

Back then ...

The Camden Historical Society

meets for lively discussions and guest speakers on the second Wednesday of each month at 7.30pm at the Camden Museum on John Street Camden. Interested persons and new members are most welcome. For further information call John on 4655 3400.

Sydney's Customs House - a means of collecting taxes

By Dr Ian Willis

Taxes and dying. Two certainties in life and that was certainly the case in colonial Sydney. For more than 150 years Customs House has provided the means of collecting taxes on the movement of goods in and out of Sydney Harbour.

Customs duties were an important source of revenue for colonial governments in Australia. They collected taxes on goods passing between colonies and those imported from overseas.

Customs officers were located in Customs House, which has been located on the original landing site of the First Fleet that marked the foundation of the colony of New South Wales.

It is claimed that the site is haunted by the ghost of convict David O'Connor, who was hanged on the spot in 1790.

The importance of the maritime industries in Sydney prompted the Collector of Customs for New South Wales to encourage Governor George Gipps to build a customs building on the site in 1844. The local economy was in recession and the building project acted as an unemployment relief for stonemasons and labourers. Colonial Architect Mortimer Lewis designed the two storey Georgian building in the Greek revival style in 1843 with a clear view of the harbour.

State Records NSW states that:

"Customs duties were first collected in New South Wales by the Registrar of Imports and Exports (1799-1800) and the Naval Officer (1800-27)." From 1 January 1826 all customs officers were placed under the direct control of the Board of Commissioners of Customs in London. Between 1850 and 1852 the control of the Customs Department passed to the colonial government.



Customs House c.1872 SLNSW

The Alfred Street premises opened in 1845 and replaced cramped facilities in Argyle Stores in The Rocks that operated from 1830.

The Alfred Street building housed the offices of the customs staff and was used as a clearing house for port transactions. Laila Ellmoos writes at the Dictionary of Sydney states:

"Bonded goods were stored in the Queen's Warehouse, in the southeast corner of the Customs House grounds, although with the growth of trade much of this storage was contracted out to private

bond storage companies. A number of structures in the yard behind serviced the main building, including stables and accommodation for customs employees along the southern boundary."

The current site straddles the former high water mark of Sydney Cove foreshore that was reclaimed for shipping wharfage. Reclamation commenced in the 1830s and made land available for docks, warehouses and wool stores. The former harbour foreshore is marked out in the paving in front of the current building.

The Customs Department of the

New South Wales colonial government carried out a number of other functions besides collecting customs duties. These included shipping, tide surveying, immigration and censorship.

Cramped and damp conditions characterised the building and the need for constant repairs in the 1870s encouraged authorities to consider additional accommodation. Colonial Architect James Barnet designed a third-storey addition with a portico in 1887. Further additions were added in the 1890s under the direction of Colonial Architect Walter Liberty Vernon

and the building was extended to five storeys.

Over the front entrance there is the coat of arms of the United Kingdom, which features the motto of the English monarchs and the motto of the Order of the Garter.

On the establishment of Commonwealth of Australia in 1901 at Federation the new government took over the function of customs. While Federal Customs operations were centralised in Melbourne, Customs House continued to act as the headquarters of the customs service in New South Wales until 1988 and then finally closed down in 1990.

The Australian Government Heritage Register states:

"With the federation of the Australian colonies, inter-colonial customs duties were abolished and the levying and collection of customs duties on goods imported from foreign countries became, according to the terms of the Australian Constitution, the sole responsibility of the Commonwealth Government."

The building was transferred to the City of Sydney in 1994 and after renovations was opened as headquarters for City of Sydney Library in 2003. One of the highlights on the ground floor is a diorama of a scale model of central Sydney under a glass floor that can be viewed by visitors.

In recent years the building has played a central role in the annual Vivid Festival when images have been projected on the building façade.

The State Heritage Register states the "Sydney Customs House occupies a unique symbolic and physical position". The building is a landmark historic and heritage building in the Circular Quay precinct that had a continuous customs role for more than 150 years and is an important part of the cityscape.

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