

A legendary time when barrels of Guinness Stout began arriving on the shores of the Bristol Channel.

Guinness Galore!

Perhaps in an idle moment whilst ferreting through the multiplicity of television channels now available thanks to the digital revolution, you may have come across the old movie “*Whiskey Galore*” – or perhaps, like me, you are old enough to have seen it first time round anyway.! Based on a true story it tells of the attempts by the inhabitants of a remote Scottish island to secure their share of a cargo of whisky from a ship wrecked on their shores, and the efforts of the police and customs officers to prevent them. Local legend has it that we enjoyed a similar event which occurred on the coasts of the Bristol Channel in 1940, only in this case the cargo was 1500 x 56 gallon barrels of Guinness Stout being conveyed from Dublin to Bristol aboard a 710 ton steamer, the *SS Cato*.



The date was 10th March, with the war against Germany less than six months old when, somewhere off Nash Point the *Cato* struck a magnetic mine and sank with the loss of thirteen of her fifteen man crew. These are the sad facts of the story, but what happened afterwards is the stuff of legend, and with the aid of the memories of local people I pieced together something of the story for inclusion in “*Tales of OUR Century*” published by the Kenfig Society in 2000 to celebrate the new Millennium.

As the wreck of the vessel began breaking up in the months that followed, so barrels from its cargo were released from the hold and distributed by tide

and current far and wide around the shores of the Bristol Channel. Sooner or later some washed ashore, and once this happened the race was on between locals and the Customs Officers to secure them! Early morning walks and late evening strolls along local beaches suddenly became a remarkably popular pastime amongst the population! Some were caught in the act of spiriting away their booty and subsequently prosecuted, but many a household in our area enjoyed the benefits of Guinness Stout that year!

At Porthcawl the Customs & Excise hired a shed at “Tommy David’s Sand & Gravel” works in Newton Dunes to store any barrels they recovered under lock and key, but it didn’t take the workforce long to find their own way in! Unfortunately, or so the story goes, they rather ‘over-indulged’ and the plant had to be shut down for the rest of the day because few if any of the men were in any state to carry on working!



Some casks found their way into Swansea Bay and onto the beach at Kenfig which, being isolated from the nearest roads by extensive sand dunes made it difficult for the Excise men to recover them. Regular patrols along the beach therefore broached any casks they found allowing the contents to drain into the sand. The presence of the dunes nevertheless proved a blessing for the locals – a hiding place where a barrel from the beach could be quickly rolled and buried for later recovery. The blacksmith at Gaines Quarry in South Cornelly is said to have been one such. He and his mate

subsequently recovering the cask from its hiding place at dead of night, and successfully transferring it undetected to a little shed behind his smithy, there it remained hidden there until they had well and truly disposed of its contents over the following months.

Others chose to keep their barrels hidden in the dunes, visiting them from time to time laden with jugs and bottles to take supplies home, but our sand dunes were tricky places in those days and far more mobile than they are now. With few permanent landmarks and with the dunes constantly in motion through the action of the wind, it is said that some barrels were never subsequently relocated and, seventy years on still await recovery! One highly-coloured tale tells of a night-time Guinness 'beach party' where some revellers sitting astride an empty barrel and singing lustily launched themselves out into Swansea Bay "*and were never seen no more*"!

The main beneficiaries from the flotsam on Kenfig Beach, however, are said to have been the personnel from the RAF station on Stormy Dune who possessed the organisation, the equipment, and the numbers to ensure that they acquired the lion's share of anything which came ashore here. The late Roy Edwards of New House, North Cornelly, a young lad at that time, told me how he and his mates went to try their luck beachcombing at Kenfig. They found no barrels, but instead came across an aircraft from Stormy Down that had made a forced landing there due to engine failure. Mechanics from the airfield attended, removed the engine, and repaired it in a makeshift workshop set up in a tent nearby. When the lads arrived the RAF men were struggling to lift the engine back into its housing on the aircraft, and gladly accepted their offer of assistance. Together they soon made short work of the task, and by way of a thank-you the crew invited the lads to join them for "refreshments" in their tent – Guinness, of course!



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