

Cawsand in the 18th century

Some comments by Athel Cornish-Bowden (great-great-great-grandson of Ambrose Bowden)

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Cawsand at the end of the 18th century and beginning of the 19th was not the peaceful village that it is today. On the contrary, many smuggling boats operated out of Cawsand, and my great-great-great-grandfather Ambrose Bowden was employed by the Collector and Comptroller of Customs in Plymouth to combat it. In a letter quoted below he provided a detailed account of his service, but first I shall give a brief summary. In 1778 and 1779 he participated in the wars with France, and was present at the relief of Jersey. From 1786 he worked primarily for the revenue service, and lived in Cawsand, where he was attacked on various occasions, with attempts made on his life.

Origins of Ambrose Bowden

The origins of Ambrose Bowden have been very obscure, despite efforts of various of his descendants, including my great-grandfather and father, to shed light on where he came from and who were his ancestors. Working without access to the modern Internet, and probably without consulting parish registers, except perhaps in Cawsand, they had little success, and offered three hypotheses, of which none is likely to be correct.

One idea is that he was the son of William Bowden, who lived in Cawsand in the appropriate period. However, this idea is based in little more than a shared surname and locality, ignoring the fact that Bowden is not an uncommon name in Cornwall. It also supposes that William Bowden was married to an unknown first wife before he married Susannah Mabin.

A second idea is that he was the son of John Bowden, of St Enoher, near Newquay. I don't know the evidence for this, and there is no other indication of any connection with St Enoher.

More fanciful than either of these, but popular with some of his descendants, is that he was an illegitimate son of King George III. This idea seems to have originated by his daughter Jane, on the basis of no serious evidence. I shall return to this in the next section.

More likely than any of these, but not easy to discover without access to the excellent site of the [Cornwall OPC Database](#), is that his father and grandfather were both called Ambrose Bowden, and all three Ambrose Bowdens had connections with Tywardreath, near Par.

Illegitimate son of George III

The following extracts from two letters, both rather incoherent, were sent in about 1862 from William Bowden (later Cornish-Bowden) to his cousin Frederick James Bowden (later Cornish-Bowden). They married two sisters, Elizabeth Anne and Esther Priscilla Cornish and both added their wives' name to their own.

Life of Ambrose Bowden

The most interesting aspects of Ambrose Bowden's life concern his work in suppressing smuggling, as detailed in the last section of this document.

He was born in Tywardreath in 1750, and died in Rame in 1822. He was married twice, first to Joan Booth, by whom he had one son, John, who was described by his half-brother William (my great-great grandfather) as follows:

John Bowden, from a miniature I remember seeing, was a handsome, high spirited young gentleman. He was a Lieutenant in the Navy, and performed some dashing exploits which I forget. He was obliged to leave the Navy for knocking down, or attempting to knock down, his superior Officer. He afterwards commanded trading vessels. He was fond of public houses. He married and left two daughters; how they turned out, or what became of them, I do not know.

After Joan Bowden died, he married her sister, Elizabeth Booth, by whom he had eight sons (two of whom died in infancy) and five daughters. Their marriage on 20th April 1779 was just in time, as their first son Ambrose was born six days later. Indeed, some sources indicate that he was born on the day of his parents' marriage. He was the grandfather of Frederick James (Cornish-)Bowden, the recipient of the letters quoted above. He invented a cure for dry rot in ships by submersion in sea water. The Society of Arts and Science gave him a gold medal, and the Tsar gave him a diamond ring. His papers were stolen by an Admiralty Writer and another made use of them and was knighted on their account. His experiments ruined the family financially and he left them very poor at his death. My great-great grandfather William Bowden was a Paymaster in Chief in the Royal Navy. He lived in Plymouth, and most of the known descendants of Ambrose Bowden lived at least part of their lives in Devon.

Another brother was Richard Booth Bowden, who had a distinguished career in the Royal Navy, becoming Captain. He was a Commander in July 1848, when he signed a deed before the Magistrate for St Servan, St Malo, France. From a letter written by his daughter Emma Jane in 1923 it appears that after he retired he went to France with his family about 1843. She also recorded that during his service career he was entrusted with the safe keeping of King Louis Philippe and Queen Marie Amélie after their flight from France, in his ship in the Mediterranean.

Suppressing the smuggling traffic

The following is a letter dated 20th November 1818 addressed by Ambrose Bowden in the Busy Cutter in Plymouth to the Collector and Comptroller of Customs at Plymouth. Ambrose Bowden died in 1822 and is buried in Rame. We have no information about whether the Collector and Comptroller of Customs replied to his letter, or what they said. In any case, he would have only had a little more than three years to enjoy any pension that he received.

Gentlemen,

My health having been much impaired from long service in His Majesty's Customs, and from the length of my services, age, and my increasing infirmities being also afflicted with gout, I find myself unable to fulfil the duties required of me in command of the BUSY Cutter.

I have therefore to beg you will be pleased to apply to the Honourable Commissioners of the Customs for superannuation for me as Commander of the BUSY Cutter and Superintendent of Quarantine at this Port.

I have been 40 years in His Majesty's Service, the particulars of which I beg leave to state.

On the 28th August 1778 I entered His Majesty's service as the King's Pilot for the Port of Plymouth. In 1779 I took charge as Channel Pilot of the PALLAS Frigate, going on the expedition for the relief of the Island of Jersey, and was in the action with Sir James Wallace in the EXPERIMENT 50-gun ship, at the taking of the French Frigate DANÆ and the burning of two other enemy's frigates in Concale Bay.

In August 1779, when the combined fleets of France and Spain were before Plymouth, I was sent in a fast sailing ship to reconnoitre them by the Commander-in-Chief, and was constantly kept with this fast vessel I commanded, and on reconnoitring service, whilst those hostile fleets were in the Channel, and I have never received any remuneration for this important service.

In 1786 I was appointed to command the HAWK Cutter, in the Custom's Service at Falmouth. On the 12th of November 1787 I fell in with the ELEANOR, a large armed smuggling cutter of 14 guns and 70 men, and although I was unable to capture her, I forced her to cut her cable and quit the coast.

On the 18th March 1788, in my boat, I fell in with two armed boats having charge of a smuggling vessel with a hundred ankers of spirits on board, when an action ensued, in which I received a sword cut on my hand, but which terminated in my capturing both the smugglers and the spirits.

On the 26th December 1799, I fell in with an armed smuggling cutter near Penlee, which immediately opened fire upon me; notwithstanding which, I persevered in my attempt to board her, with my boat's crew; although the boat was full of men, I

captured her. In this action one of my men (Humphrey Glynn) was killed, and one of the smugglers was afterwards tried, convicted and executed for this murder.

My residence at this period was at Cawsand. The smugglers there have fired at me through their doors, and I have often been very severely injured when forcing my way into their cellars and concealments.

In one instance, they succeeded in getting me jammed between two doors, in which situation they endeavoured to deprive me of my life through pressure, and so I received such serious injury in my shoulders and arms as to prevent my having the use of them for some time.

Exclusive of this, I have repeatedly suffered from severe beatings with oars, sticks, etc., also my life threatened to be taken away before a given period.

On the 5th July 1800, I was appointed to command the BUSY Cutter, and made Superintendent of Quarantine at this port, from which period I have discharged the important duties I had to perform with zeal and fidelity, but being in the 69th year of my age, added to my increasing infirmities requiring me to retire from active service, I humbly hope the Honourable Board will be pleased to take the long the usefull services of an old and faithful servant of the Crown into consideration, and grant me such superannuation as they may think my long and active service deserves.

I hereby enclose the Advertisements of the Rewards the Honourable Board have been pleased to offer me on the three occasions stated in my foregoing recital of services.

I remain, Gentlemen, your most obedient humble Servant,

[signed] Ambrose Bowden
Commanding BUSY Cutter.

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