

THE MAKING OF A GENTLEMAN

In this article we return to Sudbourne and the Chaplin family, one of whom, William (1803-1882), owned the curious 'geometrical wood' within what is now Captain's Wood (see Bulletin Issue 6, pp 1-5).

Vic Harrup has now uncovered more information about William's father, Richard Chaplin (c1751-1833) who was, it seems, at least in the earlier part of his life, heavily involved in smuggling.

Richard Chaplin married Elizabeth Ablit at Sudbourne church in 1788, and both were of the parish of Sudbourne, although Richard had not been baptised there. We know that they were previously unmarried but we do not know anything of his family background. The Sudbourne register at this time helpfully gives dates of birth as well as baptismal dates, and it is interesting that the Chaplin children were baptised between six and twenty-two months after birth. James, the eldest, was born in July 1789, followed by Elizabeth, Mary, George and Rosamund Eliza, but there were four years between her and William born in March 1803.

As explained in the previous article, Richard died in January 1833, aged 82, describing himself as a gentleman. He left Cowton Farm in Sudbourne and Iken to James and his other properties to William. He farmed Church Farm as a tenant, and documents survive showing he provided a mortgage of £1000 to an Orford miller in 1817 at 5% interest. At the time of his death his sons, James and William, and a Woodbridge surgeon were entrusted with several thousand pounds. The interest and later the capital sum were to be distributed to his three daughters. His personal estate exceeded £7000. What was the source of his wealth?

Another surgeon, William Goodwin of Earl Soham, kept a diary from the first day of 1785 until 1810 and he had a lot to say about smuggling in the early part of the diary, which also served as a commonplace book. In February 1785 he noted that, by Act of Parliament, William Pitt had reduced the duty on tea drastically and smuggling of that commodity was likely to decline. Previously liquor and tea merchants had given up travelling to the countryside for orders because so much was being smuggled. Indeed, he wrote, every parish had its private tea and gin shop. It was common to see horses loaded with tea and carts with spirits passing through his village. Now, thanks to the Act and 'the vigilance of the King's Cutters' (boats used by the Revenue Men) the 'shameful business' was nearly at an end. He reckoned, such was the profligacy of the smugglers and so great were their losses by the capture of their vessels, worth between £5,000 and £30,000 each, that none was set up for life. Was he right?

Actually, he began to provide contrary evidence within a few days of writing. He recorded 20 carts going through the Earl Soham carrying 2500 gallons of spirits, and in the same month came five carts with 150 tubs, then another five. However in October 1786 the duty on brandy and rum was reduced, and lowered again in May 1787. Between those dates a peace treaty with France brought about a further decline in smuggling. Certainly he ceased recording the movement of smuggled goods through his village about this time, but later he told the story of nine tubs of spirits being found in Monewden Church in 1790 behind the Ten Commandments, hidden there by the sexton!

He also was in the habit of pinning extracts from the Ipswich Journal in his book and in August 1785 can be found the following advertisement, placed in the newspaper by Richard Chaplin, then aged 34.

RICHARD CHAPLIN, Sudbourn, Suffolk, near Orford, begs leave to acquaint his friends and the public in general, That he has, some time back, declined the branch of Smuggling, and returns thanks for all their past favours.—Also, To be SOLD, on MONDAY, August 8, 1785, at the dwelling-house of SAMUEL BATHERS, Sudbourn, the property of Richard Chaplin aforesaid, A very useful CART, fit for a maltster, ashman, or a smuggler—it will carry 80 half-ankers, or tubs; one small ditto that will carry 40 tubs; also two very good loaden Saddles, three Pads, Straps, Bridles, Girths, Horse-cloth, Corn-bin, very good Vault, and many articles that are very useful to a smuggler.

Cutting from The Ipswich Journal of 1785.