

# THE GOLD COAST

The pretty seaside community of Robin Hood's Bay was once the heart of smuggling operations. **Joe Shute** takes a tour of the twisting streets and hidden alleyways that gave Smugglers' Town its fearsome reputation.

# WELCOME TO SMUGGLERS' TOWN

The year is 1779 and the centre of the small fishing port of Robin Hood's Bay teems with activity. Vast ships are moored out in the bay while on land, wooden carts pulled by horses haul the cargo up the narrow cobbled streets to be logged by the port authorities. But at the same time, another altogether more clandestine activity is taking place away from the prying eyes of officialdom. Through secret tunnels and hidden alleys, vast quantities of gin, brandy, tea, tobacco and French lace are being spirited away from the ships to be sold on the black market.

In some of the half dozen or so pubs clustered around the harbour, basement rooms are piled high with smuggled goods; while at the bar grizzled sailors roar and chink tankards through the pipe smoke. The tumbledown houses boast trapdoors and hidden cupboards to enable bootleg items to be more easily transported.

So many of the 900 or so residents of Baytown - as Robin Hood's Bay was known back then - are involved in the smuggling operations that apparently it is possible to pass a bale of silk from the bottom to the top of the village without it ever seeing daylight. 1799 is the year Paul Johnston likes to start his smuggling tour of Robin

**FACT**  
**900**  
Around 900 people lived in Bay Town at the height of smuggling operations

Hood's Bay because it is when the activity was at its most rife. Britain was embroiled in the American War of Independence - indeed on September 23rd of that year Yorkshire inhabitants witnessed the Battle of Flamborough Head for themselves when an American continental navy squadron clashed with Navy vessels escorting a convoy

of merchant ships. But the country was also fighting numerous other battles across the Empire.

As always in times of war, the government hiked up taxes to fund its military ventures. Many civilians, however, had little inclination to pay and up and down the country smuggling began to thrive. In 1779 alone, some



Previous page: Robin Hood's Bay © Mike Kipling. Clockwise from left: A plaque commemorating Reverend John Wesley. Typical fisherman's cottages in Robin Hood's Bay. Getting into character. A secret stone hide. Traditional fisherman's boat. A cottage that was the notorious Fisherman's Arms.



17 million litres of Dutch gin (Genever) was produced for the black market in England.

Yorkshire's East Coast was, in those days, a bleak and isolated location; a world away from the hotchpotch of pretty seaside towns it resembles today. The rocky coves and caves that pockmarked the shoreline made it a natural homeland for smugglers – no more so than the tight-knit community of Robin Hood's Bay. "To an extent it was an entire village operation," says Johnston. "There were several core families involved who you didn't mess around with."

The 55-year-old, who with his partner Maggie runs Fern Dene - a bed and breakfast in a former sea mariner's home - is a wealth of information on such matters. As well as leading the occasional smuggling tour, Johnston also produces the Baytown range of spirits and beers, brewed at nearby Cropton Brewery. The drinks are inspired by individual stories of Yorkshire's dark smuggling past which Johnston delights in re-telling as he - and his business partner George Colson - lead us through the labyrinthine cobbled streets and alleyways that made Robin Hood's Bay the epicentre of the trade.

As with Jamaica Inn, Daphne Du Maurier's famous tale of Cornish smuggling, in Yorkshire much of the illicit activity focused around the pubs. The now-closed Mariner's Tavern, Johnston points out, "was the heart of smuggling in the village" and a place where the sole Customs Officer who was posted to Robin Hood's Bay feared to tread.

So too, the Fisherman's Arms, also now closed. On an autumn evening in October 1779, Revenue officers backed by the local militia raided the pub and seized 200 casks of gin and brandy, 150 sacks of tea and a small armoury of blunderbusses and cartridges. Local legend has it that the Customs men tasked with guarding the seized spirits overnight sampled rather too much for themselves and fell asleep - allowing the smuggling gang to return and retake the bulk of their contraband.



## Goods were whisked up from ships to caves, houses or coastal farms and then moved inland

Other clashes, of course, did not end so neatly. At the Saltersgate Inn, a meeting point for gangs on the moorland road to Pickering, Johnston says, "the pub had a fire that was supposed to never go out as beneath it was the body of a Customs officer after he had been killed by a smuggling gang."

The money at stake meant those involved in the trade were desperate to protect their interests at all costs. "People earned 25p a week and that was the duty on a barrel of brandy," Johnston says. "If you were involved in the smuggling trade you could make £1 in a single night."

On shore, the enterprise was highly organised and the potential riches on offer meant all classes of society were involved. Goods were whisked up from ships to caves, houses or coastal farms and then moved inland following packhorse trails before being dispersed across the country, even as far as London.

At Thorpe Hall, a 17th century Elizabethan manor house in the nearby village of Fylingthorpe,

### Don't miss

The Farsyde family of Thorpe Hall were involved in shipping and smuggling in the local area. There is still an enclosed secret stone hide in the rear garden thought to have been a stash to hide contraband. It is said that it was used to store a barrel of brandy for the local constable's cooperation.

the Fawside family who lived there were well known for their involvement in shipping and smuggling. Johnston points out an oddly carved crook of banister on one of its twisting staircases which indicated a secret compartment below. Out in the gardens, near to a large fish pond, a smuggling pit still exists that was used to receive a regular cask of brandy in order to ensure the co-operation of the local police.

According to Michael Knaggs, a volunteer at the Scarborough Maritime Heritage Centre which contains a treasure-trove of old documents detailing the extent of the smuggling operations that existed on the East Coast, at its height some 30 - 40 per cent of those that lived here were involved. "We think of smuggling now as an almost quaint activity but it was pretty brutal back then," he says.

In the 18th century, two prominent kingpins ruled the North Sea: George "Stoney" Fagg and David "Smoker" Browning. Fagg's ship, the Kent, was eventually captured off Filey in 1777 with 200 tonnes of contraband onboard. Both Fagg and Browning had ransoms placed on their heads and the penalties for smuggling were severe. Those caught were either flogged, jailed, or deported. The smugglers often fought to the death to evade capture and many on both sides lost their lives.

In 1817, a sea battle between the Revenue cutter Ranger and a heavily-armed smuggling lugger raged from Robin Hood's Bay all the way to Yarmouth. In total, two smugglers and three Revenue men were killed and seven others wounded. The smugglers eventually abandoned ship leaving behind a cargo of contraband worth £10,000. "The Revenue," says Johnston, "always gets its revenge."

As the 19th century progressed, the authorities managed to gain an upper hand on the smugglers and many of those who had made vast profits in Robin Hood's Bay began to invest the money in more legitimate enterprises. But even nowadays, the smugglers still come.

One Robin Hood's Bay resident, Jim Foster, is a retired Customs officer stationed in Teesside who used to work all along the East Coast. Standing outside The Bay Hotel, which overlooks the water, Foster recalls various hauls that the authorities managed to thwart in the area and says even in the modern era the geography of the coastline continues to make it an ideal location for smuggling.

"I certainly pity the one customs man who used to work in Robin Hood's Bay," he says, "it wouldn't have been an easy job." As Foster speaks he casts a wary eye out over the North Sea - all is flat and seemingly calm but who knows what secrets are still being whisked to shore.

Joe Shute stayed at The Fern Suite in Fylingthorpe. Call **01947 880513** or go to [www.thefernsuite.com](http://www.thefernsuite.com)

He ate at The Victoria Hotel, Robin Hood's Bay. Call **01947 880205** or go to [www.victoriarhb.com](http://www.victoriarhb.com)

You can book Smuggler Tours with Paul Johnston throughout the year. Call **01947 880513** or go to [www.baytownrhb.com](http://www.baytownrhb.com)

### Experience

The Victoria Hotel in Robin Hood's Bay has a panoramic sea view restaurant boasting the best views in Robin Hood's Bay. Enjoy a candle-lit dinner whilst sampling superb cuisine, using local suppliers so quality is guaranteed.

## SMUGGLER STATS

**40%**

At its height 30 - 40% of those that lived in the village were involved in smuggling.

**£1**

People earned 25p a week. If you were involved in the smuggling trade you could make £1 in a single night.

**£10k 200**

The value of the cargo left behind after a sea battle between smugglers and Revenue men in 1817. Two smugglers and three Revenue men were killed.

When George Fagg's ship, the Kent, was captured off Filey in 1777 it had 200 tonnes of contraband onboard.



Left to right: Wooden carts pulled by horses hauled cargo up narrow streets. A reminder of the village's rich heritage. The Bay Hotel overlooking the water. Robin Hood's Bay in the early 1900s.

