

SMUGGLING AT BIRCHINGTON

by C.W.R. WINTER

A Birchington resident who achieved a certain amount of local notoriety as a smuggler was one James Eastland, known to all as Jimmy Landy. Landy was born in 1824 and was a carpenter by trade on the Quex estates. But his hobby was smuggling. He has been dead now for nearly 60 years, but there are still people living in the village who remember him.

Jimmy Landy was a big raw-boned man, over six feet tall. He was a rough diamond, pretty tough, but he had a dry sense of humour, and it is mainly for this that he is remembered. One night he and a young crony, George Brockman, were in Quex woods after the odd rabbit, when they heard a horse and cart coming down the road.

Now, one of Landy's accomplishments was to imitate, most realistically, the squeak of a rabbit, so those two hid in the edge of the wood and, as the horse and cart approached, Jimmy started to squeak like a rabbit caught in a trap. The driver stopped the horse and hopped off into the wood, no doubt with the thought of rabbit pie for supper. While he was floundering about in the dark, Landy and George urged the horse to "gee-up", and off it went, down the road towards the village. The owner disentangled himself with difficulty from the undergrowth and tore off after it in hot pursuit, cursing loudly, to the great amusement of the two who were watching nearby.

Rabbits feature in another Landy story. One day someone saw him stroking a cat and said, "Are you fond of dumb animals, Mr Landy?" "Yes" said Jim, "especially rabbits".

Towards the end of his life he was crippled with rheumatism, probably brought on by frequent immersion in the dykes when hiding from customs officers. One such story concerns the occasion when he was trapped at the far end of Minnis Bay with a number of kegs of spirits which he had landed, and he had to spend a considerable time lying under water in a gully while the Excise men searched desperately for him overhead. When they finally called off the hunt, Jim walked up to the village with some of the contraband, which he sold to the local innkeepers, and then went back for more.

Another old Quex servant, Tom Hurrell, who at 84 is still very much alive and kicking, remembers Landy and an incident that involved him many years ago. Tom was having a drink in the Powell Arms with his uncle, who was a sailor, having run away to sea at the age of 14. His uncle said he wanted to meet a smuggler, and just at that moment Tom spied Jimmy Landy crossing the Square. He fetched him in and introduced him to his uncle, whereupon the two men went off into a corner and had an earnest conversation, refusing to let Tom listen. Tom was naturally intrigued to know what they were cooking up, but never found out. Years later, long after he had given up seafaring, his uncle was taken seriously ill and was sent to hospital. It became apparent that he was dying, and one day Tom received an urgent message saying that his

uncle wanted to see him as he had something to tell him. Unfortunately the message arrived too late and the old man had died before Tom could reach him. So the secret was never disclosed, but Tom always believed that there is something buried somewhere.

For many generations Tom Hurrell's family lived in a cottage in Chapel Place- just across the road from Evergreen House, but now pulled down. When he was a small boy, smuggling was rife, and one day the Excisemen descended on the cottage saying they had reason to believe that there was contraband on then premises, and demanding a search. Old Mrs Hurrell, Tom's grandmother, had a favourite armchair which had a loose cover, with a valance that reached the floor. As there happened to be a keg of spirits in the room at the time, and questions which might have been difficult to answer, she popped the keg under the chair behind the valance, and sat down. The customs men searched the house from top to bottom, but never thought to ask Mrs Hurrell to move, and so an embarrassing situation was avoided.

Jimmy Landy was not always successful in evading the Preventive Officers and on one occasion he was caught and sentenced at Sandwich to six months. When he came out, his employer, Major Powell-Cotton, asked him how he had been treated. "Very well", said Jim, " I had a butler in uniform to wait on me, and he never forgot to lock the door after him."

Although towards the end of his life his body was wracked with the rheumatics, his spirit remained bright to the end. When over 80, and walking with great difficulty, he went one day into the New Inn, now the Pewter Pot, and found a "bean feast" in progress. The bar was full of young and lusty men and the beer was flowing freely, but Jim took a poor view of this and invited any who cared to come outside and fight him.

About a year before he died, a visiting artist named Florence Winser happened to meet him and he agreed to sit for his portrait. The resulting charcoal drawing now hangs in the bar at The Smugglers (formerly Evergreen House) and attracts a lot of attention. It shows a face full of character, the most compelling feature being the eyes, which are gentle and kind but very strong. At the bottom of the portrait is a cartouche, in which is inscribed: "James Eastland his mark, witnessed by Ellen Neame."

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James Eastland was buried in Birchington October 10 1906, aged 82 – Grave no. 93 (Ed.).