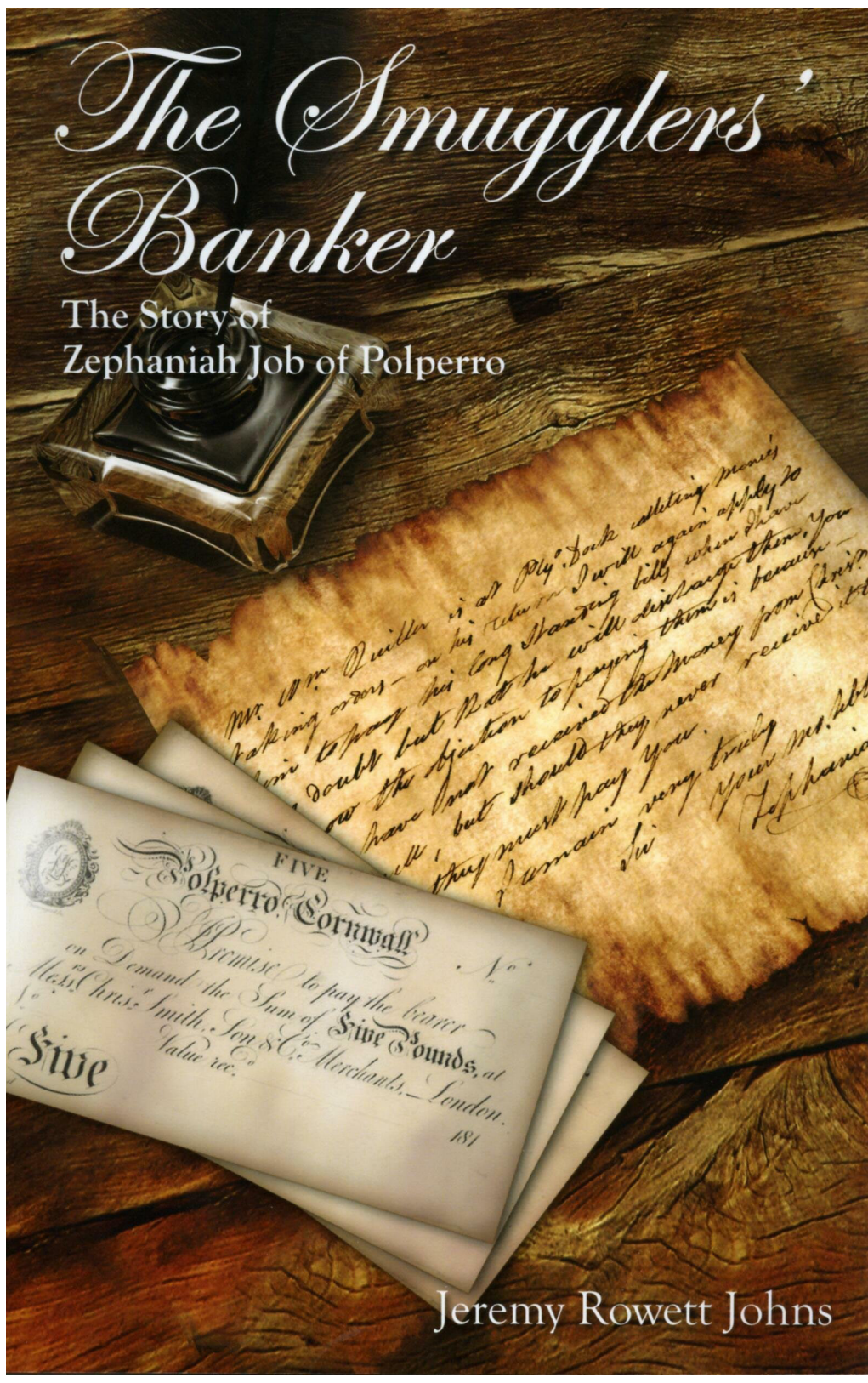
The Smugglers' Banker

The Story of Zephaniah Job of Polperro



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ISBN 09530012 2 9

First edition published 1997
Second edition published 2008
Polperro Heritage Press,
Clifton-upon-Teme, Worcestershire WR6 6EN UK
www.polperropress.co.uk

Cover design by
Steve Bowgen

Printed by
Orphans Press
Leominster, Herefordshire
United Kingdom

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FOREWORD

It is doubtful that the true story of one of Cornwall's more remarkable citizens could have been written had not an eccentric amateur historian named Frank Hill Perrycoste arrived in the Cornish fishing village of Polperro around the year 1900.

Perrycoste quickly developed a keen interest in local history and offered to help Sir Francis Galton, the eminent scientist and pioneer of the study of fingerprints, by collecting the prints of the inhabitants of Polperro; Galton wanted to know if fingerprints were an inherited characteristic and could, therefore, be used to determine whether any two individuals were related. To chart the relationships of the men, women and children of Polperro he fingerprinted, Perrycoste also compiled pedigrees of the families who lived there.

Perrycoste's studies later led him to the archives of Talland and Lansallos, the two parishes that divide Polperro, and eventually to the accumulation of papers and ledgers left by Zephaniah Job the financier of smugglers and privateers nearly a century earlier. When Perrycoste came across the Job papers they were still stored in a worm-eaten chest at Crumplehorn Mill above Polperro and his account of the discovery relates how, after Job's death in 1822, 'certain malefactors made a huge bonfire' which destroyed a large quantity of the records.

Although many of the items that survived long enough for Frank Perrycoste to examine have since vanished, the substantial remainder is now in the Courtney Library at the Royal Cornwall Museum, Truro, and I am grateful to the Royal Institution of Cornwall for the kind assistance I have been granted there. In addition, I have received generous

help from a number of people, in particular the author and historian James Derriman, the Polperro artist Sue Lord, and the Polperro Harbour Trustees who administer the Polperro Heritage Museum.

Publication of this book has been generously assisted by a grant from the Sir Arthur Quiller Couch Memorial Fund.

Jeremy Rowett Johns, 1996

INTRODUCTION

On a cold Spring afternoon in the year 1822, a group of villagers gathered round a blazing bonfire outside a lime-washed stone cottage above Polperro, one of the smallest and remotest fishing harbours on the south-east coast of Cornwall. From time to time someone would emerge from the doorway of the building clutching an armful of books and papers and throw them unceremoniously onto the crackling fire, pausing only briefly to watch as they curled in the heat and the flames began licking their scorched brown edges.

Every now and then the chill wind blowing down through the coombe behind the houses would gust, lifting a flurry of charred fragments high into the air where they hung for a moment before being carried out to sea.

A strange stillness enveloped the quayside that day. The bustle and noise that usually filled the area halted temporarily as if in deference to the man whose home the cottage had been; a man whose devotion to business and the community in which he lived had not only brought great prosperity during the years of goodness and plenty, but great comfort and support throughout the bad times.

Bonfires in Polperro traditionally marked events of special significance. Beacons had been lit on the cliffs nearby to warn smuggling vessels at sea it was unsafe to approach. Great fires had marked the end of the wars with France and the coming of peace. The communal bonfire of tar-barrels and faggots lit on the eve of the annual fair there in July was accompanied by singing and shouting as it burned. And now this fire, marking the end of an era, the end of another chapter in Polperro's

remarkable history at the passing of one of its most respected adopted sons and citizens, Zephaniah Job.

Onto the bonfire went his ledgers, journals and account books, his cashbooks and the parchment bound letter-books that contained copies of correspondence relating to business dealings over decades with men and women from all walks of life. Many secrets perished in the flames as the circle of onlookers swelled, some curious, others content in the knowledge that their confidential financial affairs were at least safe from the prying eyes of those who had no business to know.

As dusk fell and a light drizzle began to fall, the flames flickered and died, leaving only a glowing heap of embers like the last remains of a funeral pyre. The crowd drifted away and an eerie emptiness filled the cottage whose contents had fuelled the flames.

Not everything of Zephaniah Job's was cremated that afternoon, however. Enough survived to tell the story of one of the most extraordinary Cornishmen ever. One hundred years later the curiosity of Frank Perrycoste,* another migrant to Polperro, led to the discovery of a residual horde of account books, ledgers and letter-books once belonging to Zephaniah Job that had lain decaying in the loft of Crumplehorn Mill above Polperro.

Perrycoste encountered more than half a hundredweight of material which had somehow escaped the flames in 1822. For the next twelve months he set about cataloguing, sifting and piecing together the enormous quantity of fragmented

* Frank Hill Perrycoste (1866-1929) developed a keen interest in local history after settling in Polperro with his wife at the end of the 19th century, offering to help Sir Francis Galton, the scientist and pioneer of the study of fingerprints, by collecting prints of Polperro inhabitants. Galton wanted to know if fingerprints could be used to determine whether any two individuals were related. To chart the relationships of the men, women and children whose fingerprints he obtained, Perrycoste also compiled pedigrees of the Polperro families concerned.

records that had fallen into his hands. And at the end of his labours, he published an account of his studies in 1930 entitled *Gleanings from the Records of Zephaniah Job of Polperro* in which he observed:

> 'This collection of records seems to me of very great value, as a huge quarry for social and economic data of various kinds and of both local and general interest during forty or fifty momentous years - a value that will necessarily increase as, with the progress of time, the past becomes more and more remote:'

Frank Perrycoste's *Gleanings* proved to be much more than just a revealing social study of 18th century life in Cornwall. They pieced together for the first time the many strands of a complex network of people and places involved in the clandestine trade of contraband goods of which Zephaniah Job had indeed been the central figure in Polperro.

1

Fugitive From St. Agnes

Zephaniah Job was born in the parish of St. Agnes, the centre of a large mining area on the north-west coast of Cornwall, sometime around the beginning of January, 1750. It was a time of great social and economic change marking the beginning of the Industrial Revolution that was to sweep through Cornwall during the latter half of the eighteenth century, bringing great wealth to a few and employment for many more.

The youngest of the five children of Zephanias and Sarah Job, Zephaniah was baptised at the Parish Church of St. Agnes on January 22nd 1750 by the Reverend James Walker, an event recorded in two separate volumes of the Parish Church Registers:

> *Zephania Son of Zephanias Job & Sarah his wife Bapt. 22 Jany 1749**

The same Registers record the baptism of Zephaniah's father in 1708 and his death in 1769. His mother, Sarah, gave birth to three sons and two daughters. Their first child, born in 1735 and baptised Zephanias, died in infancy. The second, John, was born a little over a year later, followed by a daughter Elisabeth in 1740 and another, Sarah, in 1744.

The family had moved to St. Agnes at the beginning of the eighteenth century from the parish of Gwithian to the west when Zephaniah's grandfather had come in search of work

* The baptism is shown as having taken place in 1749 because prior to 1752 two calendar systems were in use in England; the Civil or Legal year began on March 25th (Lady Day), while the Historical year began on January 1st.

among the flourishing mining industry there. St. Agnes is a large coastal parish whose main features are the St. Agnes Beacon, rising sharply inland to a height of over 600 feet and dominating the countryside to the west of the Trevaunance valley, and Trevaunance Cove which affords access by sea.

The Job family settled somewhere in the area between the sea and St. Agnes Beacon. One of the tenants recorded as having paid 5s 6d rent for a plot of land in nearby Goonfrey (Goonvrea today) at the time was a Zephany Job, in all probability the grandfather of Zephaniah.

The area around St. Agnes Beacon was rich in tin, copper and silver deposits and even in the mid-eighteenth century the landscape was scattered with mine-workings in every direction. Improvements in mining techniques and a growing demand for Cornish metals encouraged greater exploitation of such mineral deposits. This in turn gave employment to many thousands of people who otherwise had nothing other than subsistence farming or fishing to support themselves. By the time of Zephaniah Job's birth, a particularly rich vein of tin ore had just been discovered near St. Agnes at a site known as Polberro.

Cornish miners were a tough, hard-living race and the children of such mining communities were employed from an early age. Boys as young as eight years would be taught to sort the various ores, so getting to know them at a glance; at the age of 14 they would usually be sent underground. A few, those who displayed a quickness of learning and a natural ability to master complex techniques, would be singled out for special instruction. It is very likely that the young Zephaniah Job was marked out in this manner judging by the earliest reference to his childhood, in the *History of Polperro* published in 1871:

> '[Job] received an education that was to fit him for the position of mine-captain, which requires, besides common arithmetic, a knowledge of mensuration and the lower branches of mathematics.'

While it may have been the ambition of many young men employed in the mines to become a mine captain,* only those who displayed exceptional qualities were likely to reach such a position. According to a 19th century issue of the *Mining Journal*:

> 'To fill this important office properly, the individual should be possessed of certain natural physical capabilities, one of the most important of which is a robust, sound constitution, as exposure to wet, and the fatigue of climbing the various pitches, backs and levels where the miners work, entail considerable bodily exertion. He should possess a quick eye, a retentive memory and a keen power of observation; these endowments should be improved and cultivated by a careful and suitable education, embracing more particularly the liberal sciences of mathematics, chemistry, geology, mineralogy, civil engineering, and a knowledge of accounts; in addition to all these, he should have extensive practical experience, so as to adapt them to his purposes.'

There is little doubt, as subsequent events were to demonstrate, that Zephaniah Job displayed many, if not all of these qualities and that, had he remained in St. Agnes to pursue his intended career in the mining industry there, he would indeed have fulfilled the expectations for him. But at some time around 1770 Job was involved in an incident that was to have a dramatic effect on the rest of his life. Years later, there was talk of his having killed another young man in a fight, but the only real clue to what happened is contained in the original draft manuscript of the *History of Polperro* where the author, Dr. Jonathan Couch (in later life, Job's physician and confidant), recalls:

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* A mine captain was responsible for the direct management of the mine, ensuring that costs were tightly controlled as well as providing technical guidance to the adventurers under whose direction he was employed.

'[Job] had the misfortune in a fit of rage to beat a boy in such a manner that it was supposed his life was in danger.'

The published version refers only to Job as a 'very young man' being 'obliged to quit his home abruptly in consequence of some trouble he had brought upon himself in a fit of rage.'

Whatever the cause of his sudden outburst of temper and the assault that followed, the consequences were serious enough for Job to flee from his home in St. Agnes, leaving behind his family and every prospect of a promising career. There were rumours in later years that he had even killed another young man. The truth can only be guessed, but what is known is that the aspiring mine captain found himself a fugitive as a result with nowhere, apparently, to go.

Instinctively, perhaps, he set off eastwards across Cornwall with little more than the clothing he was wearing, aware that any other direction would soon bring him to the coast again. On foot, he would have had to cross the high moorland terrain that divides the rugged north coastline of Cornwall from the gentler undulating shoreline in the south, working his way steadily east and south for more than 30 miles until he had reached a point somewhere along the road between Fowey and Looe that led eventually to Plymouth. Here, fate again took a hand in leading him to his ultimate destination. Job turned off the road and made his way down to the sea, perhaps following one of the many ancient routes that led down through the thickly-wooded valleys that lay between the headlands that dominated that part of the coast. On, down, until he came to Polperro.

What compelled him to leave the road and make his way overland towards the seclusion of this small fishing village hidden from all but the sea? Whatever it was, it proved to be a turning point in the life of Zephaniah Job and the small, isolated community in which he was soon to find himself.

2

Polperro Schoolmaster

When Zephaniah Job came to Polperro on the south coast of Cornwall sometime around 1770, he could not have wished for a more secluded haven. Enclosed by the sea at the mouth of the narrow creek in which it lay, it was surrounded on the landward side by steep thickly-wooded slopes forming a natural barrier to the outside world. The arrival of a stranger in such a tightly-knit community would not have passed unremarked, though curiosity soon gave way to hospitality.

The cottages of the few hundred inhabitants crowded round the harbour in haphazard arrangement, some perched on rocky ledges, others back-to-back and side-to-side as if competing for space along the narrow, tortuous lanes that wound among them. Low roofs of slate and thatch rose up on either side while through the middle past the Green ran the fast-flowing torrent that divided the parish of Talland to the east from that of Lansallos in the west. Many of the houses belonging to the fishermen were constructed of ships' timbers and granite stone to withstand the storms that regularly swept up the Channel, and their occupants lived on the floor above the ground level cellars used for storing fish and other provisions for the winter months.

The stench of fish reeked everywhere on Polperro. It wafted in from the boats moored in the harbour and from the fish scales on the quay where the fishermen and jowters* with their slimy brown panniers bargained noisily with one another over the latest catch to be landed. It hung in the air and in the houses and clung to the clothing of all who came into contact with it.

* Jowters were travelling fish salesmen and women.

To a stranger such as Job, the smell would have seemed suffocatingly pungent at first. Only a year or so earlier when John Wesley had ridden into Polperro in 1768, the Methodist preacher recorded in his journal:

> 'The room over which we were to lodge being filled with pilchards and conger-eels, the perfume was too potent for me, so that I was not sorry when one of our friends invited me to lodge at her house.'

After preaching to a crowd of local inhabitants standing in torrential rain on the Green, Wesley accepted an offer to stay at the home of John Rommett in the Warren. Rommett was a fisherman and fish-curer and the odour of dried conger eel stored in the cellar beneath his living room soon persuaded the preacher to remain instead at Mrs Martin's house in Talland Lane.

To the people of Polperro, however, the smell represented their principal means of subsistence; and for many, their only livelihood. Generations of them had depended more on the sea than on the land for a meagre living despite the insecurity it afforded. The fishermen, like seafarers everywhere, were a hardy group of men resigned to a precarious existence dictated by the changing rhythm of the wind and the waves. While they were at sea, the women were employed salting, pressing, bulking and cleaning the fish ashore; and when they were not directly involved in this work women traditionally passed the time gathered in groups around the harbour knitting the distinctive knit-frocks worn by their menfolk.

Pilchards were an essential part of the Cornish economy, for much of the land above the cliffs was too poor to support much more than a few cottagers. In good years when the pilchard shoals arrived in abundance off the coast during the summer and autumn months, there was fish enough for all. But if the pilchards failed to arrive, or storms prevented the boats from putting to sea, everyone shared the hardship and hunger of a bleak winter ahead.

The fishermen themselves were ill-educated and most were illiterate, unable even to sign their own names. Their dialect, peculiar to that part of Cornwall, would certainly have been unfamiliar even to someone like Job from another part of the county. As soon as a boy was old enough to go to sea and earn his keep, some as young as eight years of age, any semblance of formal education gained at either of the two poorly managed charitable schools in Polperro at the time ended abruptly.

Education was the one thing the impoverished fugitive from St. Agnes had to offer in return for his keep. As a tutor to the children of the community into which he had come, Zephaniah Job very soon found he was able to provide himself with a modest income. One of his early pupils was a Polperro boy named John Clements whose arithmetic book was found among the documents salvaged by Frank Perrycoste. The home-made, hand sewn exercise book is filled with examples of multiplication of money, division, 'reduction' and something called '*The Golden Rule or Rule of Three Direct*', all presented in Job's neat copperplate handwriting.

Clements was just seven years old when he sat down at Job's direction and learned the multiplication table that adorns the first page of the book, carefully inscribed with his name, *John Clements of Polperro*, above and the date below: *12th December 1775*. The arithmetical examples that follow, page after page, start simply enough but get progressively more difficult:

> If one yard of Broadcloth cost 18s..7d what shall 5 pieces each piece 12 yards cost?
>
> What shall 72 Ankers of Rum each 10 gallons cost at 4s..9d per gallon?
>
> If 14s will buy 8lbs of Tobacco, how much will £14..8s buy at that rate?
>
> Bought 42 Hundred[weight] of Tea at £10..15s..9d per Hundred. Sold it at 2s..3d per pound. What did I gain by the whole?

On a later page, recorded in the same neat copybook hand:

> Division of Divers Denominations. This Rule sheweth you to equally divide almost any sum of money equally between different persons.

And on another, under the head of Reduction:

> *Reduction is of two kinds that is ascending and descending; descending is the bringing of a greater denomination into a lesser denomination as pounds into shillings, shillings into pence and this is performed by multiplication.*

Such arithmetical axioms were widely taught in schools in the eighteenth century and Job's pupils were probably required to recite them from memory as well as use them to solve the sort of baffling exercises illustrated in Clements' book:

> *How many barleycorns will reach round the globe it being accounted 360 degrees, each degree 60 miles?*

The answer given is a mind-boggling total of 4105728000 barleycorns, although modern mathematical students would not even be expected to know that a barleycorn was a measure of length in common use at the time equal to one third of an inch. Another exercise requires the number of seconds in 38 solar years to be calculated; and another even the number of wagons that would stretch end to end from Fowey to Looe 'allowing six yards for the standing of each waggon', though no clue is given as to the distance between the two towns..

Such exercises are an indication of the flair and fascination for figures that Job demonstrated throughout his life. They also provide an illuminating insight into the cost of living in Polperro at the time: a man's yearly income is given as £29..18s..9d; a sheep could be bought for 12s..9d, while brandy was 7s..6d a gallon, rum 4s..9d a gallon and tea 2s..3d a pound, though from whom such goods could be purchased at these

prices is not revealed. John Clements' little book does reveal, however, the extent to which Job adapted his instruction according to the needs of the families whose children he taught. Calculations almost always involved quantities of tea, tobacco, brandy and rum, all commodities then passing through Polperro as contraband.

When John Clements was older he went to sea and eventually became captain of the schooner *Polperro* trading between Cornwall and Ireland. Job became a part owner of the vessel and, wasting nothing, he later used the blank pages at the back of the school book he had prepared for his young pupil in 1775 to record the schooner's accounts between 1787 and 1808.

Job's attempt to establish a school of his own was not a great success however. In a community where the ability to earn a livelihood depended more on the skills of seamanship than scholarship, there was little regard for the need for children to be taught how to read and write. To supplement the meagre income he earned from teaching, Job soon found he could help the Polperro boatowners in other ways; as book-keeper, general correspondent and advisor for their business affairs, relieving them of hours of tedious paperwork.

The boats were invariably owned by syndicates, small groups of fishermen and others who would take a share in the cost of buying and fitting out a vessel. Venturers were also encouraged to take shares in a voyage in the hope of profiting upon the boat's safe return. Whatever learning the fishermen lacked was more than compensated for by their seamanship, courage and natural shrewdness when facing the elements at sea. And if there were no fish to be had, there was a harvest of an altogether different kind awaiting those bold enough to gather it.

Generations of Polperro mariners had supplemented their living by bringing contraband ashore, often at secluded coves along the coast near Polperro under cover of darkness. In

nearby Lantivet Bay, boats would land stealthily in Palace Cove or Parsons Cove and the goods carried up the narrow sunken lane that still leads today to Lansallos church. Others came into Talland Bay where, once landed on the beach, the illicit cargoes would quickly disappear into the churchyard above or be taken away inland along well-trodden paths to secret hiding-places where they could be stored safely before being distributed.

Sheer economic necessity drove the Polperro seafarers to smuggling. In Cornwall it increased steadily throughout the eighteenth century to such an extent that it became a major activity there. Successive British governments had imposed high duties on a variety of luxury goods imported from Europe, initially to protect trade with the North American colonies, and smuggling became exceptionally profitable for anyone prepared to face little more risk than most people encountered in their everyday struggle to earn a livelihood. Understaffed revenue authorities were invariably powerless to prevent the smugglers, who were often protected by a sympathetic public.

Brandy, gin, tea and tobacco were all readily available across the Channel at considerably lower prices than they were in England where such commodities attracted heavy duties and were often unobtainable. By 1770 some 469,000 gallons of brandy and 350,000 pounds of tea alone were being smuggled into Cornwall every year amounting to the considerable loss of some £150,000 to the Exchequer.

Because the Channel Islands were exempt from any taxation imposed by a British parliament they become the main centre for the supply of contraband goods into Britain during the 17th and 18th centuries. The Guernsey merchants at St. Peter Port imported large quantities of geneva (gin) from Rotterdam, brandy from France and Spain, rum from the West Indies, tobacco from Virginia and tea via the powerful East India Company from China. Most of these commodities were sold on to English wholesalers and smugglers.

Cornwall's proximity to Guernsey ensured such trade was particularly active there, but the 100 miles of sea separating Polperro from St. Peter Port involved a hazardous voyage for small fishing vessels in all but the most favourable weather, even in times of peace. With only the crudest of navigational instruments to guide them, the men who made the perilous crossing often risked death at sea and many were lost in the attempt to bring back contraband goods.

When the tax on salt was increased by the young William Pitt in order to raise money to pay for the wars against France, Cornish pilchard fishing communities were particularly hard hit. Large quantities of salt were used in preserving pilchards for markets both at home and abroad, and the extra tax burden only served to encourage an illegitimate trade with Britain's enemy, France, from which country much salt was normally obtained.

For ordinary folk, the only way to get cheap salt to cure enough fish for their own families was by smuggling it into the country. It required a bushel of salt to cure a thousand pilchards, barely enough to supply a moderately large family throughout the winter, but the duty on such a quantity of English salt, amounting to 3s. 4d (6s. 8d for foreign salt), represented nearly half the wages made in a poor fishing season.

Britain's restrictive trading laws and high taxes also led to her North American colonies making their historic Declaration of Independence in 1776. When war broke out between Britain and the rebel colonists, France and Spain joined the rebels in order to gain revenge on Britain for territorial and trade losses suffered in earlier years.

A few weeks after France had declared war on Britain in February 1778, a letter arrived at the home of Zephaniah Job in Polperro that was to implicate the erstwhile schoolmaster in the contraband trade carried on there for many years to come.

The Smugglers' Banker reveals for the first time the full story of Zephaniah Job, the remarkable Cornishman who not only masterminded the flourishing contraband trade in Polperro during the Napoleonic wars but also the privateers whose adventures during the wars with France and Spain led to the capture of handsome prizes. Job's flair for business, his association with the Trelawny family and links with those engaged in the smuggling trade brought lasting prosperity to the inhabitants of this remote Cornish fishing village at the end of the 18th century.

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ISBN 978-0953001224
ISBN 0953001229

9 78-0-9530012-2-4

£7.95