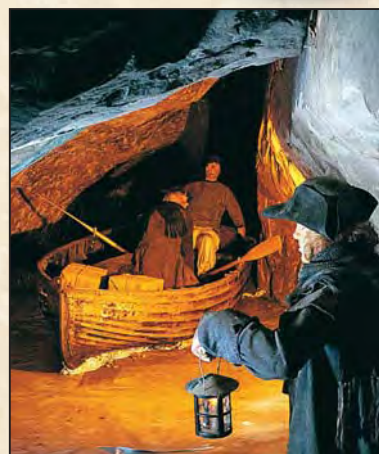




# When Hawkhurst Ruled the Weald...



Pouncer,  
Funny Jack,  
Footsey and  
Butcher Tom...



These characters sound as though they could have stepped out of a nursery rhyme, but in reality they were 18th-century smugglers who would have given most small children nightmares.

Nearly 300 years ago, stories about the Hawkhurst Gang were on everybody's lips, not just in the Wealden village where this notorious band of smugglers based their lucrative business, but across the south-east, stretching from Deal in Kent to Poole in Dorset. A hard core of Gang leaders ran what appears to have been a village-wide 'cottage industry' with much of the rural population taking part in the larger free-trading operations.

Smugglers hatched their plans for smuggling of tea, brandy, rum and coffee from France and the Channel Islands in the local pubs still running today, from Hastings to Hawkhurst, Rye to Goudhurst.

Eventually, Hawkhurst Gang leader Arthur Gray was captured, tried at the Old Bailey for smuggling at Lydd and executed in 1748. He was then hung in chains. Thomas Kingsmill from Goudhurst assumed leadership, though the Gang's influence was reduced after its defeat by the Goudhurst Band of Militia in April 1747. Kingsmill and other Gang members were tried at the Old Bailey, executed and gibbeted near their villages in 1749.

Text © Sarah Lovell  
Selected from Sara Lovell's article in Kent Life, Nov 2009.  
See [www.kent-life.co.uk](http://www.kent-life.co.uk)



## The Queens Inn Hawkhurst,

is famed for receiving Elizabeth I when journeying to or from Rye in 1573. Whereas it is barely known the cruel inhospitality meted out to two soldiers of Lord John Murray's Regiment of Highlanders, "quarter'd at Rye in Sussex (who) were coming to London, by Leave of their Commanding Officer, (where) upon their arrival at Hawkhurst in Kent ... they were billited at the Inn ... and soon after their Arrival there, they were assaulted by upwards of twenty Persons, whom ... (they) apprehend were Smuglers, being arm'd with Blunderbusses and Pistols."



Such a statement published by Order of Commissioners at The Custom-House, London, April 14, 1746, thereby promised Persons making Discovery of Person or Persons concern'd in the said Assault, the Reward of Fifty pounds.

The Queens Inn publican had alerted the Hawkhurst Gang of visiting Revenue, thereby inflaming 'that nest of vermin' to 'barbarously abuse' the soldiers, such that 'it is doubtful whether (one) will not die of the wounds'. Hawkhurst's history is dominated by that notorious gang of smugglers who supplied goods and then terrorised the Weald between 1735 and 1749.

Hawkhurst 'smokkelen' journeyed from 17th Century 'owling' exporting Wool illegally to the Continent, onto 18th Century 'freetrading' Brandy and Hollands imports to England, hidden and stored, it is claimed by a few, in safe side tunnels off wells at Fowlers Park, just a few score paces eastward.

Text © John Dawes

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