Programme 2
Smugglers’ Cornwall

Introduction

On this 4 day walk we journey along the south coast of Cornwall, renowned for its picturesque harbours, golden beaches and stunning cliff top paths. But in the late 18th century this area was famous for something else - smuggling. And this wasn’t just the foray of a few lawless sailors, the Cornish economy relied on smuggling, whole towns and communities were involved, everyone from fishermen and school teachers to the local vicar.

Throughout this walk, we’ll discover why smuggling became a way of life in Cornwall and what - by the mid-19th century - finally brought the Cornish smuggling’s golden age to a close.

This 44 mile route begins in the small fishing village of Portwrinkle, before heading west to follow the coastal path into the heartland of Cornwall.


**Walking Through History**

**Day 1**

Takes use to Looe and Talland where we uncover how smuggling was carried out in this remote land.

⇒ Portwrinkle to Talland, via Looe.
   Distance: 11 miles

**Day 2**

We’re off to Polperro where highly organised smuggling was becoming big business. Then it’s on to Lantic Bay to see how this illicit trade became endemic in Cornish culture.

⇒ Talland to Polruan, via Polperro, Lansallos and Lantic Bay.
   Distance: 8.5 miles

**Day 3**

Takes us to Fowey and Mevagissey, through the period of the Napoleonic wars and a government crack-down on contraband.

⇒ Polruan to Portloe, via Fowey and Mevagissey (including two ferry trips).
   Distance: 12 miles

**Day 4**

The final day’s hike takes us to Portscatho for a last desperate smuggler’s hurrah, before heading towards Falmouth Bay and into the 1840’s when Cornwall’s black market economy comes to a close.

⇒ Portloe to St Mawes, via Portscatho and St Antony Head (including one ferry trip).
   Distance: 12.5 mile

Please use OS Explorer Maps 105, 107, 108 (1:25k) or OS Landranger 204, 200, 201 (1:50k). All distances approx.
Walking Through History

Day 1 – Places of Interest

Portwrinkle to Talland, via Looe. Distance: 11 miles

Our walk begins just 10 miles west of Plymouth in the picturesque hamlet and historic fishing village of Portwrinkle. Car parking is available in Portwrinkle - from here we follow the South West Coast Path heading west to start our journey through Cornwall’s contraband history.

Portwrinkle

Portwrinkle is a traditional Cornish fishing village, so small it could be easily missed by the average tourist. The hamlet previously known as Port Wrickell has a tiny harbour dating back to at least the 17th century when there is the first evidence of a pilchard store and processing works here. The impressive fish cellar walls still stand, located next to the harbour, although today they are incorporated into housing.

Known as ‘pilchard palaces’ such processing works are a reminder of the days when whole communities relied on ‘liquid gold’ for their income. The fortunes of everyone in villages like these rested on a brief period from the end of summer until early Autumn, when great shoals appeared off this coast. The pilchards were pressed and fish oil was sent to large cities like London to fuel street lamps, while the remainder of the pilchards were preserved in salt and exported to the Mediterranean. With this international shipping trade already established fisherman started bringing small quantities of contraband goods ashore, alongside their catch. But what began as small-fry rapidly expanded and by the late 18th century around half of all the brandy consumed in Britain was being smuggled through the southwest.

Heading through Portwrinkle we pass the old pilchard cellar on our right before reaching the picturesque harbour. Take time to explore the old port and imagine the huge hauls of pilchards that would have been netted along these shores. From the harbour follow the road up the hill before bearing left through a wooden five bar gate to join the South West Coast Path to Looe.
Walking Through History

The Cause of Smuggling in Cornwall
Smuggling took off in Cornwall in the 1770’s when economic events in Britain took a turn for the worse. Cornwall, like the rest of the country, found itself in a disastrous financial crisis. Two hundred and fifty years ago, thanks to events in America our national debt had spiraled and the cost of living was shooting up.

This economic crisis had been sparked by the American War of Independence. For seven years Britain had fought an expensive war; our aim being to keep the colonies we relied on for the bulk of our trade. When France and Spain joined the American side Britain lost the war. The nation teetered on the edge of bankruptcy and taxes rapidly went through the roof. The tax on tea hit a whopping 110%. On brandy and gin there were 18 different duties totaling 250%, and the tax on tobacco made up 95% of the price.

But perhaps worst of all for the people of Cornwall were the relentless increases to the tax on salt – vital for the fish industry. Ordinary salt wouldn’t do. Only high quality salt from Spain or Brittany was good enough to preserve the pilchards. But by the late 18th century the tax on imported salt was 40 times its actual cost, way beyond the reach of Cornish fisherman. Without salt to preserve pilchards, they faced starvation. Yet all of these products, now subject to massive tax hikes, were available for a fraction of the price, from nearby France or the Channel Islands. The scene was set for a Cornish smuggling explosion.

Cornwall’s Isolation
Walking this coast path, you get a real sense of how hard it must have been for the revenue men to enforce the law here. This rugged coastline with its isolated coves, miles from the nearest town was a smugglers haven. The landscape and geography lend themselves to smuggling. It’s often said that Cornwall, the only county in Britain to border just one other, is almost an island. Virtually entirely surrounded by the sea, this geographical separation from the rest of the country was one of the main reasons smuggling flourished.

Smugglers Cave
The entrance to the cave is natural, but the rest of the tunnel into the rocks is hand cut. The cave is about 15-20 yards long, not quite high enough to stand up in, but bent double, you can walk down into the cave.

It’s more likely the cave was dug to connect one side of the cave to the other, and not completed, or it was the result of mining prospecting. There is no written reference to the cave so its origins remain a mystery.
Walking Through History

From the beach in East Looe we head through town and cross the bridge to West Looe, re-joining the South West Coast Path. As you follow the road along the harbour side in West Looe make note of The Jolly Sailor Inn which you will pass on your right-hand side.

The Jolly Sailor Inn
Established in 1516, The Jolly Sailor Inn is among the oldest pubs in the UK. Affectionately known as the Jolly, it has been a place of rest and recreation for seafarers and travelers for centuries. During the golden age of smuggling, seafaring vessels would have moored right alongside The Jolly Sailor. Today the land has been reclaimed and a road now stands where a river mouth would have been.

A favourite haunt of smugglers, it’s thought that The Jolly Sailor Inn was another spot where contraband was stored. Local legend has it that on one occasion revenue men raided the pub on the hunt for an illegal stash. The landlady, a resourceful woman, quickly sat upon the illegal barrels, covering them with her voluminous petticoats. Once hidden, she continued her knitting, while the revenue men searched the Inn to no avail.

Following the road and the coast path out of West Looe to Hannaford, we’re met by a spectacular view of Looe Island, also known as St George’s Island, just a short distance from the mainland.

Looe Island
Looe Island lies about a mile offshore and in the summer months it’s possible to make a boat trip to visit the island. A couple of hundred years ago Looe Island was home to an infamous smuggler - Black Joan, who allegedly headed up the contraband activities in Looe. Folklore has it that Black Joan got her name following a fight in a local pub. During a drunken argument with a Jamaican seaman, she drew her pistols and, with both barrels, shot him through the head. Black Joan was arrested, thrown into the jail, which is now the Looe Museum, and brought before the magistrate the following morning. Strangely she was acquitted of the charge despite the many witnesses - possibly because the magistrate was one of her best customers. Today Looe Island is owned by the Wildlife Trust and is a haven for wildlife.

From Hannaford we head nearly 3 miles along the coast to our last stop of the day, Talland. Passing Aesop’s Bed and rounding the corner, we get our first view of Talland Bay. Here we stray briefly from the coast path diverting inland towards Talland church where we complete Day 1’s walk.

Talland Church
Talland Bay is thought to have been a popular location for bringing in smuggled goods. Quiet and out of the way it was also close to Polperro which, as we’ll see on tomorrow’s walk, was a hotspot for 18th century smuggling.

Talland church is thought to have been used to store contraband and its vicar was reputedly involved. It’s been said that the Reverend Richard Doidge had the ability to summon spirits, and there are stories of him running around the churchyard in the dead of night chasing ghosts. However, it’s highly likely that this was a clever ruse to cover up the illicit nightly activities of smugglers. It’s almost certain that the spirits Doidge was chasing were of an entirely different kind!
Day 2 - Talland to Polruan, via Polperro, Lansallos and Lantic Bay. Distance: 8.5 miles

Day 2 of our walk begins at Talland Bay. Be sure to take a stroll along the beach if the tide is out, worth it if only to admire the usual pink rocks that line the shore. From Talland we take to the South West Coast Path heading to Polperro for the next installment of the counties smuggling activity.

As the steep sided cliff edge path drops down into Polperro bear in mind that in the 18th century this was the main route into the village. Polperro was isolated. It was near impossible to get to by land. So everyone came by sea, and the people of Polperro could see everyone who passed through the steep-sided harbour, no one came in or out without the villagers knowing about it.

Polperro and The Smugglers Banker
Polperro is a small, stunning fishing village, which 250 years ago became home to one of the biggest smuggling businesses in Britain. In 1789 the French Revolution sparked a crisis in Europe. Within two years Britain had been dragged into another expensive war. The government needed huge amounts of cash to pay the troops, so sky-high taxes were pushed even higher, generating an ever increasing demand for cheap smuggled imports from France and the Channel Islands.

For the people of Polperro, the conflict would present the chance to make some serious money, all it took was a bit of organisation and the man who would provide that was Zephaniah Job. Well-educated and well-connected Job set up triangular trading arrangements between fishermen in Polperro, merchants in Guernsey and financiers in London. Co-ordinator, accountant, businessman and later banker (Job set up a bank in Polperro and had his own bank notes printed) Job organized this illegitimate trade enabling it to be conducted on a vast scale.

Everyone was involved from the magistrates and landowners to the fishermen - smuggling percolated through all strata of society and this massive smuggling boom made the people of Polperro vast amounts of cash. The remarkable Cornishman not only masterminded the flourishing contraband trade in Polperro, but also the activities of privateers whose adventures during the wars with France and Spain led to the capture of further handsome prizes.

Follow the coast path into the heart of Polperro to the village’s picturesque harbour. From here you can make a small detour heading inland, tracking the main road out of Polperro to the Crumplehorn Inn and Mill, or continue along the route of the South West Coast Path to track the cliff tops to the west of the village.
Walking Through History

Crumplehorn Inn and Mill
The Crumplehorn Inn and watermill is a great place to stop for refreshment. But that's not all it has on offer. It was once thought to be a counting house, and during the golden age of smuggling it was owned by Zephaniah Job. It's also the place where a great stash of Job's accounts and letters, detailing the smuggling activities of the village were found. And it is these unique papers that give us a rare insight into the organized world of 18th century smuggling.

Leaving Polperro the coast path takes us along arguably the finest stretch of coastline of this 4 day hike. Passing Nealand Point, Shag Rock and heading across Lansallos Cliff, we drop down to the breath-taking Lantivet Bay at West Coombe, close to the village of Lansallos.

West Coombe and Lansallos
West Coombe, known locally as Lansallos Bay is simply stunning. But the beach also has an intriguing feature. At its centre where the path leading up to Llansallos meets the beach, there is a very dramatic manmade cut through the rock.

The path itself, known as The Sand Lane, was thought to have originally been made by farmers to bring sand, shell and seaweed fertiliser up from the beach to their fields, and the cut was created to give easier access to the beach. The manmade incision in the rock is vast, easily 8-10 feet high. The base has been smoothed and there are two grooves worn in the rock by the wheels of a cart.

This track is thought to have been used by smugglers, providing a readymade route to bring landed contraband up from the beach. It’s worth taking a short detour here, up The Sand Lane to Llansallos church. By the church door you’ll find a cluster of headstones all marked with the name Job. It’s believed that the large casket grave is that of Zephaniah. Also keep your eyes peeled for the grave of John Perry thought to be a smuggler killed by a cannonball.

Leaving West Coombe, the spectacular scenery continues as we head past Sandheap Point and Watch House Cove. As the coast path rounds Pencarrow Head we get our first view of Lantic Bay, one of Cornwall’s hidden gems.

Lantic Bay
Two hundred years ago this secluded stretch of sand became infamous when a 100 strong gang of smugglers were spotted unloading contraband by two revenue men patrolling the coast here. When reinforcements were called a huge fight ensued. The smugglers were armed with large sticks. The revenue forces managed to arrest five of the smugglers, but one revenue man was knocked unconscious during the skirmish. The smugglers were sent to court before a Cornish jury and charged with handling prohibited goods and carrying dangerous weapons. The defence claimed that the alleged weapons were just common-or-garden sticks that all Cornish man carry whilst walking the coast path - they were found not guilty. It’s thought that a Cornish jury never found a smuggler guilty, so engrained was this illicit trade in Cornish culture.

We follow the coast path around the cliff tops of Lantic Bay. A detour down to the beach at Lantic Bay is well worth the trouble. But be warned the path is very steep; you'll get down to the beach quickly but the return journey up the cliff will not be so swift, presumably it would have been even slower carrying a keg of brandy. From Lantic Bay it's a further 2 miles to the Polruan where Day 2 of are walk is complete.
Day 3 – Places of Interest

Day 3 - Polruan to Portloe, via Fowey and Mevagissey.
Distance: 12 miles

On today’s walk we leave Polruan, once home to Daphne Du Maurier and take to the sea, crossing the river by foot ferry from the quayside at Polruan, to reach the town of Fowey, where we explore the government’s efforts to put a stop to Cornwall’s black-market economy. Ferries run regularly year round.

You can check the timetable at - http://www.ctomsandson.co.uk/polruanferry.html#times

Government Contraband Crackdown

Smuggling in Cornwall had been going on almost with impunity throughout the 7 years of war with France. But in 1799 Napoleon seized power, and would soon be preparing to invade Britain. The government would need all the money it could muster to stop him. Two hundred years ago Fowey was the frontline in the government’s fight back against Cornish smugglers. As war against Napoleon raged the smugglers were trading with the French on a huge scale. It was time for the revenue to act. They sent their best man, Captain Gabriel Bray to Fowey to wage war on the smugglers.

Bray had already earned a fearsome reputation fighting smugglers elsewhere. At Deal in Kent he was involved in a clash onboard a smugglers’ vessel that resulted in Bray practically removing the head of a smuggler with a swipe of his cutlass. Heavily armed and well provisioned with the fastest ships, this new and improved revenue service was a force to be reckoned with. In just five months three smuggling vessels were captured, along with Polperro’s most successful smuggling ship - The Lottery. The days of smuggling openly with no fear of reprisal were gone forever.

Channel Islands Clampdown

In 1805 just weeks after Nelson’s victory over the French at Trafalgar, the Channel Islands now fell under the same legislation as the rest of the UK. They could no longer carry out their duty-free trade with the Cornish. The main supply of duty-free goods evaporated. However, 100 miles away in Brittany, Napoleon declared Roscoff a free port, a cunning ruse to lure the Cornish smugglers there. Smuggling was becoming harder, but it wasn’t over yet.
The ferry trip to Mevagissey takes around 50 mins. Look out for dolphins and other marine life on route. The ferry drops us in the outer harbour on arrival in Mevagissey. From here make your way to the inner harbour and explore the picturesque fishing port, before re-joining the South West Coast Path heading west.

Smugglers Get Sneaky and the Rise of Religion
Like Polperro, Mevagissey had made a fortune smuggling duty-free goods from the Channel Islands. The ringleader here was fisherman turned smuggler James Dunn. Dunn used the profits from smuggling to set up a shipbuilding business, which built ships for smugglers.

By the early 19th century the government’s clampdown on smuggling meant that the illicit operations went undercover. Increased numbers of ships were being seized, convictions were commonplace and the punishments stiff. Smuggling was fast becoming a risky business, so fewer men were now involved.

The steadfast smugglers responded by moving to more hidden methods. Shipwrights began building boats with false hulls, and hidden compartments - double skins in the base of the boat where barrels could be stashed. Contraband could now be hidden onboard, but how was it covertly brought to land? Barrels were brought close to shore, and then dropped over the side, weighed down with sinking stones and anchors, for collection later under the cover of darkness or when the coast was clear.

The Rise of Religion
At the same time as the revenue service clampdown on smuggling, a further force was rising in Cornwall; a force that was to cause a moral shift in the attitude of the Cornish people - Methodism.

Methodism, which offered opportunities for education and enabled the working man to better himself, grew enormously in the 19th century. Now law-breaking and booze-drinking became increasingly frowned upon. In the tiny village of Portloe, there is evidence of the two forces that were now making smuggling in Cornwall difficult.

On leaving Mevagissey, finally today there’s a chance to do some serious walking. It will take the rest of the day to cover nearly 12 miles of coastline. From Mevagissey we follow the coast path through Portmellon, to Gorran Haven, past Penare and through East and West Portholland to reach the final destination of the day, Portloe.

In 1824 a revenue boat was stationed here and a watch station with boathouse and slipway built - today it’s a holiday home. Around the same time the Methodist hall in the centre of the village was built. Smuggling was getting harder to carry out and to justify.
Walking Through History

Day 4 – Places of Interest.

Day 4 - Portloe to St Mawes, via Portscatho and St Antony Head
Distance: 12.5 miles

The final day’s walking takes us along the coast through Kiberick Cove.

Then through, Nare Head, across Gerrans Bay, to Porthcurnick Beach, before reaching the village of Portscatho, 6 miles from the day’s starting point, where we uncover the dying days of Cornish smuggling.

Cornish Smuggling’s Last Hurrah

A hundred and ninety years ago the British Army fought one of the most celebrated battles in our history. The outcome was to have a profound effect on life along this remote stretch of coastline. Wellington’s victory at Waterloo in 1815 was a black day for Cornwall’s black market economy. After almost 20 years of constant war with France, peace suddenly led to 300,000 soldiers and sailors returning home.

In 1822, bolstered by these veterans the various revenue branches were amalgamated to form the Coastguard Service. This coastal path was now patrolled by a new unified, battle-hardened customs force. Well paid and well equipped, these professionals were determined to put the smugglers out of business for good. The tide had turned - it was now only a few desperate Cornishmen who would risk everything on the high seas to continue smuggling. The determined few quit their conspicuous sailing vessels and began rowing to Roscoff!

Amazingly, six to eight-man gigs were used to row the 100 miles to France to collect contraband. But there was method in this madness. The advantage a rowing boat has is that it can head directly into the wind. No sailing vessel can do this. Under sail you have to tack, taking a zigzag route when travelling directly into the wind. A rowing boat, like a gig is very fast and by heading into wind it could easily out run a sailing ship. A gig from the Scilly Isles is known to have made the trip to France twenty five times. Despite the holding capacity of a gig being small, the goods brought back were still of such high value, that it was a worthwhile pursuit for those who struggled to make ends meet by more legitimate means - the demographic of the Cornish smugglers had changed.

From Portscatho we follow the South West Coast 4 miles, past Greb Point and Porthbeor Beach to St Antony Head at the southernmost tip of the Roseland Peninsula on the final leg of this 4 day hike.
Walking Through History

St Anthony Head
St Anthony Head guards the entrance to one of the world's great natural harbours. It offers commanding views of Falmouth Bay and there is an abundance of wildlife. Lookout for Fulmars gliding around the cliffs and grey seals hauled up on the rocks as the tide falls. One of the most well-known features on St Anthony head is the Lighthouse - built in 1834 to warn the ever increasing number of ships of the hazardous Manacles rocks.

Less well known perhaps, is the fact that a huge gun battery has existed here since the early 19th century. The working battery is mostly underground, and below the gun emplacements a door leads down to the magazine, which was the storage place for ammunition. The concrete structures present today were added during the Second World War but the first gun battery built here was to defend Falmouth from the French during the Napoleonic wars. St Anthony Head has always been of strategic military importance. It's a reminder that during the golden age of smuggling Britain's economy had been geared for war for centuries, creating the high taxes that had made smuggling so profitable. But by the 1830's this was all about to change.

Leaving the gun battery and rounding St Anthony Head, we follow the coast path past the lighthouse. From here there are great views of St Mawes and its castle, our final destination. But to get there we must take to the seas for one last time. At Place the coast path comes to an abrupt end and we take the foot ferry across the creek to St Mawes where we find out what would finally bring an end to smuggling in Cornwall.

The ferry operates from late May to the end of October. A water taxis booking will be necessary if you make this journey out of season. For ferry times check - http://www.falriver.co.uk/getting-about/ferries/place-ferry/timetable.

St Mawes and its Castle
St Mawes is the principle village of the Roseland Peninsula. The picturesque harbour with its whitewashed houses is guarded by a clove-shaped castle. St Mawes Castle, built by Henry VIII is one of the best-preserved forts in a chain of Tudor coastal defences constructed between 1539 and 1545 to counter the threat of invasion from France and Spain. Although prominent in Henry's time, such forts were rearmed and used again during the Napoleonic wars. St Mawes Castle remains today a significant defensive military position protecting Falmouth and its estuary.

From the ferry drop off point in St Mawes harbour it's a short walk west along the waterfront to reach St Mawes Castle. From here the views across the bay to Falmouth are breath-taking.

The Dawn of a New Era
By the early 19th century, for the first time in hundreds of years Britain no longer faced the threat of a major European war and big expensive defences were becoming redundant. It was the dawn of a new era - The Victorian Age and the Industrial Revolution was rising. In Westminster there was talk of a radical peacetime approach to taxes, sparked by what was going on in great ports like Falmouth. By the mid-19th century Falmouth would hold up 500 ships at a time, each laden with raw materials from around the world and all destined for British factories. The nation now exported far more than we imported, so high import taxes were no longer in our interest. In 1842 the government introduced a policy of free-trade, slashing the tax on imports. Overnight a bottle of legal brandy became the same price as a black-market one. There was no longer any money to be made in the illicit trade - the golden age for British industry, marked the end to the golden age of Cornish smuggling. Ironically, after more than a century of smuggling in Cornwall, it would all come to an end when the duty-free trade that created it became government policy.
**Smuggling and Tourism**

Shortly after duty-free trade became the driving force of Victorian economics, Cornwall began profiting from smuggling again, but this time in a very different way. In the 1840’s famous Cornish smugglers began publishing their memoirs and their romanticised tales became hugely popular, helping to give birth to a tourist industry that today drives much of Cornwall’s economy. So perhaps smuggling will always be, even if in a much smaller way, engrained in Cornish culture.