

The Battle of Sidley Green



IT was never enough for the customs men to catch smugglers red-handed, or even to capture their contraband. Smugglers were ingenious, and they had a rich vein of sympathisers throughout local society.

On one occasion customs men captured a cargo of spirits and engaged a reputable local farmer, Samuel Beeching, to take the contraband into Hastings.

Unknown to them, Beeching himself dabbled in smuggling. So generous was he with his own supply of spirits, that the customs officers escorting him passed out in a drunken stupor aboard his wagon. At Bulverhythe the casks were unloaded into a field, later to be collected by the innkeeper of the nearby Bull Inn.

The bloodiest smuggling incident in Bexhill — and the one which triggered the decline of large-scale smuggling — was the notorious battle of Sidley Green in January 1828.

Thirty years later William Cooper recounted the story in the Sussex Archaeological Collections, as told to him

RUSSELL CLAUGHTON looks at Bexhill's bloodiest smuggling episode — the notorious Battle of Sidley Green in January 1828.

by one of the smugglers involved.

"According to his account," wrote Cooper, "a cargo of goods was landed at Mr Brook's 40 acre point near Bexhill. It was a moonlight night, the moon being in the last quarter; the tubs of spirit were loaded on men's shoulders and in carts. A noted smuggler, a native of Bexhill, was captain of the boat." (Nicknamed "Spinner," the captain once made a daring escape from Bo-Peep Martello Towers at St Leonards by shinning down a rope smuggled in to him)



Died with bat in hand

"The Coast Blockade men from Galley Hill Tower tried to intercept the smugglers, but finding themselves too weak for the purpose (the smugglers being armed, and having likewise with them 16 or 18 batsmen), they obtained reinforcements that

raised their numbers to about 40 men.

"They came up with the smugglers near Sidley, and here the armed portion of the smugglers drew themselves up in a regular line, and a desperate fight took place. In the first onset a quartermaster, named Collins, was killed.

Two batsmen were also killed; the body of one named Smithurst was carried and laid out in the barn of Cramps Farm (near the present Pelham Hotel). When his body was found his bat was still grasped in his hands, and it was almost hacked in pieces by the cutlasses of the Blockade men.

"The goods were all got away, as were all the wounded. One of the wounded men, named P—, was taken to his home, a lonely house near Windmill Hill, and the surgeon who attended him was in the habit of taking his horse to a gentleman's stable in the neighbourhood, putting him there, and quietly walking

across the fields to where his patient was lying. The smuggler became a cripple for life."

At Horsham Assizes that same spring, Thomas and Henry Miller, John Spray, Edward Shoemith, William Bennet, John Ford, Stephen Stubberfield and Spencer Whiteman were indicted for assembling armed. At the Old Bailey later, they pleaded guilty and were sentenced to death, the sentence commuted to transportation to New South Wales, in Australia.

Smuggling became less well organised after this rout, although smugglers and customs men alike still lost their lives in their roles as pursuer and quarry.



Shots in the night

Gravestones in "the old burial ground in Bexhill" (in Barrack Road, long since swept away) recorded in 1923, provided mute testimony to that.

"In memory of David Watts of the Coast Guard Station No XLII Tower," read one. "He was shot and almost instantly expired on the 21st February 1832 aged

45 years. Short was the warning, quick the summons flew, Ere scarce his weeping friends could bid adieu."

The other was inscribed: "In memory of William Meekes, the Chief Boatman of Coastguard Station No XLII Tower. He was mortally wounded on the night of the 21st and died on the 23rd of February, 1832, aged 35 years."

As smuggling dwindled the Star Inn gradually lost its notoriety. But for an isolated inn, it still attracted more than its fair share of incident.

In 1865 a sixty foot long whale, weighing 72 tons, with jaws 22 feet long, was washed ashore, dead, outside the inn. The railway, built 17 years earlier, quickly cashed in on the fascination this accident held for Londoners, by running special excursion trains to a "station" at Normans Bay, hastily assembled from old sleepers and cinders.

The Star Inn ran dry within 48 hours, the landlord having to barricade himself and his family in a bedroom as parched and angry visitors besieged him.

Twenty years later he was once again forced to take to his room, this time with his sheep and pigs as well

as his family, when one of the coast's periodic great storms breached the sea wall, making an island of the Star Inn for several days.

For many years a Whitsun Tuesday fair was held in front of the inn, at which Lucy Knight sold gingerbread from a stall in front of one of its windows.

As for smuggling, it was not so much the customs men who stopped it (in 1830, at its height, English prisons held only 116 smugglers, out of the tens of thousands actively engaged in it throughout the country).



An end to warfare

It was the reduction in Excise duty that turned smuggling from big business into a pin-money sideline, ending what one clergyman described in a pamphlet as "the dreadful evils resulting from illicit distillation and smuggling — worse than the calamities of civilised warfare."

NEXT WEEK: More personal memories of smuggling, and some Bexhill descendants of smugglers