

Criminal Spirits – Gin and Whisky Smuggling in the Borders.

An empty ship that is fully loaded, a person that turns into a mule and a hearse with no body but full of spirit were three 19th Century conundrums put before Glendale Local History Society at their latest meeting.

Graeme Watson from Yetholm was the conundrum setter and his subject was smuggling in the Scottish Borders. Borders exist to control movement across them – movement of people and goods, often at a price – and where money is involved people will always try to get round the rules.

In the early 19th Century, the commodity was alcohol, specifically *water of life* from Scotland and *mother's ruin* from the continent. While governments today may recognise the harmful effects of society's addictions, they have always recognised their potential as a lucrative source of revenue – hence domestic taxation and import duty imposed on wines and spirits. Where government enacts there will always be those who choose to evade.

In the Borders this was done in two ways – illegal stills concealed in the Cheviot hills and the secreting of whisky into England from Scotland. This latter was made somewhat easier and more lucrative because until the 1850's there were differential rates of duty either side of the border. Is there a lesson for our own times in that?

So, it was with Gin from the Continent. The levying of import duty led to large quantities of gin being landed on the Northumbrian coast and taken by packhorse into Scotland by little known routes across the Border. Boulmer to Yetholm was a favourite and in one notorious case a gang was intercepted on Old Berwick bridge. A pitched battle ensued between Revenue Men and Smugglers with death and injury on both sides.

With the stakes so high violence was an inevitable accompaniment to the "trade" – something that with hindsight has been glossed over. Even in their own time the "gentlemen" were romanticized in popular culture. Men they may have been, but gentle is some way from the truth!

So, what brought it to an end? Various legislations and more effective policing through the 19th century had an effect but like much else in history things don't go away but reappear in another form.

So, to put those conundrums into the 21st century. Customs and excise still discover yachts with hidden compartments stashed full of contraband, travellers are regularly intercepted with stuff hidden about their persons and not all conveyances are what they appear - closer inspection sometimes reveals a lot more!

The next meeting of Glendale Local History Society will be on February 9th when Derek Sharman will give a talk on The Barony of Wooler in the 13th Century.

CJB (13/01/22).