

## Smugglers of Parkgate and Heswall

By Gavin Chappell

During its glory days in the eighteenth century, Parkgate was a bustling place with numerous cottages and lodging houses, inns and alehouses, and a quay where boats and ships moored, some transporting coal from the nearby Denhall collieries. The old customs house still stands, although it is now a private dwelling-place with little to suggest its original function, when it oversaw the collection of customs dues and despatched patrols to deter smugglers – though not always with success.

The customs officers were shorthanded, having only a single riding officer, a mounted revenue man stationed at Dawpool, whose duty was to patrol the Dee shore to search for smugglers. It was a simple matter for smugglers to bring in incredible amounts of contraband, avoiding Parkgate to unload cargoes upriver near Gayton and Heswall.

The land on which Heswall was built was mainly heath, of the kind still visible on Poll Hill and Whitfield Common, or woodland, still to be found in the Beacons and the Dales, and the Dungeon. In the days of the smugglers these were wild, out-of-the-way spots, crossed only by a few lanes and paths, shunned by villagers at night due to rumours of ghosts.

Parts of Heswall still retain the atmosphere of bygone days. Old houses and cottages sit swamped by new developments in many places, and the remaining countryside can be eerie at night. By the shore, where the houses give way to fields sloping down to the beach, things seem to have changed very little since the eighteenth century. Walking these shadowy lanes at night you might perhaps see the Devil's black hearse hurtling down Well Lane, or the strange green figure that haunts the Dales -- if local tradition is to be believed.

One of the earliest references to smuggling in the Dee estuary dates from 1584, when the Controller of Chester complained of "...unlawful conveyances of lether, corne and other merchandyzes and some disorders used in the Creekes of the... porte of Chester..." Little else is recorded of smuggling before the eighteenth century, when an ongoing traffic of contraband existed between Wirral and the Isle of Man. Parkgate was the chief port, along with Dawpool further up the Dee Estuary. Both of these small ports came under the auspices of the Port of Chester.

The government was by no means ignorant of the ongoing "free-trade", and were determined to root it out in the Isle of Man. In 1765, with putting an end to smuggling in mind, the Crown purchased the island from the Stanleys for £70, 000 – an unpopular move that had to be carried out in secrecy. The effect on the Manx economy was little short of disastrous; Wirral was forced to look elsewhere for its illicit luxuries.

Irish packet ships were the source of most contraband entering Parkgate until the nineteenth century. These were ferry boats that sailed between Parkgate and Dawpool to Dublin, carrying passengers, newspapers, and thousands of pounds worth of cargo. Due to the silting up of the Dee, Parkgate was the furthest upstream ships could go until the creation of a channel called the "New Cut" in 1737, which made it possible for ships to reach Chester once again. Despite this, packet ships continued to sail to Parkgate, which was a better place for favourable winds, since the tide would turn and the river become too shallow. Larger vessels offloaded some of their cargo onto smaller boats at Parkgate, so they could navigate the remaining water. This was the moment for which the smugglers were waiting. Once night fell, the crew members involved would ensure their contraband made it ashore.

The work of smuggling now entered the hands of well-armed men working in gangs, capable of holding their own against the revenue men. While the sea smugglers tended to be sailors or fishermen supplementing their existing incomes, the land smugglers were farm labourers who protected the contraband and sped it on its way in return for some extra cash. Considering the low wages most farm workers earned, smuggling must have been a welcome source of extra income, whatever the potential hazards.

Those in employment worked something like a seventy-two hour week, and although their wages would have paid for food, the cost of cooking was beyond most people's means. A farm labourer's earnings would amount to something in the order of seven or eight shillings a week, while a single night's work in the free-trade might pay as much as five shillings to seven-and-six.

We possess two main sources of information for this period: written accounts from records taken by customs men after the capture of smugglers and seizure of their contraband, and traditions recorded by local historian Greg Dawson in his book *Wirral Gleanings*. Local families helped each other in smuggling ventures, working on a small scale that benefited the local community.

Occasionally, however, a "big job" would turn up, financed and organised by local dignitaries, quite possibly including the local magistrates who might otherwise prosecute captured smugglers. Dawson has unearthed evidence to suggest that ship's masters and captains, pilots, members of parliament, and even customs men themselves profited.

Contraband for Parkgate, Neston, or further inland was unloaded at night on Heswall or Gayton Beach. The shore was a wild, desolate place, half a mile from the nearest village; the steep hillsides were swathed in woodland where almost anything could be concealed. For smaller operations, goods would be hidden aboard Irish packet boats, coal sloops heading for Denhall Colliery, cattle boats, or even ships of the Royal Navy. When revenue men were in the vicinity, fishermen would row out to these vessels, and a member of the crew shouted out to the fishermen, asking to buy fish. The fishermen then passed fish up in covered baskets, and a swap would be made, the fish for contraband goods. Then the sailors would lower the baskets back down to the fishermen.

Almost all the people of Heswall, Gayton and Parkgate were connected with smuggling, or at the very least benefited from it, including the clergy, who were happy to receive contraband wine. Customs officers were regarded as tyrants who were to be cheated and gulled with impunity, and they encountered a wall of silence when making enquiries. The smugglers employed an elaborate system of codewords. When there was to be a landing of contraband, it was said that "the ghost walks tonight."

Ghosts were apparently a common sight in Heswall and Parkgate. These legends were either exploited or concocted by smugglers to cover their unlawful operations. In local dialect, ghosts were referred to as "buggens", a word of Welsh origin related to *bogle* and *bugbear*. The name remains in Buggen Lane, which leads from Moorside in Parkgate towards the centre of Neston.

Other supposedly haunted areas included Whitfield Common, where a headless dog was supposed to roam; the Beacons, haunted by a large black hound; the Dales, home to a green ghost; Cottage Lane and Well Lane, where the Devil drove his black hearse at night; and the Bloody Gutter on Heswall Shore, where the ghosts of two mariners, who had fought each other to the death over smuggled goods, haunted a path leading to the shore where the Dungeon Brook reaches the beach.

Buggen Lane, Cottage Lane/Well Lane, Broad Lane and Manners Lane would all have been ideal ways to transport contraband inland from a landing on Heswall Shore. Whitfield Common, the Beacons and the Dales remain wild, largely unspoilt areas. In the eighteenth and early nineteenth century they were only part of the five hundred or more acres of heath that was Heswall Common, perfect country for smugglers to store their goods before transporting them on to the purchaser.

A ship carrying contraband would sail in straight from the open sea and weigh anchor for the night in Gayton Hole, opposite Manners Lane, the best anchorage on the Heswall Shore. Unless they had previously been tipped off, it would take a while before the revenue men were aware of the ship's presence. The land smugglers notified the crew when the coast was clear by shining a lantern from a field up the bank from the shore; due to slight inward curve of the coastline, anyone standing on here would be hidden from both Dawpool Watch House and Parkgate Customs House.

The sea smugglers landed their contraband on the shore at the bottom of Manners Lane. Here the land smugglers – all Heswall residents – would take over the operation. The smugglers would work through the night to transport the illicit goods to some secluded location where they were stored until they could be moved on the next day. These places included those haunted woods in the Dales or the Beacons. The routes by which they were transported were rumoured to be haunted by ghosts and buggens.

The shore was bleak and desolate, almost uninhabited. Four lanes led up from the shore: Broad Lane, which now runs roughly parallel to the Wirral Way; Banks Road, which comes up from the Heswall Yacht Club and Sheldrake's Restaurant; Manners Lane, a former cart track which now leads up to Davenport Road; and Cottage Lane, which joins with Well Lane by Gayton Hall and then up to Gayton Roundabout. Sometimes customs men watched these routes, and alternative paths were required. On nights like these, the smugglers would make their way up the banks of the Scarbrook, a stream which rises near the junction between Thurstaston Road and Telegraph Road, passes down the side of the Dales, and enters the Dee in the vicinity of Gayton Hole. The old route of the Scarbrook now passes through the garden of the house known as "The Cave," named after an artificial cave cut into the rock on the east side of the stream, expressly for the purpose of hiding contraband.

The smugglers rarely took the contraband directly to a cottage or inn in case the revenue men were spying on them. They chose locations in secluded, unfrequented woods and heaths known only to the smugglers, to which they could return the following day.

The next day local farmers drove sheep and cattle down the lanes they had used, in order to cover any tracks the smugglers might have left. When the smugglers were certain the revenue men had no suspicion, they would transport the contraband to their customers, again enlisting the aid of farmers or farm workers, using farm wagons to cart the goods to their destination, concealed under hay or vegetables.

The smugglers' heyday did not last long into the nineteenth century. After the Napoleonic Wars ended the government stepped up its efforts to combat the "wicked trade". As the authorities began to increase their preventive efforts and as navigation and marine technology improved, the opportunities for smuggling became less and less.

At the same time, the living conditions of normal people in Wirral improved dramatically. In 1800, the peninsula, particularly the northern coastline, was a wild, remote place cut off by marsh and bog, in which a small population scratched a living

as farmers or fishermen. By 1850, the working week had shrunk to about fifty hours, while wages had increased. The construction of new roads and bridges, the draining of marshes, the creation of more productive farmland, not to mention an increase in policing, the influx of wealthy and not-so-wealthy “incomers”, and the onset of urbanisation, all combined to transform Wirral from a hotbed of piracy into a place that the local council once touted as the “leisure peninsula”.

*First published in the Heswall Magazine*