

## NAPOLEON AND THE ‘CITY OF SMUGGLERS’, 1810–1814

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**ABSTRACT.** *In the final years of the Napoleonic Wars, Napoleon allowed English smugglers entry into the French ports of Dunkirk and Gravelines, encouraging them to run contraband back and forth across the Channel. Gravelines catered for up to 300 English smugglers, housed in a specially constructed compound known as the ‘city of smugglers’. Napoleon used the smugglers in the war against Britain. The smugglers arrived on the French coast with escaped French prisoners of war, gold guineas, and English newspapers; and returned to England laden with French textiles, brandy, and gin. Smuggling remains a neglected historical subject, and this episode in particular – the relationship between English smugglers and the Napoleonic state between 1810 and 1814 – has attracted little scholarly interest. Yet it provides a rich historical source, illuminating not only the history of Anglo-French Channel smuggling during the early nineteenth century, but offering insights into the economic, social, and maritime history of the Napoleonic Wars.*

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### I

In July 1811, John Gedge, the lieutenant commander of the English gunboat, *Locust*, intercepted a galley, the *Apus of London*, just off the French port of Gravelines. The galley stopped only after Gedge’s gunboat had fired several times. The galley’s master, Besant, claimed he was from Ramsgate and on a secret assignment for J. W. Croker of the Admiralty, sailing to France to rendezvous with two escaped English prisoners of war. Gedge, though, found a gold ingot hidden in Besant’s shoe, and coins on the crew. But this was only the beginning:

Finding small canvas bags, for the use of which no probable reason could be assigned, makes me also believe that she had specie on board which was thrown overboard whilst the boat of the *Locust* was in chase of her. There was found in a secret drawer in the Binnacle, which opens by a spring, small paint pots containing white and black paints for the purpose of defacing or writing the name on her stern, a practice which is much followed at the present time by smugglers and there was also the licence for the said boat – and in two kegs with false heads, were also secreted a quantity of letters addressed to French merchants and

various other papers – upon the discovery of which the master appeared very much agitated indeed.<sup>1</sup>

Gold, English newspapers, letters to French merchants, spring loaded secret compartments, false kegs, tales of prisoners of war, and secret assignments – such was the lot of the English smuggler in league with Napoleon during the final years of the Napoleonic Wars. In exile on St Helena, Napoleon recounted to his British captors the role that English smugglers played in the later stages of the war, claiming they ‘did great great mischief to your government’.<sup>2</sup> Between 1810 and 1814, first through Dunkirk and then Gravelines, Napoleon allowed English smugglers entry into France, encouraging them to run contraband back and forth across the Channel. In the ports of Dunkirk and Gravelines, the French authorities officially received and quartered the English smugglers, who offloaded their cargoes and collected goods from French merchants and manufacturers for the return voyage. The smugglers enclosure at Gravelines became known as the ‘ville des Smoglers’, the French borrowing and modifying the English word. The mischief of the English smugglers was indeed great: they brought across gold guineas, escaped French prisoners, newspapers, and the occasional spy; and returned to England laden with gin, brandy, and silks.

Channel smuggling, however, remains a neglected subject of historical investigation; and this episode in particular – the relationship between English smugglers and the Napoleonic state between 1810 and 1814 – has attracted little scholarly interest from historians of either smuggling or the Napoleonic Wars.<sup>3</sup> Historians of Napoleonic France and the Continental Blockade have long appreciated the illegal entry of English textiles into continental Europe.<sup>4</sup> The English smuggling bases at Dunkirk and Gravelines, though, offer a rare opportunity to explore the reverse: the illegal entry of prohibited goods into Britain, and the illegal export of goods and people from Britain into France.

The so-called ‘golden age’ of English smuggling is often considered to have ended with William Pitt’s 1784 Commutation Act which slashed the import duties on tea, effectively ending the most common and lucrative form of smuggling in eighteenth-century Britain.<sup>5</sup> Prior to the Act, English smugglers brought tea

<sup>1</sup> Lieutenant Commander John Gedge to collector and controller of customs at Dover, at sea, 17 July 1811, The National Archives (TNA): CUST 54/25.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Barry E. O’Meara, *Napoleon in exile* (7th edn, 2 vols., London, 1836), 1, p. 253.

<sup>3</sup> An exception, written in the early twentieth century and reproducing official French decrees, instructions, and tables on the establishment of Gravelines, is Dr Delbecq, ‘La ville des smoggers à Gravelines de 1811 à 1814’, *Mémoires de la Société Dunkerquoise*, 56 (1911), pp. 261–365.

<sup>4</sup> See for instance, R. Dufraisse, ‘Contrebandiers normands sur les bords du Rhin à l’époque napoléonienne’, *Annales de Normandie*, 11 (1961), pp. 212–6; Geoffrey Ellis, *Napoleon’s Continental Blockade: the case of Alsace* (Oxford, 1981), pp. 143–62; Gavin Daly, *Inside Napoleonic France: state and society in Rouen, 1800–1815* (Aldershot, 2001), pp. 188–94.

<sup>5</sup> See Hoh-cheung and Lorna M. Mui, ‘Smuggling and the British tea trade before 1784’, *American Historical Review*, 84 (1968), pp. 44–73, and their ‘William Pitt and the enforcement of the Commutation Act, 1784–1788’, *American Historical Review*, 76 (1961), pp. 447–65; W. A. Cole, ‘Trends in eighteenth-century smuggling’, *Economic History Review*, 2nd ser., 10 (1958), pp. 395–410.

across from continental Europe, especially from France. Yet smuggling did not come to an end with Pitt's Act: it continued throughout the French Revolutionary-Napoleonic epoch, surviving and adapting, and in some senses taking on new forms amidst the crucible of war. Spirits and textiles continued to flow illegally into Britain; the old art of illegally transporting guineas out of Britain flourished with the support of the Napoleonic state; and the war encouraged a new form of contraband – trafficking escaped French prisoners – a type of trans-Channel people smuggling.

Between 1810 and 1814, the Napoleonic state officially sanctioned and supported the smugglers, using them as a weapon of war against Britain and to boost domestic French industry. This smuggling was sophisticated, part of an international economic environment, not merely limited to the Kent and northern French coasts, but with ties to greater Britain and France, to London and Paris, and encompassing a diverse world of professional smugglers, fishermen, labourers, shipowners, merchants, manufacturers, bankers and ultimately consumers.<sup>6</sup> In establishing ties with English smugglers, the Napoleonic regime tapped into a traditional Anglo-French smuggling community that had existed for centuries along the Channel coast. Just as the Channel was a place of Anglo-French conflict during the Napoleonic Wars, so too was it a place for the illicit exchange of goods and peoples, with English smugglers linking the two rival shores.

## II

During the Napoleonic Wars, despite the intensity of the naval conflict between Britain and France, the Channel remained the most important smuggling area along the British coastline.<sup>7</sup> In particular, three traditional smuggling regions proved most problematic for the customs and excise authorities: Kent and Sussex; Cornwall and Devon; and the Channel islands, especially Guernsey and Jersey. All these smuggling communities had strong historic ties with Europe: Kent and Sussex with northern France and the Low Countries; and the West Country and the Channel Islands with Normandy and Brittany. Until 1810, though, English smugglers were not officially welcomed in French ports. Consequently, smugglers collected the majority of continental contraband that entered Britain either directly from the Low Countries or from passing neutral merchant ships.

<sup>6</sup> The international and entrepreneurial nature of much English smuggling in the eighteenth century has been emphasized in Hoh-cheung and Lorna M. Mui, 'Smuggling and the British tea trade', pp. 59–61; P. Monod, 'Dangerous merchandise: smuggling, jacobitism, and commercial culture in southeast England, 1690–1760', *Journal of British Studies*, 30 (1991), pp. 150–82; and P. Muskett, 'English smuggling in the eighteenth century' (PhD thesis, Open University, 1986).

<sup>7</sup> The secretary of the Treasury to secretary of the Admiralty, London, 9 July 1807, TNA: ADM 1/4294.

From the summer of 1810, however, the lot of English smugglers received an unexpected boon. On 15 June 1810, Napoleon issued an Imperial decree opening the port of Dunkirk to 'ships known under the name of Smugglers'.<sup>8</sup> In early 1811, the port of Wimereux, near Boulogne was also opened.<sup>9</sup> Of the two ports, Dunkirk was by far the most important, with 300 English smugglers residing there compared with only 25 to 30 at Wimereux.<sup>10</sup> However, French concerns over the suitability of Dunkirk as a place for receiving foreigners, given that it was a site for armament production, led to its closure to English smugglers.<sup>11</sup> Other ports were considered – Nieupoort, Sangatte, and St Valéry – but they were dismissed because of various problems: poor sailing conditions; the close proximity of English naval patrols; and lack of access for English smugglers.<sup>12</sup> Gravelines, a port between Calais and Dunkirk, suffered none of these disadvantages, and the smuggling base was duly transferred there through an Imperial decree of 30 November 1811.<sup>13</sup> Gravelines was named as the exclusive entry point for English smugglers, and remained so during the last three years of the war.

What finally prompted Napoleon to court English smugglers and allow them limited access to France? His decision was above all a response to a changing economic and military environment. On the one hand, the 'city of smugglers' was designed to help French manufacturing and banking; on the other, Napoleon hoped it would play a role in bringing about the collapse of the British economy, and strengthen his own war finances.

In allowing English smugglers official access to French goods, Napoleon was building upon the recent re-opening of a limited amount of trade between the two countries. Since the outbreak of hostilities in 1793 – with the exception of the brief Peace of Amiens in 1802–3 – there had been no official direct commerce between Britain and France. During the early years of the Napoleonic Wars, maritime trade continued between the two belligerents via neutral shipping, especially Danish, Prussian, and Hanseatic ships.<sup>14</sup> Yet neutrality on the high seas effectively ended in 1806–7 with the escalation in the economic war following the establishment of Napoleon's Continental Blockade and retaliatory British measures.<sup>15</sup> Under Napoleon's Berlin decree of 21 November 1806, French allies were banned from trading with Britain; British orders-in-council of November–December 1807 then declared as lawful prize any neutral vessels adhering to the Berlin

<sup>8</sup> Extract of the minutes of the secretary of state, Saint Cloud, 25 June 1810, Archives Nationales (AN) F<sup>7</sup> 8360.

<sup>9</sup> F. Crouzet, *L'économie britannique et le Blocus continental, 1806–1813* (2 vols., Paris, 1958), II, p. 673.

<sup>10</sup> The commissaire of police at Boulogne to minister of police, Boulogne, 17 Dec. 1811, AN F<sup>7</sup> 8358.

<sup>11</sup> Report to Napoleon from minister of marine, Paris, 27 Nov. 1811, AN AF IV 1199.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> The commissaire of police at Boulogne to minister of police, Boulogne, 17 Dec. 1811, AN F<sup>7</sup> 8358.

<sup>14</sup> P. Butel, 'Crise et mutation de l'activité économique à Bordeaux sous le Consulat et l'Empire', *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine*, 17 (1970), pp. 540–58.

<sup>15</sup> For the decrees of the Continental Blockade, see J. Tulard, *Dictionnaire Napoléon* (2nd edn, Paris, 1999), pp. 219–38.

decree, and authorized all neutral ships bound for French ports to divert to British ports.

Economic necessity, however, soon led to a limited amount of trade between Britain and France. From 1809 until the end of the war, the British and French governments, through mutual co-operation, granted a limited number of trade licences, allowing merchants to ship goods between the two countries.<sup>16</sup> This contradicted the economic war and Continental Blockade but acknowledged a number of pressing realities. Following Britain's poor harvest of 1809, the country was in desperate need of grain imports, and French merchants were able to meet this demand.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, from mid-1810 both the British and French economies slid into severe recession. In such hard economic times it was difficult to ignore the traditional trade ties between the two belligerents. Britain could provide an important market for French wines, brandy, and silks; in turn, France needed colonial products and raw materials, and British merchants needed further export markets. The licensing system met all these needs. The licences simply legalized for some merchants what smugglers had been doing over the course of the war. Having opened up French ports to a controlled level of licensed trade with Britain, it was only one logical step further for Napoleon to allow English smugglers entry in the following year, providing a further export outlet for French products.

Yet it was what English smugglers could now bring to France, more so than what they took back to England, that was the decisive factor in Napoleon's reasoning. English gold, either as specie or bullion, was the key. As the commissaire of police at Boulogne wrote in 1811: 'smuggling commerce is advantageous to the Empire' through the 'rather considerable importation of gold or money'.<sup>18</sup> The smuggling of English gold, especially in the form of guineas, was not new: it had occurred from time to time over the eighteenth century,<sup>19</sup> and more recently, in 1800, with guineas leaving for the Netherlands.<sup>20</sup> The export of English gold had been illegal since 1797, following a run on the gold stocks of English banks, and grave fears about domestic gold reserves.<sup>21</sup> The 1797 Bank Restriction Act prohibited the Bank of England from issuing gold (it could issue only paper notes)

<sup>16</sup> For a summary of the licence system under Napoleon see *ibid.*, pp. 229–31; for more detail see F. E. Melvin, *Napoleon's navigation system: a study of trade control during the Continental Blockade* (New York, 1919), and Eli F. Heckscher, *The continental system: an economic interpretation* (Oxford, 1922), pp. 205–20.

<sup>17</sup> Ian R. Christie, *Wars and revolutions: Britain, 1760–1815* (London, 1982), p. 313.

<sup>18</sup> The commissaire of police at Boulogne to Réal, councillor of state responsible for the First Police *arrondissement* of the Empire, Boulogne, 31 July 1811, AN F<sup>7</sup> 8358.

<sup>19</sup> Parliamentary Papers, 1810–11, vol. 10 (98) (103), 'Correspondence on illicit exportation of gold coin or bullion (customs)'.

<sup>20</sup> The collector and controller of customs at Dover to commissioners of the customs board, Dover, 3 Dec. 1800, TNA: CUST 54/13.

<sup>21</sup> See John M. Sherwig, *Guineas and gunpowder: British foreign aid in the wars with France* (Cambridge, MA, 1969), pp. 85–9, and Herbert H. Kaplan, *Nathan Mayer Rothschild and the creation of a dynasty: the critical years, 1806–1816* (Stanford, 2006), pp. 48–9.

and prohibited the export of English gold bullion and coins. The Act remained in place during the wars with Napoleon.

In 1809, however, the guinea smugglers were back in business as a new gold scare emerged in Britain in response to the Napoleonic Wars and a domestic monetary and economic crisis.<sup>22</sup> The crisis was debated in the press and parliament, with a parliamentary Bullion Committee, created to examine the price and circulation of gold, handing down its findings in 1810. The heart of the matter was the supply and price of gold, and a falling British pound relative to continental currencies. The onset of the Peninsular War in 1808, with the growing financial cost of supporting Wellington's troops, put a renewed strain on foreign gold levels in Britain.<sup>23</sup> With the continuing ban on the export of English gold, the British government purchased foreign gold and silver, in London and abroad, to help pay for the war in Portugal and Spain. Gold prices in Britain rose accordingly. Moreover, the British pound, which until 1808 had more or less held its value, began to depreciate. From mid-1808 until the end of 1810, the pound fell in value by roughly 15 per cent relative to continental currencies, like the French franc and Hamburg schilling.<sup>24</sup> This encouraged British merchants to pay their continental accounts – including those arising from the licence trade with France – with gold: gold, unlike British bank notes, had not fallen in value relative to continental currencies. More significantly, the exchange rate crisis led to gold speculation: gold purchased in London with British bank notes could be sold on the Continent for a much higher value (in terms of British bank notes) than the original purchase price. The gold speculators could realize profits of 15 to 20 per cent.<sup>25</sup> With foreign gold in short supply in London, speculators and merchants turned to English gold coin and bullion. Testifying before the parliamentary Bullion Committee in 1810, William Merle, banker and precious metal refiner, said of guineas: 'I have no doubt that they are collected up to be sent abroad ... the exchange making it so much more favourable to transmit it than bills.'<sup>26</sup> And to compound this monetary crisis, Britain moved into economic depression from mid-1810, with bankruptcies and unemployment.<sup>27</sup>

This all played into Napoleon's hands. Napoleon's understanding of the financial world has been described as 'idiosyncratic', characterized by 'strong objections to paper money and to government debt, to speculation and to free markets'.<sup>28</sup> In keeping with many French economists of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, he was convinced that the British economy was structurally weak, propped up by credit, with relatively only small gold reserves.<sup>29</sup> Napoleon was, in Eli Heckscher's words, a 'bullionist'.<sup>30</sup> As Britain slumped into

<sup>22</sup> See Kaplan, *Nathan Mayer Rothschild*, pp. 49–54, and Crouzet, *L'économie britannique*, pp. 526–9.

<sup>23</sup> For the problem of financing Wellington's army during 1809 and 1810 see Sherwig, *Guineas and gunpowder*, pp. 222–36.

<sup>24</sup> Crouzet, *L'économie britannique*, p. 527.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 528.

<sup>26</sup> Quoted in Kaplan, *Nathan Mayer Rothschild*, p. 54.

<sup>27</sup> Heckscher, *The continental system*, pp. 238–47.

<sup>28</sup> Charles P. Kindleberger, *A financial history of western Europe* (London, 1984), p. 100.

<sup>29</sup> Tulard, *Dictionnaire Napoléon*, p. 231.

<sup>30</sup> Heckscher, *The continental system*, p. 71.

depression, Napoleon saw an opportunity to hasten its economic woes by encouraging the flight of gold. This was the primary purpose of the English smuggling bases.

Napoleon also facilitated the flight of gold from England to strengthen his own financial position and war chest, especially in light of the growing financial burden of the Peninsular War.<sup>31</sup> On St Helena, Napoleon recounted the ingenious manner in which paper money and gold flowed through international routes, and the not inconsiderable role played by complicit English merchants and smugglers. Indeed, this sophisticated money trail ultimately ended with guineas and smugglers:

I did not receive money direct from Spain: I got bills upon Vera Cruz, which certain agents sent by circuitous routes, by Amsterdam, Hamburg and other places to London, as I had no direct communication. The bills were discounted by merchants in London, to whom ten per cent was paid as their reward. Bills were then given by them upon different bankers in Europe for the greatest part of the amount, and the remainder in gold, which last was brought over to France by the English smugglers.<sup>32</sup>

However, it has sometimes been suggested that Napoleon himself may have been duped, with some of the guineas that entered France possibly used to finance the British war effort in the Peninsula. The central figure of this story is Nathan Rothschild, of the Rothschild family from Frankfurt. In 1808, Nathan moved from Manchester to London, and soon began speculating in gold, taking advantage of the depreciating British pound and his family's presence and business connections on the Continent.<sup>33</sup> Initially he sent the gold to the Netherlands, but from the end of 1810 his activities switched to France through the English smuggling bases at Dunkirk and Gravelines. Nathan sent across vast sums of gold, including smuggled English guineas. From the French Channel ports, Nathan's younger brother, James, helped transfer the gold to Paris where it was exchanged for bills on London from local bankers. And this occurred with the knowledge and consent of French authorities. On 26 March 1811, the French minister of finance, Mollien, wrote to Napoleon:

A Frankforter who is now staying in Paris with a Frankfort passport, and goes by the name of Rothschild, is principally occupied in bringing British ready money from the English coast to Dunkirk, and has in this way brought over 100,000 guineas in one month. He is in touch with bankers of the highest standing at Paris, such as the firms of Mallet, of Charles Davillier, and Hottinguer, who give him bills on London in exchange for the cash.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Delbecq, 'La ville des smogglers', p. 263.

<sup>32</sup> Quoted in Geoffrey Morley, *Smuggling in Hampshire and Dorset, 1700-1850* (Newbury, Berkshire, 1983), p. 36.

<sup>33</sup> For Nathan Rothschild's gold smuggling and speculation, see Kaplan, *Nathan Mayer Rothschild*, pp. 55-65.

<sup>34</sup> Quoted in Count Egon Corti, *The rise of the house of Rothschild* (New York, 1928), p. 114.

So adept did Nathan become in the buying and selling of gold, that the British government turned to him in 1814 to finance Wellington's campaign which by then had entered southern France.<sup>35</sup> In January 1814, Nathan entered into an official, but secretive, agreement with the British government, initially instructed to buy £600,000 of French gold on the Continent and ship it to Wellington via British warships off the Dutch coast.

Nathan's role as a war financier for Britain from 1814 is well established. However, a recurring story within the historiography of the Rothschilds suggests that Nathan was using smuggled gold guineas to finance Wellington's army long before 1814, and under the very nose of Napoleon.<sup>36</sup> Count Corti, in his 1928 book, *The rise of the house of Rothschild*, claims as such: 'gold pieces were trickling through in complete security, under the eyes and indeed under the protection of the French government, across France itself, and into the pockets of France's arch-enemy, Wellington'. Niall Ferguson has also pondered this possibility: 'And it is just possible that James was already using the bullion sent to him by Nathan to buy bills on Spanish and Portuguese houses which were then sent across the Pyrénées to Wellington.' Ferguson adds: 'Although evidence for this assertion is scant, it is not implausible.'<sup>37</sup>

The evidence is indeed scant and much rests on Sir Thomas Fowell Buxton's account of a meeting and dinner conversation he had with Nathan Rothschild in 1834. According to Buxton, Nathan claimed:

When I was settled in London, the East India Company had £800,000 worth of gold to sell. I went to the sale, and bought it all. I knew the Duke of Wellington must have it. I had bought a great many of his bills at a discount. The Government sent for me and said they must have it. When they got it, they did not know how to get it to Portugal. I undertook all that and I sent it to France; and that was the best business I ever did.<sup>38</sup>

Richard Davis, in his 1983 book, *The English Rothschilds*, is sceptical of this claim, writing: 'Nathan told a good story, and told it well.' According to Davis, 'there is no evidence of any such transaction in East India Company gold' and 'little evidence' that Nathan's gold smuggling into France 'had much to do with the Duke of Wellington'.<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, Hebert Kaplan's recent biography of Nathan Rothschild, where he has exhaustively mined Nathan's business records and transactions, does not mention the possibility that Nathan was secretly sending gold to Wellington prior to 1814.

To be sure, the French police were suspicious of the Rothschilds' dealings with the English smugglers at Dunkirk and Gravelines.<sup>40</sup> In February 1812, for

<sup>35</sup> For Nathan Rothschild and Wellington see especially, Kaplan, *Nathan Mayer Rothschild*, pp. 73–89.

<sup>36</sup> Corti, *The rise of the house of Rothschild*, pp. 115–28; and Niall Ferguson, *The world's banker: the history of the house of Rothschild* (London, 1998), pp. 93–4.

<sup>37</sup> Ferguson, *The world's banker*, p. 94.

<sup>38</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 93. See *Memoirs of Sir Thomas Buxton* (2nd edn, London, 1849), p. 354.

<sup>39</sup> Richard Davis, *The English Rothschilds* (Chapel Hill, 1983), pp. 29–30.

<sup>40</sup> Corti, *The rise of the house of Rothschild*, pp. 119–21; Delbecq, 'La ville des smogglers', pp. 306–11.

example, Count Réal, responsible for the First Police *arrondissement* of the Empire, expressed concerns about James Rothschild's presence in Dunkirk:

How could this man be anything but suspect? What could have been in his Majesty's mind when he permitted the smugglers to trade? Surely it must have been with the intention that this trade should benefit French industry, an object which will not be achieved if London firms can maintain correspondents, not to mention branch offices, in Paris. What are we to think of this Rothschild's sojourn on our coast? A man who has established his brother in London, with whom he actually has common interests.<sup>41</sup>

French police concerns appear to have been based on the fact that James was a foreigner in France, that he had business links with his brother in London and father in Frankfurt, the latter city being a notorious entrepot for English smuggled goods during the Napoleonic Wars, and that he was dealing in vast quantities of gold. But the French authorities certainly did not uncover the Rothschilds sending smuggled gold to Wellington.

It therefore seems highly unlikely, in the absence of corroborating evidence from the time, that Nathan Rothschild directed gold to Wellington in the years 1810–13. Nor is there evidence that Napoleon suspected such an arrangement. Furthermore, the elaborate and dangerous nature of this alleged financing scheme seems completely unnecessary, as the gold could simply have been shipped directly from London to the Iberian Peninsula.

In the years 1809–10, then, a conjuncture of financial, economic, and military factors convinced Napoleon that English smugglers could serve the interests of Imperial France. Napoleon, always the pragmatist, was quick to act. What then came into being was a circular flow of contraband goods, gold, and people between England and France, with Kent and Sussex on one side of the Channel, and Dunkirk and Gravelines on the other, as the key staging points or gateways for this traffic.

### III

The English smugglers who took advantage of Napoleon's change of heart were from Kent and Sussex. These English maritime counties, like the French departments they directly faced across the Channel, were frontier regions in the war with France, especially during the Napoleonic invasion scare of 1803–5.<sup>42</sup> Yet their very proximity to France also meant that the coastal inhabitants – especially fishermen, sailors and traders – traditionally interacted with the French in diverse social and economic contexts, including smuggling.

For centuries Kent and Sussex had been the main English entry point for continental contraband: the smuggling of wool (owling) in the seventeenth century, and tea, spirits, tobacco, and silk in the eighteenth century. Kent and

<sup>41</sup> Quoted in Corti, *The rise of the house of Rothschild*, pp. 120–1; see also the text of the original letter in Delbecq, 'La ville des smogglers', pp. 307–8.

<sup>42</sup> R. Glover, *Britain at bay: defence against Bonaparte, 1803–1814* (London, 1973), pp. 77–124.

Sussex smugglers played a crucial role in Britain's eighteenth-century consumption revolution, providing cheap tea and tobacco, often acting as the conduit between London and continental merchants.<sup>43</sup> Geography had conspired to ensure these two coastal counties a pre-eminent role in the smuggling trade with the Continent. The straits of Dover were the narrowest part of the English Channel, with a distance of just over thirty kilometres separating the English and French coasts. The ports of Flushing, Ostende, Dunkirk, and Calais were all within relatively short sailing distance. The coastline of East Kent and Sussex also had an abundance of beaches and coves to facilitate the landing of goods from France; and once landed, the goods could be swiftly transported by overland route to the largest market in Britain: London.<sup>44</sup> Given such favourable circumstances, smuggling flourished along the Kent and Sussex shorelines: Ramsgate, Dover, Folkestone, Hythe, Hastings, Bexhill, and Eastbourne were all noted smuggling centres and remained so during the Napoleonic period, with Deal, Folkestone, and Hastings often singled out by the authorities.<sup>45</sup>

It is impossible to quantify the exact number of inhabitants from Kent and Sussex directly or indirectly involved in the smuggling trade with Napoleon's France. French records indicate that Dunkirk and then Gravelines catered for up to 300 English smugglers.<sup>46</sup> These men performed the most dramatic stages of the smuggling ventures, sailing and rowing across the Channel. They were most commonly fishermen, who had either left their previous occupation to become full-time smugglers or combined smuggling and fishing. Fishing lent itself to smuggling: fishermen were familiar with the local waters and coastline, and fishing licences provided an ideal cover for smuggling activities, a fact not lost on the customs and excise authorities.<sup>47</sup>

The Kent and Sussex smuggling captains and crews were frequent visitors to Dunkirk and Gravelines. A veritable fleet of smuggling vessels operated between the English and French coasts. In December 1812, up to thirty English smuggling vessels were reported at anchor off the port of Dunkirk,<sup>48</sup> and in 1813, English smuggling vessels docked in Gravelines on 606 separate occasions.<sup>49</sup> The overwhelming majority of these boats were under ten tonnes, with many only a tonne, and crewed by five to six men. The smugglers favoured galleys, a tradition in Kent, at least in terms of guinea smuggling, that went back into the early

<sup>43</sup> Monod, 'Dangerous merchandise', pp. 150–82.

<sup>44</sup> Waugh, *Smuggling in Kent and Sussex, 1700–1840* (Newbury, Berkshire, 1985) p. 65.

<sup>45</sup> E. K. Chatterton, *King's cutters and smugglers* (London, 1972), p. 185.

<sup>46</sup> The commissaire of police at Boulogne to minister of police, Boulogne, 17 Dec. 1811, AN F<sup>7</sup> 8358.

<sup>47</sup> See for example, the tider at Folkestone to collector and controller of customs at Dover, Folkestone, 30 Apr. 1812; the collector and controller of customs at Dover to commissioners of the customs board, Dover, 1 May 1812; and the collector and controller of customs at Dover to commissioners of the customs board, Dover, 4 May 1812, TNA: CUST 54/26.

<sup>48</sup> The secretary of the customs board to secretary of the Admiralty, 11 Dec. 1812, TNA: ADM 1/3689.

<sup>49</sup> Compiled from monthly tables for 1813 – *Etat des Bâteaux entres et sortis de l'enceinte du Fort-Phillippe, au Port de Gravelines, et des valeurs qu'ils ont importés et exportés*, AN F<sup>7</sup> 8359–60.

eighteenth century.<sup>50</sup> Indeed, Deal was notorious as the centre of galley construction; so much so, that in 1785, William Pitt, in one of his more dramatic and draconian moves against smuggling, had a regiment of troops burn the entire Deal boat fleet after it had sought sanctuary on the beach from a storm.<sup>51</sup>

Over twenty years later, the galleys were as active as ever. Smuggling luggers of 50–200 tonnes were ill-suited to frequent dashes back and forth across the Channel, and to evading revenue cutters. Galleys, on the other hand, were light, cheap to construct and crew, and built for speed and stealth. Powered by small crews of rowers, and sometimes up to forty feet in length, the galleys could make the crossing in a single night, and had the advantage of being able to turn and row into the wind if pursued by revenue cutters.<sup>52</sup> Smuggling galleys proved the bane of the English customs service which complained of 'boats so finely constructed and manned with such expert rowers that few if any of the boats in the service of the Revenue are equal to them in swiftness'.<sup>53</sup> From 1809, the newly created Preventive Water Guard had at its disposal only thirty-nine revenue cutters and sixty-two boats for patrolling the entire English and Welsh coastlines.<sup>54</sup> In the end, customs was forced to build its own galleys to compete against the smugglers, with three deployed in the Channel in 1812.<sup>55</sup>

To make matters worse, though, the smugglers painted false names on galleys, and threw contraband overboard during pursuits. Hiding contraband in false compartments was another popular strategy. In 1811, for instance, two tide surveyors from Dover found 20,000 guineas hidden aboard a smack, the *New Union*, from London.<sup>56</sup> Their search lasted several days, yielding, among other finds, 6,000 guineas in the ceiling of the stern port and 8,000 guineas in hollowed out pigs of iron hidden under the ballast. Smooth channel crossings to France were also facilitated by the French authorities: in 1812, the British discovered a system of signals devised by the English smugglers and the French naval and port authorities to ensure that smuggling vessels were safe from French naval ships and coastal gun batteries.<sup>57</sup> The smugglers used different types of flags according to the days of the week, and lantern signals at night. The signals helped 'smugglers

<sup>50</sup> The collector and controller of customs at Dover to commissioners of the customs board, Dover, 1 July 1811, TNA: CUST 54/25.

<sup>51</sup> F. McLynn, *Crime and punishment in eighteenth-century England* (London, 1989), p. 195.

<sup>52</sup> The collector and controller of customs at Dover to commissioners of the customs board, Dover, 1 July 1811, TNA: CUST 54/25; Geoffrey Morley, *The smuggling war: the government's fight against smuggling in the 18th and 19th centuries* (Phoenix Hill, Gloucestershire, 1994), p. 68.

<sup>53</sup> The collector and controller of customs at Dover to commissioners of the customs board, Dover, 1 July 1811, TNA: CUST 54/25.

<sup>54</sup> Brian Lavery, *Nelson's navy: the ships, men and organization* (rev. edn, London, 1990), p. 274.

<sup>55</sup> The commissioners of the customs board to controller and collector of customs at Dover, 16 June 1812, TNA: CUST 31/12.

<sup>56</sup> The tide surveyors of Dover to collector and controller of customs at Dover, Dover, 5 Oct. 1811, TNA: CUST 54/25.

<sup>57</sup> The secretary of the customs board to captains of the waterguard, London, 7 Mar. 1812, TNA: CUST 31/12.

avoid danger and ... to remain on the coast close in shore or to enter the harbours'.<sup>58</sup>

Once the smuggling vessels arrived back on the English shore, many local hands helped in the transportation, storage, and distribution of the contraband. Seamen and local farm labourers did the heavy lifting from the beaches, and depending on the size of the cargoes, the men sometimes operated in gangs of up to 200.<sup>59</sup> Among the local labouring classes the financial rewards of smuggling were simply too enticing relative to paid lawful work. In 1813, Arthur Young found that Sussex labourers were paid between 16*d* and 18*d* daily, yet: 'The principals engaged in the business [smuggling] have about 10*s.* 6*d.* each night: the common men a guinea a week; and in the conveyance from the vessel to the shore, from 2*s.* to 7*s.* per night.'<sup>60</sup>

Smuggling was therefore economically important to many hundreds of Kent and Sussex seafaring and labouring families. Yet these families rarely funded the smuggling operations. In 1800, the collector and the controller of customs at Dover wrote of the Kent smugglers: 'Few of the men clandestinely employed in navigating smuggling vessels have any property either in them or their cargoes.'<sup>61</sup> Those who owned or part-owned the vessels and contraband varied according to the nature and size of the cargoes. The owners included local shopkeepers and merchants from Deal, Dover, and Folkestone, who placed written orders – shopping lists, in fact – with smuggling captains. Some of the orders were short, only three or four lines, and written in a semi-literate hand. One such letter, dated 27 July 1813, is from a Bushell to Motte, a merchant at Gravelines: 'Please to send me 4 dusons of plain dark suttid shalls. Please send the bills – by so Dover – you will oblige. Your humble servant.'<sup>62</sup> A man called Harvey from Deal, wrote to Bonverlett of Gravelines:

Please to send me 40 guineas worth of all plain dark shots shawls and if you cant send me the culers I send for do not send any as I have got them by me that you sent before for you did not send the cullers that I sent for ... or else I should have sold them. Please to send them dark and good ones.<sup>63</sup>

The writers of these notes were socially and geographically removed from the London bankers, financial speculators, and merchants who funded the large shipments of guineas. However, rarely do any of the individuals who financed the smuggling operations – whether Deal shop and inn keepers or London bankers – appear in the English archival sources, for it was generally the sailors,

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> The commissioners of excise to lords commissioners of the Treasury, London, 27 Oct. 1804, TNA: ADM 1/4293.

<sup>60</sup> Arthur Young, *General view of the agriculture of the county of Sussex* (Newton Abbot, 1970), pp. 404–5.

<sup>61</sup> The collector and controller of customs at Dover to commissioners of the customs board, Dover, 18 May 1800, TNA: CUST 54/25.

<sup>62</sup> Bushell to Motte, 27 July 1813, AN F<sup>7</sup> 3643/11.

<sup>63</sup> Harvey to Bonverlett, *ibid.*

fishermen, and labourers who were caught in the act of smuggling or in possession of contraband.

## IV

What types of contraband were taken across to France between 1810 and 1814 and in what quantities? Of all the contraband export items, the one that was most eagerly awaited by Napoleon, and caused most alarm for English authorities, was gold. French records reveal the scale of the guinea trade. In Dunkirk, during the last six months of 1810, English smugglers delivered 139,338 guineas (3,622,801 francs).<sup>64</sup> The following year saw a huge growth in the trade. For the first nine months of 1811, smugglers brought across 1,876,617 guineas (48,792,026 francs).<sup>65</sup> This strong trade continued with the shift to Gravelines. In 1813, the smugglers' city received 1,607,119, guineas valued at 42,555,330 francs.<sup>66</sup>

That year, the overwhelming majority of smuggling vessels that docked in Gravelines brought guineas. For instance, thirty-four of the forty-two smuggling captains who arrived in the month of January had guineas on board. These consignments, though, varied in size from a pocketful of gold coins, twenty or fewer, to thousands. A handful of smugglers – Crisp on the *Po*, Minter on the *Dart*, Peak on the *Flora*, Baker on the *Po* and the *Hero* – made regular trips during 1813 carrying between 5,000 to 30,000 guineas at a time. A certain Captain Haywood, though, dominated the trade. Haywood is listed as having entered Gravelines seventy-three times for 1813, and almost always in the boat *Hope*, although it is impossible to determine from the tables whether there may have been more than one Haywood captaining a number of boats named *Hope*. Nevertheless, Haywood brought in tens of thousands of guineas at a time, with a largest single cargo of 29,669 guineas valued at 771,000 francs.

On the French side, a small group of merchants and bankers controlled the guinea trade. The 1813 smuggling import tables for Gravelines reveal four names, above all, as recipients of guineas: Jean Castinel, Benjamin Morel, Henry Faber, and Salomon Hesse. In September 1813, for instance, Castinel, Morel, and Faber took almost 87 per cent of the total 237,687 guineas imported for the month. They, like other French merchants in Gravelines, received guineas from many different smuggling captains, although Haywood was their most important single supplier. It was also common for them to share the guineas from a single boat's cargo. For instance, Haywood's boatload of 29,669 guineas was shared amongst eight merchants: Faber 11,100, Morel 8,500, Castinel 6,000, Debarque 3,500, Avril 300, Bonvarlet 133, Rambai 96, and Huguet 40.

Interestingly, James Rothschild does not appear on the 1813 import tables. However, Castinel, Morel, Faber, and Hesse, among others, were acting in his

<sup>64</sup> Delbecq, 'La ville des smogglers', pp. 358–9.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>66</sup> The following discussion of guinea smuggling in 1813 is based on detailed monthly tables, *Etat des Bâteaux entres et sortis de l'enceinte du Fort-Phillipe, au Port de Gravelines, et des valeurs qu'ils ont importés et exportés*, AN F<sup>7</sup> 8359–60.

interests. The Rothschilds dealt with many French merchants and bankers but especially Morel Frères, with offices in Dunkirk, Gravelines, and Paris.<sup>67</sup> Together with James Rothschild they helped collect Nathan Rothschild's guinea consignments, transferring the gold to Paris, Lille, and Amsterdam, and purchasing bills of exchange on London. Between February and November 1811, for instance, the Morels received over 400,000 guineas sent by Nathan.<sup>68</sup>

The smugglers often took across to France something just as precious to Napoleon as gold – his military and naval officers. During the French Revolution, especially the period of the Jacobin Terror, French aristocrats and refractory clergy had fled to Britain across the Channel, and during the Revolutionary-Napoleonic Wars spies on both sides were transferred back and forth. Yet the war also gave rise to French prisoners in Britain, providing an unexpected business opportunity for English smugglers.<sup>69</sup>

Throughout the greater eighteenth century, prisoners of war in European conflicts were not held for the duration of the conflict. Rather, prisoners were exchanged in cartels between belligerents, and officers were granted their parole, giving their word as officers and 'gentlemen' that upon their release they would return home and not take up arms again during the conflict. During the Revolutionary-Napoleonic Wars, however, these traditional conventions broke down. This resulted in over 100,000 French prisoners being held in Britain over the course of the Napoleonic Wars. Ordinary soldiers and sailors were held in land prisons and on board hulks at Portsmouth, Plymouth, and Chatham, whilst officers were granted parole on condition that they remained in specific towns in Britain. Under parole, officers could roam no further than one mile from their parole town, had to observe morning and evening curfews, and keep regular contact with the local parole agent.

Many French officers, though, did not honour the conditions of their parole and escape was common, particularly in the later stages of the war with 299 officers successfully escaping between 1811 and 1814.<sup>70</sup> The officers most commonly escaped with the aid of smugglers: the officers were hidden in barns, farm houses, or inns before boarding smuggling vessels that ferried them across the Channel to French ports. This provided a lucrative income to British smugglers who charged the French officers up to 300 guineas. Smugglers courted business in parole towns and were also approached in the English smuggler ports in France by concerned relatives. Napoleon recalled:

The relations of Frenchmen, prisoners in your country, were accustomed to go to Dunkerque, and to make a bargain with them [smugglers] to bring over a certain prisoner.

<sup>67</sup> Kaplan, *Nathan Mayer Rothschild*, pp. 61–5.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 61.

<sup>69</sup> For the following discussion see Gavin Daly, 'Napoleon's lost legions: French prisoners of war in Britain, 1803–1814', *History*, 89 (2004), pp. 361–80. See also Philippe Masson, *Les sépulcres flottants: prisonniers français en Angleterre sous l'Empire* (Rennes, 1987); Francis Abell, *Prisoners of war in Britain, 1756 to 1815* (London, 1914); and Patrick Crowhurst, *The French war on trade: privateering, 1793–1815* (Aldershot, 1989), pp. 173–98.

<sup>70</sup> Abell, *Prisoners of war*, p. 391.

All that they wanted was the name, age, and a private token, by means of which the prisoners might repose confidence in them.<sup>71</sup>

French police records reveal that for the year 1811, up to 20 November, 141 French officers successfully returned to France after breaking their parole in Britain.<sup>72</sup> Nearly all these officers returned through the Channel ports via English smuggling vessels. Dunkirk received 35 prisoners, Boulogne 30, and Calais 10, with Deal the most common departure point from Britain.<sup>73</sup> After escaping with the aid of smugglers, the prisoners could be in France in a matter of only days. Louis Sanson, for instance, a dragoon captain, escaped parole on 10 February 1812, arrived in Deal two days later, then crossed the Channel to Gravelines on 16 February.<sup>74</sup> French escapers arrived at a variety of French ports, and at such a frequent rate that Napoleon was forced in February 1812 to allow English smugglers bearing them entry into French ports other than Gravelines.<sup>75</sup>

In addition to guineas and prisoners of war, the smugglers took letters and newspapers across to France. The letters were most commonly business instructions and correspondence between English and French merchants and shopkeepers. Smugglers also conveyed personal letters. For example, in 1812, Peter Deville, a French POW held on board a prison hulk at Chatham, sent a letter to his wife in France via Deal smugglers.<sup>76</sup> The smugglers were also Napoleon's principal means for following developments in the British press. In 1813–14, English newspapers were regularly brought into Gravelines by the English smuggler, Kelsey.<sup>77</sup> Upon arriving, Kelsey's packets of newspapers were immediately sent by courier to the minister of police in Paris. As Napoleon recounted: 'During the war all the information I received from England came through the smugglers. They are people who have courage and ability to do anything for money ... I had every information I wanted from them. They brought over newspapers and despatches from the spies we had in London.'<sup>78</sup>

## V

With their export cargoes of guineas, prisoners, letters, and newspapers, the English smugglers thus entered France. Once they arrived in port, the smugglers, who flouted the law in their own country, were subjected to the early nineteenth

<sup>71</sup> Quoted in O'Meara, *Napoleon in exile*, II, p. 253.

<sup>72</sup> List of French prisoners of war who had broken their parole and returned to France up to 20 Nov. 1811, AN F<sup>7</sup> 8359.

<sup>73</sup> Deal commonly appears in the police reports on French prisoners and British smuggling vessels, AN F<sup>7</sup> 8359.

<sup>74</sup> The commissaire of police at Gravelines to minister of police, Gravelines, 16 Feb. 1814, AN F<sup>7</sup> 3643/11. <sup>75</sup> The minister of police to minister of marine, Paris, 3 Feb. 1812, AN F<sup>7</sup> 8359.

<sup>76</sup> Peter Deville to Mr John Gillhem and Mr Oliver, Prison Ship Crown Prince, Chatham, 9 May 1812, AN F<sup>7</sup> 8359.

<sup>77</sup> The commissaire of police at Gravelines to minister of police, Gravelines, 7 July and 15 Oct. 1813, 11 Feb. and 28 Mar. 1814, AN F<sup>7</sup> 3643/11.

<sup>78</sup> Quoted in Morley, *Smuggling in Hampshire and Dorset*, p. 37.

century's most sophisticated police and bureaucratic state. Whilst the smugglers enjoyed an 'economic' relationship with the Napoleonic regime, they were left under no illusions in France that they nevertheless still constituted the British enemy. From the official French perspective, the smugglers, although an important asset in the war with Britain, were still nevertheless enemy citizens on French soil, capable of spying and bringing in illegal English textiles. The sub-inspector of customs at Boulogne held the English smugglers in contempt, describing them as 'people of the sack and rope, capable of everything except what is good'.<sup>79</sup> Initially, the French policing of the smugglers was far from perfect. In May 1811, the commissaire of police at Boulogne claimed that the smugglers in Dunkirk were not complying with French regulations, feared their involvement in espionage, and complained of the 'throng of the enemy population' and of the 'foreigners circulating and scattered throughout the city'.<sup>80</sup> At the time, nine smuggling vessels were detained in Dunkirk: four did not have crew lists, and the other five had crew lists that did not match the crew numbers on board.<sup>81</sup> As with so many other aspects of Napoleonic France, with its mania for information and administrative process, smuggling was bureaucratized: at the very least, English smugglers who hoped for a profitable long-term relationship with the Napoleonic regime had to get their paper work in order. When Napoleon visited Dunkirk in October 1811, and expressed concerns about the excessive freedom that English smugglers enjoyed, the port's days as a smuggling base were numbered.<sup>82</sup>

When the smuggling base shifted to Gravelines, Napoleon ordered the construction of a smugglers' enclosure. He later remembered this as a 'little camp for their accommodation' but it was something more than this.<sup>83</sup> The enclosure was to be triangular in shape with sides 200 to 260 meters long – complete with guards and gun batteries.<sup>84</sup> Civil, military, and police authorities went to work, collaborating on how best to organize the site.<sup>85</sup> In all, six ministries – Interior, War, Navy, Finance, Police, and Manufactures – were involved to varying degrees. In August 1812, Count Réal, the councillor of state responsible for the First Police *arrondissement* of the Empire, submitted a thirty-two article report to the minister of police, detailing procedures to cover the arrival of the smuggling vessels, the checking of all letters, papers, and packages on the persons of the smugglers, the entry of the smugglers into the enclosure, the housing and feeding of the smugglers, and finally their departure.<sup>86</sup> In the end, a bustling 'city of

<sup>79</sup> Quoted in Heckscher, *The continental system*, p. 192.

<sup>80</sup> The commissaire of police at Boulogne to Réal, councillor of state responsible for the First Police *arrondissement*, Boulogne, 31 May 1811, AN F<sup>7</sup> 3643/12.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>82</sup> The minister of marine to Napoleon, Paris, 27 Nov. 1811, AN AF IV 1199.

<sup>83</sup> Quoted in O'Meara, *Napoleon in exile*, 1, p. 252.

<sup>84</sup> See Imperial decree of 29 January 1812, reproduced in Delbecq, 'La ville des smugglers', pp. 272–5, and extract of the minutes of the secretary of state, Paris, 15 Mar. 1812, AN F<sup>7</sup> 8359.

<sup>85</sup> See correspondence in AN F<sup>7</sup> 8358 and F<sup>7</sup> 8359, and Delbecq, 'La ville des smugglers', pp. 275–83.

<sup>86</sup> Réal to minister of police, 27 Aug. 1812, AN F<sup>7</sup> 8359.

smugglers' emerged behind the walls. There was a 'quarter' for the English smugglers; lodgings for French military and security personnel; lodgings and shop stalls for merchants; and a customs office and buildings. The French who had cause to enter and leave the 'city' were issued with special security passes. At Gravelines, therefore, the English smugglers or free-traders were anything but free, subject to paperwork, rules, restrictions, and surveillance, and physically isolated from most of the local community.

Central to the Napoleonic regime's organization of smuggling was its own merchant community. The Napoleonic state officially granted permission to seventy merchants in Gravelines to import and export goods through the smugglers. In keeping with the Napoleonic 'culture of information', a detailed government table was compiled on the merchants.<sup>87</sup> Of the seventy, listed as either 'marchands' or 'négociants', fifty-five were men and fifteen were women. Although from Napoleon's point of view the activities of these merchants were legal and state-sanctioned, the high proportion of women among the merchants may nevertheless indicate a greater freedom for women to pursue business ventures within the subversive world of smuggling. The overwhelming majority of the merchants were local based, with forty-two having previously been in Dunkirk and obviously associated with the English smugglers of that city; and over 70 per cent of the merchants had been born in the local adjoining French departments of the Nord and Pas de Calais.

But there was also a cosmopolitan character to this group, highlighting the international nature of both trade and smuggling. Many of the merchants spoke English and knew English smugglers, and some had lived in England or travelled there on business especially during the Peace of Amiens. Twenty-one of the merchants are mentioned as having a 'correspondant' in Britain – these were normally London and Kent merchant companies. Among the Gravelines–London connections, Albert Huguet was in contact with Leaf, Severs and Company in London; Louis Joos with Prayant and Company; and Salomon Hesse with Rothschilds. Given that most of the English smugglers at Gravelines operated from Deal and Folkestone, it is not surprising that Gravelines merchants had business contacts there: Charles Edwards with John Hall from Folkestone, and Jean Castinel with James Seal and Company. Concerning Deal, both Salomon Hesse and Jacques Decarpentry were in contact with a certain Edwards; Charles Avril and Joseph Dantin with Kelsey; Caroline Brown with Mokett; and Jean Castinel with May and Company. Henry Faber had connections to Latham, Rice and Company of Dover.

Furthermore, at least nine of the merchants had strong family connections with England. Three had been born in London: Jean Gaugain, Charles Edwards, and Thomas Chantrell. Gaugain, aged fifty-seven, had been born to French parents and had remained in England for most of his life, only living in France from 1810,

<sup>87</sup> Table – *Etat nominatif des négociants qui ont demandé et obtenu des cartes pour commencer avec les smugglers à Gravelines*, *ibid.*

leaving his wife and three children behind in London. Others were born in France to English parents: Robert Cook was born to English parents in Dunkirk and had two brothers in Folkestone and relatives in London; the Brown sisters, Elisa and Caroline, were also born in Dunkirk to English parents and had a brother and other relatives in London. And of course there was James Rothschild's connection to his brother in London.

Smuggling profited these seventy merchants first and foremost, but it also offered relief to local French workers. Over the course of the Napoleonic Wars, the British naval blockades had a detrimental impact on the economic life of the French port cities and towns. French shipping along the Atlantic coast was reduced to licensed commerce, coastal trade and a handful of privateers.<sup>88</sup> The economic war affected not only merchants and shipowners, but also fishermen and workers in ancillary maritime industries. In the Norman port of Dieppe, for example, between 1789 and 1810 the number of people employed in the local fishing industry fell by 52 per cent.<sup>89</sup> In this depressed economic environment along the French Channel coast, the smuggling industry provided a lifeline. As the prefect of the Nord commented in 1811, smuggling was Dunkirk's 'only resource'.<sup>90</sup> The merchants' warehouses had to be filled with finished products for export, and special ropes and kegs were needed so that the smugglers could haul spirits off English beaches and up cliff faces. In 1813, two lace makers from Caen petitioned Napoleon to allow them to trade with smugglers from the Channel Islands, claiming that this, among other benefits, would 'relieve the poorer classes' of the city.<sup>91</sup>

A report of the French minister of manufactures and commerce reveals the details of the export cargoes of English smugglers from Gravelines for the year 1812.<sup>92</sup> During this period, the English smugglers left with goods to the value of 4,579,346 francs. Lace, silk, and leather products comprised 62.5 per cent of the total value. Of these, the single most important item was lace (1,052,460 francs), followed by silk fabric (794,508 francs) and leather gloves (585,954 francs). Given France's tradition in silk making, it is not surprising that all silk products, including fabric, shawls, bonnets, and ribbons, made up just over a quarter of the total export value (1,224,430 francs). Alcohol accounted for almost a third (32 per cent) of the export value. French brandy was the most important alcohol export (487,599 litres valued at 959,449 francs) followed by Dutch and French gin (253,121 litres and 192,741 litres respectively). Other items included playing cards, watches, and French perfume.

<sup>88</sup> For the examples of Rouen and Le Havre, see Daly, *Inside Napoleonic France*, pp. 134–56. For French privateering, see Crowhurst, *The French war on trade*.

<sup>89</sup> Daly, *Inside Napoleonic France*, p. 150.

<sup>90</sup> Prefect of the Nord to minister of police, Lille, 25 Oct. 1811, AN F<sup>7</sup> 8358.

<sup>91</sup> Petition of Pierre Hammelin and J. B. Bonnaire to the emperor, Caen, 20 Sept. 1813, *ibid.*

<sup>92</sup> Report of the minister of manufactures and commerce on smuggling at Gravelines, Paris, 24 Mar. 1813, *ibid.*

Most of this contraband landed in Kent and Sussex. Visiting Sussex in 1813, Arthur Young wrote: 'between 3 and 400,000 gallons of gin, rum, and other spirits, are annually smuggled into this district ... 12,000 gallons of spirits have been landed in a week at Dungeness, in Kent'.<sup>93</sup> And Kent was the main entry point for French silks, laces, and gloves. Throughout 1812–13, the customs board frequently wrote to the customs officials at Dover about the problem and how to address it. They were particularly concerned about the small number of seizures, especially of contraband items on shore. The collector and the controller were asked to respond 'to what cause we attribute that so few seizures of French manufactured goods are made in the houses and shops of individuals when it is so notorious that considerable quantities of such goods are introduced upon the Kentish coast'.<sup>94</sup> Part of the problem was that once the contraband was hauled off the beaches, much of it passed on to the London market, as had been the case throughout the eighteenth century.<sup>95</sup>

Maxine Berg has recently written on the development, marketing, and consumption of British luxury products during the eighteenth century.<sup>96</sup> In competing against French design and luxury, British manufacturers promoted new, fashionable, and what were seen as characteristically 'British' products – china and earthenware, glass and metal goods. These were produced for the middle classes, for both domestic and overseas markets. The promotion of such goods, especially during the Revolutionary-Napoleonic Wars, constituted 'consumer patriotism', part of the broad construction of Britishness in opposition to the French.<sup>97</sup> Yet, the history of eighteenth- and early-nineteenth century smuggling needs to be taken into account. French luxury goods, especially silk, continued to enter Britain. The Dunkirk and Gravelines smuggling bases reveal that during the Napoleonic Wars there remained a British demand and taste for French goods, although the relative cheapness of the goods on the black market was clearly a determining, if not the decisive, factor. The export cargoes from Gravelines catered to diverse English consumer tastes. From gin to silk, from the inn house to polite society, a broad cross-section of the English, patricians, and plebeians alike, unwittingly or not, played their own small role in sustaining the contraband networks.

## VI

Napoleon's fall from power in 1814 ended this unique phase in the long history of Anglo-French smuggling. The smuggling bases at Dunkirk and Gravelines were part of Napoleon's broad economic strategy against Britain, albeit conceived in response to changing domestic and international circumstances. With the

<sup>93</sup> Young, *General view of the agriculture of the county of Sussex*, pp. 404–5.

<sup>94</sup> The collector and controller of customs at Dover to commissioners of customs, Dover, 13 July 1812, TNA: CUST 54/26.

<sup>95</sup> Monod, 'Dangerous merchandise', pp. 169, 175–8.

<sup>96</sup> Maxine Berg, *Luxury and pleasure in eighteenth-century Britain* (Oxford, 2005).

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, espec. p. 91, and Maxine Berg, 'Shopping for Britain', *History Today*, 55 (2005), pp. 28–35.

Continental Blockade in place, and the British economy in its worst shape since the start of the war, Napoleon hoped that guinea smuggling might fatally undermine Britain's domestic gold levels. In the end, of course, nothing of the sort happened, and the British economy weathered the storm of the late Napoleonic era. Yet, amidst the intensity of the conflict, Napoleon and the British government took very seriously the issue of guinea smuggling.

For a period of four years, circumstances produced an environment conducive to illicit economic collaboration between the Napoleonic state and British subjects. This partnership served the interests of both parties, assisting the Napoleonic state's war effort and French industry and commerce, whilst at the same time providing livelihoods and financial gain for British smugglers, merchants, and financial speculators. The arrangement was a coming together of both the new and the old. New, in the sense that the English smugglers, unwittingly or not, played their own small part in the Napoleonic war machine, delivering gold, prisoners of war, and information. They provided the vital cross-Channel link between the London and Paris financial markets, between French prisoners and their families in France, and between French manufacturers and the distribution and sale of French goods in Britain. Never before had a French state so calculatingly used the services of English smugglers to further its own military and strategic ends, and never before had a French state so systematically controlled and watched English smugglers on its own soil. This was smuggling, Napoleonic style.

Yet Napoleon made use of pre-existing Anglo-French smuggling communities, that for generations had transferred contraband between England and France. For both Napoleon and the British government, the Channel was a zone of warfare, a geographical space to be defended or invaded. For the English smugglers, however, the Channel between 1810 and 1814 was as much a place for illicit Anglo-French cooperation and exchange as it was for adversarial relations; a place for profit and entrepreneurial activity as it was for war.