when, in May 1788, two customs men, Philip Cuming and Philip Cove were savagely assaulted by smugglers. Cuming was left with a fractured leg and Cove suffered a broken skull and various other injuries from blows to his body and arms. Their attackers fled to Teignmouth, but troops were sent after them and they were captured.[14]

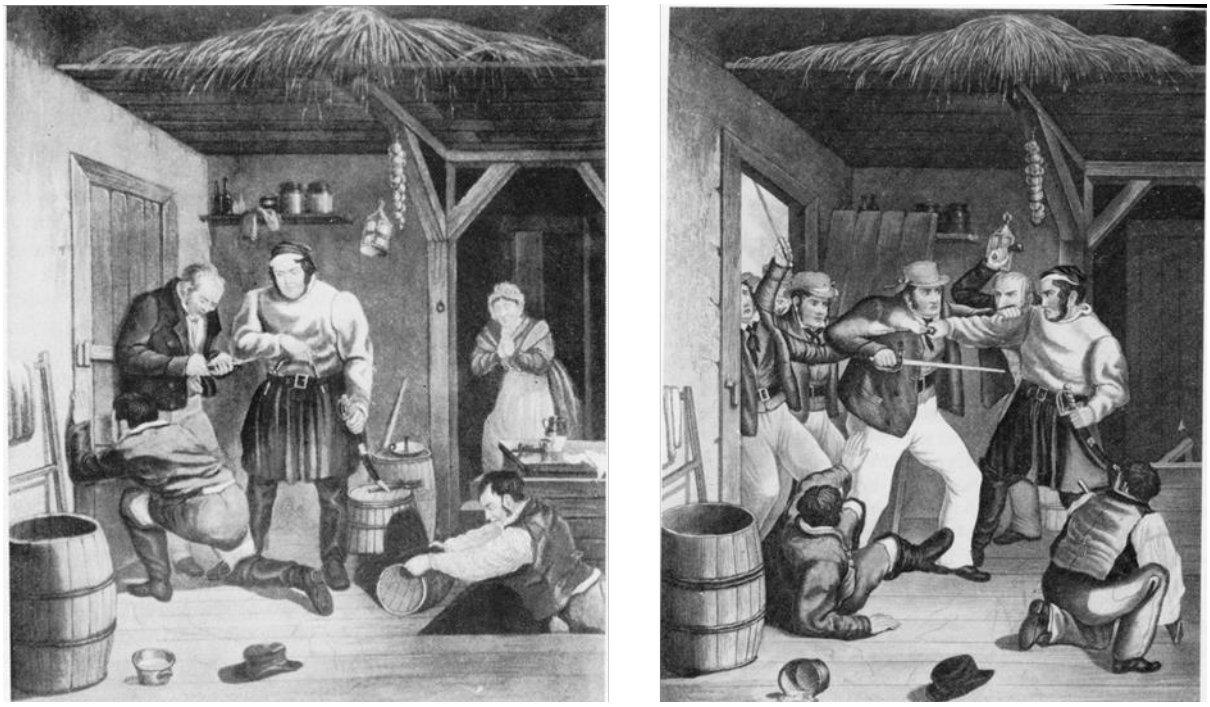
A revenue officer under attack from smugglers (Mary Evans Picture Library)

Not all of the officers in the revenue service were willing to put themselves in harm's way – some were still colluding with the smugglers. Warren Lisle, Surveyor of Sloops of the South Coast from 1740 to 1779 reported that on the South Devon coast, most of the cargoes of tea and brandy were brought from Roscoff and came over in fine lugsail vessels, but that the revenue cutters made few seizures and 'the shore officers are too much their friends to give them trouble'.[15]

The Revenue cutters based in Plymouth and Dartmouth and the Customs boat at Salcombe were sometimes joined by Royal Navy ships seeking prize money from seizures. In July 1790 the Salcombe customs boat chased the Cawsand shallop *True Blue* which had just arrived off the coast from Guernsey, but was unable to catch her. Seeing His Majesty's sloop *Fly*, nearby, the customs boat alerted her and the *Fly*, taking up the chase, soon captured the smuggler. However, when the Salcombe boat came near, the naval officers made it clear that they had no intention of sharing the prize money and threatened to open fire if the customs men tried to interfere.[16]

In July 1793 a Salcombe sloop also named *Fly*, laden with 78 casks of spirits from Guernsey, was taken after a smart chase by His Majesty's cutter *Ranger*, of fourteen guns, Lieutenant Cotgrave, off the Start,.[17] Other successful seizures involved the *Jane*, smuggling cutter, with 200 ankers of spirits, taken off Salcombe on 15th December 1800 by the *Mary and Betsy* gun-boat of Plymouth;[18] and the smuggling lugger *Phoenix* of Salcombe, laden with 190 casks of spirits taken, on 7 October 1802, by Captain Masefield of the *Atalante*, a sixteen gun sloop of war.[19]

An intriguing episode took place in January 1799 when fourteen smugglers, who had fired into the customs boat off Salcombe, were captured and taken to Plymouth. Escorted by a party of the Surrey cavalry, they were put on board the *Cambridge* flag ship in Hamoaze, and later taken for trial in London.[20, 21]



Left: 'Smugglers alarmed'. Right: 'Smugglers attacked'. Two popular nineteenth century prints by an unknown artist (Alan Hay)

When smuggling boats were seized by revenue officers the most seaworthy were often taken into service. Others were either put up for auction or broken up. In September 1803 the auction took place at the Turks Head, Salcombe of the captured smuggling sloop *Endeavour*, burthen 33 tons, by order of the Commissioners of His Majesty's Customs.[22] And in April 1809 the Commissioners put up for auction the broken-up hull and materials of a boat called the *Mary of Salcombe*, burthen 7 tons, at the Custom House in Topsham together with 61 gallons of brandy, 10 gallons of rum, 28 gallons of Geneva 'all for the accommodation and use of private families only.'[23]

Smuggling and the Coastguard from 1815

'Smugglers: To Save their Necks', painting by Charles Napier Hemy RA
(Art Gallery of New South Wales)

The end of the Napoleonic wars in 1815 released men and ships to join the fight against smuggling. At the same time the 'respectable' men of capital – farmers, merchants and landowners – who had previously funded the trade began to withdraw, so in the years that followed it increasingly became a small-scale criminal activity.[24]

However, old-style smuggling runs were still being carried out in Salcombe harbour. Towards the end of June 1818, William Webber, one of the riding officers, received information that some spirits had been brought ashore at the mouth of the harbour, at a place often used for landing. Informed that the goods were still to be carried away, Webber and a hussar in the 15th Regiment, went to the spot in the evening and hid behind a hedge. After a short time they heard men's voices and the sound of horses being led down to the beach. The men were then seen carrying the casks from a nearby hiding-place and loading them on the backs of the horses. At this point, the riding officer and the hussar crept out from their place of concealment and advanced towards the band of smugglers. who took to their heels leaving one of their number, James Thomas, behind with both horses and casks. He was promptly arrested and eleven months later prosecuted by the Attorney-General.[25]

It may be that George Wills, a local mariner, was one of the smugglers who got away on this occasion. If so, he was not so lucky a few years later. In 1816 Wills had bought an orchard at the north end of the town near the North Orestone. Part of the land was an island at high tide and on this he started to build a house. Before he could finish it he was caught in the act of smuggling by the Customs men and held in custody until he

could pay a fine of £2,000. Unable to raise such a vast sum it is said that poor George went mad.[26]

In 1824 George Wills' house at the Island became the site of the first Methodist Church in Salcombe. Prior to that it had been occupied by two customs officers following Wills' arrest, but they moved out soon after 1822, when all of the forces concerned with the prevention of smuggling – the preventive water guard, revenue cruisers, and riding officers – were consolidated into a single force, the Coast Guard, under the direction of the Board of Customs. The coast was divided into districts with the Salcombe District extending from Prawle to Challaborough. Sites for the new coastguard stations were generally leased by the Board of Customs, from landowners and, in most cases, the start date of a lease gives an indication of when stations were built.[27]

Coastguard in 1830 uniform (T. Palmer)

Hope Cove: 4 January 1813 (pre-dating the formation of the Coast Guard service)

Prawle: 1 January 1823 (near the site of an earlier Preventative Station).

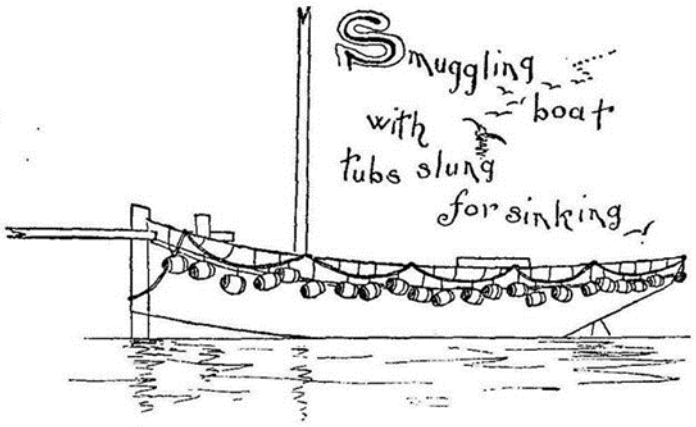
Challaborough: 1 September 1823

Salcombe: 18 January 1825

Rickham: 12 February 1846

The coastguard station at Salcombe was built at South Orestone on a site which straddled the original ferry steps and south of what is now the Ferry Inn (the Commercial Inn in 1842). The armoury, on the southernmost side was built on the site of an old lime kiln. On the other side of the public steps was the watch house. For many years there were no purpose-built coastguard cottages at Salcombe and the men and their families lived in rented accommodation in Buckley Street, the Balkwill Buildings in Union Street (now the RNLI lifeboat station) and in Chapel Street. In the 1850s eight cottages were built for the coastguards at the top of Robinson's Row and in the 1870s a further four were built at Baker's Well. By the time of the 1901 census most of the coastguards were living in Church Street.

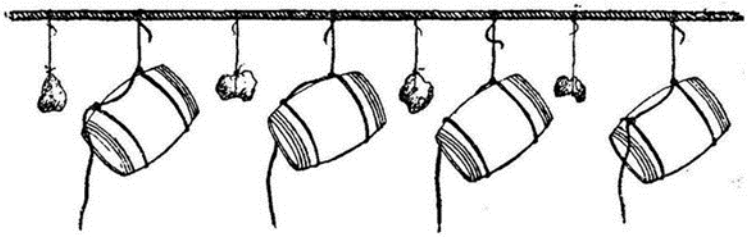
It took time for the new coastguard service to gain the upper hand against the 'free-traders' and as a result the 1820s saw a revival of smuggling on the south Devon coast, particularly in the small fishing village of Hope Cove to the west of Salcombe. On 3 June 1821 a boat from Roscoff was captured by the Hope Cove coastguard and four local men were sent to Exeter goal, and in May 1823 another four men of Hope suffered the



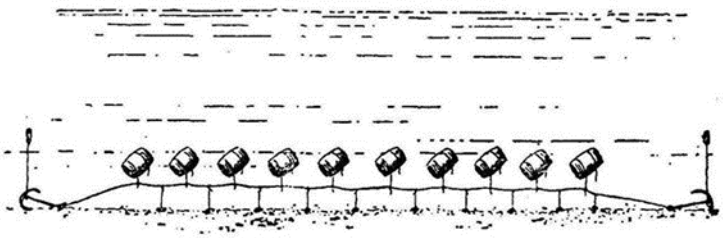
The sinking stones were always bent on, and kept on deck till just before slipping.

SINKING AND CREEPING

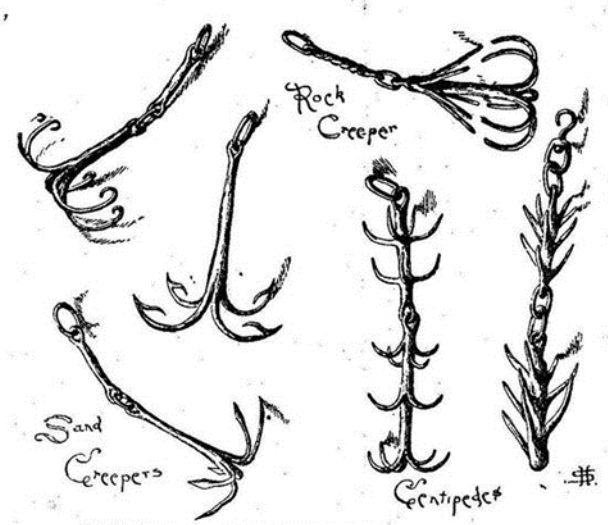
Methods used by smugglers to sink and carry tubs of contraband, and the devices used by the coastguards to 'creep' for sunken goods



METHOD OF SECURING TUBS AND STONES FOR SINKING.



A CROP SUNK.



APPLIANCES USED FOR CREEPING UP SUNKEN GOODS.

The tub-sling consisted of a piece of small left-handed rope (French), secured round each end of the tub, so as to leave two ends, or "tails," of equal length. If the cargo was sunk, one only of these tails would be used for fastening the tub to the sinking-rope, so that if, as was usually the case, this tail was cut off in the hurry of "working" the crop, there would still be one left. The tub-carrier would then be able to sling his pair of tubs by taking the tail from each tub over the shoulder and securing it to the other tub, as shown in the drawing on page 191.

Sinking and Creeping.
Source: 'Smuggling Ways and Days', Lt. The Hon. Henry Shore R.N., 1892

same fate after their boat the *Mary Ann* was captured by Salcombe coastguards.[28] Six months later, eighteen fishermen's wives from Hope found themselves in Exeter gaol for 'insulting' the coastguard. The women had been caught red-handed, in Bolt Barn above the Square in Inner Hope, getting donkeys ready to carry smuggled goods inland to Churchstow. It is said that on their release the women returned to Hope Cove with the prison's copper kettles![29]

Increased vigilance by the authorities led the smugglers to modify their operations. According to Waugh 'the larger vessels were abandoned in favour of small half-decked ones. Open galleys employed in seine netting also took part, and under cover of their normal activities, grappled up tubs which had been sunk offshore'.[30] Another change was the use of French vessels. In December 1824 the coastguard commander at Kingsbridge, William Fletcher, reported that although a number of local vessels were well known as smuggling craft, the smugglers at Bantham, Salcombe, Ford and Hallsands, were occasionally hiring French vessels to bring over their contraband. Fletcher reported three recent runs were the smugglers had evaded the coastguard. One cargo had been sunk on the western part of the Salcombe station and later brought ashore by the smugglers. A second was landed at Bantham and conveyed inland. A third, carried by a French cutter had been sunk in Bigbury Bay but in spite of three days of creeping the coastguards were unable to locate it. (Creeping involved dragging an iron grapnel along the seabed where it was believed the smugglers had sunk their cargo). Fletcher attributed the recent increase in smuggling 'to the improvement in agriculture which has brought a greater demand into the market.' However, the quantities involved were quite small. 'I do not think that any cargo run on this coast exceeds from 80 to 120 or 130 tubs of spirits'. The spirits were being sold at a low price in order 'to get immediate payment and a small profit, as there is no large capitalist, and no one person who has much property at stake'.[31]

A coastguard sentry, 1831 (Lt. Henry Shore RN))

In the late 1830s and throughout the 1840s, the coastguards enjoyed more success. When the *Thomas and Susannah,* a Plymouth trawler, was taken, by the coastguard in Salcombe harbour, in July 1837, she was found to be laden with 214 tubs of spirits.[32] In the same year, Thomas Jarvis, 39, of Salcombe, was sent to Dorchester Gaol to serve six months hard labour for smuggling, possibly as a result of this seizure.[33]

By May 1844 the coastguard had built up a

strong force in South Devon with 61 officers and men in the Salcombe district. The district could call upon the services of the Revenue cutter *Defence* based in Dartmouth and other cutters, such as *Ferret* were occasionally sent on detachment to Salcombe.[34] Up until the mid-1840s spirits accounted for most of the contraband seized.

According to House of Commons account papers, 83 tubs were seized on the Salcombe station in 1843, 'a considerable quantity' in 1844 and, in 1845, eight tubs and a smuggler were captured.[35] For the next ten years, however, tobacco became the staple of the local smuggling trade.

On 6 August 1846 the sloop *Urcelia*, of Cowes, 15 tons, carrying 136 bales, containing about six tons of tobacco stalks, and four cases of cigars all from Guernsey, was captured by the *Harpy*, customs cutter, south of Rame Head and taken into Sutton Pool, Plymouth. Before being taken, her crew threw the contraband overboard but it was all recovered by the *Harpy*.[36] Amongst *Urcelia's* crew of six was Richard Pepperell, of Salcombe, later described by the authors of the two-volume '*King's Customs',* published in 1908, as 'probably the most daring and notorious smuggler in the West of England'.[37]

Richard Pepperell was apprehended on at least five occasions for smuggling. On 4 September 1848, the lieutenant of the coastguard of Salcombe observed a boat entering the harbour at nightfall and ordered a boat to give chase. Her occupants, Richard Pepperell, another man and a woman, at once headed for the shore. The two men landed and made off, closely pursued by the coastguards; the woman remained, and was taken into custody. One report gives the name of the woman in the boat as Jarvis, another says it was Pepperell's wife Ann. The coastguards later succeeded in taking Pepperell but the other man escaped. The boat contained thirty bales of tobacco-stalks, weighing 2,598 pounds. The following week Kingsbridge magistrates acquitted the woman but sentenced the 42-year old Pepperell to imprisonment at Exeter Gaol. The constable, in whose charge he was placed, hired a bed for them at the New London Inn, Dodbrooke, intending to proceed to Exeter the next morning. During the night, Pepperell made his escape out of the third-floor window. A reward of £20 was offered for his capture. According to a newspaper report, this was the fourth time Pepperell had been detected smuggling.[38, 39]

On 22 October 1849 the coastguards at the Yealm station noticed a smuggler's boat working into Stoke's Bay. When they bore down on her in their six-oared galley, the smugglers began to throw parcels overboard and so the coastguards fired a volley of musket balls to bring her to. It was a 22 foot open boat, marked on the stern *'W.H.Y. Guernsey'* and on board were nine bales of tobacco and two men, one named A. Le Lacheur, of Guernsey. The other was the 'notorious' Richard Pepperell, who six months previously had escaped from the police at Kingsbridge. The £20 reward was paid to the

coastguards for his re-capture and this time the authorities took no chances in getting Pepperell incarcerated.[40] In 1851 he was still serving his sentence in Exeter Gaol.[41]

Whilst Pepperell was languishing in prison, his wife Ann carried on his illicit business. On 5 July 1851, she arrived with a man named Richard Jenkins, off Bolt Head in a small open boat laden with twelve bales of tobacco-stalks from Guernsey. As they waited to enter Salcombe harbour after nightfall, they spoke to a passing Fowey pilot boat, the *Rebecca* and, giving the crew several handfuls of tobacco, asked them to take a note on shore to the party waiting to collect the contraband. The *Rebecca's* crew agreed to this, but instead they placed the note into the hands of the coastguard, who immediately manned a boat, and Mrs. Pepperell and her accomplice were soon safe in custody.[42,43]

The Pepperell's of the South Hams followed respectable trades for the most part and included a number of well-known master mariners, but there were clearly one or two black sheep in the flock. In addition to the notorious Richard and his wife Ann, there are separate reports of transgressions by William and Edmund Pepperell.

William Pepperell, was the master of a limestone barge called the *Quarry*. On 17 November 1847 he appeared before Kingsbridge magistrates charged with having smuggled nineteen bales of tobacco ten days previously. A Salcombe coastguard named Bambridge had gone on board the *Quarry* when she anchored at Frogmore, and when men started to heave out the cargo of stones, he was seized by the neck and thrown on the deck. Refusing a bribe of £20 to keep quiet, Bambridge was tied up and left on board. After a while he managed to struggle free and, going down into the now empty hold, found fragments of tobacco. He still had his pistol and when he fired it the mounted guard came to his assistance. The nineteen bales of tobacco were later found in a field about 200 yards from where the vessel lay. William Pepperell and the mate of the barge, John Stone, were fined £100 and in default committed to six months imprisonment.[44]

Even as late as 1871 at least one member of the Pepperell 'clan' was still carrying on the old trade. In November of that year Edmund Pepperell, master of the schooner *Amy*, from St. John's, Newfoundland, was found guilty of smuggling a quantity of tobacco by Bristol magistrates, and was ordered to pay treble value and duty and costs, amounting in all to £2, or go to gaol for fourteen days.[45]

On 30 April 1848 the sloop *Jane and Mary* of Jersey, 7 tons, was making for Salcombe from Guernsey with 80 bales of tobacco on board. When she approached the harbour, a boat came out to warn her master, a man named Parker from Plymouth, that the Revenue cruiser *Ferret*, based in Salcombe, was preparing to give chase. Fearing capture, Parker and his second hand (from Kingsbridge), threw all the tobacco overboard and so nothing was found when their boat was later boarded by the revenue officers. By the

following morning, Parkin, had become so deranged at the loss of his valuable cargo, that he jumped overboard and drowned. The *Jane and Mary* was later seized 'for being beyond the limits of her licence' and taken into Plymouth.[46] In January 1849 John May, a clerk, and two men from Plymouth were taken from Salcombe to Exeter for smuggling forty-one half bales of tobacco.[47,48] Tobacco continued to be the staple of the smugglers' trade in the 1850s. In July 1852 the smack *Nelly* sank in Starehole Bay whilst attempting to land smuggled tobacco.[49,50]

On 22 August 1854 a Salcombe man named Caunter appeared before the Kingsbridge magistrates on a tobacco smuggling charge. After spotting a longboat off Salcombe, a coastguard went in pursuit and captured Caunter. Another man who was with him made his escape. There was one bale of tobacco in the boat, and twenty-three on the shore nearby.[51] In September 1855 it was the turn of Thomas Bushell and John Stone, of East Portlemouth, to be up in front of the magistrates on a similar charge. A coastguard had spotted the two men board a vessel that was passing off Salcombe harbour. After some time they came off and made for the shore. The coastguard boat was manned and as it approached the two men were seen throwing packages overboard. The men were taken into custody and the packages, which contained about one hundredweight of tobacco were later recovered by grappling irons. The magistrates sentenced Bushell and Stone to six months hard labour.[52]

These successes by the local coastguard must have had a deterrent effect on local would-be smugglers and, in era of Free Trade legislation, the climate had also changed at a national level. In 1857 the Board of Customs reported that 'with the reduction in duties, and the removal of all needless and vexatious restrictions, smuggling has greatly diminished.'[53]

No newspaper references have been found of cases of smuggling during the remainder of the nineteenth century. Nevertheless alleged smuggling by East Portlemouth residents in 1879 was apparently grounds enough for them to be evicted. 'When the Duke and Duchess of Cleveland demolished much of the village in 1879, one of the reasons for their wholesale evictions was that the two inns were hotbeds of smuggling. The profits from contraband and from fishing made the villagers reluctant to work the Cleveland lands for a pittance'.[54]

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Published jointly by:
Salcombe Maritime Museum
Old Council Hall, Market Street, Salcombe, Devon, TQ8 8DE
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2. Tudor and Stuart Trade and Shipping
3. The Spanish Armada 1588
4. Pirates and Privateers in the 17th & 18th Centuries
5. Salcombe and the Civil War 1642-6
6. The Newfoundland Cod Trade
7. The Threat from France: 1778-83 and 1793-1815
8. Salcombe and the Smuggling Trade
9. The Trade of the Estuary in the Early Nineteenth Century