

**TROZE**

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**Merchants and  
smugglers in  
eighteenth-century  
Penzance: the brothers  
John and James  
Dunkin**

*By Charlotte MacKenzie*

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## **TROZE**

Troze is the journal of the National Maritime Museum Cornwall whose mission is to promote an understanding of small boats and their place in people's lives, and of the maritime history of Cornwall.

'Troze: the sound made by water about the bows of a boat in motion'  
From R. Morton Nance, *A Glossary of Cornish Sea Words*

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Charlotte MacKenzie lives in Cornwall where she is a freelance historical researcher and writer. She completed a PhD in the history of medicine at University College London and was previously a senior lecturer in history at Bath Spa University. This article forms part of a larger research project on merchants and smuggling in eighteenth century Cornwall.

# Merchants and smugglers in eighteenth-century Penzance: the brothers John and James Dunkin<sup>1</sup>

*Charlotte MacKenzie*

## Introduction

Late eighteenth-century shipowners at Penzance were predominantly local merchants, shopkeepers, and artisans willing to invest in transportation. They were not necessarily wealthy. Shared ownership and the fact that owners could transfer their shares individually created a market in which trading ships, like mines and seines, were open to small-scale investors hoping to secure more than the 3 per cent on government bonds. For most of these investors, access to the ‘dense networks’ of coastal or European trading opportunities was the prime consideration.<sup>2</sup> Merchants, fish curers, innkeepers, shopkeepers, and their customers might purchase items more cheaply or increase profits when duties went unpaid; and perhaps because of this smuggling was actively engaged in or tacitly tolerated by people in many walks of life.

John Rule has suggested that smuggling was a ‘social crime’ popularly countenanced despite its illegality.<sup>3</sup> Within this framework, two articles in *Troze* added detailed perspectives on smuggling off the Cornish coast. The involvement of Mount’s Bay fishermen and fishing boats in smuggling was described by Tony Pawlyn, while Martin Wilcox revealed that Zephaniah Job of Polperro engaged in a wide range of trading activities of which smuggling was just one element.<sup>4</sup> The same was true of John Dunkin, who worked as a carpenter, merchant, lighthouse agent, and distiller; and whose commercial investments included shares in trading ships, seines, properties, and mines. He and his brother James were described by the press as ‘the most notorious smugglers’.<sup>5</sup> What follows is the reconstruction of this family’s activities and their place within the merchant networks of Penzance, a story which contains recurrent themes of eighteenth-century picaresque and romantic fiction.

The Dunkins’ smuggling activities were combined with legitimate foreign and coastal trade. In 1791 the port of Penzance had the third largest tonnage of foreign trade and sixth largest tonnage of coastal trade in Cornwall. But it was a long way behind some other Cornish ports, with approximately one-fifth of the tonnage listed for Falmouth’s foreign trade and Truro’s coastal trade.<sup>6</sup> John Dunkin owned shares in eleven trading ships out of a total of forty registrations at Penzance in 1786-91 (Table 1). Six ships were registered in 1786, three in 1787, one in 1788, and two in 1791, including a second registration of the *Hope* following alterations.<sup>7</sup> The largest, the *George*, was the only one to complete transatlantic voyages, while the *Adventure* was their only ship to be Lloyds

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<sup>1</sup> The author would like to thank Angela Broome, Helen Doe, Elias Kupfermann, Jo Mattingly, Cathryn Pearce, and Keith Pearce for their contributions to this research as well as Paul Stephens who partly funded it.

<sup>2</sup> Roger Knight and Martin Howard Wilcox, *Sustaining the Fleet, 1793-1815, War, the British Navy and the Contractor State* (Boydell & Brewer, 2010).

<sup>3</sup> John Rule, ‘Smuggling and Wrecking’ in Philip Payton, Alston Kennerley and Helen Doe (eds.) *The Maritime History of Cornwall* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2014), pp. 195-208.

<sup>4</sup> Tony Pawlyn, ‘Petates and Fish: Cornish Fishermen Smugglers in the Late Eighteenth Century’, *Troze*, March 2010, Volume 2, Number 1; Martin Wilcox, ‘Maritime Business in Eighteenth-Century Cornwall: Zephaniah Job of Polperro’, *Troze*, September 2010, Volume 2, Number 2, p.3.

<sup>5</sup> *Reading Mercury*, 12 September 1791.

<sup>6</sup> Helen Doe, ‘Cornish Ports in the Eighteenth Century’ in Payton, et al. *Maritime History*, pp.184 and 187.

<sup>7</sup> Cornwall Record Office, hereafter CRO: MSR/PENZ/1 Shipping register, 1786-1823.

registered from 1790 to 1796.<sup>8</sup>

	<b>James Dunkin</b>	<b>John Ellis</b>	<b>Thomas Love</b>	<b>Richard Oxnam</b>	<b>Other owners</b>
<i>Adventure</i> brigantine	Y		Y		Ralph Dewen*
<i>Betsey</i> brigantine	Y	Y			
<i>Dolphin</i> lug sail boat					Joseph Batten, Charles Francis
<i>Friendship</i> brigantine	Y	Y			John Tyeth
<i>George</i> ship	Y		Y		
<i>Hope</i> brigantine	Y			Y	William Carne, Richard Hosking*, Thomas Hosking, Abraham Tyeth
<i>Industry</i> sloop	Y	Y		Y	Richard Jennings, Henry Rowe, Thomas Rowe
<i>Liberty</i> sloop	Y	Y			
<i>Lord Hood</i> brigantine	Y				Thomas Bevan
<i>Nancy</i> brigantine	Y			Y	William Treluddra*
<i>Penzance</i> sloop	Y			Y	Thomas Branwell, John Quick*

Note: \* denotes the master of the ship

Table 1: Table 1: ships registered at the port of Penzance 1786-91 and partly owned by John Dunkin and associates

Source: Cornwall Record Office: MSR/PENZ/1 Shipping register, 1786-1823.

This represented substantial investment. In addition to the cost of the ships, their registration required a bond to be paid by the subscribing owners who swore an oath that the ship belonged to the owners listed, who had no allegiance to any foreign states, and that the ship survey was correct. The shares held by each owner were not listed. Some shipowners had no direct involvement with shipping, and in some cases the ship's master negotiated many trading decisions on route. But the evidence here shows that John Dunkin was involved in the dispatch, landing, and onward distribution of cargoes carried by ships that he partly owned; James Dunkin sometimes went to sea. The extent of their investment and direct involvement in shipping and distribution at Mount's Bay is comparable to Zephaniah Job in Polperro and James Dunn in Mevagissey.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> CRO: MSR/PENZ/1 Shipping register, 1786-1823; The National Archives, hereafter TNA: CUST 68/13 Penzance collector to board, 1786-88; National Maritime Museum Cornwall, hereafter NMMC, *Lloyds Register*.

<sup>9</sup> Wilcox, 'Zephaniah Job'; C.H. Ward-Jackson, *Ships and Shipbuilders of a Westcountry Seaport: Fowey 1786-1939*, (Truro, 1986), pp. 14-21; Helen Doe, 'The Smuggler's Shipbuilder: The Customers, Trades and Vessels of a Mevagissey Shipyard, 1799-1816', *Mariner's Mirror*, Vol. 92, No. 4, (2006), pp.427-442.

## Orphans and apprentices

John and James Dunkin came from a family of mining industrialists in Cornwall whose personal fortunes foundered in their parents' generation. Their mother died in 1762, followed by their father two years later; John was twelve and James was nine. They were adopted by an uncle. In 1769 James was apprenticed to a wheelwright at Phillack where the new Copperhouse canal and quays were a centre for Cornwall's copper industry.<sup>10</sup> John purchased an apprenticeship as a carpenter at St Erth in 1772, where he met his future wife Elizabeth, eldest daughter of John Ellis, who was employed at Carnsew by the merchant William Cornish.<sup>11</sup> James remained unmarried although he had two children from different relationships.

The Dunkins evidently received a family inheritance in the 1770s, but it is not known what this comprised. Despite differences of temperament, John and James Dunkin made some shared investments and worked together. Given their family background they might have been expected to invest in mines, but following John's marriage they chose to purchase trading premises and ships. Most of John's trading associations included relations of his wife Elizabeth, who may have influenced his choice of commercial investments. The first of these was at Carnsew, where William Cornish's widow, Frances, assigned the quayside premises and house occupied by John Ellis to John Dunkin and Thomas Ellis of Tregethas for £350 in December 1779.<sup>12</sup> These premises were then partly assigned to other traders by Dunkin and Ellis. A new merchant partnership was formed at Carnsew called Harris, Ellis & Co in which members of the Ellis family were in business on their own account, and from which the Dunkins received payments when the partnership was dissolved in 1790.<sup>13</sup>

## Privateers

The first ships in which the Dunkins are known to have invested were privateers. In 1777-83, an increasing number of ships from Cornish ports sailed as privateers with letters of marque for Britain's wars against America, France, Spain, or the Dutch Republic. The privateers of Mount's Bay were predominantly trading vessels rather than purpose-built warships, but some succeeded in capturing enemy ships. In the South West, Penzance had one of the highest success rates for prizes in this period.<sup>14</sup> British privateers were entitled to keep the proceeds from the sale of enemy ships and cargoes which they captured. Some, including John Carter and Richard Oxnam,<sup>15</sup> seized this opportunity and owned or had shares in several ships which obtained letters of marque. Most of those listed as owners invested more cautiously in one or two privateers; for many, obtaining letters of marque and being legally armed may have been a defensive measure intended to discourage enemy privateers from attempting to capture their fishing boat or coastal trader.<sup>16</sup>

In January 1781, a 60-ton sloop named the *Active*, commanded by Captain Richard Hosking, was granted letters of marque; its owners were 'J. Dunkin' 'J. Carter' and Richard Hosking. In April the *Active* was advertised for sale. By June, John Carter, John Dunkin, and Moses Symons obtained letters of marque for a 150-ton lugger, the *Phoenix*, described as of Marazion. The *Phoenix* was

<sup>10</sup> TNA: IR 1/26 Board of stamps apprenticeship book, 1768-71.

<sup>11</sup> TNA: IR 1/27 Board of stamps apprenticeship book, 1771-3.

<sup>12</sup> CRO: X473/27. Assignment of leaseholds, house, wharfs, warehouses, Carnsew, St Erth, 1779.

<sup>13</sup> CRO: X473/28. Assignment of leaseholds, house, wharfs, warehouses, Carnsew, St Erth, 1780; CRO:

X473/29. Assignment of leaseholds, part house, wharfs, warehouses, Carnsew, St Erth, 1783; CRO:

X473/30. Assignment of leaseholds, house, wharfs, warehouses, Carnsew, St Erth, 1790.

<sup>14</sup> David J. Starkey, *British Privateering Enterprise in the Eighteenth Century* (Exeter, 1990), p. 221.

<sup>15</sup> Richard Oxnam, was a prominent Penzance merchant, buried at Madron, 30 April 1793.

<sup>16</sup> C. J. Davies, 'Cornwall and Privateers in the War of American Independence', *Journal of the Royal Institution of Cornwall*, Vo.2, No. 3 (1998), pp. 60-65.

commanded by Captain Ralph Dewen who had enjoyed an early success as a privateer commander when he seized the *Snelle Zeylder* on its way from Surinam to Amsterdam with a cargo of coffee, cocoa, and cotton wool; but the capture and sale of the *Snelle Zeylder* and its cargo was later subject to a successful legal appeal as the ship's owner was a British subject.<sup>17</sup>

The acquisition of the *Phoenix* was recalled by the smuggler Henry 'Harry' Carter, the brother of John Carter, in his life story. He described how the lugger and the Carters' recently purchased 200-ton cutter (which can be identified as the *Shaftesbury* privateer) 'went in company together from Guernsey smuggling along the coast'.<sup>18</sup> In September 1781, a newspaper report from Dartmouth noted that 'The Shaftesbury and Phoenix privateers of Mount's Bay have brought in here a French privateer belonging to Dunkirk with eight ransomers on board. The privateer threw eight of her guns overboard. She sailed from Dunkirk 11 days before'.<sup>19</sup> The Penzance borough recorded on 16 December 1781 that '*Le Renard*' had been taken by 'the Phoenix Ralph Dewen master'; and newspapers reported that 'The Phoenix privateer of Penzance has taken and sent into that port the Fox a French privateer she had taken three prizes and sent them into France'.<sup>20</sup>

On 22 January 1782 *Saunders Newsletter* reported that:

The first instant a large French privateer was discovered from St Ives the collector of the port [John Knill] immediately dispatched a messenger to the captains of the Phoenix and Shaftesbury privateers in Mounts Bay [Captain Harry Carter and Captain Ralph Dewen] who came to sea from thence and took 40 volunteers at St Ives and went in pursuit of the enemy but could not come up with him. The next day they landed the volunteers at St Ives and were coming round the Land's End to their former station when they espied a large cutter standing in from sea to which they gave chase and soon after an action commenced. The Phoenix received a shot between wind and water from which she sunk in about two hours after with 14 of her crew; the rest were saved by swimming to the Shaftesbury who was making all the dispatch possible to their assistance.<sup>21</sup>

Carter vividly described the strenuous efforts to save the *Phoenix*'s crew at sea using the boat from the *Shaftesbury*:

I got my boat out ... sent her alongside the lugger so that some of the men jumpt over board and my boate pickt them up and immediately the lugger went down. I hove to the cuttar and laid her to that she drifted right over the place that the lugger went down so that some of the men got on board by virtue of ropes hove from the cuttar sume got hold of the jib tack and sume pickt up by the cuttar's boate so that we saved alive seventeen men and fourteen drowned. As Providence would have it was aboute the full of the

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<sup>17</sup> *Sherborne Mercury* advertisement dated 26 April 1781.

<sup>18</sup> Captain Harry Carter, *The Autobiography of a Cornish Smuggler (Captain Harry Carter of Prussia Cove) 1749-1809*. Intro & notes by John B. Cornish (London: Gibbings & Co., Ltd, 1900), p.14.

<sup>19</sup> *Newcastle Courant*, 29 September 1781.

<sup>20</sup> CRO: X460/1. Book of precedents and forms, Penzance Quarter Sessions etc, 1753-1800; *Caledonian Mercury*, 26 December 1781.

<sup>21</sup> *Saunders' Newsletter*, 22 January 1782; some reports named the commander of the *Phoenix* as a 'Capt. Davey' but a *Sherborne Mercury* advertisement, 31 January 1782, confirmed Captain Ralph Dewen was commander of the *Phoenix*. In February 1782 James Dunkin, Charles Carter, and Moses Simons obtained Letters of Marque for their 140 cutter *Resolution*, of Penzance. She was commanded by John Davey, which may have been the reason for the mistake in naming his as master of the *Phoenix*. NA: ADM 7/317; HCA 26/70; 19/2/82. Special thanks to Tony Pawlyn for this information.



moon or certainly all must be lost.<sup>22</sup>

*Saunders Newsletter* said the French privateer was damaged but not captured.

After January 1782 no further action by the Carters' or Dunkin's privateers were reported although Charles Carter and James Dunkin obtained letters of marque for a second cutter named the *Resolution*. In 1909 Charles G. Harper suggested that the number of ships owned by the Carter family and the ease with which they replaced those lost meant that they may have had a wealthy financial backer.<sup>23</sup> The evidence here suggests that privateering was sufficiently profitable for some owners to replace lost ships. However, the loss of the *Phoenix* must have reduced any gains that John Dunkin made from privateering. In contrast, when the successful privateer commander Captain Francis Ford died at Lisbon in 1782, his will made bequests totalling more than £3000. He appointed his wife Jane and good friends John Dunkin 'of Penzance' and John Badcock as trustees for their children.<sup>24</sup>

John Dunkin's experience as a privateer owner was sufficiently positive for him to add to his investments in ships and quayside premises after the wars ended. By 1783 he and his wife Elizabeth had moved from St Erth to Penzance, where 'John Dunkin, merchant', insured his premises against fire for £1000.<sup>25</sup> The Dunkins continued to have commercial interests at Carnsew, where James Dunkin was described in property records on 13 March 1783 as 'of St Erth'.<sup>26</sup> From 1784 John Dunkin and Pascoe Grenfell of Marazion leased Captain Newton's quayside house and cellars at Lelant which Dunkin occupied commercially until 1803.<sup>27</sup> From 1786 the Dunkins identified themselves in the shipping register as merchants of Penzance.<sup>28</sup>

The Dunkins prospered sufficiently to acquire additional ships in the 1780s, but their commercial relationships included some debts and disputes. In August 1781, the civil case of *Butler v. Dunkin* was heard at the Hereford Assizes. James Dunkin attended the hearing with a written brief from Helston attorney Christopher Wallis, but lost the case and was ordered to pay £17 10s. to Butler, plus 40s costs.<sup>29</sup> In 1788-91 notice was given to the Cornwall Assizes of four civil disputes, including at least one debt. The plaintiff in two of these was 'Tyeth,' probably the part-owner of the *Friendship* and *Hope* brigantines whose complaints were either settled or dropped as none went to a court hearing.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Carter, *Autobiography*, p.16.

<sup>23</sup> Charles G. Harper, *The Smugglers* (London: 1909), p. 74.

<sup>24</sup> CRO: AP/F/828. Will of Francis Ford, mariner, of Penzance, 1782.

<sup>25</sup> London Metropolitan Archives, hereafter LMA: Sun fire insurance policy register 1777-86, policy number 478055.

<sup>26</sup> CRO: X473/29. Assignment of leaseholds, part house, wharfs, warehouses, Carnsew, St Erth, 1783.

<sup>27</sup> CRO: X473/96. Lease, Captain Newton's house and cellars, Lelant, 1784; CRO: X473/101 Assignment of leasehold, house, lime kiln, quays, Lelant, 1803.

<sup>28</sup> CRO: MSR/PENZ/1. Shipping register, 1786-1823.

<sup>29</sup> The Royal Institution of Cornwall, hereafter RIC: DJW/1/1, Journal of Christopher Wallis, 1781-3; TNA: ASSI 4/6 Assizes Oxford Circuit postea book, 1780-3. The Wallis journal notes the brief was prepared and given to James Dunkin who left for the Assizes. There are no details extant of Butler's case as plaintiff.

<sup>30</sup> TNA: ASSI 22/44. Assizes Western Circuit civil minute book, 1786-1800.

### An ‘artful and designing man’

In October 1782 John Dunkin again employed Christopher Wallis when he made a claim for the return of Geneva, ‘seized’ by ‘Shorthose’ at Chyandour near Penzance.<sup>31</sup> Wallis’s brief journal entries rarely give a full account and the available volumes do not include all years, but it is likely that Dunkin consulted Wallis throughout his time at Penzance. Customs officers described Dunkin as an ‘artfull and designing man’ but this reputation may have owed much to the advice he received from his attorney.<sup>32</sup>

From the outset Dunkin was suspected of smuggling, but Penzance Customs officers’ suspicions were sometimes stronger than any proof. In June 1784 the *Adventure* had been bound for Guernsey when it landed its cargo unexpectedly at Penzance after developing leaks; the water-damaged fruit was sold for a ‘trifling’ sum of half its original value. Customs officers suspected that wine and brandy had been off-loaded at sea, landed, and then moved ‘to some other port in a covered & locked up waggon drawn by three horses’. Dunkin insisted the wine was previously imported and duties had already been paid; *Adventure* was released back to its owners.<sup>33</sup> Brandy seized from Dunkin in December 1785 had been held for three years when Customs officials at Penzance discovered their cellars had been broken into. The containers had been emptied of their contents using a hand pump which the thieves left behind with empty casks.<sup>34</sup>

Customs was again suspicious when the *George* arrived at Mount’s Bay in October 1787 after ‘a long and disagreeable voyage’ carrying ‘naval stores’ from Wilmington, North Carolina. The landing of its cargo was delayed by Customs officers waiting for directions from their Board. The *George* was registered at Penzance and had a British crew, but Customs officers queried whether it was nevertheless subject to a recent prohibition on foreign-built ships landing transatlantic cargoes. The *George*’s cargo of ‘tar, turpentine, pitch, reeds, and staves’ was finally landed at Penzance after the ship sustained damage during local gales, following which Customs officers confirmed to their Board that Dunkin’s latest petition regarding the ship, crew, and cargo was ‘strictly true’.<sup>35</sup>

The Dunkins assisted Harry Carter to escape after a confrontation with Customs in 1788. Carter captained a Guernsey smuggler *The Revenge*, which fired on HMS *Druid*’s boats near Cawsand, killing one man and wounding seven others.<sup>36</sup> When Carter went on the run, he left Cornwall on board the Dunkins’ ship, the *George*. The master was Captain Ralph Dewen, the former commander of the *Phoenix* privateer, from which Carter had helped to rescue seventeen men from drowning:

Oct 24 in 1788 sailed from Mounts Bay for Leghorn in the ship ‘George’ Capt Dewen master ... So I think I arrived at Leghorn in the latter end of December where I passed my Christmas ... Well then the Capt got a freight there to go to Barcelona to load with brandy for New York in America ... So I think we sailed from Leghorn in the latter end of Jan 1789 ... I arived at New York on the 19 April in '89...<sup>37</sup>

While the *George* completed its transatlantic voyage, the Dunkins continued their smuggling operations. From March to June 1789 fortnightly

<sup>31</sup> RIC: DJW/1/1. Journal of Christopher Wallis, 1781-3.

<sup>32</sup> TNA: CUST 68/14. Penzance collector to board, 1789-90.

<sup>33</sup> TNA: CUST 68/12. Penzance collector to board, 1782-86.

<sup>34</sup> TNA: CUST 68/14. Penzance collector to board, 1789-90.

<sup>35</sup> TNA: CUST 68/13. Penzance collector to board, 1786-88.

<sup>36</sup> A description of what occurred was published in the *London Gazette*, 12 February 1788.

<sup>37</sup> Carter, *Autobiography*, pp.32-35.



advertisements appeared in the *Sherborne Mercury* publicising the Dunkins' stock of wine and spirits.<sup>38</sup> In May 1789 James Dunkin paid duty for Guernsey salt carried by the *Success*, one of the Carters' sloops. By the time the unloaded cargo was discovered to be British rock salt on which higher duties were payable, the *Success* had left port and Customs officials were unable to seize the sloop.<sup>39</sup>

During the latter half of 1789, the Dunkins had several altercations with Customs. In August, the *Dolphin* revenue cutter intercepted and seized the Dunkins' brigantine *Lord Hood*, carrying a cargo of brandy and Geneva to Prussia Cove. Captain Richard John triumphantly sailed the captured brigantine behind the *Dolphin* from Prussia Cove to St Ives, an action which led the Customs officer at Penzance to object to their Board that this journey had taken a day and a half and the seized cargo might easily have been recaptured by smugglers along the Cornish coast.<sup>40</sup> But it was not. In November Captain John attempted to intercept the *Liberty*, owned by the Dunkins and John Ellis, which he believed was landing a cargo of Geneva. The revenue cutter's boat was fired on from Prussia Cove and retreated.<sup>41</sup> Receiving Captain John's reports that a battery had been erected above Prussia Cove and mounted with six cannon, the Customs board immediately asked for a military detachment to be sent to assist its officials at Penzance,<sup>42</sup> but none arrived. In December, John Dunkin wrote to Customs officials at Penzance threatening legal action if they failed to release for export the brandy seized with the *Lord Hood*, claiming that it was the same brandy which had been held previously by Customs when their cellars were broken into. It was this which prompted local Customs officials to write for advice from their Board, complaining of 'being at a loss how to act having so artfull and designing man to deal with'.<sup>43</sup>

Customs officials' frustrations continued when in February 1790 they intercepted a fishing boat, the *Endeavour*, carrying 244 empty ankers from Dunkin's cellars at Penzance to Prussia Cove. Tony Pawlyn has described how the fishermen petitioned for the return of the boat, rented from the Dunkins, along with their fishing tackle, after it was seized by Customs officers.<sup>44</sup> In this case the Customs officers acted on the direction and advice sent from London on 23 March 1790 that there was no cause to detain empty casks, which should be returned to their proprietors. However, the boat should be 'prosecuted'. The *Endeavour* had been rented by 70 year old Joseph Hichens, described by the collector of Customs at Penzance as 'a very poor old Man and we believe at present in great distress'.<sup>45</sup> Hichens may have had other means of support as he lived a further sixteen years before dying at Newlyn, aged 86.<sup>46</sup> When, in December 1790, Customs Officers found full ankers sunken in Gwavas Lake, Mount's Bay, John Ellis and James Dunkin stood bail for Ben Cornish, the fisherman suspected of smuggling.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> *Sherborne Mercury*, 13 April 1789.

<sup>39</sup> TNA: CUST 68/14. Penzance collector to board, 1789-90.

<sup>40</sup> TNA: CUST 68/14. Penzance collector to board, 1789-90.

<sup>41</sup> TNA: CUST 68/14. Penzance collector to board, 1789-90.

<sup>42</sup> TNA: CUST 68/46. Penzance board to collector, 1788-91.

<sup>43</sup> TNA: CUST 68/14. Penzance collector to board, 1789-90.

<sup>44</sup> Pawlyn, 'Petates and Fish', p.7.

<sup>45</sup> TNA: CUST 68/46. Penzance board to collector, 1788-91.

<sup>46</sup> CRO: Paul parish baptisms and burials 1776-1812, 10 December 1806.

<sup>47</sup> TNA: CUST 68/14. Penzance collector to board, 1789-90.

## Archangel

Penzance Customs officers complained in 1782 about the smuggling of ‘Russia goods,’ including sail cloth, most notably at Marazion.<sup>48</sup> In 1787, four out of ten ships leaving Archangel on the north coast of Russia were sailing to British ports. British merchants increased and diversified their trade through Russian ports even further when French ports were blockaded during the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars.<sup>49</sup> In 1789-90 Customs officers listed two Penzance registered ships as importing goods from Petersburg. Hemp, iron, linen, rhubarb, and tallow were carried on the *Hope* brigantine, partly owned by the Dunkins.<sup>50</sup>

A second Dunkin ship, the *George*, also became involved in the Russian trade. In March 1790 it returned to Penzance in a distressed condition after another difficult transatlantic voyage, this time from James River in Virginia. The ship had taken on water in ‘violent weather’ and was allowed to unload its cargo of wet corn at Penzance.<sup>51</sup> The *George*’s next voyage in the summer of 1790 was to Archangel where it had loaded its cargo by 8 September. What happened in the early hours of Monday 9 September was reported two months later in the *Caledonian Mercury*:

ARCHANGEL SEPTEMBER 13

On Sunday evening the 8th instant we had a heavy storm of wind from the W to the NW which about midnight was tremendous indeed and beggars all description... The same night or rather early on Monday morning the ship *George* of Penzance Ralph Dewen master bound for Falmouth lying at anchor within the bar drove from her anchor and went on shore and out of thirteen of the crew only one and that is John James the second mate was saved to tell the dismal tale; the others all perished together with a pilot and his assistant... The names of the poor sufferers in the *George* were Ralph Dewen master, James Banfield chief mate, John Frethay carpenter, Andrew Millar, John Dunstan, John Edmunds, John Wills, Henry Balf, George Gould, James Rule, Richard Vial, and an Italian; seamen and boys.<sup>52</sup>

This must have been a substantial loss for the Dunkins and Thomas Love, its other owner; the *George* was their largest trading ship, loaded with cargo for a homebound journey. Dewen was an experienced ship’s master who had worked with the Dunkins since 1781, completing their longest trading routes.

## ‘the most notorious smugglers’

In 1791, the Dunkins’ reputation as smugglers came to the fore of their trading activities. In January the *Friendship* sought refuge from a gale at Penzance. The brigantine was said to have been on its way to Madeira with a cargo of brandy and rum but Customs officers suspected it had been on a coastal smuggling trip and thus seized it. The *Friendship* was owned by the Dunkins, John Ellis, and the Launceston wine and spirit merchant, John Tyeth. When Ellis applied for the brigantine to be released, the Customs board confirmed to Penzance officials that it was not ‘advisable to seize either the said vessel or cargo on the bare suspicion of her being on a smuggling voyage’ but they nevertheless recommended that officers kept possession of the seized cargo.<sup>53</sup>

In August 1791 James Dunkin sailed on board the *Liberty* sloop to the Isles of Scilly, where he stayed for almost two weeks at Old Grimsby harbour,

<sup>48</sup> TNA: CUST 68/12. Penzance collector to board, 1782-86.

<sup>49</sup> Herbert H. Kaplan, *Russian Foreign Commerce with Great Britain during the Reign of Catherine II* (American Philosophical Society, 1995), p. 207.

<sup>50</sup> TNA: CUST 68/14. Penzance collector to board, 1789-90.

<sup>51</sup> TNA: CUST 68/14. Penzance collector to board, 1789-90.

<sup>52</sup> *Caledonian Mercury*, 8 November 1790.

<sup>53</sup> TNA: CUST 68/15. Penzance collector to board, 1790-92; CUST 68/46. Penzance board to collector, 1788-91.

Tresco. On 25 August, the *Friendship* brigantine also arrived there. Having received ‘information’, a revenue boat approached the brigantine at 10 or 11pm by which time night would have fallen. The men on board the *Friendship* opened fire on the Customs cutter, killing two revenue men and injuring a third man and a boy.

Newspapers reported that the revenue boat had a crew of five boatmen, plus an assistant and the surveyor of Customs, Mr Thomas Hall. After the shooting the boat returned to St Mary’s. The next day, a rapidly assembled inquest by jury opened into the deaths of William Millett and John Oliver. A deposition from Abraham Leggatt, the garrison surgeon, stated that both men died ‘by balls received from out of muskets or blunderbusses or both’. The carefully worded conclusion of the inquest was that the men had been ‘killed by balls received from fire arms from James Dunkin or others on whom he had vast influence from on board the Brigg *Friendship* belonging to Penzance whereof George Branwell was heretofore master. But now under the command of John Williams.’<sup>54</sup>

On 8 September, a *London Gazette* notice reported that:

On the 25<sup>th</sup> of August last, Mr. Thomas Hall, Surveyor of the Customs at the Islands of Scilly, having received Information of a Smuggling Vessel called the *Friendship*, of Penzance, belonging to James Dunkin, and commanded by George Branwell, went out in his Boat in Search of her, and about Ten o’Clock at Night fell in with her in Old Grimsby Harbour, near the Island of Tresco; and that on his rowing toward the said Vessel for the Purpose of boarding her, a Person from the Deck hailed, and asked, “What boat is that?” and upon the said Hall’s answering, “The Custom Boat,” Two Muskets or Blunderbusses were immediately fired by the said James Dunkin into the said Boat, by which William Millett and John Oliver, Two of the Boatmen in the said Custom-House Boat, were killed, and John Jane, another of the Boatmen, dangerously wounded...[T]he Coroner’s Inquest having sat on the Bodies of the said William Millett and John Oliver, have brought in their verdict Wilful Murder against the said James Dunkin or others on whom he had vast influence.

A £500 reward was offered for information or to anyone ‘who shall discover or apprehend’ James Dunkin; £200 was offered for information leading to any ‘other persons concerned’ in the murders.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> CRO: FS/2/15. Court record book, Isles of Scilly, 1786-1917, pp.121-2.

<sup>55</sup> *London Gazette*, 6-10 September 1791.



Figure 1: 'What boat is that?' Revenue men attempting to board a smuggling cutter.

Source: Image from by L. Raven-Hill in J. Henry Harris, *Cornish Saints and Sinners*. London: The Bodley Head, 1906.

Newspapers published a letter from St Mary's dated 26 August, adding information that the revenue boatman John Jane had received serious wounds to his face and that the 'assistant,' also wounded, was the son of one of the officers. The letter noted that the *Friendship* was the property of 'Messrs John and James Dunkin, of Penzance, the most notorious smugglers in that part of the kingdom'. It suggested of the *Friendship* and the *Liberty* that '[b]efore morning both vessels departed, as supposed, for a foreign port'.<sup>56</sup>

## Escape

After leaving Tresco, the *Liberty* may have sailed to Roscoff, in Brittany, north-western France, whose merchants supplied many Cornish smugglers. Pourchasse's analysis of shipping records for Roscoff in 1783-7 provides strong evidence which supports Pawlyn's account of smuggling by Cornish fishermen; 60 per cent of boats calling at Roscoff were between 2 and 10 tons, with some boats making regular trips 'from a multitude of small ports on the coast of Cornwall' including 87 recorded trips from Mount's Bay and 91 from Coverack.<sup>57</sup> These frequent voyages to and from dispersed locations in Cornwall meant that Roscoff would have been a reasonable choice as a first stopping place after the *Liberty* left Tresco.

Roscoff was also the place to which Harry Carter settled temporarily after returning from his exile in New York. In August 1791 he opened a shop there. In his life story he recalled that 'about the same time Captain B. came there, an old acquaintance of mine, being the first Captain I sailed with, a man of what we calls good morels'. It is possible that this was Captain George Bramwell, who had been on the *Swallow* privateer and imprisoned in France with Carter in 1777-9.<sup>58</sup> Although Bramwell had been succeeded by his son-in-law John Williams as master of the *Friendship*, it is possible that he was master of the

<sup>56</sup> *Reading Mercury*, 12 September 1791.

<sup>57</sup> Pierrick Pourchasse 'Roscoff un important centre de contraband entre la France et l'Angleterre a la fin du xviiiie siecle' in Marguerite Figeac-Monthus and Christophe Lastécouères (eds) *Territoires de l'illicite, ports et îles, De la fraude au contrôle XVIe-XXes* (Armand Colin, 2012).

<sup>58</sup> TNA: ADM 103/134. Location: Brest, Dinan, Fougères, La Rochelle and Saumur. British and Danish. Register of prisoners of war, 1779-81.

*Liberty.*

On 26 September 1791 the *Liberty* was intercepted by revenue officers near Prussia Cove. The crew said that they had been blown off course while on their way from Roscoff to Bergen in Norway; they were carrying a cargo of Geneva.<sup>59</sup> On 30 September the Customs board ordered that the *Liberty* should be detained and the crew questioned about the events at Old Grimsby. They listed James Dunkin, George ‘Branwell’, William ‘Nines’, John Williams and ‘name unknown’ from the *Friendship*, and Richard ‘Fourd’, John Morris, and ‘a boy name unknown’ from the *Liberty*.<sup>60</sup> It is unclear how this list was compiled and how those firing on the revenue boat had been on board the *Friendship*. On 6 October a letter from the Isles of Scilly Customs House suggested that some of the *Liberty*’s crew had been on board the *Friendship* when the shooting occurred and that Richard ‘Fourd’ and John Morris had assisted James Dunkin in firing on the revenue boat. It is not known how many of the men wanted for questioning were on board the *Liberty*, although the Customs officer Captain Richard John alerted the Board in London to the fact that Richard Ford might be ‘apprehended ... as he is now in Penzance and walks in public’.<sup>61</sup> It is possible that the only legal proceedings to result from the *Liberty*’s return were the detention of the sloop and its cargo by Customs at Penzance. The named men were not listed as prisoners in gaol nor did they appear in cases known to have been heard at the Cornwall Assizes.<sup>62</sup> Bramwell may have remained in France; he died there in the 1790s while a prisoner of war.<sup>63</sup>

How did James Dunkin escape? In the late eighteenth century the resources invested in capturing outlaws were limited. Following the shooting, the *Friendship* and the *Liberty* were not prevented from leaving Tresco. Rewards were offered for a limited time period. Official notices named suspects but rarely included physical descriptions. When warrants were issued, it fell to local magistrates to organise arrests and searches. They sometimes asked local militia to assist. The shootings at Prussia Cove in 1789 and Old Grimsby in 1791 were not followed by arrests, but they were not forgotten. In June 1792, following a further incident in which the revenue cutter was fired on at Prussia Cove, the Penzance Customs officer John Julyan applied to local magistrates for a warrant to search the cellars. This led one of the magistrates, Rev. Edward Giddy, to write to the Home Secretary informing him that: ‘[s]oon after the Murder committed at Scilly by James Dunkin I took the liberty of writing to the Commissioners of the Customs, concerning Prussia Cove, & the pernicious consequences of suffering the Battery to remain there’.<sup>64</sup>

While the *Liberty* had most likely sailed to Roscoff after the murder, James Dunkin may have sailed the *Friendship* from Tresco to London in August 1791 or he may have quietly returned to Cornwall ahead of the news breaking and travelled to London at a later date. He held a lease of the remote hamlet of Lady Nance in Colan which he released to Harry’s brother Charles Carter in 1793.<sup>65</sup> During the Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars the priority in London and other ports was identifying French nationals and those suspected of spying. James

<sup>59</sup> TNA: CUST 68/15. Penzance collector to board, 1790-92.

<sup>60</sup> TNA: CUST 68/46. Penzance board to collector, 1788-91.

<sup>61</sup> TNA: CUST 68/15. Penzance collector to board, 1790-92.

<sup>62</sup> TNA: ASSI 21/14. Assizes western circuit Crown minute books, 1792; ASSI 23/8. Assizes western circuit gaol book, 1774-98; CRO: QS/16/1. Accounts, County Treasurer, gaol and bridges, Court of Quarter Sessions, 1782-94.

<sup>63</sup> TNA: 103/631. Location: France. Nationality: British. Register of deaths of prisoners of war, 1794-1815.

<sup>64</sup> TNA: HO 42/20/183. Letter from Edward Giddy, Cornwall county magistrate, requesting the removal of the battery at Prussia Cove [The King of Prussia’s Cove], 16 June 1792.

<sup>65</sup> RIC: DJW/1/2. Journal of Christopher Wallis, 1790-93.



Dunkin may have had money to live without working or been able to find work either legitimately or within the world of organised crime. He avoided arrest, and only reappeared in records at Bethnal Green in London over twenty years later.<sup>66</sup>

## John Dunkin & Co

John Dunkin's characteristic response to the events of 25 August 1791 at Old Grimsby was to seek to rebuild his family's trading capacity and assets at Penzance. Two weeks after the shooting, John Dunkin, Richard Oxnam, and the St Ives shipwright Richard Jennings registered the *Industry* sloop at the port of Penzance. James Dunkin, John Ellis, and St Ives mariners Henry Rowe and Thomas Rowe were non-subscribing owners. It is possible that this registration was completed before news of the events was published in newspapers. Two months later, the *Hope* brigantine was altered to include a third mast, so becoming a 'barque'. It was registered at Penzance with four part-owners, including James Dunkin and the wine and brandy merchant Abraham Tyeth of Truro, now non-subscribers.<sup>67</sup>

As Britain prepared for war with France, experienced traders at Penzance may have anticipated the impact war might have on trade with Europe. In February 1793 Christopher Wallis made well-timed representations on John Dunkin's behalf to 'bail' and bring back into active use the *Lord Hood* which had been seized by Customs in 1789.<sup>68</sup> In April 1793, John Ellis's petition for the *Liberty* to be returned confirmed that he, John Dunkin, and James Dunkin owned the sloop.<sup>69</sup> By June, Dunkin and Ellis were in a position to register the *Lord Hood* at Penzance but the *Liberty* does not appear to have been returned. As James Dunkin and Thomas Bevan were no longer part-owners of the *Lord Hood*, it would appear it may have been repurchased by John Dunkin with Ellis who had not previously been an owner.<sup>70</sup>

On 24 August 1793 John Dunkin registered another *Friendship* at the port of Penzance. He was sole owner of this brigantine, which was slightly larger than the first of that name. The newly registered ship was said to have been built at Penryn and previously registered at Gweek, although records from this time period are not available.<sup>71</sup> Customs officers raised questions about this new registration and noted that Dunkin told them that he had sold his share of the *Friendship* to Ben Cornish, now described as a mariner.<sup>72</sup>

The losses at sea and prospect of war may explain why Dunkin also acquired mining investments, including two new investments in 1792. He was one of the adventurers in the Ding Dong mine, and he invested in Jonathan Hornblower's engine at Wheal Margaret in Lelant as did Richard Oxnam.<sup>73</sup> On 24 December the same year, Christopher Wallis noted he had '[a]ttended Mr John Dunkin and sold him 1/16 in Wheal Good Fortune belonging to Thomas Bodilly bankrupt'.<sup>74</sup>

By the mid-1790s John Dunkin faced mounting financial challenges. At the Cornwall Assizes in Lent 1794, he was represented by Wallis when

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<sup>66</sup> LMA: DL/C/466. Original wills and letters of administration, will number 73, 1817.

<sup>67</sup> CRO: MSR/PENZ/1. Shipping register, 1786-1823.

<sup>68</sup> RIC: DJW/1/2. Journal of Christopher Wallis, 1790-3; unfortunately this volume did not include entries in 1791.

<sup>69</sup> TNA: CUST 68/16. Penzance collector to board, 1792-96.

<sup>70</sup> CRO: MSR/PENZ/1. Shipping register, 1786-1823.

<sup>71</sup> CRO: MSR/PENZ/1. Shipping register, 1786-1823.

<sup>72</sup> TNA: CUST 68/16. Penzance collector to board, 1792-96.

<sup>73</sup> CRO: AD1583/11/100. List of adventurers concerned in Hornblower's engines, c.1792.

<sup>74</sup> RIC: DJW/1/2. Journal of Christopher Wallis, 1790-93.



'Backhouse' successfully sued him for £653 16s 3d.<sup>75</sup> In April 1795 Dunkin asked Wallis to draw up a mortgage of properties at Penzance to Carteret Priaulx of Guernsey for £1,300.<sup>76</sup> On 1 June 1795 at Helston, Dunkin obtained probate administration for his father's estate, thirty-one years after the elder James Dunkin's death. In these documents the elder James Dunkin was described as 'of Penzance, merchant', but that was crossed out and replaced by the description that he was 'of Probus in the County of Cornwall, yeoman'.<sup>77</sup> It was probably at this time that John Dunkin mortgaged Trenithen at Probus, where his grandfather had lived, to a John Henty.<sup>78</sup>

On 10 June 1795 Wallis noted in his journal:

Rec'd a letter by a messenger from Mr Jno. Dunkin of Penzance that the actors in Ding Dong had been served with notice of motion for an injunction ag[ain]st the fire engine there, and desiring my attendance tomorrow at Marazion in order to consult on a defence etc etc.

Wallis attended the meeting with Dunkin and the mine manager, and so commenced a legal dispute about the engine constructed at the Ding Dong mine which applied technology partly developed and patented by Boulton and Watt.<sup>79</sup> Wallis also advised Dunkin in the same year on a dispute between seiners at St Ives; and in 1795-8 on matters related to the Longships lighthouse for which Dunkin had been appointed agent to manage supplies and relief boats.<sup>80</sup>



Figure 2: 'The Longships Lighthouse off the Lands End Cornwall', drawn and engraved by William Daniell.

Source: William Daniell, *A Voyage Round Great Britain Undertaken In The Year 1814*. London: Longman & Co, 1814.

Trade continued despite the war, but the risks and losses were substantial. In August 1794 the *Lord Hood*, on her way home to Penzance from Oporto, was captured by an 18-gun French cutter 'between the Long Ship and Woolf Rock' off Land's End.<sup>81</sup> By October newspapers reported that 'The *Hope*, Hosking, from Petersburg to Penzance, is drove onshore in Stoke's Bay, off Portsmouth,

<sup>75</sup> TNA: ASSI 22/4. Assizes Western Circuit civil minute book 1786-1800.

<sup>76</sup> RIC: DJW/1/3. Journal of Christopher Wallis, 1794-5; Carteret Priaulx were Guernsey merchants who supplied smugglers, see Ward Jackson, *Ships and Shipbuilders*, pp.16-20.

<sup>77</sup> CRO: AP/D/1935. Will of James Dunkin, yeoman, of Probus, 1795.

<sup>78</sup> RIC: DJW/1/7. Journal of Christopher Wallis, 1804-5.

<sup>79</sup> RIC: DJW/1/3. Journal of Christopher Wallis, 1794-5.

<sup>80</sup> RIC: DJW/1/3. Journal of Christopher Wallis, 1794-5; DJW/1/4, Journal of Christopher Wallis, 1796-7; DJW/1/5. Journal of Christopher Wallis, 1798-9.

<sup>81</sup> *Caledonian Mercury*, 1 September 1794.

in a violent gale, but is expected to be got off'; and so it was, 'with trifling damage'.<sup>82</sup> One month later at Hull, arrivals in port included the Dunkins' sloop the 'Penzance, Quick, from Malaga, with raisins, etc'.<sup>83</sup> By 17 December 1796, Customs officers noted that four ships registered at the port of Penzance had been captured by the French; these included the *Lord Hood*, the *Nancy*, and the *Betsey*, owned by the Dunkins.<sup>84</sup> In 1797, although the *Friendship* continued to transport goods to and from the port of Penzance,<sup>85</sup> the freehold of the 'Dwelling Houses and Cellars' at Penzance quayside, including those occupied by 'Messrs Dunkin & Co', was auctioned on 20 October.<sup>86</sup>

Dunkin continued to have commercial interests at St Ives and Lelant. In 1788-1802 the bankruptcies of Hugh Edwards and John Grenfell, both of St Ives, affected him; he was one of their creditors. Grenfell, a grocer, may have been a relation of Elizabeth Dunkin. Two weeks before Edwards was declared bankrupt in August 1788, a sale was held 'at the warehouse of Edwards and Grenfell in St Ives' which included '400 gallons of exceeding good rum'.<sup>87</sup> It was common for spirit merchants to provide stock to retailers on a sale or return basis and the Dunkins may have been their suppliers. Following the initial hearings for Edwards' creditors in 1788, John Dunkin was party to a legal agreement to bargain and sell Edwards' properties at St Ives. After obtaining a share in the freeholds of these properties, Dunkin generated a financial return by letting some of them.<sup>88</sup> Grenfell continued trading until 1792, when he was declared bankrupt. Afterwards, a dispute arose between the assignees of Edwards and Grenfell.

The later decisions related to Edward's and Grenfell's debts may have had larger implications for the Dunkins or they may have become more difficult to absorb due to other losses in the 1790s, including difficulty administering James Dunkin's assets. By October 1797, the assignees' dispute appears to have been resolved, but the *London Gazette* gave notice of a further meeting:

... to consider of referring to Arbitration the unsettled Accounts between the said Bankrupt [Hugh Edwards] and John Dunkin and Co. and between the said Bankrupt and John and James Dunkin, and also between the said Bankrupt and John Dunkin solely; and to consider of other special Affairs.<sup>89</sup>

It is possible that this went to arbitration because it was a further five years before the *London Gazette* published notice of a meeting at Helston in November 1802 where John Dunkin's final dividend would be paid.<sup>90</sup> By this time he was living in London.

## London

During the 1790s John Dunkin's trading activities suffered losses and legal proceedings. He visited London to attend to legal matters, where his stays between 1793 and 1798 became increasingly extended, particularly during winter months. In 1796-8 his business in London partly concerned the Longships lighthouse. Dunkin and Christopher Wallis visited Henry Smith, who had built the lighthouse, in debtors' prison and had meetings with representatives of Smith's creditors and Trinity House, the authority which

<sup>82</sup> *Caledonian Mercury*, 11 October 1794.

<sup>83</sup> *Stamford Mercury*, 14 November 1794.

<sup>84</sup> TNA: CUST 68/16. Penzance collector to board, 1792-96.

<sup>85</sup> TNA: CUST 68/17. Penzance collector to board, 1796-99.

<sup>86</sup> *Sherborne Mercury*, 25 September 1797.

<sup>87</sup> *Sherborne Mercury*, 7 August 1788.

<sup>88</sup> CRO: CH/37/95. Lease, the Island, St Ives, 1790.

<sup>89</sup> *London Gazette*, 3 October 1797.

<sup>90</sup> *London Gazette*, 2 November 1802.

oversaw English lighthouses. Their efforts to assist Smith to obtain a mortgage to pay his creditors and secure the £10,000 bond required by Trinity House were ultimately unsuccessful. Dunkin's production of affidavits from Cornwall in 1798 saying he had actual possession of the Longships lighthouse did not prevent Trinity House obtaining leave from the Court of Chancery to take control 'lest the public should suffer any failure in exhibition of light' and appointing a new agent.<sup>91</sup>

John Dunkin's legal issues continued in January 1798. He was charged with a misdemeanour which magistrates referred to a 'higher court'. Details of what occurred are not known and it does not appear to have been heard at the Surrey Assizes.<sup>92</sup> In June the same year Dunkin lost the appointment as agent for the Longships lighthouse, and his brother in law and business associate at Penzance, John Ellis, died. By 1799 Dunkin relocated to London where he became a distiller. Commercially this move was not well-executed compared to, for example, Lemon Hart of Penzance who extended his trading activities as a distiller, wine and spirit merchant to London in 1805 and whose rum continues as a specialist brand name today.<sup>93</sup>

By 1799, John and Elizabeth Dunkin's eldest son John, aged 21, was working with his father. Initially the younger John remained in Cornwall where he managed his father's business affairs. On 11 May 1800 Wallis noted that he had provided advice to John Dunkin junior, who had been summoned to attend an Excise hearing at 'Richard Colenso's Kings Head' in Penzance on 15 May 'for forfeiture 2056 gallons of foreign distilled spirituous liquors and strong waters'. According to Wallis, the maximum fine was £20,000.<sup>94</sup> The final outcome of this is not known, but both the forfeiture of seized goods and any related fines can only have contributed to the elder John Dunkin's looming financial difficulties. In September 1803 Dunkin transferred his Lelant trading premises to the Cornish Copper Company. By then, he was described as a 'rectifier of spirits', living at Red Cross Street at Cripplegate in London, where the London land tax assessment showed he occupied '2 houses' and paid £6 17s. 6d. rates in 1802.<sup>95</sup>

### Bankruptcy of John Dunkin

Dunkin's new business venture was not successful. By March 1804 he was declared bankrupt. The size of his debts meant that he was unable to take advantage of the 1801 Act for the Relief of Certain Insolvent Debtors, which enabled those with debts totalling less than £1,500 to be released from prison by swearing a declaration of their financial circumstances before magistrates. At the first bankruptcy hearing Dunkin failed to appear. One of his younger sons, James, explained that his father had gone missing from home. However, Dunkin attended the second hearing in April where he swore to answer outstanding financial queries at the next hearing.<sup>96</sup>

In May 1804 Dunkin gave evidence at the Old Bailey against Joseph Stoneham, his clerk in London, whom he accused of embezzlement. At this trial, Dunkin's employee, Edward Richards Adams, produced Stoneham's

<sup>91</sup> RIC: DJW/1/4. Journal of Christopher Wallis, 1796-7; DJW/1/5. Journal of Christopher Wallis, 1798-9; Elisabeth Stanbrook, *Longships Lighthouse* (Twelveheads Press, 2016), pp.10-11.

<sup>92</sup> Surrey Heritage Centre: QS/3/5/10. Process book, 1787-1803; TNA: ASSI 31/18. Home Circuit, 1797-1800.

<sup>93</sup> Keith Pearce, *Jews of Cornwall*, (Halsgrove, 2014), pp.199-210.

<sup>94</sup> RIC: DJW/1/6. Journal of Christopher Wallis, 1800-1. The statutory fine for smuggling offences was treble the value of the goods seized.

<sup>95</sup> CRO: X473/101. Assignment of leasehold, house, lime kiln, quays, Lelant, 1803; LMA: MS11316/310. City of London land tax assessment, 1802.

<sup>96</sup> TNA: B3/1276. In the matter of John Dunkin now or late of Red Cross Street, London, rectifier, wine and spirit merchant (dealer and chapman), bankrupt, 1804.

pocket book. However, Adams also confirmed that in December 1803, when the financial dispute arose, he was not in London. In court Dunkin relied on Stoneham's pocket book as evidence that his clerk had not noted down all of the money he collected, but Dunkin did not produce his books. He confirmed that his current financial difficulties had commenced '[o]n the 6th of March; I was distressed before, in December last my affairs were deranged' and described his failure in business as a 'misfortune'.<sup>97</sup>

As the bankruptcy proceedings continued, Dunkin produced a single page balance sheet statement of assets and ledgers, labelled A to Z (which unfortunately do not form part of the archive). His debts ranged from a bond of £4030 10s to Richard Bannister of Newington Place in Surrey, who was appointed as one of the creditors' assignees for the proceedings, to unpaid bills from a back maker (who made equipment for brewers), boot maker, brandy merchant, brewer, carpenter, chemist, corn and coal merchant, glazier, grocer, hairdresser, linen draper, malt distiller, mason, mathematical instrument maker, orange merchant, painter, saddler, sail makers, school mistress, smith, stationer, tailor, undertaker, upholsterer, wheelwright, and worm-maker (manufacturers of copper spiral condensers that ran through stills); plus unpaid legal costs due to 'Steventon & others defending Priaulx & Co's Law Suit'. Dunkin's unpaid debts and assets showed his continuing ties with Cornwall including property on a lighthouse which Dunkin estimated to be worth £2818 15s. The statement of Dunkin's debts to Hans Busk of Broad Street in the City of London included £100 credit accepted by a 'J. W. Darwin', discussed below.<sup>98</sup>

Dunkin told the Old Bailey that he had moved to London in 1799 and lived on Red Cross Street. After the initial bankruptcy hearings these premises were advertised as available in November 1804:

RED CROSS STREET, Cripplegate ... To be LETT ... on a repairing lease for 21 years ... all those ELIGIBLE PREMISES Nos 6 and 7, situate in Red Cross street aforesaid, with very extensive Warehouse and Still house behind, the same late in the occupation of Mr John Dunkin, Distiller.<sup>99</sup>

The 1805 land tax assessment listed Dunkin as owing £6 5s at Red Cross Street.<sup>100</sup> But in December 1804 the first payment had already been made to Dunkin's creditors.

By this time, John Dunkin's eldest children were adults. His clerk, Edward Richards Adams, married to Dunkin's eldest daughter in January 1805, involved himself in the family's concerns. In 1805 Adams met with Christopher Wallis for advice on realising the value of John Dunkin's assets in Cornwall. When Wallis visited London in 1805 he met with Dunkin (although it is unclear whether this was the father or son) and discussed possible changes to the law on smuggling.<sup>101</sup> By December 1805 Wallis was advising the widow and son of Charles Carter about 'the disputed sum between her as rep[resentative] of her said husband, and the assignees of Jno. Dunkin b[an]kr[u]pt being a dividend on the effects of Hugh Edwards a Bankrupt' and examining the deeds to Trenithen, which the younger Charles Carter now held from the assignees of John

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<sup>97</sup> *Proceedings of the Old Bailey*, trial of Joseph Stoneham, 16 May 1804. See <https://www.oldbaileyonline.org/browse.jsp?id=t18040516-37&div=t18040516-37&terms=Stoneham#highlight> Accessed 30 October 2016.

<sup>98</sup> TNA: B3/1276. In the matter of John Dunkin now or late of Red Cross Street, London, rectifier, wine and spirit merchant (dealer and chapman), bankrupt, 1804.

<sup>99</sup> *Morning Post*, 12 November 1804.

<sup>100</sup> LMA: MS11316/319. City of London land tax assessment.

<sup>101</sup> RIC: DJW/1/7. Journal of Christopher Wallis, 1804-5.

Dunkin.<sup>102</sup>

As the bankruptcy proceedings unfolded, Dunkin allowed his creditors to take cash and items, including a gold watch, from his London home, but kept what his family needed, and mostly remained out of prison.<sup>103</sup> On 4 May 1808 he was briefly admitted to Fleet Prison at the suit of Robert Stevenson and Thomas Bennetts, but three days later he was released on bail, with Joseph William Dawson of Church Street Islington and Edward Jackson of Charles Street Blackfriars Road each paying £200 bail on Dunkin's behalf.<sup>104</sup>

Following Dunkin's bankruptcy, members of the family lived at Bethnal Green. John Dunkin was admitted to a 'madhouse', where he died aged 62; he was buried at St Matthew's in January 1814. The Bethnal Green madhouses were notorious for inhumane conditions, and were reported on for the Commons Select Committee hearings in 1816.<sup>105</sup> Dunkin never received a certificate discharging him as a bankrupt; the proceedings continued and the final dividend was eventually paid to his creditors in 1828. Elizabeth Dunkin returned to Cornwall with some of their children, where she lived at St Ives until her death in 1833.

**'James Dunkin  
alias Joseph  
William Darwin'**

In 1816, 'James William Darwin,' described as of Welwyn, in Hertfordshire, submitted a promissory note for £100 from John Dunkin, dated 29 January 1799, to the bankruptcy commission. It is possible that he was also the 'J. W. Darwin,' listed as having accepted £100 credit in Hans Busk's account with John Dunkin. In May the following year, 'James William Darwin', aged 63 of 'Greyhound Row, Bethnal Green' was buried at St Matthew's.<sup>106</sup> His true identity was made clear in the probate administration for 'James Dunkin alias Joseph William Darwin' of 'St James Place, Bethnal Green', which was completed by his nephew John Dunkin and his niece's husband Edward Richards Adams.<sup>107</sup> The estate of James Dunkin was valued as worth not more than £200. He may also have been the 'Joseph William Dawson' of Church Street Islington who paid £200 bail for John Dunkin in 1808.

It is unknown if James was in contact with his children after August 1791, but they were provided for. His son and daughter knew of each other. William Dunkin attended Penzance grammar school; he was later employed as a 'computer' making long calculations for the nautical almanac at St Hilary and Truro in Cornwall and then at Somerset House in London. William's two sons worked as computers at the Greenwich Observatory where Edwin Dunkin had a distinguished scientific career, becoming a Fellow of the Royal Society and president of the Royal Astronomical Society. He was President of the Royal Institution of Cornwall in 1890 and 1891.<sup>108</sup>

Following James Dunkin's death in 1817, several freehold premises near the quay in Penzance were advertised for sale by auction. These were probably the

<sup>102</sup> RIC: DJW/1/7. Journal of Christopher Wallis, 1804-5. By accident or design the property burnt down in 1805.

<sup>103</sup> TNA: B3/1276. In the matter of John Dunkin now or late of Red Cross Street, London, rectifier, wine and spirit merchant (dealer and chapman), bankrupt, 1804.

<sup>104</sup> TNA: PRIS 2/98. Fleet prison commitment files, number 12863; PRIS 3/11. Fleet prison discharges, 1808-9; PRIS 10/53. Entry books for discharges, Fleet prison, 1805-15, p.99.

<sup>105</sup> British Parliamentary Papers, *Minutes of evidence taken before the select committee appointed to consider of provisions being made for the better regulation of madhouses in England* (House of Commons, 1816).

<sup>106</sup> There was a 'Greyhound Lane' and 'Dog Row' in Bethnal Green but not a 'Greyhound Row'.

<sup>107</sup> LMA: DL/C/466. Original wills and letters of administration, will number 73, 1817. There was a 'St James Place' in Bethnal Green.

<sup>108</sup> Edwin Dunkin, 'A Far Off Vision: A Cornishman at Greenwich Observatory' *Journal of Astronomical History and Heritage*, 1999.



premises which had been auctioned in 1797 and included:

All those FREEHOLD PREMISES known by the name of DUNKIN'S PREMISES with a HOUSE inhabited by Stephen Townsend opening a communication to the Sea, and capable of being rendered a very desirable situation for the purpose of general Trade.<sup>109</sup>

By the time of the 1841 census, Penzance fisherman Stephen Townsend was living on Quay Street, possibly still inhabiting the house which had formed part of 'Dunkin's premises' and which may previously have been the family home of John and Elizabeth Dunkin.

## Conclusion

The Dunkins' trading activities have not been the focus of previous histories despite the news reports describing 'Messrs John and James Dunkin, of Penzance' as 'the most notorious smugglers'.<sup>110</sup> This article adds another example of Cornwall's eighteenth century merchant-smugglers in addition to Zephaniah Job of Polperro and James Dunn of Mevagissey.<sup>111</sup> It provides further evidence that, as Tony Pawlyn previously noted, Christopher Wallis of Helston was a smugglers' attorney and banker as was Zephaniah Job.<sup>112</sup> For a decade John Dunkin and those who owned ships with him appear to have been financially resilient, able to replace the trading ships which were lost or to buy back those seized by Customs. This might prompt speculation that their activities had an unidentified financial backer, but it is possible that the profits from privateering and smuggling outweighed the costs, just as the sale of seized ships and cargoes partly compensated the Government for lost revenue. John and James Dunkin combined smuggling with legitimate trade and had an ambitious vision of Penzance's shipping potential. In the 1780s they were the only local ship-owners undertaking transatlantic voyages from Penzance with all the commercial risks that these entailed. Family history records proved invaluable in rediscovering the Dunkins, whose vicissitudes of life and fortune would not seem out of place in an eighteenth century novel.

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<sup>109</sup> *Royal Cornwall Gazette*, 11 October 1817.

<sup>110</sup> *Reading Mercury*, 12 September 1791.

<sup>111</sup> Ward-Jackson, *Ships and Shipbuilders*, pp. 14-21; Doe, 'Smuggler's Shipbuilder', pp. 427-442; Wilcox, 'Zephaniah Job'.

<sup>112</sup> Pawlyn, 'Petates and Fish', p. 8; Jeremy Rowett Johns, *The Smugglers' Banker: The Story of Zephaniah Job of Polperro*, (Polperro Heritage Press, 1997).