

John Carter - a Cornish legend and smuggler supreme

An endearing tale...

Written by Andy Owen



In Cornwall, smuggling has been around for centuries.

The evidence is everywhere.

Just have a look next time you are on a Cornish beach - and you are likely to spot caves, manholes, hook holes and gulleys, beaten into the cliffs by the smugglers.

These are weathered reminders of how these colourful characters used to transfer their stolen goods from their boats to their hideaways inland.

In the period from 1760 -1810, the smugglers came into their own.

Britain was fighting a number of costly wars at the time and, because of this, money was needed badly. This had to be raised by taxation, particularly on imported goods - and heavy duties had been put on luxury items - especially, wine, spirits and tobacco.

This was hurting people. So, a number of local 'entrepeneurs' decided to do something about it. After all, Cornwall was an ideal smuggling base, because it was fairly remote. France and Holland were only a few hours sailing away - and the coast was suited for bringing in contraband.

So, anyone with a small, fast boat could become quite effective and profitable by bringing in popular goods and evading the high taxes. But, of course, they had to keep clear of dedicated customs officials, who were hell bent on catching them.

While the Cornish were by no means alone in pursuing this trade, it was Cornwall's close geographical and cultural ties with Breton ports that gave Cornish smugglers their unique advantage – even the Cornish and Breton languages are similar.

So, enter, stage left, one of the most famous smuggling families in Cornwall - the Carter family. They were perfectly placed and had all the right credentials

It was John Carter who became the natural leader - calling himself the 'King of Prussia'. It is said that he was given the nickname 'King of Prussia' because as a child he always had to be 'king' when playing with his brothers. The real King of Prussia was a successful military leader in Germany who had been famous during John's lifetime.

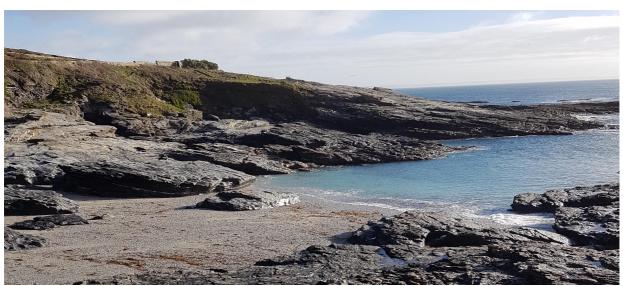
In the legends of the Cove the personality of John Carter looms so large that his associates are almost - if not entirely - forgotten, and so much centres around him alone.

He was a mixture of hard-working fisherman, honest smuggler - and out-and-out rogue.

The Carters' home in Prussia Cove (originally Portleah), was tucked neatly behind a sheltered headland, right at the centre of Mount's Bay. The three brothers - John, Harry and Charles Carter, ruled this part of the coast from 1770 to 1807.

This little cove had considerable natural advantages as it was well protected, being very difficult to reach from the landward side, at least without being seen. It offered convenient slipways for landing cargoes, and here alongside a "good dwelling house" their property included "commodious cellars, lofts, and salt houses", which were perfect for storing contraband goods.

It was so sheltered and secluded that it was pretty much impossible to see what boats were in the little coves.



The family mainly used three small inlets for their business.

There was Pisky's Cove on the west side, Bessey's Cove and King's Cove.

Bessey's Cove was named after Bessey Bussow, who kept a 'Wink' there. A Wink' was an unlicensed Ale House.

The gang created a secret passage that ran from the back of the cave in the cove to the Ale House above. One can only imagine the riotous scenes in the Wink after another successful trip.

Part of the original Ale House is still visible in Cliff Cottage and the grooves cut by the wheels can still be seen on the stone of the cove today.

John Carter built a substantial house (demolished long ago) above a large cave at King's Cove - and he constructed a harbour cut out of solid rock and roadways with wheel-tracks, partly cut and partly worn, climbing up the face of the cliff on either side of the cove.

A lot of those tracks can still be seen today.



There were a number of caves that were used for storage and he also placed a battery of guns on the headland.

The Carter boys were fine seamen and owned two large vessels - a 19-gun cutter of 160 tons, and a 20-gun lugger, each with a crew of around 30 men and equipped with at least one smaller boat for close inshore work.

They were fearless and possessed an intimate knowledge of both the Cornish and the French coasts.

The people of Cornwall were very unhappy with what they saw as immoral levels of taxation on trade.

So, the idea of depriving the government of revenue extorted by high taxes was seen to be a legitimate activity. And, of course, the increasing traffic flow of cheap alcohol made it a drunken and very pleasurable one too.

It was a time when few local people believed smuggling to be a crime - and, indeed, to many, smuggling was their principal source of employment. John was very popular because of the fair way he conducted his business.

So, the brothers were held in high regard by their fellow Cornishmen.

This proved to be a massive help in protecting him and his team from the authorities.

Smuggling relied upon a close network of individuals ranging from the smugglers themselves to those who stored, transported, and resold the goods into the local and national markets.

But smuggling was a very dangerous business. The cost of getting caught was very high. Smugglers frequently went to jail. Those who had been implicated in violence could be sentenced to death or, if they were lucky, to transportation.

The Carters were ardent Methodists and this was another feature that endeared them to their fellow countrymen.

It is said that Harry held Sunday services on the quayside for smugglers when he was exiled in later years, in Roscoff. Swearing and unseemly behaviour by the crew was forbidden on the Carter's vessels.

The Carters ran many trips, mainly to and from the French coast.

One trip saw Harry head to Cawsand in 1788 — and almost to his death.

As he guided his boat into the harbour, he assumed that the two small boats that came alongside, were preparing to unload the contraband.

But, he was wrong and it nearly cost him his life. He realised too late, that they were from a man-of-war, loaded with customs officials, and a fierce battle ensued. Harry was struck down, severely wounded and left for dead. But, after several hours, his body was still warm although 'his head is all to atoms' as one of the guards observed.

Despite his injuries, he was able to crawl across the deck and drop into the water.

Once in, he found — not surprisingly — that his stout swimming skill had deserted him, and he was forced to pull himself along ropes at the ship's side, until he could touch the bottom and crawl out of the water. On land, he was picked up, half dead, by local men.

Harry described his injuries:

"My strength was allmoste exhausted; my breath, nay, my life, was allmoste gone. The bone of my nose cut right in two, and two very large cuts in my head, that two or three pieces of my skull worked out afterwards"

Harry was taken from the scene and remained in hiding for three months. He was at first hidden by his brother at Kennegy. A reward of £300 was posted. It was an astonishingly high sum for the time.

He was moved on to a "gentleman's house" in Marazion and then later moved again, to hide in the newly built Acton Castle, while his wounds healed.

He lit fires only by night, so frightened was he of discovery, but he slowly recovered from his wounds.

Slowly he recovered and after three months, was able to cross Cudden Point, under cover of darkness, to meet his brothers. Eventually the family decided to send Harry to America, leaving his wife Elizabeth, who was now dying of consumption.

Once in America the family sent money to help to maintain him and he also took some casual farm work – a far cry from the sea he knew so well – working on farms amongst the Negro slaves.

It was during this hard time, that Harry became a Methodist and remained in America until 1790. He finally decided to take a passage back to Dunkirk in a ship flying American colours.

While Harry was away, the transport side of the business was taken over by other members of 'the firm' - and John concerned himself with sales and distribution, an occupation also not entirely free from violence.

On one occasion, from a gun battery high on top of the cliffs, John and his followers poured cannon fire into a revenue cutter that was attempting to follow one of the Carter's vessels into Prussia Cove. Later the cutter returned fire and, when customs officers joined in the attack from the landward side, John and his men had to seek refuge in a friendly house nearby.

Despite these bloody encounters, at other times an uneasy truce appears to have existed between the Carters and the customs authorities. Poorly paid and disliked by many of the people among whom they lived, minor officials were unwilling to put their lives at risk, while others were more than happy to turn a blind eye in return for a bribe. Besides, John Carter's honest character was held in high regard; even the excise men recognised his fair dealings.

On one occasion, when the authorities had been successful in seizing contraband from Prussia Cove, they stored it in the Customs House at Penzance. John broke in at night and took back his "property", while leaving other goods untouched.

John insisted on retrieving the goods, on the basis that he had promised them to someone and he couldn't let them down. Returning the next day, the revenue men said, "John Carter has been here. We know it because he has taken nothing away that was not his own".

John and his brother Harry were well known along the French coast - but, during the French Wars, they were arrested and imprisoned in St Malo for a year on one occasion. Harry took his new cutter to St Malo for repairs, but officials felt his ship's papers were not in order, so he was imprisoned for suspected piracy.

When John found out, he went to petition for Harry's release, but he too was imprisoned. The Carters had influential friends in high places however - and, following lengthy negotiations by the Admiralty, they were eventually exchanged for two Frenchman, but left France without the new cutter.

After their prolonged absence, they returned to find their family business failing badly, but John Carter's reputation was such, that he quickly obtaining credit from the Guernsey Merchantmen and started to rebuild the fortunes of the cove boys.

The dangerous life they led was never far from disaster though - and Harry was arrested once more at the end of a smuggling trip to The Mumbles in South Wales, after an incident that saw him left behind when his crew were arrested yet once again.

As previously, the Carter's contacts within the Admiralty came to their rescue - and they negotiated Harry's release.

We must look to the American war of independence for the increase of the fortunes of the Carter family and for the tenuous respectability awarded to the Carter brothers (now well known as "the cove boys.") by obtaining Letters of Marque for at least five vessels and were thus able to combine "legitimated" privateering with smuggling.

The Carters evidently had their uses to the powers that be and one story is a great example of this. In 1782, Harry was coming ashore for Christmas in Newquay, after sailing with two of the family privateers - The Shaftsbury, that he commanded and the Phoenix commanded by Raph Dewen.

He received a request from John Nill, the Collector of Taxes of St Ives (and incidentally commemorated by Knill's steeple above the town) to attack the enemy privateer the Black Prince from Dunkirk, who had been harassing the shipping in the Bristol Channel.

Harry accepted the request and after a bloody battle, the fight continued into Padstow, where the captain of the Black Prince abandoned his sinking ship and Harry Carter managed to rescue 17 of the 31 men on board.

Harry soon resumed his smuggling career, but now combined it with preaching as an important convert, until warned by "a great man of the neighbourhood" to disappear before others betrayed him.

So, he took a 15-hour open boat trip to Roscoff from Prussia Cove. Once in France, Harry again established himself, preaching to the English Community until a further twist of fate saw war break out between Britain and France.

The British community were placed under house arrest – Harry in the company of Carmelite nuns.

In Harry's absence, the authorities made a great effort to destroy the Carter's stronghold at Prussia Cove - protected by eight six-pounder guns.

In 1794, a direct assault by the Penzance Collector assisted by the Helston and Penzance Volunteer battalion, succeeded in temporarily capturing the guns.

But John was warned by a Marazion doctor and he and his men mounted a spirited counter attack and eventually the battalion withdrew, with one officer shot.

But, you could see why they wanted to shut the Carters down. During that fight, it was stated that the stores held 40 gallons of rum, 739 of brandy and 2,778 of gin.

That's a lot of contraband booze. And it showed the size - and success - of their smuggling activities. Incidentally, in this raid, the authorities seized a mere eight casks of brandy and five of gin.

Warrants were issued for the Carter's arrest, but no constable would enter the cove without military support. And the officer of the troops stationed at Helston, refused to go in, without direct orders from the War Office.

So, an uneasy truce existed.

Harry eventually managed to return from France and took (perhaps buoyed by his religious zeal) no further part in smuggling, but lived out his days in quiet poverty in Rinsey.

He lived quietly on his smallholding and continued as a Methodist lay preacher and died aged 80, leaving all of his possessions to his friend, James Macculloch.

John Carter mysteriously disappeared and was never seen again. Rumour has it that he died in 1807. But this was never confirmed.

In May of that year, the lease of Prussia Cove was offered for sale. The particulars were described:

"All those large and commodious Cellars, Lofts, Salt Houses, Fish-Presses, Boatbeds, Capstan, together with the said Cove and Landing Places therein. The above premises are extremely well adapted and situate for carrying on any form of trade...."

Some said that this sale had been arranged to convince the authorities that the family were now 'going straight'.

Strangely the smuggling business continued at Prussia Cove into the 1820's, but the success of the improved revenue service in seizing contraband became ever more effective.

It all finally came to an end, when the building of a Coastguard Station saw a preventive customs boat based there. And in 1825, the row of coastguard cottages that can still be seen today, were built above the cove.

But, as a final twist to this endearing tale, a copper mine was opened on the cliffs overlooking the cove, and on the slipways where brandy barrels had once been hauled ashore, now coal was landed, to drive the mine's newly-installed steam engine.

Perhaps the newly found wealth from mining proved more lucrative than smuggling.

Whatever, the public taste for the like of smugglers had also melted away, as prosperity from mining ushered in a new era of gentility.

This is a remarkable tale - and it must be said, that for the brothers to be able to run their astonishingly successful smuggling business over such a long period without being caught, is guite incredible.

They were clearly smart - and developed and nurtured powerful contacts and enjoyed strong devotion from the local people. They had strength and power and understood how to cleverly intimidate.

But, above all, they appeared fair and honest, in a dishonest business - and they were enormously successful.

Encounters with revenue cutters and naval vessels were always avoided if possible, but running battles did ensue, amid smoke-billowing cannons and the splintering of masts.

But they survived it all - and the Carter's story is now one of folklore and legend.

But John Carter - the 'King of Prussia' is the hero of most of the tales that are told of those extraordinary days. His mysterious disappearance at the end, only adds to his legendary status.

I know where he is now, though. Visit Prussia. His presence is *definitely* there.

I felt it, very strongly. He's still keeping an eye on his beautiful Cove...

