Customs & Excise History Network

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Rummage Through the Ages

McCoy's Dictionary of Customs and Excise defines rummage as: "The search of a ship by Customs and Excise Officers to ascertain that there are no prohibited or dutiable goods concealed on board."

During the "golden age" of English smuggling (from the smugglers' viewpoint at least!) of the mid to late eighteenth century, hiding prohibited or dutiable goods in ships had not been necessary. So wild was the coast, so few the forces of the separate Customs and Excise services, so willing the local coastal population to smuggle, that huge quantities of contraband goods were openly landed on the country's beaches. Indeed, smugglers were so confident of being unmolested that they often carried out this work in broad daylight! The pleas of Customs Collectors to their masters in London – safely ensconced in their comfortable Custom House away from the privations and trials of their staff – went mostly unheeded. If they were lucky they received the occasional new cutlass or pistol, but more often they were admonished for the laziness and lack of seizures by their overworked and unloved officers.

The 1820 Instructions for Customs Tide Surveyors at the outports stated:

You are, then, in person, carefully with your boatmen to rummage the hold, cabins and all suspicious places...and in case you discover any prohibited goods, or any small parcel or parcels of fine or other goods in portmanteaus, hampers, trunks, or other small packages...as also all bags and bundles of tobacco, and other loose tobacco, tea, wines, brandy and other liquors, in bottles, flasks, or unsizable [sic] casks, except French wines, and wine of all sorts from the islands of Jersey, Guernsey, or Alderney....And you are to observe that ships of war, transports, and all other vessels in the government service, are liable to be searched, both inwards and outwards.

and for the lowly Boatmen:

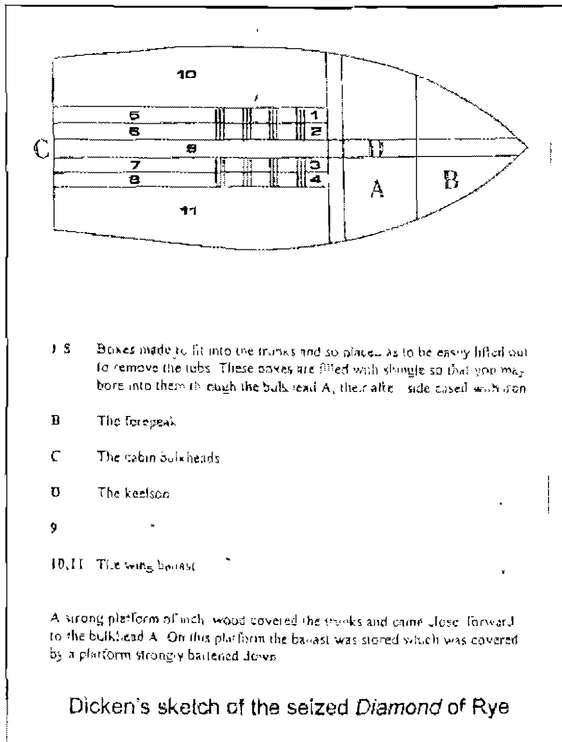
You are to make yourself perfectly acquainted with the construction of ships and vessels, and are carefully and diligently to rummage all such places therein as you may be directed to do by the Tide Surveyor, or other principal officer who accompanies you, in order to find out concealments and frauds.

The most successful contrivances for smuggling, because they were difficult to detect, were by means of false bottoms, or ingeniously contrived concealments inside the vessel itself. One of the earliest cases concerned the smack *Flower of Rye*, which when seized was found to have a false bow, holding nearly 50 half-ankers of spirits (about 200 gallons), where a small piece, which could be removed, was fastened by two screws, the heads of which were concealed by wooden plugs disguised as trenails (wooden pegs used to fasten a ship's timbers).

Another seizure was made in Rye in 1822, by Lieutenant Dicken, Commander of the *Enchantress* Sussex Coast Blockade Guard Ship moored on a mud dock in that port:

"I bored with a gimlet through the bulkhead which secures the ballast forward and bored into something which I clearly felt was not shingle. I therefore commenced removing her ballast which consisted of first shingle, next two tins of iron closely stowed, and under which another layer of shingle. On removing this I discovered a platform under which were four trunks of sufficient breadth to contain one tub each and about twelve feet long. The trunks are loaded by entering the tubs at the foremost end and pushing them aft, a line being fastened to the aftermost tub to draw them out again. To prevent detection from

boring *each trunk was footed at its foremost extremity next the bulkhead with a small box the shape of the trunk and about three inches wide, one inside of which was lined with iron. This box was filled with shingle so that in* ***boring,*** *your gimlet would penetrate the box and get into the shingle and passing through it come against the iron plate which would lead you to suppose you were touching the iron ballast."*



Dicken's sketch of the seized *Diamond* of Rye

It is very obvious from the nature of these discoveries that the concealments must have been specifically ordered from the boat-builder when vessels were commissioned. It is impossible to know how many were never discovered, but removing the contraband must have been quite an effort. Of course, once caught, masters could hardly claim ignorance of their illicit cargoes, so cunningly and painstakingly had they been concealed from the prying eyes of the revenue men!

So strongly did the owners of the *Diamond* feel about their livelihood being taken away from them that some of them attacked Dicken in the street a few days after the seizure. The Lieutenant had just dined with the local Customs Collector and, together with his Portuguese servant Poncho, was returning to *Enchantress* when two men ambushed them. Dicken's arm was broken in two places by one of them and, according to a contemporary account, he turned to see his "cowardly servant, though well-armed and unhurt, crouching under the raised bludgeon of another smuggler." The assailants were captured and had time to reflect on their actions during their spell in the local House of Correction.

In the early 1820s a further assault took place as a result of a rummage, this time on Joseph Swaine, a Hastings fisherman who was shot by George England of the Coast Blockade. Swaine and his partner had been trying to winch their boat up across the shingle to the safety of its berth adjacent to the market place. England tried to insist on boarding the vessel to rummage her, fearful that the fisherman, whom he suspected of smuggling, would get their contraband away under the cover of the crowds. A scuffle ensued and Swaine was shot dead on the spot, though witnesses disagreed about exactly what had taken place. England was tried for murder at the Horsham Assizes but was acquitted with a verdict of accidental death.

Moving ahead to the 20th century, the *Customs Code of Regulations* for 1906 contains a special paragraph about the rummaging of fishing vessels, with an emphasis on the prevalence of tobacco smuggling:

The favourite place of concealment is in the ballast bags, which ordinarily contain shingle; but the boatmen have smaller bags made to go inside the ballast bags, and in these smaller bags the tobacco is put; or they will have one bag of shingle and one bag of tobacco lashed together, so that, if hard pressed, they can drop the bags overboard, when the shingle sinks the tobacco [reminiscent of the methods used by their ancestors a century earlier].

In boarding boats the boarding line should always be shifted, as it is frequently coiled around and over a package of tobacco, with an old oilskin or something of that kind thrown over it.

Many boats carry a "boat's box" with a false bottom. In searching such a box it is necessary to remove all the firewood, kettles and other articles that are in it, and prise up the centreboard at the apparent bottom.

In searching the locker aft, it is requisite to look well round the top inside, as there is often a ledge on which a considerable quantity of Cavendish can be stored, which might not be detected by a rapid glance.

The superficial rummage which suffices for an ordinary Waterman's boat is quite useless with a boat of

the class here referred to, and unless the latter is thoroughly and minutely overhauled she may have a hundredweight of tobacco in her without its being seen.

The instructions finish with some comments about methods employed by trawlers working from the East Coast ports:

Offal fish is purchased from the fishing fleet and placed over the tobacco in the hold, so as to make it appear that the men have been legitimately employed in fishing, the smell of the tobacco being at the same time neutralised by that of the fish. The iron with which the trawl beam is shod is polished to make it appear as if recently used, and the trawl or nets are wetted for the same purpose.

Notes on Smuggling and its Detection, published in 1936 for the use of Waterguard Officers (my copy bears the 1938 date stamp of a Mr. Couch, Liverpool Chief Preventive Officer) provided a handy pocket guide to the wiles of smugglers and the art of rummage.

Although new tricks are tried, and very often with success, sailors persist steadily in the old methods. The outlines of smuggling methods known to have been adopted and the observations thereon contained in this brochure will therefore, it is hoped, be found of interest and use to the newcomer and possibly even to some of the older members of the Service.

Rummaging is undoubtedly a most important part of the work of the Waterguard Officer. It is at times arduous and dirty, but the keen officer will not hesitate to dirty his overalls in pursuit of his game.

The concealment of dutiable or prohibited goods on board vessels is the principal method adopted by seamen when they intend to land goods without payment of duty or to evade any import prohibition.

Where, as frequently happens, a vessel cannot be effectively rummaged throughout, it is of much greater value thoroughly to rummage a part than to make a hurried and superficial examination of the whole vessel. If the officer has used his powers of observation he will probably be able to decide whether further search is desirable or necessary.

Success in rummaging depends to a great extent on a careful study of the movements and demeanour of members of the crew.

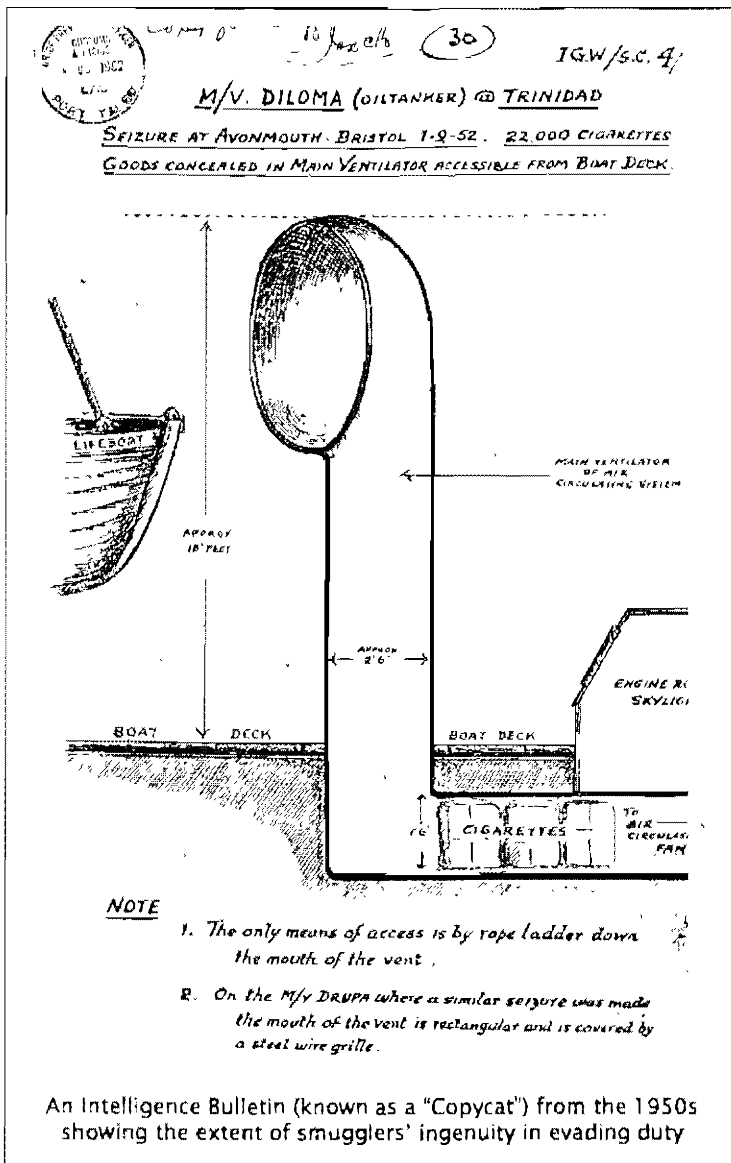
Usually the rummage crew works according to a plan pre-arranged in consultation between its members and on occasion with the advice of the Chief Preventive Officer, care being taken to ensure that the officers are fully equipped with the necessary rummaging tools to carry out effectively the rummage as planned.

The manual goes on to give practical advice to potential rummagers about how to adopt a systematic approach to whatever part of the ship they are in, whether engine rooms, stokeholds, coal bunkers (*an unpleasant, dirty job and the heat from the boilers adds to this discomfort*), and crew cabins. In those days, rummaging tools were still fairly primitive, and judicious use of the spit was advocated as well as the ubiquitous screwdriver. In the latter case, the guide recommended that officers set a row of screw heads one way, to enable them to see if they had changed on any subsequent visit to the same vessel.

A series of articles entitled ***On the Art of Successful Rummaging*** appeared in the 1930s editions of the *Customs Journal*, where experienced officers readily gave their general opinions and practical tips. The following lyrical piece gets to the core of the issue.

"Rummaging" does not mean shovelling coal, nor crawling about under engine-room plates, nor turning over miles of canvas and rope in forepeaks, nor searching among crews' clothes or officers' quarters or

passengers' effects, in any aimless or haphazard style. It means, rather, the performance of all these and many other varieties of activity in a brainy and timely manner; and it is only then, when the zest and energy of the artist at work are brought into rummaging, that it can ever hope to be really successful. There is, indeed, probably no form of work in which a man is given more scope for combining the full use of his wits, eyes and hands.



An Intelligence Bulletin (known as a "Copycat") from the 1950s showing the extent of smugglers' ingenuity in evading duty

*The qualities so necessary to the successful rummager can all be summed up under the heading of the "detective" instinct. They are all **mental** properties and, to give the best results, should be found in conjunction with physical ones which would rival those of the detective of schoolboy fiction. For, to be successful, the rummager must possess the strength of a blacksmith, the activity of an acrobat, and the tirelessness of a machine.*

Assuming all Waterguard Officers to be possessed of these essential qualifications and to combine with them the enthusiasm of an artist for his job, there would seem to be no reason why, in time, this important and highly skilled work of rummaging should not receive its just recognition as such – recognition that is now long overdue.

News from the Museum: *Seized- Revenue and Customs Uncovered*

The new museum has welcomed more than 170,000 visitors since opening in May 2008. Undoubtedly Liverpool's success in hosting the City of Culture has brought record numbers to the Maritime Museum site. We owe a huge debt of thanks to many who have contributed in ways small and large to the success of the new gallery.

The process of creating a gallery radically condenses information. Research covering several pages and more can be reduced to one line on gallery. There were times when space, cost, coherence would mean no presence. Yet the gallery does cover a far greater subject spectrum than its predecessor. It is a story dominated by Customs and the perfect medium to showcase some of the museum's unique objects: a steel girder, a King's chest, a model of Liverpool Custom House, Lear's Macaw seized from a Yorkshire farmer, and a maker's model of the latest cutter 'Vigilant'.

In these uncertain times we are currently pulling together our 3 year plan from 2010. More of this in the next issue, but you may rest assured that our acknowledgement of Customs and its collections will not be severed lightly in any future re-organisation. The museum is perfectly placed to tell the wider story of the new Border Agency.

You can obtain a complete set of back numbers, in a thermal binding cover, by sending an A4 SAE plus £3.90 to *John Pink, 6 Inns Court, Grove Road, Surbiton, Surrey, KT6 4BE*

If you would like to be on the mailing list, please drop a line to *Karen Bradbury, Curator, HM Customs & Excise National Museum, c/o Merseyside Maritime Museum, Dock Traffic Office, Albert Dock, Liverpool, L3 4AX*

Please send any items for the newsletter to: Mark Bullen HM Revenue & Customs, 2 Rivergate, Temple Quay, Bristol, BS1 6EJ (Tel: 0117 372 2047) or e-mail Mark at: **mark.bullen@hmrc.gsi.gov.uk**