

Incentive Payments and the Sale of Smuggled Goods in Dorset in the Eighteenth Century

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Customs duties provided a steady annual income for the eighteenth-century Exchequer, and further legislation added dutiable items, which by 1787 totalled 1,425 articles. Customs officers in London and the out-ports were enjoined to collect 'every duty which is to be paid upon the importation or exportation of goods, wares or merchandize'.¹ Duties were rarely inconsequential and every penny paid added to the goods' costs. Naturally, traders attempted to evade payment, and the Customs Commissioners anticipated some degree of fraud and bribery in every port. However, smuggling contributed far more than fraud and bribery to the considerable loss of annual revenue. In 1723 the Board of Trade estimated from calculations made on the balance of trade between 1689 and 1719 that smuggling equalled fully one third of the entire legitimate trade between England and France and Holland.² A later estimate showed that 'free traders', as smugglers styled themselves, lost the Exchequer at least two-fifths of its potential customs revenue.³ Any dutiable article was liable to be smuggled, but the smugglers' staple commodities were firstly popular, and secondly carried high duties, namely tea, tobacco, wine and spirits.

Successive governments loaded tea with duties, and from a modest level of 36% of net cost in 1712 the proportion of duty rose to 64% in 1768, and 106% in 1780.⁴ France, Sweden, Denmark and Holland, had been trading in tea since the early years of the eighteenth century, and, with the latter's exception, smugglers were relied upon to dispose of surplus stocks. The Channel Islands – outside British customs control, but a short sailing distance from the English coast – provided a convenient entrepôt. The quantity of tea smuggled continued to rise. The House of Commons was informed in 1745 that three of the four million pounds weight of tea annually consumed in England was smuggled,⁵ a figure which doubled with tea drinking's fashionability by the 1780s.⁶ Dorset's proximity to the Channel Islands, and its multiple convenient landing places, was reflected in its customs officers responsibility for 10% of all tea seized in England in 1773–6.⁷ Tea rapidly became the smugglers'

chief commodity, and fluctuations in other illegal trades, notably tobacco and spirits, paralleled the fortunes of tea sales.⁸

Tea and tobacco were bulky but light cargoes, inadequate for the ballast required for the smugglers' fast-sailing, cross-channel cutters and luggers; the inclusion of wines and spirits provided the weight necessary for nautical stability, while making additional profits.⁹ A hogshead of claret in 1709 cost £22.0.6. of which £17.2.2. was duty. Brandy duties exceeded £75 per tun in 1720, while rum imposts were 4/6 a gallon in 1755. Duties on French wine rose from £48 per tun in 1735 to £90 by 1782. By avoiding such payments smugglers sold wines and spirits at much lower prices than those charged by legitimate traders. With large volumes crossing the coast, everybody expected that customs officers frequently seized considerable quantities of geneva, rum, brandy, and wine. Twenty-seven percent of rum seized in England between 1773 and 1776 had crossed the Dorset coast, and if not popular nationally, local demand in Devon and Dorset was buoyant, principally owing to its favour as a cheap drink in the important Newfoundland trade. Consumption of rum increased after 1740 owing to shortages of grain spirits, and with brandy being enjoyed by all classes, Dorset's customs warehouses always held substantial volumes of both.¹⁰

In 1764 the Customs Commissioners launched a formal enquiry into smuggling between the Channel Islands and west country ports. Lyme Customs replied that 'Goods of all kinds . . . are landed without any payment,' from the Islands, chiefly brandy, rum, tea, tobacco, salt and wine. Poole, despite little direct trade with the Islands, was heavily involved in clandestine operations in 'Tea and other India goods of all kinds, Rum, Geneva, Currants, Brandies from France and Spain . . . wines of all sorts, strong Beer, Flower, Malt, Wool, and French Molasses'. Controllers in Southampton, Exeter, and Weymouth, confirmed these observations. They knew that in the Channel Islands, goods from France, Denmark, Sweden and Holland 'are all deposited . . . for the conveniency of running them into this kingdom'. Smugglers had no difficulty in purchasing all they wanted, for 'there is no duty paid . . . either on importation or exportation', and moreover 'the inhabitants of Guernsey . . . style themselves merchants, and keep shops or warehouses for vending to smugglers'.¹¹

While the Islands remained the source, some Dorset smugglers took advantage of France's proximity, and traded in tea, wine and brandy, directly with French ports. Smuggling vessels sometimes liaised with passing East India ships, and traded with the masters before they docked in London. If not a major source for smugglers, such operations had a nuisance value for the customs men.¹²

Dorset customs knew smugglers' methods, and the routes and destin-

ations for distribution of the goods. Smuggling vessels 'wait for a favourable but pretty stiff Gale of wind . . . when they make for the first convenient place . . . there they sink their brandy . . . carry of their Tea . . . and land the same lodging it among the Rocks, Bushes, Ditches and Fields adjoining where it can be most conveniently secured untill it can be carry'd off which is generally the same night . . .'.¹³ On any stretch of coast thinly protected by customs men, smugglers commonly boldly landed their goods openly, and even relied on local people to advertise their presence, to the point of providing buyers. One witness told the Weymouth Controller that 'on Thursday last at Worbarrow . . . five vessels runned their goods there being then a Perfect fair at the Waterside some Buying of goods other loading of Horses . . . as many in Number as . . . might be usually at Dorchester Fair.'¹⁴ The customs men identified three main routes out of the county. Some smuggled goods were carried through Sherborne 'to Bristol and other great Towns that way, and also into Gloucester and Worcester'. A second route – for the goods landed in the Purbecks – led north through Wareham and the Piddle valley. The third, favoured by smugglers using Bournemouth and Christchurch beaches, led to Wimborne and then north to Bristol and Gloucester, or directly by road to London.

Detection of smugglers and seizure of their goods was the responsibility of the customs staff, based on the three Dorset ports. In 1700 there were sixty-one officers in Poole, Weymouth and Lyme, including a small number of Riding Officers, whose responsibilities included patrolling the coastline to record the movement of all ships, especially vessels 'hovering' or illegally unloading.¹⁵ But the chief watchdogs of the coast were the sloops and cutters of the customs service. These offshore patrols were increased, inflating the staff to ninety-one by 1800, through the inclusion of sailors in the shore establishment, though from the 1750s they were fortified by Royal Navy cruisers.¹⁶ Overall responsibility devolved on three Customs Controllers, who attended the daily business of the ports in clearing and receiving ships, collecting duties, and detecting smuggling over a coastline offering dozens of suitable landing places over some eighty miles. The task was perennially difficult, frequently hazardous due to the inevitable violence, and recurrently rendered impossible through the local populace's general sympathy and support of the smugglers.

Despite quite detailed knowledge about the smugglers' routes, the few customs men available for intercepting goods made little impression on the smugglers' trade owing to the participation of armed gangs who were fully prepared to use violence. Threats, intimidation, and the violent climate, were such that magistrates and customs men alike often lived in fear of reprisals. In England and Wales, six customs men were murdered, and two hundred and fifty-six were injured, between 1723 and 1733.¹⁷ In

1718 the Weymouth Controller complained that 'the Smuggling Traders in these parts are grown to such a Head that they bidd Defiance to all Law and Government they come very often in Gangs of 60 to 100 men to the shoar in disguise armed with Swords, Pistolls, Blunderbusses, Carbines and quarter staffs'. By mid-century the Portlanders' automatic resort to violence was so inevitable that customs men rarely ventured there unless in considerable force and with military support. The Purbecks were dominated by gangs, capable of moving goods through the centre of Wareham in broad daylight with escorts of up to two hundred armed men 'in Defiance of any Officer'. In 1770 at Christchurch, 'a most daring crew of smugglers constantly frequent two bays of the sea', the same year that the entire complement of the customs boat operating out of Weymouth was drowned during an attempted interception of a smuggling cutter. The customs men's ranks were often seriously depleted: thirty-seven customs officers, many with serious injuries, required medical aid after just one incident in 1784. The overwhelming superiority of the smugglers was demonstrated time and again, for 'no kind of secret practices or stratagems are used', and smugglers were, 'in a most daring manner imagineable', moving their goods 'openly and frequently in the day time . . . by such large and desperate gangs that the officers have found it impossible to oppose them'.¹⁸

People from all ranks of society supported the smugglers. Many folk would have been precluded from drinking spirits, and possibly very much tea, if it were not for the widespread availability of the smuggled articles. The tax was therefore resented, and no element of the evasion process was deemed a crime. Hence, 'the Generality of the People on the Coasts are better Friends to the Smugglers, than to the Custom House Officers'; 'if People on a Road see a Custom-House Officer and Soldiers together, they suspect their Design and send Intelligence to the Smugglers, who therefore hide their Goods, or take some other Road', and officers lamented that 'our greatest efforts are very often Inefectual.'¹⁹ Popular support for smugglers not only spawned open hostility towards customs men – which prevented one officer at Abbotsbury carrying seized goods a mere eight miles to the warehouse in Weymouth without armed protection – but was shared by local officials including constables and tything men. The latter generated further difficulties as customs men were not law officers, and needed the active aid of amateur policemen to enforce search warrants issued for premises. On one occasion the customs officers evacuated a village before nightfall 'by reason of the danger of the Mobb who appeared in great Numbers', leaving the impotent Controller railing that 'the Peace Officers and people . . . are all soe firmly lincked together in the Smugling Trade that it will be impossible to prove a Collusion on them'. The situation appeared to worsen in 1772 owing to

publicity of the customs men's lack of authority to demand entry to houses, whereupon villagers near the coast exhibited a renewed 'very Violent and Extraordinary Manner' in their refusals to co-operate with the officers.²⁰

If it was understandable that petty constables were more conscious of loyalty to their community, and regarded a tax law which condemned their neighbours as criminals, and almost unenforceable, the collusion extended further, and perhaps increasingly involved magistrates and attorneys. Whether through financial gain, or from fear of violent reprisal, many locally influential people supported the smugglers. The customs men knew that Captain Bingham, a J.P. 'favours the smugglers', and that solicitor Thomas Carter facilitated the escape of smugglers by forewarnings of the imminent serving of a writ. Carter was not alone; the Poole Controller complained that 'most of the attorneys in our neighbourhood are rather friends to the smugglers than the Officers', and with the county juries being 'too tender' towards defendants, there sometimes seemed little hope of convictions even when the evidence was compelling.²¹

Corrupt customs officers were an even greater boon to smugglers than obdurate jurymen. Thirty officers in Hampshire, Dorset and Devon, were summarily dismissed from the service between 1723 and 1733 for fraud, and for aiding smugglers. Was there, therefore, a grain of truth in the outburst of Thomas Ireland, a Supervisor of Customs at Poole, when he told his drinking companions that 'the officers of the customs at Poole were smugglers and considerable ones'? Soon after this incident the Deputy Controller at Poole was prosecuted on criminal charges and imprisoned.²² It was not altogether uncommon for such senior men to lose their posts, for

an officer by residing long in any of the Out Ports, contracts a friendship with the Traders in that Place, some of them, which 'tis to be apprehended does very often engage him to connive at the running of Goods, or may give the Smugglers better opportunity of corrupting the officer by Bribes.²³

Among those of some rank sacked were the Weymouth Collector in 1736, and the first mate of the *Laurel* cutter in 1777. In 1782 the Poole cutter deliberately withdrew from its patrol area 'to give opportunity to the smugglers to land and carry off their cargoes without interruption', and when John Early's smuggling vessel was boarded in 1788, details of armed patrols, in the handwriting of the Deputy Controller at Poole, were found in his cabin.²⁴

Acquaintance through long association between senior customs officers and the local smugglers could sometimes be forestalled by transfers

to other ports, and through a policy of promotion and transfer for energetic officers responsible for many seizures, but that could not be done with subordinates recruited from local communities. Waiters and Searchers, Boatmen, and Riding Officers, faced 'the pressure of low salaries and great Temptations', but they usually had to be recruited locally despite the Commissioners' injunction to avoid wherever possible 'the Employing Officers in such of the Out Ports where they have been related or Habituated'.²⁵ West Lulworth, a small isolated community, provides a case in point. The inhabitants earned a meagre living from the land, and were keen for extra income from running goods from vessels putting into the perfect bay. The two resident customs Boatmen, Thomas Packer and John Gregory, were themselves strongly suspected of smuggling, and the latter was reprimanded for his son Thomas's proven involvement. Despite the scale of smuggling in the Purbecks, neither man made any seizures, and their activity over clandestine goods was restricted to casks washed ashore. However, the Commissioners had so few candidates for Gregory's replacement on his death in 1750, that son Thomas was appointed at the annual salary of £30.²⁶

The post of Riding Officer was notorious as 'of very little Service tho' a great Burden to the Revenue'.²⁷ Seizures were rare, partly a reflection of the job – isolated and generally unsupported – and compounded by the fear of violence which such lightly armed men might expect, and commensurately weak motivation. It was common for these officials to ignore information, especially if circumstances dictated making an arrest alone. Some, including Thomas Thorne of Weymouth 'was fix'd in a Publick House', and neglect of duty was regularly ascribed to drunkenness, while smugglers 'carry on . . . without the least fear of interruption'. Benjamin Hounsell of Abbotsbury drunkenly rode his horse into the sea and was drowned, while Marten Wightwick, another Riding Officer domiciled in a pub, offered his horse, his official journal, and his post for fifty guineas.²⁸ A colleague, William Phipard achieved the remarkable feat of living thirty miles from his station, and completed thirty-four years service without submitting his journal for inspection, or making a seizure. Another Riding Officer at Wareham was bedridden for eleven years during which his patrol remained uncovered, and even the officers for Langton and Osmington – much favoured by smugglers – made few seizures despite regular patrols. The Commissioners supposedly strict rules against officers engaging in supplementary activities were widely evaded. The Deputy Controller at Weymouth rented out houses during the summer season, and also exported corn. William Old doubled as a vellmonger, leather-seller and brewer, while William Crossman employed as a Tidewaiter, taught navigation and writing. Thomas Vizard was just one of many part-time publicans. Moreover, many idle, corrupt,

and inebriate officials survived occasional purges, such as that ordered by Surveyor General Pusey Brookes in 1753, in response to increased 'Frauds' ascribed mainly to 'the careless manner in which the Riding Officers performed their Duty'.²⁹

Land based officers were never well-placed to make substantial seizures. Generally, circumstances were against their seizure of more than a small part of whatever was landed, and only during the early eighteenth century did they profit from impounding horses and waggons used to transport smuggled goods. The chief seizures were made by the customs cutters. Between 1763 and 1771, the customs cutter based in Weymouth seized goods to the value of £31,962.18.0, and in addition to an average sum of £3,551 from sales of goods shared among them each year, the sailors on the cutter also benefited from the sale of confiscated vessels. From February 1792 to May 1793, eleven ships, one of 75 tons, were seized, and most went for public sale. From these sales the cutter's share was divided: 50% of the officers' share went to the commander; 25% to the mate; and the remaining 25% was shared among the mariners.³⁰

When goods were seized by customs officers on suspicion of smuggling or fraud, they had first to be legally condemned by a Justice of the Peace, then stored to await sale at a public auction. Merchants welcomed sales because goods were normally those in popular demand and valued slightly lower than normal retail price. Customs officers benefited as they qualified for between a third and a half of the net proceeds payable as a bonus to their salaries.

After legal condemnation merchandise was deposited in the nearest customs warehouse; the Collector of the port applied for a Writ of Appraisement, under which two or more persons carefully estimated the value of the goods prior to auctions. Outports were notoriously open to monopolistic purchasing, and for sales at artificially deflated low values. The Board of Customs Commissioners often required outports to send goods to well-attended London auctions with keener competition among buyers.³¹ Where there was little local demand, outport Controllers ordered the despatch of goods to the London sale rooms. Weymouth and Poole Controllers sold small quantities of East India goods – 'muzzlins, Handkerchiefs, Bengals, Persian silks and callico' – and various assorted lots of logwood, naval stores, linen, salt, and tombstones, but spices, lace and Venetian glass were among those items commanding better prices in London.³²

Auctions were held four times annually – January, April, July, and October, immediately before the outports' quarterly returns of goods held, and net returns from sales, which Controllers submitted to London. The Controller had a great deal to do in supervising the weighing of

goods, recording, appraising, advertising, renting the rooms, arranging a 'tasting' – where appropriate – of the goods beforehand, organising the auction, and collecting payments, and supervising the proper disposal of the goods. Unfortunately, not all customs officers faithfully executed such responsibilities. According to a report on the Poole Comptroller's neglect to supervise an auction

he gives himself no more concern about the warehouse or seizures than if he had liv'd 100 miles off, never gives my selfe or Clerkes the least assistance in delivering Goods or filling up Permits, is still incapable of making up a Quarterly Account of Seizures tho' he has been Comptroller 15 years . . . were our Poundages to be in proportion to our Trouble, his Penny would be adequate to my Shilling in the Pound.³³

Generally, however, customs officers proved to be able administrators anxiously maximising auction receipts out of which came not only the expenses but also officers' bonus shares. The costs of warehousing, transportation, legal fees, and, after 1783, all the expenses of victualling, wages, rigging and sails of the customs cutter, came from the sums realised.³⁴ Payment to the principal officers – the Collector and the Controller – and the appraisers' expenses and fees, were drawn out of poundages charged on the entire quantity sold. The net sale was then divided into three shares: the Crown, the Exchequer, and the seizing officers. The seizing officer was responsible for paying one third of his share to the informer whose intelligence had led to the seizure. This elaborate system of incentive payments should have worked smoothly to everyone's advantage, but in practice many officers found that their payments were slow. On sale, the purchaser paid a deposit, and should, within 'a limited Time, not exceeding Twenty days', have paid the balance, from which the Controller paid the seizing officer's part. The accounts, together with bills of exchange facilitating speedy payment of the Crown and Exchequer's shares, were despatched in the Exeter mail coach, which passed through Dorchester.³⁵ Any delay in the accounting procedure impeded payments to local customs officers.³⁶ Merchants were not always punctual in their payments and they frequently left port having paid only a part. The customs men found delayed payments a particular hardship, for their salaries were low and paid quarterly, and many men found it difficult to cope. As one petitioner put it,

when Goods are sold at the Excise the money is paid in Six weeks or Two Months at most, but not at Customs where it is almost Two Years which hurts the inferior Officers who has no more Sallery from the Government which will just maintain their Families.

Moreover, merchants penalised the rank and file officials by withholding payments in disputes, as exemplified in the mid-1760s by Isaac Lester of Poole – ‘considerably concerned in the Newfoundland trade’ – and angry at losing a public contract for making ‘very extravagant charges’.³⁷

After advertising the place and time of the auction the goods scheduled for sale were put into conveniently sized ‘lots’, ‘as we think will fetch the best price’. The appraised price was made known before bidding began, and the merchant whose bid most exceeded it became the successful buyer. Outport prices tended to be slightly lower than those in London, reflecting the fewer buyers attracted, but normally current retail prices guided appraisers’ valuations. The pricing of tea, for example, revealed local appraisers’ current market awareness, and could sometimes be pitched above London prices. In 1744 the Weymouth Controller queried the Commissioners’ 7 May pricing different tea grades; they acknowledged that provincial prices could exceed those in London, and agreed that local disparities should guide the appraisers. Tea became generally available in all public sales, especially after the increase in duty on tea in 1759, and in the early 1770s, Weymouth customs sold about twelve tons annually.³⁸

The customs men seized only a small fraction of the total of all smuggled merchandise; the ratio of seized to smuggled tea was no better than 50:1, and other popular smuggled goods were probably in the same ratio. To the smuggler ‘the Loss . . . was a Meer Trifle’, but to officers the storage of goods became a constant problem.³⁹ Burdened with huge quantities to store, and aware that Weymouth attracted more buyers, Controllers in Fowey, Dartmouth, Plymouth, Exeter and Lyme, began using Weymouth as a ‘depositancy Port for the Western Ports’. The Weymouth Controller complained to the Commissioners about the ‘want of warehouse and Cellar room’ available, and sales in Weymouth were depressed because ‘some of there Tea are much lessen’d in value by lying here so long’. The Commissioners ordered the customs cutters to carry some supplies to London, but that did not solve the problem. In April 1744, and again a year later, tea on sale in Weymouth attracted no bids, and even when sales were made, tea which failed to meet the appraised price, was rewarehoused, 7,388 lbs of tea after the June 1756 auction. In December 1761, another glut depressed the price of tea in Weymouth by four pence per pound; with every cellar full, and the warehouse floor propped up to support the additional weight, the Controller could do little to ease the situation.⁴⁰

Renting basements and rooms for warehousing was always a major problem; the inevitable use of scattered rooms and cellars had severe security ramifications. Goods should have been stored under constant surveillance but this meant finding suitable accommodation within the

town and close to the customs office. Even then locks were forced, walls broken down, or thatch removed, and Controllers' reports to London frequently recount losses through theft. The Weymouth Controller was responsible for Portland, but goods could not be moved from Weymouth to Portland for safe keeping, where a solitary Riding Officer was stationed and he feared mob violence. 'The people residing in the said island pay little or no regard to order and law.' Goods seized on Portland had to be moved immediately to Weymouth, and even the operations were invariably 'attended with some difficulty', because Portlanders quickly gathered in force to intimidate and attack the customs men, and retake seized goods.⁴¹ The Poole Controller experienced identical problems with contraband taken in the Purbecks, and his Lyme Regis counterpart never delayed the despatch of seizures to Weymouth, thereby aggravating that station's problems, despite its larger establishment.

Warehouses, generally cellars and sealed rooms, were unfit for the storage of large quantities of perishable goods. Tea quickly deteriorated, became 'musty and mouldy', so that after five or six weeks it would fetch much reduced prices once in 'a bad or perishing condition'. Such articles, and others damaged by sea-water were often offered for immediate sale, hopefully to avoid recourse to destruction in the absence of buyers. In such cases the appraisers' values heavily undercut normal retail prices. Non-perishable commodities like geneva, rum, brandy, and wine, caused a different storage problem. Unsold lots could be returned to the warehouse for another sale, but vast quantities aggravated security and marketing difficulties. In the 1750s three times the quantity of brandy to rum was stored in the warehouses of Weymouth and Poole, probably a reflection of the proportion then being smuggled. Between 1779 and 1782, five times more brandy than rum was available, and as in all outports, the Controllers almost continuously employed the coopers. By the 1780s almost 25,000 gallons of spirits were offered at each quarterly auction in Weymouth.⁴² Tobacco caused no storage problems, because all seizures were incinerated, and the ash was sold to soap boilers at anything from 3/9d. to 4/6d. a bag. The commodity least relished by officials, who received a fixed sum of 2d. per pound, instead of a share in the selling price.

Damaged goods which the appraisers judged unsellable, were destroyed either by burning or by dumping at sea. Goods judged fit for auction were generally in good condition, and bidders were often attracted from a very wide area. Public auctions held at Weymouth and Poole were well advertised locally and in the London papers, and they attracted buyers like the Salisbury firm of Wansborough, the largest tea dealers in the west country, together with brewers, distillers, merchants, and agents from Bristol, Exeter, and London.⁴³ As an incentive to bulk buyers, offers

were permitted before the auctions were held. In the January and April sales in Poole, Newfoundland traders were sometimes prepared to buy the entire contents of the warehouse, thus saving the customs marketing expenses. In February 1768, unsold Bohea tea stored in Poole presented no problem to the Controller because, 'our Newfoundland ships will be setting out soon and we are of the opinion we could sell it all here for more than the appraised value'. In 1790 a buyer reserved 16,992 lbs of tea because he expected to ship it to Newfoundland, and it was not entered at auction.⁴⁴ In October 1786, 'two of the most capital merchants of the place' purchased the entire stock of confiscated brandy and rum for their Newfoundland ships because spirits could be stored until the next fishing season. Despite the abundance of fresh provisions and cheap rum available from New England traders, the west country-Newfoundland traders preferred to stock their ships with rum, brandy, and provisions, as part wages for the crew, and in exchange for Newfoundland fish.⁴⁵ They were among the most regular buyers from Dorset customs stations.

The revenue from customs dues which the Controllers despatched to London was gathered from ships entering and clearing the ports, and these sums reflected the trade of the ports. The chief Dorset overseas trade – to Newfoundland – did not directly contribute because the west country traders were permitted to export their dried and salted cod directly to foreign purchasers in the Mediterranean. The return cargoes were subject to duty, but much of the bulk cargoes of oil, nuts, and fresh and dried fruits, loaded in Mediterranean ports, carried only a very low tax burden. Wine from Spain and Portugal, which most returning Newfoundland ships carried, did pay heavy duties, though the total quantity imported was relatively small.

There was no customs establishment at Newfoundland; from 1737 to 1767 the entire island was served by only one preventive officer, and it was impossible to control smuggling in such a vast place where fishermen and traders of France, the Channel Islands, and New England, mingled so freely with West Country and London merchants. Rum, for example, was easily and cheaply bought from New England distiller-merchants who produced it from English and French molasses. When the Newfoundland traders returned to the Dorset ports, they openly imported the rum and claimed that it was Newfoundland produce.⁴⁶ The customs men knew that rum was not distilled there, and that it was all 'Plantation make', but they had to accept 'official' verification signed by self-appointed 'Admirals of Harbours' in the fishery, and were able to do nothing to stop the illegal trade in rum and timber from New England, even after the setting up of a customs house in St John's in 1767.⁴⁷

Although the efficiency of the customs service in combatting smuggling was never measured in monetary terms, the proceeds of public auc-

tions in the outports provided more revenue for the government than the costs of the customs service. From 1760 to 1779 the salary bill for the customs at Weymouth amounted to £14,250, whereas sales of condemned goods netted over £72,485. Even after meeting all the county custom establishment's expenses, salaries amounted to less than twenty per cent of net receipts.⁴⁸

But auctions did more than generate profits for the Crown and the Exchequer; they provided incentive payments for the officers whose efforts had led to the seizures. The meagre salaries offered to the customs men were 'so small as not to offer common Support', but bonuses received as a result of the sales sometimes boosted their earnings to a much higher level.⁴⁹ One sale alone could guarantee a sum considerably greater than an officer's salary. The seizing officers in the county in 1787 shared over £1,559, representing a bonus equal to almost half of the total salary bill. On 9 January 1759, from tea sold, the seizing officers' share amounted to over £225, as against the total salary bill for the entire establishment of seventeen customs men in the port for the same quarter amounting to only £180. 13. 6. In June and December 1754, Weymouth sold goods to the appraised value of £1,473, but the annual salary bill totalled only £735.⁵⁰ Between 31 May 1743, and 2 March 1744, goods to the appraised value of over £2,834 were offered for sale in Weymouth, and the officers' share was about one thousand pounds. From July 1749, to June 1751, goods appraised at over £3,748 went on sale at Weymouth, which boosted the officers' aggregate income by £1,300. To this was added the tobacco allowance, and shares from the sale of goods transferred to London. The latter source benefited Weymouth officers to the tune of over four hundred pounds in the second half of 1754.⁵¹ The Controllers were conscious of the value of the bonuses, and encouraged their prompt payment as a means of rewarding diligence and loyalty. In February 1731, the Weymouth Controller requested seized goods sold immediately after condemnation by a J.P., 'ye means to Encourage the inferior offrs to a strict observance of their Duty'.⁵² The magnitude of the sums which could be, and were earned, went some way towards counteracting the notorious combination of idleness, fear and corruption which compromised the service.

Over £1,885 was shared by the officers in Weymouth between 1788 and 1790 from the sale of spirits alone. This sum alone would have been a guarantee of some considerable wealth to the men concerned, yet it came from only a part of total contraband sales.⁵³ The sum paid out as a share varied slightly according to the commodity being sold, but the seizing officers and their superiors rarely collectively received less than 38% of the gross, and it is not surprising that some customs officers, like Controllers and commanders of customs cutters, who benefited from

almost every sale held, sometimes became figures of some respectability and even achieved prominence as local landowners.⁵⁴

Where seizures followed information from an informer, or accomplished with naval or army help, the responsible officer paid them out of his bonus. Soldiers, and after 1757, naval officers, who participated in seizures, received up to two-thirds of the officers' part according to the extent of assistance rendered.⁵⁵ Informers – upon whom customs relied quite heavily – received one third, often the subject of much resentment. The navy's, or, more commonly, the army's, assistance usually prevented personal injury to the lightly armed and frequently outnumbered customs men, but the informers took no part in the seizure, had their anonymity guaranteed, ran no risk of personal injury, and yet were entitled to quite a large share of a bonus which others may have earned during a violent affray. Some informers demanded more than a third, and some undoubtedly expected payments by way of retainer. In October 1718 one officer paid cash to a regular informer, and added that 'when you know of anything that may be of service to the Revenue . . . come here directly', but a colleague articulated a recurrent complaint that 'wee always Gratifie our Informers soe well that wee have but a very small part of any service left for ourselves'.⁵⁶ Such resentment probably prompted three officers in Poole to offer only a guinea a hundredweight for tea recovered, and three shillings a keg of spirits, instead of the stipulated third. Under pressure they increased their offer, but as this remained short of the norm, the Commissioners intervened directly with orders that the value of a third be honoured.⁵⁷

Informers were often smugglers, or deep in their confidence, like William Fry, 'in the smuggling line, and from his acquaintance with the Principal smugglers on this coast', an official was 'led to imagine he might be useful – procuring information – my expectations have been fully answered as he has been of very material use'. Prosecutions were sometimes dropped in return for smugglers becoming informers, and another form of inducement lay in the offer of a supernumerary place in the crew of customs patrol vessels, which promised some security and shares in the crew's bonus for seizures. But in Joshua Elliott's case the customs men were not successful because he refused to give evidence, saying that 'he would sooner leave the country than be in the way of being subpanaed, as he is by some means known to be the Informer and the smuglers already threaten his Life.' James King's stay on the boat was marred by drunkenness, demands for payment and clothing, and frequent absences. Unable to tolerate the discipline he finally deserted.⁵⁸

Despite the continued high level of tariffs throughout the eighteenth century, and an obvious and marked increase in smuggling, the customs establishment in Dorset remained fairly small. But the Commissioners in London had no reason to feel dissatisfied with the outport officers'

achievements.⁵⁹ The county customs represented no drain on the Exchequer, for the net receipts from the wine duties alone more than compensated for the outlay on salaries. But, where smuggling was so profitable for the illegal trader and led to such violent activity, one might conclude that in preventive terms the small establishment in the county was overwhelmed, and their efforts might have represented a net loss to the Exchequer. This was not the case. Revenue from the sale of smuggled goods covered salaries, costs, and provided a handsome profit. This showed that the smuggler was sometimes thwarted, and that despite the intensity of smuggling throughout the county the customs scored some successes as a preventive service.

On an individual level, membership of the customs service could sometimes lead to the accumulation of personal wealth, and an improved social status. Some customs men rapidly occupied leading positions in the community, and established themselves so securely that the influence of the family name continued long after they had retired. Their social and economic positions equalled the leading merchants of the boroughs, and their names ranked alongside the wealthy traders, like the Tuckers of Weymouth, and the Thompsons, the Garlands and the Masters of Poole. In Weymouth during the eighteenth century the office of mayor was held on nine occasions by senior customs officers, and in Poole on seven.⁶⁰ Undoubtedly, the greatest degree of success in terms of wealth and improved social status was achieved by Warren Lisle.

When Warren Lisle died in 1788 he had risen through the ranks of society largely because of his long and devoted service as a customs officer.⁶¹ His three children married well. Daughter Radigan married Edward Tucker, a leading merchant and M.P. for Weymouth; Anne married Augustus Floyer, a member of a wealthy and well-established landed family; and William married Hester, daughter of Viscount Malpas, son of the Earl of Cholmondeley.⁶² Yet Warren Lisle's beginnings, in the first decade of the eighteenth century, had been humble enough. His father had been Waiter and Searcher in the customs staff at Weymouth with an annual salary of only £40, paid to rummage through the holds of incoming ships to detect smuggled goods, and to assist in the unloading and recording of cargoes. Probably through his influence, his son, also Warren, was appointed to the same post in Poole at the age of nineteen. This served as a beginning, for he soon transferred to Weymouth where he fitted out an armed vessel for lease to the customs for coastal patrols.⁶⁴ Despite his appointment as Searcher and Supervisor of Riding Officers – a post he continued to hold for almost fifty years, and handled through deputies – he is generally referred to in customs reports from about 1725 as 'Captain' Lisle, and this may indicate recognition as master of a vessel contracted to the customs service. Certainly his post as Searcher would

have offered him little opportunity for wealth accumulation, for the position was poorly paid, and he supplemented the low wage by fees from merchants for assistance with their paper work.

In 1734 his expertise and experience in handling armed patrol boats was rewarded with the command of the *Walker* sloop operating out of Weymouth, and patrolling the coast as far as the Needles.⁶⁵ Within twelve months of his new appointment he had bought the *Walker*, and, for £60, an ex-smuggling cutter, and leased them to the Customs Commissioners. By 1747 he owned and commanded the sloop *Cholmondeley*, at eighty tons, the largest customs sloop in service. As part of the Exeter establishment, Warren Lisle had the responsibility of inspecting other sloops and boats from Portsmouth to Land's End.⁶⁶ By this time his position as a man of wealth and local influence was secured; he stood bond in £1,000 for the appointment of Stephen Harvey as Collector at Exeter, and in 1751 he began three terms of office as mayor of Lyme Regis.⁶⁷ After the death of his first wife he married Ruth Clapcott who inherited the Minterne and Clapcott estates. By 1771, when his luggers *Shaftesbury*, *Wasp*, and *Amelia*, were all contracted to the customs, he had settled on the 260 acre estate he owned at Stottingway, Upwey, simultaneously selling an extensive holding in north Dorset.⁶⁸ In 1773 he resigned his post as Searcher at Poole in favour of his son William. At the age of sixty-nine, he accepted a pension and retired permanently to the Upwey estate. William's circumstances, however, were wholly unlike those faced by his father fifty years before: William's wealth meant that he did not depend for a livelihood on customs service. After only a few years William resigned and lived as a country gentleman on his Dorset estate.

Despite the extent of smuggling, and the considerable quantity of goods landed illegally on the coast of Dorset in the eighteenth century, the customs service was not without some small degree of success. The sale of goods after seizure contributed towards the Exchequer, offered incentive payments to many customs men, and sometimes provided individuals with access to wealth and higher social status.

Notes

¹ Richard Burn, *The Justice of the Peace and Parish Officer*, (1756), Vol. II, p. 1.

² G.N. Clark, *Guide to English Commercial Statistics, 1696–1782*, (1938), pp. 25, 114.

³ A.L. Cross, *Eighteenth-century Documents relating to the Royal Forests, the Sheriffs and Smuggling*, (1928), pp. 289–90.

⁴ W. Milburn, *Oriental Commerce or the East India Trader's Complete Guide*, (1825), Vol. II, pp. 538–9.

⁵ Sir Stephen T. Janssen, *Smuggling Laid Open*, (1767), p. 11.

⁶ W.A. Cole, 'The arithmetic of 18th century smuggling: a rejoinder,' *Economic History Review*, Second series, Vol. XXVIII, No. 1, (Feb. 1975), pp. 44–9.

⁷ H.C. and L.H. Mui, 'Smuggling and the British tea trade before 1784', *American Historical Review*, LXXIV, (1968), pp. 53–66.

⁸ W.A. Cole, 'Trends in 18th century smuggling,' *Economic History Review*, Second series, X, Part 3, (1958), pp. 395–410.

⁹ Janssen, *op. cit.*, p. 49.

¹⁰ H. Atton and H.H. Holland, *The King's Customs: An Account of Maritime Revenue and Contraband Traffic in England, Scotland and Ireland, from the earliest Times to the year 1800*, (1908), vol. I, pp. 375–6; A.L. Simon, *Bottlescrew Days: Wine drinking in England during the Eighteenth Century*, (1926), p. 154. H. Crouch, *A Complete View of the British Customs*, 2 vols., (1746): Clark, *op. cit.*, p. 106. T.S. Ashton, *An Economic History of England: The Eighteenth Century*, (1955), pp. 57–8; Cross, *loc. cit.*

¹¹ P(ublic) R(ecord) O(ffice). T[reasury] 1/429. Part I, pp. 23, 33, 37–40, 45–6; T.1/433. p. 170.

¹² PRO. T.1/429. Part I, p. 23; PRO. Cust[oms], 59/78, March, 1773; Evan Cotton, *East Indiamen*, (1949), p. 38.

¹³ PRO. Cust. 59/5, 2 Sept., 1738; 59/7, July 1749.

¹⁴ PRO. Cust. 59/1.

¹⁵ PRO. Cust. 59/13, 27 May 1772; Cust. 18/50, establishment in Dorset in 1700.

¹⁶ W. Williams, *Contraband Cargoes*, (1959), pp. 107–8; PRO. Adm[iralty] 8/29; Cust. 18/513, establishment in Dorset in 1800.

¹⁷ *The Report with the Appendix, from the Committee of the House of Commons appointed to enquire into the Frauds and Abuses in the Customs, to the Prejudice of Trade, and Diminution of the Revenue* (London, 1733)

¹⁸ PRO. Cust. 59/1, 4 March 1718; 59/3, 25 April 1770; 59/17, 13 March 1784; 60/3, 27 June 1770; 60/6, 31 Oct. 1783, and 21 Feb. 1784.

¹⁹ Janssen, *op. cit.*, pp. 18, 68. PRO. Cust. 59/1, 4 March 1718.

²⁰ PRO. Cust. 59/2, 28 Dec., 30 Dec. and 14 Nov. 1720; 59/13, 27 May 1772, and 4 July 1772.

²¹ PRO. Cust. 60/107, 22 June and 27 Nov. 1765; 59/1, 29 Oct. 1718; 59/4, 9 July 1737.

²² *Report into Frauds and Abuses* (1733). PRO. Cust. 60/1, 7 July 1759; 60/106, 6 June 1761.

²³ B(ritish) L(ibrary) Add. Mss. 18903 f. 89.

²⁴ Atton and Holland, *op. cit.*, p. 249. PRO. Cust. 60/5, Sept. 1777. Cross, *op. cit.*, pp. 264–7. D. Arnold Foster, *At War with the Smugglers*, (1936), pp. 142–3.

²⁵ *Parliamentary Papers*, XXXVI, Reports, VI; House of Commons, No. 59 (1784), 'Second Report from the Committee appointed to Enquire into the Illicit Practices used in Defrauding the Revenue', pp. 10–11. Cross, *op. cit.*, pp. 262–3.

²⁶ PRO. Cust. 59/4, 10 Dec. 1736; 59/2, 30 Jan. 1719; 59/74, 5 Feb. 1750.

²⁷ Cross, *op. cit.*, p. 255.

²⁸ PRO. Cust. 59/1, 19 Nov. 1718; 59/2, 12 Aug. 1719; 60/5, May to Sept. 1778.

²⁹ PRO. Cust. 59/4, 1736; 59/6, 3 Feb. 1741; 59/10, 27 April 1753; 59/14, May 1774; 59/77, 10 Nov. 1770 and 7 Jan. 1773; 59/78, 23 April 1774; 60/1, 19 June 1758; 60/3, 26 May 1768 and 23 July 1770; 60/5, 7 Oct. 1777; 60/6, 7 July 1783.

³⁰ PRO. Cust. 59/13; 59/20; 59/71, 5 Aug. 1736.

³¹ H. Crouch, *A Complete Guide to the Officers of His Majesty's Customs in the Outports*, (1732), p. 302.

³² PRO. Cust. 59/4; 59/6 shows examples of goods sent to London; 59/1 and 59/71 have examples of goods offered for sale in Dorset.

³³ PRO. Cust. 60/107, 15 March 1766.

³⁴ E. Hoon, *The Organization of the English Customs System, 1696–1786*, (1938), pp. 178–9.

³⁵ PRO. Cust. 60/5; 60/9; 60/107; 59/7.

³⁶ PRO. Cust. 59/71, 7 Feb. 1735, provides an example.

³⁷ PRO. Cust. 60/3, March 1768; T. 11/456, 2 Feb. 1767.

³⁸ PRO. Cust. 59/10; 59/14; 59/78, May 1774.

³⁹ Janssen, *op. cit.*, p. 18; Robert C. Nash, 'The English and Scottish tobacco trades in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries: legal and illegal trade,' *Economic History Review*, Second series, Vol. XXXV, No. 3, (Aug. 1982), pp. 354–72.

⁴⁰ PRO. Cust. 59/9, 26 June 1756; 59/10, Jan. 1757, Nov. 1758 and 14 Feb. 1761; 59/73, April 1744 and April 1745; 59/74, Feb. and July 1753.

⁴¹ PRO. Cust. 59/15.

⁴² Calculated from PRO. Cust. 59/8; 59/10; 59/16; 59/17.

⁴³ PRO. Cust. 60/7; 59/15; 60/1; 59/16. Under 24 Geo II. c.41, all tobacco was to be burned after formal condemnation and an allowance per lb was made to the seizing officer. Under 12 Anne. c.8, goods, after storage for six months, were sold by inch of candle. The method of sale, according to Giles Jacob, *Lex Mercatoria or the Merchant's Companion*, (London, 1729), was that 'a small piece of wax candle, about an inch long, is set burning, and the last bidder when the candles goes out is intitled to the Lot of Parcel thus expos'd The goods are set up as such a Price; and none is bid less than a certain Sum more than another had bid before.'

⁴⁴ PRO. Cust. 60/3, 6 Feb. 1768; 60/8, 1790.

⁴⁵ PRO. Cust. 60/7, 30 Oct. 1768.

⁴⁶ PRO. Cust. 60/2.

⁴⁷ R.G. Lounsbury, *The British Fishery at Newfoundland 1634–1763*, (1934), pp. 326–7.

⁴⁸ PRO. calculated from Cust. 59/5; B.L. Add. Mss. 33043. PRO. Cust. 18/457; 18/245.

⁴⁹ *The Reports of the Commissioners appointed to Examine, Take, and State The Public Accounts of the Kingdom, Presented to His Majesty and to Both Houses of Parliament; with the Appendixes Complete* by John Lane, Secretary to the Commissioners (London, 1787) III, 'Fifteenth Report, Relative to the Payment of the Officers of the Customs at the Outports', p. 185.

⁵⁰ PRO. Cust. 18/244; 18/281; 59/8; 59/75. *Report of the Commissioners*, (1787).

⁵¹ Calculated from PRO. Cust. 59/73.

⁵² PRO. Cust. 59/3; 59/75.

⁵³ PRO. Cust. 59/18.

⁵⁴ J. Hutchins, *The History and Antiquities of the County of Dorset*, (third ed. 1861–70, republished 1973), I, p. 35; II, pp. 49, 439.

⁵⁵ B.L. Add. Mss. 8133 B., f. 267.

⁵⁶ PRO. Cust. 59/1.

⁵⁷ PRO. Cust. 60/1.

⁵⁸ PRO. Cust. 59/71, 18 Nov. 1735 and 6 April 1736; 60/4, 22 May and 9 June 1773; 60/8, 21 April 1790.

⁵⁹ PRO. Cust. 18/513.

⁶⁰ Hutchins, *op. cit.*, I, p. 35; II, pp. 49, 439.

⁶¹ Dorset County Record Office. W 1788 495.

⁶² Hutchins, *op. cit.*, II, pp. 195, 437.

⁶³ PRO. Cust. 18/71; 18/75.

⁶⁴ His exact date and place of birth are not known, but PRO. Cust. 59/4 gives his age as 32 in 1736; PRO. T. 11/19; Cust. 18/59.

⁶⁵ PRO. Cust. 59/4.

⁶⁶ PRO. Cust. 18/238; 59/7, 19 March 1747; G. Smith, *King's Cutters*, (1983), p. 59; G. Roberts, *Social History of the People of the Southern Counties of England*, (1856), p. 372.

⁶⁷ PRO. Cust. 59/74.

⁶⁸ Hutchins, *op. cit.*, II, pp. 195–6; 845; IV, p. 448. *Notes and Queries, Somerset & Dorset*, Vol. XIII, Part CI, (March 1913), pp. 221–2.