

PHILIP KENNEDY

SMUGGLER AND FOLK HERO - COLLIESTON

'God send us men like Kennedy, who for true manhood bled', runs a line in a poem lamenting the death of Philip Kennedy, farmer and smuggler in the parish of Slains near Collieston.

The whole Aberdeenshire coastline was a magnet for the illicit movement of goods following the Act of Union in 1707 as the duty on intoxicating liquor was hiked up to finance England's debts. It was believed by authorities that 10,000 gallons of spirits were landed illegally every month here. The hamlet of Oldcastle was so notorious a site for burying smuggled goods that once during a dance at a nearby farm, the ground gave way beneath the crowd, casting the unfortunate dancers in amongst hidden barrels of French and Dutch contraband.



Cransdale Head near Collieston

Almost a century later, in Kennedy's day, the situation had not changed. Collieston area abounded in caves, all on the edge of nearby farms, such as Clochtow and East Bridgend, close neighbours of Kennedys at Ward of Slains. On the night in question, 19th December 1798, Philip and his brother John, both strapping lads, waited in the dark at Cransdale Head just outside Collieston. Well-acquainted with the precariousness of their position, the Kennedy brothers carried stout wooden staffs weighted with lead. Twentieth century robbers would carry a smaller version called a 'cosh'; Philip and John were not going to mess about if disturbed.

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The cargo, 16 'ankers' or 160 gallons of Holland gin, was brought ashore by the crew of a Dutch lugger. The brothers and a few of their farm servants would transport the barrels up to the ward and conceal it until their buyer came to call. However, someone in the party had 'shopped' the Kennedys, as a few minutes later they were met by three excisemen, armed with cutlasses. The 'gaugers' as they were known clearly expected the men's arrival. A fight ensued and Philip Kennedy's servants scattered like worried sheep, leaving only him and John who was in danger of being overpowered by one exciseman named Anderson. Philip tripped up the latter's colleagues and held them down with his considerable strength.

Anderson, having already struck John down with his sword, demanded that Philip release his colleagues. Philip refused. Anderson swung the cutlass, bringing the curved blade down on what the poet described as 'the loftiest head... in all broad Buchan's land', leaving a wide-open wound. The official panicked and ran. The bleeding farmer hauled himself to his feet and staggered off to fetch aid for his brother. A mile further on, Philip crashed through the door of Kirkton farmhouse and collapsed on a wooden settle or 'deas'. As his neighbours attempted to bind his head, he gasped with his last breath 'if a' had been as true as I, I'd nae be dying now!'



Phillip Kennedy's Gravestone