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SOME EVIDENCE ON THE SMUGGLING OF FULLER'S EARTH FROM THE MEDWAY ESTUARY DURING THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY

V.E. MORANT, M.A. (Lond.)

Smuggling has for many centuries accounted for a not inconsiderable proportion of Kent's trading activities, fostered as much by the commercial acumen and independent spirit of its inhabitants as by the County's position astride main routes from London to northern France and the Low Countries. The scale of smuggling operations at times reached such a high level that the legal trade in some goods was made uneconomic, and pitched battles were fought between gangs of smugglers and preventive men. A serious analysis of Kentish smuggling still awaits the attention of historians, but since the fourteenth century, at least, official restrictions and financial levies on both imports and exports have stimulated illicit trade in a wide variety of goods. The 'free traders' – as the smugglers called themselves – regularly imported and distributed large quantities of finished cloths, tea, sugar, tobacco and spirits, their return cargoes comprising mainly unfinished wool cloth, wool, and other raw materials needed by the textile manufacturers of the Continent. Among such raw materials was fuller's earth, and its illegal export represents one of the less well-known aspects of Kent's smuggling history.

Fuller's earth is a natural earth product of comparatively rare occurrence which in former days was an indispensable raw material of the woollen textile industry. Cloth was beaten in water to which the earth had been added to remove oils and grease from the wool, to close together the threads of the fabric and to bleach it, the process being known as 'fulling'. The production and transport of this earth were consequently of major concern to the textile manufacturers and government of seventeenth-century England.

Thomas Fuller in 1655 called fuller's earth 'a precious treasure

whereof England hath (if not more) better than all Christendom besides.¹ Its principal source was an outcrop near Woburn in Bedfordshire (Fuller's Earth Beds of the Great Oolite series) which produced superior quality earth. However, there were transport difficulties because of its inland location, so that the lesser but more accessible deposits obtained from veins in the Sandgate Beds in Surrey and Kent were in far greater demand. English woollen manufacturers were thus fortunate in having plentiful home supplies of 'this precious earth', but clothiers in the Low Countries suffered from the disadvantage of having to depend on England to supply much of their needs. The English manufacturers could, by prohibiting the export overseas of fuller's earth, restrict the production of their Continental competitors and so increase the demand for their own cloth. In 1621, in response to their pressure, an Act was passed through the House of Commons 'to prohibit the exportation of Wooll, Wool-Fells, and Fuller's Earth',² and the resulting unsatisfied demand for the earth abroad soon led to widespread and organised smuggling, which went on through the rest of the seventeenth century.

The bulk of the smuggling occurred in Kent, where the fuller's earth pits were situated within five miles of the navigable Medway, within the parishes of Maidstone, Detling, Leeds and Boxley,³ and where the estuary of the Medway, with its numerous creeks and channels, was well suited to smuggling. Joseph Trevers, writing in 1675, described it euphemistically as 'the most convenient river in England to land goods privately'.⁴

During the seventeenth century, most of the fuller's earth exported from Kent came from the noted Grove Green pits in Boxley parish.⁵ The earth was packed into cauldrons, either dried or in its original moist condition, and moved by carts to Maidstone or one of the smaller Medway ports downstream, such as Millhall and New Hythe. It was then carried in hoys or lighters to Rochester, where it was transhipped into sea-going vessels.⁶ This arrangement made it comparatively easy to tranship the earth secretly to ships bound for the

¹ T. Fuller, *The Church History of Britain*, London 1845, ii, 287-8.

² *Journals of the House of Commons*, London 1803, i, 582 and 628.

³ Holinshed, *Chronicals of England etc.* London 1807, i, 91; also J. Rushworth, *Historical Collections*, London 1680, ii, 348.

⁴ J. Trevers, *An Essay to the Restoring of our Decayed Trade*, London 1675, 40.

⁵ S.C. Lamprey, *A Brief Historical and Descriptive Account of Maidstone . . . Maidstone* 1834, 68.

⁶ *State Papers Domestic Series*, London 1870-90, vol. 335, 168. vol. 424, 356. vol. 428, 488. vol. 461, 451. vol. 472, 280.

Continent, and in 1622 the Kent clothiers petitioned James I 'praying that notwithstanding proclamations against the export of wool and fuller's earth, they are still sent out of the country.'⁷ The Government replied in April 1624 by a proclamation declaring that the export of all types of wool, fuller's earth and fulling clay was to be held a felony, because of the 'great mischief being caused the country by the exportation of native commodities.'⁸

Further proclamations for the same purpose were made in April 1630 and September 1632.⁹ But the traffic still continued. Among the most notorious of the smugglers was a London merchant, John Ray or Wray, who appears to have carried on a regular trade in shipping fuller's earth from Rochester to Holland. In 1630, he was charged on the count that he had purchased 76 loads of earth from Richard Rods of Maidstone at six shillings per load, and shipped it from Rochester to Rotterdam in the 'Hope for Grace', under pretence of sailing for King's Lynn in Norfolk.¹⁰ He was found guilty, fined £2,000, pilloried and sent to the Fleet prison. In his petitions for release, Ray complained that many other traders were engaged in the fraudulent transporting of great quantities of fuller's earth through the instigation of English merchants in Holland. In particular, he accused one 'Robert Cosens of Horselydown' in Bermondsey of sending four or five barques laden with earth to Schiedam near Rotterdam,¹¹ and named another London merchant, Richard Cocks, as being engaged in the traffic.¹²

In an attempt to prevent such practices, two Government ships were posted to watch the Medway estuary for smugglers. In 1634, Captain William Cooke of the 'Henrietta', employed in guarding the Medway estuary, wrote that 'great store of fuller's earth goes out of the Medway'. He stated that he had intercepted and seized 'a lighter of earth' which 'came down the river to deliver to a Ketch of Colchester for shipment overseas'.¹³

In 1639, the Governor and Company of Merchant Adventurers in a statement to the Council, declared that they had frequently complained of the very great quantities of fuller's earth that were conveyed into the United Provinces, 'as well through the corruption

⁷ S.W. Kershaw, 'The Weald and its Refugee Annals', *Arch. Cant.*, xxii (1897), 214.

⁸ Hist. MSS Comm. *MSS of the House of Lords*, London 1872, iii, 31.

⁹ T. Rymer, *Foedera Conventiones etc.*, London 1704-32, vol. 19, 387.

¹⁰ S.C. Lamprey, *op. cit.*, 68-9.

¹¹ J. Rushworth, *op. cit.*, ii, 348; also *State Papers Domestic Series*, vol. 344, 389.

¹² *State Papers Domestic Series*, vol. 355, 50.

¹³ *Ibid.*, vol. 335, 168.

and negligence of the officers of the ports as in respect that order neither is nor can be observed in the lading and unlading of such earth so as to ensure its not being smuggled away.¹⁴ Complaints such as these came not only from the Merchant Adventurers, who wanted to diminish trading competition from foreign cloth manufacturers, but also from English clothiers, who feared a shortage of fuller's earth for their own use. In response, the Government issued a proclamation on 5th May, 1639, entirely prohibiting the carrying of fuller's earth by water.¹⁵ This absurd restriction seriously interrupted supplies to the clothiers of East Anglia, Nottinghamshire, Lincolnshire and Yorkshire, who depended on the earth shipped in coastal vessels from Kent. The East Anglian clothiers were particularly severely affected by the embargo, since the ports of Essex, Suffolk and Norfolk received about three-quarters of all the fuller's earth shipped legally from Rochester during the seventeenth century. Colchester was easily predominant among the ports of destination, with Ipswich, Manningtree, Maldon, Lynn and Yarmouth in subsidiary roles.¹⁶ In July 1639, the clothiers of Essex and Suffolk petitioned the Council to license the carriage by water of fuller's earth from Rochester to Ipswich in return for sureties that the earth would be landed at the port named. They stated that it was the practice of the Suffolk fullers to go to Rochester each summer to buy sufficient earth for the whole year, and while the cost of the normal carriage by water was 2s. per ton, land carriage would cost £6 per ton.¹⁷ The Council issued the required licence and ordered the Company of Merchant Adventurers to transport to Ipswich the quantity of earth needed. The Company complied with some reluctance, at the same time urging the Council to maintain their first resolution against the carrying of earth by water, and even went so far as to suggest that 'such earth as is brought from the pits and lies ready at the Waterside in divers parts of Kent in great quantities, may, for avoiding of secret conveyance, be removed further inland.'¹⁸

In spite of this suggestion, it became the practice for the Council to issue special licences for stated quantities of the earth to be shipped from the Medway to the textile manufacturing areas of eastern England. However, the quantities licensed were apparently inadequate and considerable quantities were also shipped secretly. Thus, in September 1639 the clothiers of Suffolk and Essex again petitioned the Council 'showing that by reason of the late restraint of carrying of fuller's earth by water, much cloth in their hands is likely to be spoiled, and praying licence for shipping the parcel of fuller's earth,

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, vol. 424, 356-7.

about 300 chauldrons, now lying ready dry near Maidstone in Kent to Manningtree and Maldon in Essex.¹⁵ The Council again ordered the Merchant Adventurers to transport the earth, and in their reply the Company protested that during the past year more earth had been delivered at Rochester under pretence of being bound for Suffolk and Essex than could have possibly been needed by the clothiers in those counties, so that part of it must have been smuggled abroad.¹⁵

The North Country cothiers were also affected by the restrictions on transport. In 1639, Henry Horsfield of York petitioned the Council for a licence to ship 120 cauldrons of wet fuller's earth to Hull. He declared that the cost of the land carriage of the earth from the pits to York would 'nearly surmount the price of the cloth and so ruin the mill owners, fullers and clothiers in that county.' In return for a surety of £1,000 'that no portion of such fuller's earth shipped to York should be exported into foreign parts', Horsfield was allowed to ship 99 loads of earth from Rochester to Hull.¹⁸

John Holmes, master or owner of a Yarmouth hoy, was at the same period engaged in shipping earth to Hull illegally.¹⁸ One such unlicensed cargo arrived soon after Horsfield's shipment, thereby interfering with its marketing. Another of Holmes's cargoes arrived at Hull in November 1640.¹⁹

It was clear that the banning of the water transport of the earth except under licence was becoming increasingly ineffective, and in May 1640 the clothiers, fullers and clothworkers of Kent protested to the Council 'that many hundreds of them having lived in good fashion upon their trades are now like to fall into want owing, as they conceive, to the export of fuller's earth to foreign parts, which takes place notwithstanding the late proclamation and divers Orders of Council.' They petitioned 'that no more fuller's earth be suffered to be water-borne, and that petitioners who live near the fulling-pits may be authorised by warrant from the Board to survey the quantity digged in that County and take account thereof.' The Council in reply ordered that the Merchant Adventurers should 'think upon some fit means how the fuller's earth may be carried into the several counties, without being water-borne . . . so that the conveying of that commodity beyond seas, may be by all ways and means possible prevented.'²⁰ Towards the end of 1640, however, Richard Crothall of

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, vol. 428, 488.

¹⁶ C.W. Chalklin, *Seventeenth-Century Kent*, London 1965, 178-9.

¹⁷ *State Papers Domestic Series*, vol. 425, 379.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, vol. 438, 242-3.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, vol. 473, 298.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, vol. 454, 185.

Benenden in Kent was accusing Mrs. Brewer and a man named Love of Boxley parish, as well as Richard Roodes of Maidstone, of smuggling abroad earth from the famous Boxley pits. 'Mrs. Brewer . . . still sends fuller's earth to the waterside and has three houses on the shore where she stores the earth till the tide serves to bring up certain boats in which it is carried beyond Rochester and then transported beyond seas in greater vessels.'²¹

But, in spite of its ineffectiveness, the ban on the transport of earth by water except under licence was maintained. In July 1640 the millers and fullers of Nottinghamshire were given a licence 'for this present year to transport by sea 40 chaldrons of wet fuller's earth' from Rochester via Gainsborough or Hull.²² In July 1641, Yorkshire clothiers paid £1,000 as guarantee for a shipment of 120,000 cauldrons of wet earth from Rochester to Hull,²³ and later in the same month Edmund Adams of Boston and the fullers of Lincolnshire were 'permitted for this year to transport by sea 60 chauldrons of wet fuller's earth from the port of Rochester to Boston.'²⁴

The export ban fell into disuse during the Civil War and after 1641 no further applications for shipping licences appear in the State Papers. As a result the normal export of earth overseas began on a large scale, whereupon the Commonwealth soon began to legislate for its suppression.

Early in 1649, a memorandum on the decay of the cloth trade sent to the Council of State partly attributed the falling sales of cloth to Germany and the Netherlands to the 'great quantity of wool and fuller's earth which have lately been conveyed out of England,' and advocated the reimposition of restrictions on the transport of these goods.²⁵ In June, an Act for this purpose was brought before the Council,²⁶ and in November the Council voted to send their thanks to the Parliament intelligencers then in Rotterdam, for their information concerning the export of fuller's earth to Holland.²⁷

By 1650, fuller's earth was being shipped to Hamburg and one of the Merchant Adventurers' Company there was complaining that 'the drapery here is very much furthered also by the continual bringing over of fuller's earth in great quantities.'²⁸ In 1660, another Act

²¹ *Ibid.*, vol. 472, 280.

²² *Ibid.*, vol. 461, 55.

²³ *Ibid.*, vol. 482, 48-9.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, vol. 482, 60.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, vol. I, 64-5.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, vol. II, 199.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, vol. III, 406.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, vol. IX, 21-2.

prohibiting the export of 'wool, woolfells, fuller's earth or any kind of scouring earth' was passed through Parliament,²⁹ but this was as ineffective as its predecessors, and in 1675, a pamphleteer declared that so much earth had been smuggled into the Low Countries that 'the Dutch have gotten enough of it into Holland to serve them for many years to come, which was certainly transported out of the river of Medway . . .'.³⁰

A further Act was passed in 1697 'for the better execution of former acts made against transportation of wool, fuller's earth and scouring clay' because 'the said exportation is notoriously continued'.³¹ But with the gradual decline of the Low Countries as an economic rival to England, owing to the exhausting effect of the wars against Louis XIV (1689–1713), the agitation against the export of fuller's earth overseas ceased, and Government restrictions and impositions fell into disuse.

²⁹ *Statutes of the Realm*, London 1819, vol. 5, c. 31–2.

³⁰ J. Trevers, *op. cit.*, 15.

³¹ *Statutes of the Realm*, London 1819, vol. 7, c. 40.

