

## History of the Black House

A local landmark steeped in history, The Black House has stood for nearly 200 years on the sand spit of the entrance to Christchurch Harbour.

Originally built as a boatbuilders house, it has had many uses. The locals know it for it's smuggling past. The boats built here included Guinea boats, used exclusively by smugglers, until they were prohibited.

Built on the site of the famous battle of Mundeford of 1784 when freetraders fought against 3 navy ships off shore. Rumour says that the Christchurch Priory (2 miles away) was hit by cannonballs during this time. Gold was smuggled from here ashore, and distributed about the south of England. Rumour has it that tunnels and cellars have yet to be found in this area, but who knows!

Why is it black?

Once some freetraders were holed up inside and would not come out. The Customs Officers built fires right around the walls. Eventually the smoke and heat was too much and out they came. The walls were blackened through and so they have stayed to this day.

Battle of Mundeford

Smuggling has been a means of income for the British since time immemorial it seems, in fact income tax was only introduced in 1792 before which taxes were raised by Governments by means of levies on imports and exports thus our obsession with evasion of the tax. In a lull from fighting the rest of the world between 1783 and 1793 the battle of Mundeford took place in 1784.

The men behind smuggling were usually wealthy putting up the money to purchase vessels etc whereas those that ran the risk of being caught in the act were fishermen and farm laborers for whom the extra income was essential to life. To combat the regular runs abroad the Excise patrolled the channel with fast cutters and the coastline with soldiers. Each port had its own Customs House for the honest importer the House for Christchurch being at the Port of Southampton. Excise men were thin on the ground however and it was relatively easy to evade duty most of the time, even if caught it was often that the case failed so evasion was rife.

In the early 1780's Christchurch was a town of some 1500 residents nestling where it does now between the rivers Avon and Stour which run to the sea via Christchurch harbour and 'The Run'. As far back as the Stone Age man has used the area as a port trading with seafarers who visited the harbour to sell their wares. The town of Christchurch was linked by road to the fishing village of Mundeford and the harbour entrance, Haven House sits at the mouth of the harbour on the Mundeford side and the Black House on the 'Warren Hill', Hengistbury Head side. The isolation of the area generally and the difficulty in getting to it by land made it an ideal smugglers paradise.

As you might imagine there were many people involved in smuggling some of whom should have known better and much was left to chance. On the 5th July the Revenue Cutter, Rose sighted sail and made towards it to check its cargo. The sail was that of the Civil Usage which at the time was laden with contraband and on sighting the Rose made for Cherborg. After days of cat and mouse the captain of the Civil Usage changed his load to aggregate and made for home, Christchurch, needless to say she was boarded and all was well. Not so well when she made land at home and the captain had to explain his actions to the owner and a second captain who worked another of the owners vessels.

Discussions took place in the Haven and the Civil Usage and the owners other cutter, Phoenix set sail to collect their loot from Cherberg, meanwhile the owner set about mustering 300 men, 100 wagons and 400 horses to move the goods from the Avon beach where the cutters traditionally dropped off their illegal cargos. This massing of manpower did not go unnoticed by the authorities and a young Excise officer, Noyce, reported the facts to his boss. Much to Noyce's surprise he was told to go away and that is exactly what he did taking the information to the military station at Lymington.

On July 13th both the Civil Usage and Phoenix set sail from Cherborg to Christchurch fully laden with tea and other taxable goods. 24 hours later they were sighted by the lookout on Hengistbury Head and word reached the owner to muster his men to action. As the owner reached the beach the sail of the Resolution, Excise Cutter, came into view and the Civil Usage and Phoenix approached the narrow channel into Christchurch harbour. The cutters beached on the Avon beach and as the Resolution made with all haste towards them the men relieved the cutters of their illicit cargos. The Excise cutter had to stand off and watch as the last of the unloading took place being not only out numbered in men but also guns.

Unladen the 2 cutters made safe in Christchurch harbour as the Excise cutter stood ground in Christchurch Bay, as this took place troops in Lymington prepared and made their way through the Forest towards the town. The owner knew that the Captain of the Excise cutter had witnessed all and that his ships would be seized, to avoid this he ordered his

Captains to make ready to go hback to sea. The Excise Captain pre-empted this and by luck saw as darkness fell a Royal Navy vessel entering the area, contact was made and the Excise now having the manpower to enter the Harbour were joined by one other Excise Vessel. The 3 vessels blockaded the harbour as they sent their armed seamen in long boats into the harbour.

William Allen lead the flotilla of Excise and Marines picking his way into the harbour trapping the owners cutters. Knowing the vessels were lost the owner and Captains cleared what they could from the boats and handed out muskets. Six boats made their way towards the cutters and as the lead boat ran aground and Allen got out of to lighten the load and refloat it the smugglers opened fire. Allen was shot twice and severely injured but ordered the advance to continue.

Some gave covering fire hoping to assist those nearer to the cutters to board them, smoke filled the air and the sound of battle rang through the estuary towards the town. The firing stopped and the Excise boarded the cutters which were now grounded by the ebbing tide. Suddenly fire open again this time from the shore, the Haven and its outbuildings were full of smugglers firing their weapons. The onslaught convinced the Excise commanders to withdraw and as they returned the firing eased.

The Excise having left the smugglers reboarded the cutters and after a little more firing between the Excise and the smugglers darkness fell and they could not longer see to shot at each other. Under cover of darkness the smugglers retreated to Christchurch only returning in the early hours to move the cutters and anchor them off. At first light the Excise returned and meeting no resistance seized the 2 cutters and towed them to Southampton. At 6 am William Allen died of the injuries he sustained and the smugglers knew they would be searched out and face the death penalty.

Those involved made their escape and were the subject of considerable investigation to track them down by the troops from Lymington on the part of the Excise. This part of the story continues in the book which needs reading in its own right.

The full story of the Battle of Mundeford is detailed by Mike Powell in his book of the name published by Natula Publications, Briar Park Business Centre, 11 Stour Road, Christchurch, Dorset, BH23 1PL and is well worth the read.

This extract has been taken from <http://www.christchurchdorset.co.uk/bofmude1.htm>