

Smugglers and Smuggling in Henfield
by Maureen Fletcher

It all happened a long time ago, very few records exist and a lot of the tales of smuggling in Henfield were handed down in folklore and legend and so I shall say from the start I cannot be sure how much is true and how much is hearsay and so you must take some of it with a 'pinch of salt'.

I only know the name of one man in the village who was thought to be a smuggler and that was John Woolgar, known as 'Black Jack Woolgar'. He was said to be the leader of a smuggling gang. Most recently school children in the village, (mine included), have done projects on him at one-time or another. How much is true, I'm not sure but with the help of a few books on Henfield and ancestry website I think I may have found the person who fits his description. It was not easy as there were many Woolgar families in the village at the time. The Woolgar family in Henfield date back to at least the 14th century. Their family home was situated just north of Stretham Bridge, a farm known as Pokerlee now long gone.

Taken from 'The Story of Henfield' by Henry de Candole Vicar of Henfield, 1947.

'It would indeed scarcely be unfair to speak of smuggling as among the minor industries of Henfield and its bygone days. Old men, dead not long since, were still full of stories of the smuggling days, and almost within living memory John Woolgar known as "Black Jack" of smuggling fame, occupied an old cottage next to Whapham's.

And indeed I found a John Woolgar and his wife Elizabeth living next door to Whapham's in the census's of 1841, 1851, 1861 and 1871. John was born around 1787 in Henfield and married to Elizabeth Martin who was also born in Henfield. They had one son, also called John Woolgar, who was born in Henfield in 1812.

John Woolgar's occupation was gardener and market gardener, according to the census. The painting here could depict his cottage. Painted in 1877 by Lewis Pinhorn Wood the year John died. It is on the site where the house called Tipnoak stands today on the corner of Neptown Road and the High Street.



John and Elizabeth's son, John, was living with his parents and working as a carpenter in 1841, he later married and moved to Horsham. In 1851, interestingly his occupation was carpenter and tea dealer..... make what you will of that. He became a journeyman carpenter and then went on to be a master builder employing 13 men and 6 boys in 1871. He lived at 14 The Causeway Horsham, and so did well for himself.

14 The Causeway



Another reference is in the book 'Through the Lens of Marjorie Baker'. It refers to Whapham's belonging in the 1800's to a widow, Mary Falconer and her daughter Caroline Faulconer. I indeed found them in 1841, 1851 and 1861 living next door to John Woolgar. It states that close by was an old cottage where John Woolgar lived with his wife and nephew, a man with three thumbs nick named 'Twicketts'. It also again mentions that John was a member of the local smuggling gang and was known as 'Black Jack'. I found out that there were indeed 2 nephews living with John and Elizabeth, they were Robert Smith and William Martin both from Elizabeth's side of the family. Robert was living with them in 1841 and 1851 and then he married and lived in Neptown. William was living with them in 1851 but died in 1859 age 33. Were these two part of the gang?



I discovered that Mary Faulconer, who lived in Whapham's, could have been related to John Woolgar by marriage, Mary would have been John's brother's sister - in-law. Mary's father - in law, William Faulconer, had owned Henfield Place. (make a note of this for later on)

Whapham's

Henfield was an ideal spot for smugglers and smuggling, just inland from the coast. The river Adur close by, which was navigable in those days. Quiet hidden lanes and isolated farm houses with cellars and barns to hide goods. One of the places mentioned is New Inn Farm on the west side of the village by the river and once a hostelry for barge men.

This is an account of the way the goods would have travelled through the outskirts of the village: -

"The smuggled goods were landed on the coast, brought over the Downs and worked up country along many hollow lanes running almost deserted into the Weald. Between Oreham Common and Catsland's is a ford into Henfield Parish with a track to the north. The old cottage formerly Woolven's, at the N.E. corner of Oreham Common, known among smugglers as Blockhead's Inn, had ample cellars which were a frequent repository for Smuggled goods.

From there the track is called 'Old Man's Neck' leading north, a turning to Eastout and Hundredsteddle where there were sand caves there and at Holedean Farm where goods could be hidden. The track would then head north again crossing the Brighton Road and follow the unfrequented path to Bilsborough and Park Farm continuing the journey up country to London".

Woolven's (Blockhead's Inn) and Holedean



There were other places in the village that are mentioned where goods were hidden, the southernmost table tomb close to the Church porch and funnily enough the old yew tree close by a deep recess at Henfield Place.

To frighten people from discovering the smuggled goods and to stop people going anywhere near the places they worked they would put about mysterious stories of ghostly appearances and some of them still resonate today. I remember being told as a child about the ghost of a woman that appeared on a bridge in Furners Lane and now I know where the origin of this story comes from. The legend was of the ghostly appearance a headless lady who was reported to sit and spin on Pickwell Bridge over Turnham's Gill along Furners Lane. She may therefore owe her reputation to the smuggling fraternity. There was also a story put about of the ghostly appearance of an animal the size of a calf with flaming eyes seen in the woods.

Other stories were told of how farmers having left their horses well groomed and in their stables in the evening, would find them in the morning covered in mud and sweat, but in the manger a keg of spirit or bale of silk could be found. Another memory passed down was that on one occasion a hearse was seen to be backed into The Plough yard and found to contain smuggled goods.

Ten years before 'Black Jack' Woolgar was born, on Sunday 6 December 1778 a band of 190 mounted men, their horses laden with bags of tea and bales of cloth, rode through the main street of Henfield. With them, as captives, were seven revenue officers who were later released unharmed. They were fortunate, some officers were killed in fights where they were helplessly outnumbered whilst others were found dead after unexplained falls off cliff tops. Taken from 'The Coast Blockade'.

References; -

The Story of Henfield by Henry de Candole (Vicar of Henfield) 1947

Henfield Through the Lens of Majorie Baker, Editor Alan Barwick 2007

The Coast Blockade (The Royal Navy's War on Smuggling 1817-31) Roy Philp 1999

www.ancestryco.uk

Henfield Smugglers Walk

1. Start in Henfield Church yard. On the south side of the Church you will find several table tombs here is where it is thought that some of the smuggled goods were hidden.
2. Head south out of the Church yard passed the Catholic Church to the Tan Yard duck pond turn left and go along Cagefoot Lane to the High Street, turn right at the end and head to the Shell garage.
3. Pass the Shell garage and the second house (opposite the fire station) is Whaphams where Mary Faulconer and daughter Caroline lived. As you reach the corner of Neptown Road and the High Street you will pass Tipnoak house the spot where John Woolgar's cottage stood.
4. Cross the road to the grassy bank known as Borrer's Bank and head down the path to Barrow Hill.
5. Follow the path for a short distance until it branches left up the hill to the Lidds, at the top pass some grapevines on your right. Walk for about ½ a mile along the Lidds. Look south and in the distance sits Oreham Common and imagine the goods coming up from there.

6. After the $\frac{1}{2}$ mile take the first footpath on your right down a steep hill at the side of a field. Follow it as it turns left at the bottom. Don't take the path on the right but go over the track. Follow the path along two meadows and over some duck boards. Here the path turns left up the hill and around the house called Eastout. (you are now on the smugglers route). The path then comes to a tarmac lane, head north to the Brighton Road passing Hundredsteddle on your left.
7. Cross the main road to the footpath on the other side and head north down the hill keeping to the path passing through a wood known as Bluebell Wood to the locals. Ignore the path on the right and then the one on the left and find your way still going north. The path can be wet at times and people have made a new path on the left behind the hedge. The true path is in a dark damp hollow much like their route would have been.
8. You should come out on Furners Lane at a crossroads. You can at this point take a short walk up to Billsborough, as sign posted, and on to Park Farm where the smugglers would have made their way. Or just turn left back down Furners Lane towards Henfield.
9. Walk west along Furners Lane and you will come to a dip with a stream at the bottom this is Pickwell Bridge. Here you will have to lookout for the headless woman at her spinning wheel 🙊
10. Walk until you get to Backsettown house on your left and take the next footpath left and then right, walk west through Furners Mead until you come to a twitten that takes you through to the Plough Inn where the hearse with the smuggled goods was found. Now stand and imagine the 190 men riding down the High Street in 1778.



