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.
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 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

FACT

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

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 hustle and bustle 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, the sole Customs Officer who was posted to Robin Hood’s Bay feared to tread.

Other clashes, of course, did not end so neatly. At the Saltsgate 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 £25 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, 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 Fylingthorpe in 1777. Two smugglers and three Revenue men were killed. “We think of smuggling now as an almost quaint activity but it was pretty brutal back then,” he says.

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