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November 1753

John Shand and the Excise, November 1753

[\(https://www.highlifehighland.com/caithness-archive-centre/wp-content/uploads/sites/121/2015/11/James-Richardson-Testimony-Page-1.jpg\)](https://www.highlifehighland.com/caithness-archive-centre/wp-content/uploads/sites/121/2015/11/James-Richardson-Testimony-Page-1.jpg) On 2 November 1753 (half a century before Pulteneytown was even a glint in Thomas Telford's eye) John Shand, a merchant from Garmouth, returned from a trip to Orkney with a cargo of rum, brandy, tobacco and other goods, which he placed in the Girnell or storehouse at Staxigoe ("Stackseagoe") by Wick – whereupon it was promptly confiscated by the Excise. What happened next was extraordinary.

James Richardson, the Excise Officer, commandeered two boats to take the seized goods round the North Head to Wick. Shand at once "purchased a boat & crew" to intercept them.

[\(https://www.highlifehighland.com/caithness-archive-centre/wp-content/uploads/sites/121/2015/11/Daniel-Oag-Testimony-Scoundrel.jpg\)](https://www.highlifehighland.com/caithness-archive-centre/wp-content/uploads/sites/121/2015/11/Daniel-Oag-Testimony-Scoundrel.jpg) He caught up with them in Wick Bay. Shand came alongside one of the Excise's boats and began to abuse one of the crew, Alexander Bain, calling him "a Scoundrell son of a Bitch", and attacked him with a cudgel. But Bain returned blow for blow, so Shand drew and cocked a pistol

and threatened to shoot him. At this point one of the crew, Donald Oag, intervened and wrestled the pistol out of Shand's grasp, discharging it harmlessly into the air.

Shand was "obliged to sheer off a little", so he offered Bain money, but unsurprisingly Bain refused. Shand nevertheless managed to throw two ankers of brandy (an anker was a cask holding perhaps 8-10 gallons) into the sea, before the two Excise boats drifted apart from Shand's boat and reached Wick harbour.

But even that wasn't the end of the affair. The Excisemen took the confiscated cargo up to the Tollbooth (after which Tollbooth Lane off the Market Square is named), "as being the strongest place in Town", past a crowd of "near on hundred and fifty", and locked it away.

"But", as Richardson swore in a deposition two days later, "on the same night ... the said Tolbooth was Broken and all the Goods carried off, except three Baggs Slake Tobacco."

The local accomplices were soon tracked down. One Donald Oag, a sailor from Wick, interrogated on 5 November, admitted that at midnight on 2 November he had assisted John Shand and others "in carrying out of the Tolbooth of Wick" several casks "which he heard was a seizure". Shand had tried to force open the Tollbooth window, but when he found he couldn't manage it alone, Donald Oag gave him a hand, "which being done the Barrs or Slenches fell off the Window".

[_ \(https://www.hIGHLIFEhighland.com/caithness-archive-centre/wp-content/uploads/sites/121/2015/11/Witness-Testimonies-Double-Page.jpg\)](https://www.hIGHLIFEhighland.com/caithness-archive-centre/wp-content/uploads/sites/121/2015/11/Witness-Testimonies-Double-Page.jpg) The liberated cargo was loaded onto a boat in Wick harbour. Another Wick sailor, George Oag, 17, stated that he had helped take the goods out of the Tollbooth, but claimed "that he was forced on board" the boat, which sailed to Freswick Bay. There the goods were unloaded, and Oag saw "Mr Shand and others carry it up to a Bigg Sclate house at Freswick".

And there, frustratingly, the record ends. Was John Shand prosecuted? What happened to the various accomplices who helped in the attack on the Excise boats and later broke into the Tollbooth and carried off the cargo? Whose was the house at Freswick?

French brandy was one of the most common types of smuggled goods at this time. John Shand and his named associates were merchants, in Garmouth and Wick, so they don't fit the profile of smuggling gangs of legend, but whether Shand was simply trying to avoid paying excise duty on his cargo, or was outraged at having the brandy and tobacco confiscated, we will never know. The witness statements collected by the magistrates don't include one from the man we'd most like to hear from...

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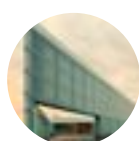
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Hey everyone!

Just to let you know that we will be closed on Monday 1st May for the May Day holiday and will reopen on Tuesday 2nd May at 9am. Hope to see you then :D

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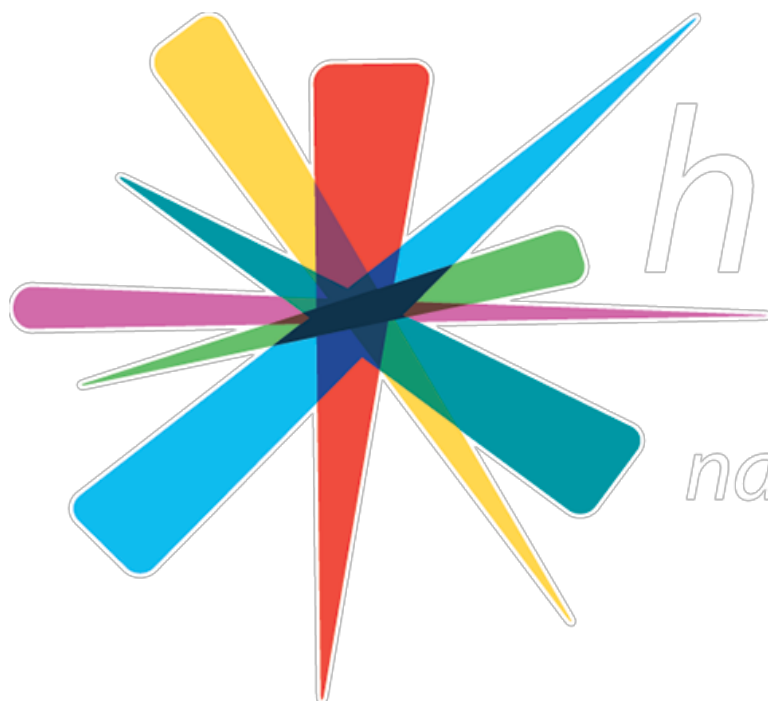
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