

This is the second of two articles on local smuggling in the early 19th century and includes quotations, never previously published, from a manuscript diary compiled in the 1880s by Dr. J. P. Wills, then a young practitioner, and who afterwards became a distinguished public figure in Bexhill. Dr. Wills, who died in 1916, interviewed some of the old men who had taken part in smuggling and recorded their recollections of some grim escapades.

The next article in this series based on development of local coastal services will begin an account of the Martello towers, of which twelve were built along the Bexhill parish foreshore.

Memories of the old smuggling days also survive in an unpublished diary dated 1884 and which was written by Dr. J. P. Wills, who had come to Bexhill as a young practitioner three years earlier, and who afterwards attained a distinguished position in the public life of the town. In his early years here he was able to talk with some of the old men who had in their youth taken part in smuggling escapades, and he recorded their stories much in the way that they were told to him.

One veteran, whose father had helped to build the Martello towers along the parish foreshore, told him—

I've been a smuggler, and then a year in the Coastguard, and I think I ought to have a pension! I mind the first night I ever worked the kegs; there was one man took that night. We used to run sometimes two cargoes in a dark (i.e. between the two moons). We used to go away right ever so far, up to Crowhurst bridge, ay, and further. 'cos they should know when we was to land the kegs—then we'd lie by all day and perhaps all night in the woods—ay, we did so.

Why, one Good Friday we run a cargo right in broad daylight down New Town (St. Leonards)—there wasn't narry a house there—just where the Conqueror Hotel be (St. Leonards Marina). There was an old boat lying along there, and Tom Bennet up in the rigging swung a bit rope round and round 'is head, and in come the boat and down we runs (as we was 'id in the wood up above), then the batsmen they drove the Blockade men right back to Hastings up to the Whiterock. There'd be eight batsmen with gert bats eight feet long, and they'd get hold o' one of the Blockade men and if he'd be quiet they'd let 'un alone, and when the kegs was all up they'd fire off his pistol if he was affered to fire hisself, but if he fired they'd knock 'em down and maybe kill 'un, maybe not.

We didn't have no batsmen at first, but they got to firing and we was forced to, and afterwards it got worse and worse and we had firearms too. We got 10s. fur two kegs; there wasn't no going back, up with kegs and off to go and put 'em in the carts. 'Twas a pound for a batsman. There wasn't never batsmen enough, 'Twas always a pound for they. Ah! there was some stout little chaps, hearty little chaps, I can tell 'ee. Nothing but a bat agen firearms, and they wouldn't let none o' us get touched if they could help it, but lor, Sirl they could stop the balls. They often I've know six or seven get wounded in one night w' slugs and such.

One night we killed a Blockade man in Mr. Brooks' meadow (below the Old Town Convalescent Home) and carried another o' ours in 'Bennet's house opposite the churchyard, and another o' ours got shot dead up in the Flat (at the junction of Sidley and Hastings roads, Holliers Hill, which until quite recently was broad unenclosed ground). They was all three buried in

Local smuggling escapades told to Doctor Wills

the churchyard. That was the worst night, some of the Blockade men was after us, maybe thirty, and then just as we got the carts loaded up, down comes another lot from Galley Hill over Holliers Hill by Morleys.

One night we lay in the hollow by the limekiln at the bottom of Sea Lane—the lime burner he said he'd like to see the fun, but presently the bullets they begun flying round and I didn't see nothing' of the burner as I come back.

We used to run spirits in kegs, and silks and tea in bags. A keg of brandy cost 13s. and was worth £4 to £5, and you could water it too. All the chief men have come to nothings; some o' em died in the workhouse. Ah, 'twas bad work, but lor, the people was all wild like in those days. When the barracks was here, Bexhill was perky little place sure enough, but awful bad, 'publiss' then was open all day and all night.

One night we was lying up in West Wood and the kegs was just got up from the hollow down below Galley Hill, where the boat came in, when along comes the Blockade men, firing at such a rate our chaps they cut and run and left thirty kegs or so in middle of the road. Well, I went home and changed my trousers and frock, they were all wet through, and come back again just as day was breaking to see what was up. Up jumps one of the men—he was quartermaster—and ketches hold of me and put my frock where 'twas wet in 's mouth. 'Hullo,' says he, 'you're one of them, you've been in salt water!' 'Why,' says I, 'I'm just come along to see what's up, you're making such a jolly row up here, I live just along over here.' Presently he looks at me and says 'Why it's our tally merchant.' 'Of course it be,' says I. 'Go and get your horse and cart,' says he, 'in the name of King William,' putting his hand on my shoulder—'twas King William was king then (this was King William IV). 'So I goes and gets it and we loaded up the kegs. 'Take them to the Hastings Custom House,' says he.

'SPECTED TO BE TOOK

Just then I see'd some o' our chaps peering about; they'd run as fur as Crowhurst but come back to see, so I sings out to 'em to come along and the Blockade men they begun firing away—there was only two of them but they'd made such a row in the night we thought they was a lot—and I gives the mare a smack as I lay down in the kegs and away she gallops right up home and then off to Westfield. Then I left the mare up there and come home and 'spected to be took, but after a fortnight I fetched the mare and went off to Hastings 'cos I was 'bliged to be looking after my business which was carrying things to and fro Hastings.

Well, as I comes along by Bulverhythe out comes the Blockade man and, 'Hold hard,' says he, 'what do you mean by leading me into that trap the other night.' 'Why,' says I, 'what did you mean running away and leaving me all alone with them chaps? I'm going to Hastings to tell the officer and get my money for the night.' Then he got in a funk and, says he, 'Come along up to the 'Bull' and we'll make it all right.'

This last escapade would seem to be that which has been recounted in something like the following terms, so that Dr. Wills' informant may well have been 'Joe S—' himself (older residents may well fill in the blank!)—Another local man, Joe S— who took part in the battle at Sidley, was once captured near Great Worsham Farm as

he was going with his horse and cart to help in a smuggling escapade. The cart was loaded with spirits and tea, but the Blockade men escorting it were surprised by a body of smugglers' batsmen, and when they were attacked Joe whipped up his horse and drove off with the cargo at full speed to Sedlescombe, from where the goods were safely carried to Rye in another conveyance.

A notorious haunt of the local smugglers was Normans Bay, long previously known as the Sluice from the outfall of Wallers Haven there, and of course the very old Star Inn was inevitably associated with the trade. Records of the old *Sussex Advertiser* newspaper (to which historians are also indebted for many of the details of Brighton in the days of the Prince Regent, afterwards George IV), and which were noted by Mr. James Donne, a former Editor of the *Sussex County Magazine*, in a history of the Inn which is exhibited there, gave details of a number of smuggling escapades in that locality.

On Trafalgar Day itself, October 21, 1805, Captain John Clark, commanding the Revenue cutter 'Vulture' which was based at Newhaven, caught a heavily laden lug-sail boat heading for Normans Bay, and secured the crew and 540 casks of brandy, while the next January he captured a lugger a mile out to sea from the Sluice, with 500 parcels of tea.

In February 1822 300 smugglers armed with cutdags and 'bats' who had gathered in front of the Inn retreated before the Customs men who were armed with carbines, preventing a landing from the vessel 'Queen Charlotte.' This boat, named after George III's Queen, was one of two owned by the local gang, the other being named 'The Long Boat.' Each capable of bringing many tubs of contraband spirits from France, they were berthed at a spot known locally as Willow Lock. *Tot.*

The gang itself was largely composed of Little Common men a number of whose activities were recorded by Mr. George Gillham, a member of the well-known village family of that name. His account book for 1825-27 listed the members of the gang, among whom were his five sons. There were also three brothers named Bennett, one of whom afterwards became the sexton at St. Mark's Church. The account book shows some of the gang's activities and the payments made by purchasers of contraband goods.

Many years afterwards Mr. Gillham's great-grand-son, also George, who as a youth had known some of the old smugglers, recorded his memories for an article which was published in the now defunct *Sussex County Magazine*.

Among these anecdotes was that of the occasion when one of George Gillham's sons, known as 'Peckham,' saw some Excisemen approaching their cottage in search of him. He made a hurried exit by the back door and wandered about the country for some days until he deemed it safe to return. Beside the front door of their cottage stood two box trees in tubs, but beneath these were other tubs which



The Star Inn at Normans Bay around which many old stories of local smugglers are centred.

concealed smuggled goods.

Another incident was the capture of a quantity of spirits by the Excisemen, who engaged a local farmer, Samuel Beeching, to take the captured cargo to Hastings. But this man, who 'combined smuggling with agricultural pursuits,' so plied the escorting Excise officers with strong drink that they fell asleep in the wagon. At Bulverhythe the tubs were turned into a field and afterwards retrieved by the innkeeper of the 'Bull.'

Grim incidents of the smuggling days were recorded by Lord Teignmouth and Charles Harper in their work on the smugglers published in 1923, in which it is stated that 'in the old burial ground at Bexhill the writers discovered a melancholy reminder of these lawless times in the shape of two headstones bearing the following inscriptions:

'In memory of David Watts of the Coast Guard Station No. XLII Tower. He was shot and almost instantly expired on the 21st Feb. 1832, aged 45 years. "Short was the warning, quick the summons flew, Ere scarce his weeping friends could bid adieu".

Also
'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.'

The old burial ground was, of course, that in Barrack Road which is now taken over by the Corporation and levelled as a public open space.

(To be continued)

GERMAN PUPILS GRATEFUL

The students from the Real-schule at Wittingen, Hanover, whose visit to Bexhill was reported in last week's 'Observer,' attended the harvest festival at St. Peter's Church, and since their return home have written to the Rector (Rev. M. D. Townroe, R.D.), expressing their appreciation.

Their letter, addressed Dear Sir, and members of the congregation, goes on:—

'We want to thank you, that we were allowed to attend your Harvest Service. It was very kind of you, to introduce us to your way of service. We had a good understanding of all and we felt members of your community.

'We also like things being new to us, giving us some new ideas. And we think that we were able to understand a lot of the sermon. It was a real event for us to be members of a Christian Parish in England. We thank you for that.'

This kindly and thoughtful acknowledgement by the German pupils is much appreciated at the church.