

## ISAAC GULLIVER

Many places associated with Gulliver's story are still worth a visit: one of his farms is on the B3072 just north of West Moors at SU0703 At Kinson the tower of the church of St Andrew (SZ064964) was used for storing contraband, and grooves cut by smuggler's ropes could at one time be seen. Ledges on the tower have also been damaged by the hauling of kegs. <sup>[87]</sup> The table tomb at the foot of the tower was supposedly purpose-made for the storage of contraband. On the N side of the church is the grave of Robert Trotman, the head of a gang of smugglers shot by the customs men in 1765. Woodlands, the Dower House, Ensbury vicarage and Kinson House are also said to have had smuggling connections. At Wimborne Minster (SU0001) Gulliver's House is in West Borough, and his tomb stone can be seen in the Minster, on the north wall of the baptistry (map 195 -- thanks to Christine Oliver, the head guide, for this info).

Bournemouth's most famous smuggler was Isaac Gulliver, who achieved almost legendary status. Though his reputation as a lovable villain is dubious, in one respect at least, Gulliver is different from other partners in the free-trade: he claimed never to have killed a man in the course of a long career.

Unlike some smuggling heroes, such as Sam Hookey, who was created in the 1950s to advertise a holiday camp, it is clear that Gulliver really did exist, and carried out some extraordinary exploits. While on the one hand there is ample documentary evidence surrounding his life, on the other it's certain that many of the tales about Gulliver have been embroidered to a greater or lesser extent. So in the account that follows, I've tried to differentiate between the facts and the legends.



Robert Trotman's Grave in the Kinson churchyard. [Click picture to enlarge](#)

Though Gulliver spent much of his life in Dorset and Hampshire, he wasn't born in either of these counties. His family were from Wiltshire, and Isaac was born in Semington, near Melksham, on September 5th 1745.

### **Smuggler's childhood**

We know little about his youth, though one Isaac Gulliver does occur in the custom house records 1757: in March, four customs officers found a cargo of spirits and tea at the foot of Canford Cliffs Chine in Bournemouth (it was then called Bitman's Chine). The contraband was guarded by a handful of smugglers, and three of the revenue men seized the goods while their colleague went for a cart to transport the cargo. Before he returned, the smugglers were reinforced, rescued the cargo and beat off the customs officers. An informant later alleged that 'Isaac Gulliver, very often at ... the New Inn within the Parish of Downton' was one of those responsible.

Our Isaac Gulliver was then only 12, so it seems likely that the man accused (he was never convicted) was the boy's father.

As he grew older, young Gulliver developed attributes that were to stand him in good stead in his smuggling enterprises: he was described as strong in physique and with great determination of character. In adulthood, he was credited with a genius at speculation, and certainly, he grew to be a very wealthy man.

Of his early smuggling enterprises we know little but it seems likely that he was already established by the time he married Elizabeth Beale in 1768. The union doesn't seem to have been entirely domestic, for his wife's father, William, was later suspected, along with Isaac, of...

*'running great quantities of goods on [the] shore between Poole and Christchurch.'*

This stretch of coast, in fact, was Gulliver's favourite landing place: he used Branksome Chine, Canford Cliffs, and Bourne Heath.

### **A cover for smuggling**

While he developed his smuggling skills, Gulliver had to have an alibi. His ostensible profession was as an inn-keeper, and the year he married he took over the tenancy of the *Blacksmith's Arms*, the pub run by his father-in-law at Thorney Down, in the parish of Handley, on the Salisbury to Blandford road.

Gulliver changed the name of the pub to the (possibly ironic) *King's Arms*, and remained the tenant for ten years. Over this period, he seems to have prospered to an extent that could hardly be explained by the turnover of the small pub, and the farming of the little land around it. In 1777, he had enough money to lend £300 as a mortgage to a farmer near Shaftesbury.

And though there is no direct evidence to connect Gulliver with particular incidents in the area, smugglers were certainly active around Thorney Down: the excisemen seized 3/4 of a ton of tea and 9 casks of spirits there in 1778, and stored the haul in the house of the supervisor of excise at Thorney Down. Their glee at the seizure must have been short-lived, for ...

*About seven o'clock the same evening a large body of smugglers came with pistols etc, on horseback, forced their way into the house, and carried the whole off in great triumph, shouting along the street,*

and firing their pistols into the air. While they were loading, they gave two casks of liquor to the mob to amuse them.



One of Gulliver's favourite landing places: Branksome Chine, Bournemouth. Watercolour by Ernest W Haslehurst. Click picture to see a bigger image

### **Gulliver's travels**

From Thorney Down, Gulliver moved to Longham, close to Kinson, and bought the White Hart Inn. Bournemouth now occupies the shore-line to the south of Kinson, but when Gulliver lived there in the late 1770s, the area was desolate. He landed goods all along the coast, but favoured Branksome Chine in particular, moving goods inland along a track that passed through Pug's Hole in Talbot Woods.

Exactly when Gulliver began to organize his 'gang' on methodical lines is not entirely clear, but according to one 19th century description Gulliver...

*kept forty or fifty men constantly employed who wore a kind of livery, powdered hair, and smock frocks, from which they attained the name 'White Wigs'. These men kept together, and would not allow a few officers to take what they were carrying* [88]

Gulliver may have used Kinson church for the storage of contraband — certainly the tower was used by other smugglers for that purpose.

When Gulliver sold the White Hart to move into Kinson itself, he significantly also auctioned off 'Twenty Good Hack Horses' — hardly a necessity for a publican. With the proceeds, he set up a regular alcohol emporium — a wine merchants, a malt-house and wine-cellars. From this base he traded quite legally for three years.

In 1782 the government offered a pardon to smugglers who would join the navy, or who could find substitutes to perform military service on their behalf. For a man of Gulliver's means, buying a substitute was no problem (the going rate was £15), and he thus wiped the slate clean as far as his smuggling record was concerned.

### **Businesses legal and illicit**

At this point Gulliver expanded his business interests, setting up another wine and spirits business in Teignmouth, and, it appears, simultaneously expanding his smuggling operations. He bought [Eggardon Hill](#) near Dorchester as a sea-marker for his ships, and planted trees on the summit to make the spot more prominent.

However, he maintained his links with Kinson, and continued to land goods on the coast south of Bourne Heath. Apparently he moved from the spirits business into wine, which was considered a far less reprehensible form of contraband. The Poole customs house reported in 1788 that ...

*but a few years ago the said Gulliver was considered one of the greatest and notorious smugglers in the West of England and particularly in the spirits and tea trades but in the year 1782... [he] dropped that branch of smuggling and after that year confined himself chiefly to the wine trade, having vaults situated in remote places and we are well informed that he constantly offers old wines considerable (sic) under the fair dealer's price from which circumstances there is no doubt that he illicitly imported that article.*

The report went on to add that Gulliver had retired from smuggling, but there is a possibility that the author was in collusion with the subject of his letter: the Poole official who dealt with this sort of correspondence was soon after sacked for passing information to smugglers.

The reference to vaults in the report has fuelled speculation that Gulliver built a network of tunnels. One was supposed to run from Kinson to Poole, though this stretches the credulity to the limits.

In 'retirement', Gulliver seems to have constantly bought and sold property, frequently moving round the Kinson district. He had a farm at West Moors that can still be seen, owned land at Handley, and at one time lived in Long Crichel, close to Thorney Down. Towards the end of his life he moved to Wimborne.

### **Isaac's last run**

According to an 1867 magazine report, Isaac Gulliver ran his last cargo of contraband at the turn of the century:

*His crowning achievement took place on the beach where the pier is now situated, when three large luggers, manned by determined crews and deeply laden with silks, tobacco and other valuables successively ran their respective cargoes; and it is in the recollection of an old inhabitant of the place, that the cortege conveying the smuggled goods inland extended two miles in length, at the head of*

*which rode the old chief mounted on a spirited charger...Thus ended Old Gulliver's smuggling career; he 'coiled up his ropes' and anchored on shore in the enjoyment of a large fortune.*

Though the legends that have sprung up around Gulliver have doubtless been exaggerated, they are too persistent to ignore: one tells how, when his house at Kinson was searched, he dusted his face with chalk and lay in a coffin feigning death. Another story tells that the pardon he received was in gratitude for saving the King's (George III) life, by revealing an assassination plot; yet another that Gulliver was pardoned for passing on to Nelson intelligence regarding the French fleet.

Gulliver lived until 1822, and was interred in Wimborne Minster. [\[89\]](#)