

AUSTRALIAN CUSTOMS HISTORY JOURNAL



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The history of the Customs Service in Western Australia commenced shortly after the founding of the Swan River settlement. In the next seventy-five years a great deal of Customs-related legislation was passed that provided a mirror to the political, economic and social preoccupations of the times.

The enforcement of Customs-related laws fell to various Government Residents, Resident Magistrates, Sub-Collectors of Revenue and Customs, Landing Waiters, Tide-Waiters, Police Constables, and Post and Telegraph masters.

Until 1853, the Department was known as the Department of Customs and Revenue. At the beginning of 1853, the Departments were separated and in the *Government Gazette* of 4 January 1853, H.C. Sutherland, who had been in charge of the Department since 1834, became Colonial Treasurer and Collector of Internal Revenue. At the same time, R. McBroun, the Government Resident, was appointed Collector of Customs. In July 1853 separate rules for the Customs Department in Fremantle were gazetted.

As trade increased in the Colony, tariff matters became the focus of bitter debates between the Freetraders and the Protectionists. In 1871, the Governor dissolved the Legislative Council over the question of increased duties on imported flour. The tariff question continued to occupy Western Australians, who in a referendum of April 1933 overwhelmingly voted in favour of secession from the Commonwealth. Customs revenues were the largest single source of income in the Colony for many years, contributing at times over 50 per cent of Western Australia's gross revenue. Duties increased or decreased with the state of the economy as the Colony marched, amidst considerable opposition, towards a policy of protectionism.

The Customs story has always been closely tied to the export trade. Sandalwood, timber, wool, guano, pearl shell, meat, gold, whale oil, wheat, livestock, fruit and in later years iron ore, gypsum, salt and mineral sands have all led at different stages to the establishment of Customs outposts. By the late nineteenth century, the Customs presence stretched from Eucla in the south to Wyndham in the north. Fremantle was the centre of Customs operations and underbond cargo was lightered from Fremantle to landing jetties at Mill and William Streets in Perth. These landing places survived until 1938 when road traffic replaced river transport for reasons of speed and economy.

The period 1880-1890 was an eventful one in the Department's history with the appointment of Committees of Inquiry and Tariff Commissions. In 1891 H.N.P. Wollaston,

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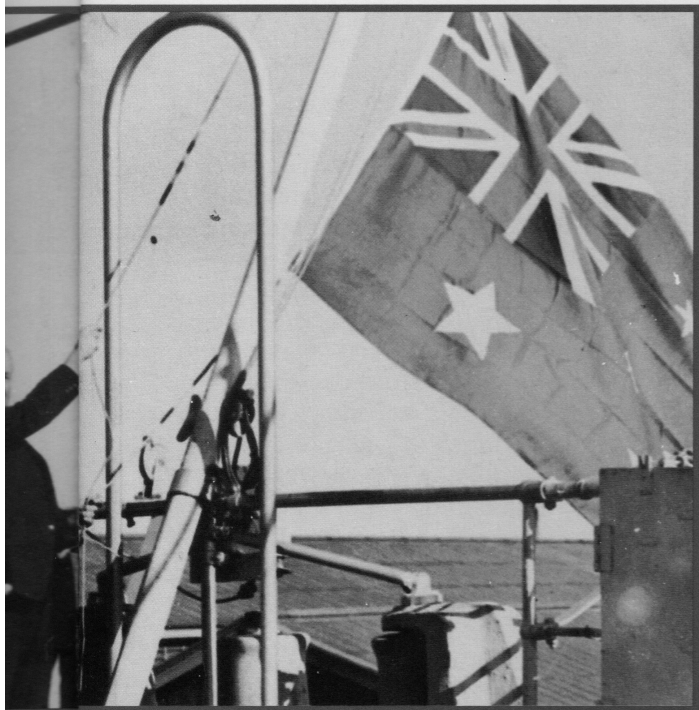


Esq., J.P., L.L.D., Chief Clerk of the Department of Trade and Customs in Victoria, reported on the Customs Department and his recommendations formed the blueprint of a more efficient organisation.

The regulation of Excise matters — distillation, illicit stills, and licences — fell variously to Justices of the Peace (1840), Customs Officers (1859), Inspectors of Distilleries (1871), Collectors (1898) and Excise Officers. In 1898, a separate Excise Branch was formed as part of the Customs Department.

In the days before aircraft, fast diesel trains and good roads, the inspection of breweries was a formidable task for the Excise Officer. Cobb & Co coaches and, in the more remote areas, camel teams were the means of transport. The itinerary was demanding: south down to Albany (250 miles-400 kilometres), eastward to Esperance (320 miles-500 kilometres), north to Wiluna via Kalgoorlie (570 miles-900 kilometres), west to Geraldton (440 miles-700 kilometres) and

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south to Perth and home (300 miles–480 kilometres).

Among the thirty-six breweries licensed in Western Australia at Federation appear names of places that today are but a memory to 'Old Timers' but, in their day, were thriving towns; Bulong, Kanowna, Broad Arrow, Kookynie were goldrush towns where men gave their lives in chasing the 'pot' of gold and, in so doing, earned their 'pot' of beer. Western Australians consumed 4¾ million gallons of beer in 1902.

By July 1914 there were fifteen licensed breweries, mainly in Perth, Fremantle, Geraldton and Kalgoorlie. Many of the colourful names of the early gold-mining days had disappeared. By 1931 only eight breweries were recorded. By 1959 the breweries in Western Australia were reduced to three with a total output of 15 million gallons of beer, contributing 7½ million of Excise Revenue. Today there are four licensed breweries in Western Australia, which in the period October 1987 to September 1988

produced 172,832,266 litres of dutiable beer and paid \$140,501,238 in beer duty.

Federation in 1901 had a major impact on the Department. As a concession to Western Australian interests, the Commonwealth Constitution allowed Western Australian intercolonial duties to remain in force for five years, in addition to Commonwealth duties, subject to the reduction of one-fifth every year. The phasing out of duties, however, reduced the number of staff needed to collect the dues, which together with the increased draught of vessels and centralised rail and interstate shipping systems, witnessed the closure of many Customs outposts. Only five outposts, Albany, Bunbury, Perth, Geraldton and Carnarvon, survived the outbreak of World War II.

The Customs Houses at Perth and Fremantle were built in the first decade of the twentieth century. Increasing restrictions on Censorship and Immigration, which Customs Officers were called upon to enforce, characterised the twenties and thirties. On the waterfront, the main items smuggled were opium, tobacco, cigarettes and silk.

During and after World War II the Department was charged with numerous activities additional to its normal functions: for example, seizure of enemy owned vessels such as the *Remo* and *Anglo Maersk*, control of contraband, strategic war materials, trading with the enemy, as well as price control, rationing, import and export control to conserve exchange, and the procurement of goods essential to the national war effort. Following Japanese attacks on Broome, Port Hedland and Exmouth, Customs staff were withdrawn from certain northern outposts. The Department's operations wound down somewhat as able bodied officers were recruited for war. They were replaced by temporary employees, mainly elderly untrained men, who nonetheless performed a useful service.

The fifties and sixties were the heyday of the great passenger ships carrying migrants to their new home. For many, Fremantle was the first port of call and the increased traffic stretched the resources of the Department. In 1959, amidst considerable opposition from the business community, the Executive and Administrative branches of the Department were relocated in new Commonwealth buildings at Perth. In the same year, new random check procedures were introduced for the control of petroleum products that were to have far reaching implications for the Department. Many officers never recovered from the shock of relinquishing total control of underbond goods. Eventually, the random check system was introduced into most areas

Mr H. St George Bird,
Collector of Customs,
seizes the Italian vessel
Remo on 11 June 1940.
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COLLECTION,
FREMANTLE.



Fremantle Customs Officers
1908.
AUSTRALIAN CUSTOMS
SERVICE HISTORICAL
COLLECTION,
FREMANTLE.

of the Department.

The sixties saw the lifting of the embargo on the export of iron ore from Western Australia and the subsequent phenomenal expansion of the industry in the Pilbara region. Asbestos, bauxite, manganese, salt, oil and gas all fuelled the industrial boom in Western Australia leading to the establishment of outports at Port Hedland (1967), Port Walcott (1973) and Dampier (1970). Following a review in March 1968, the Northern Territory was formally proclaimed a full Collectorate and assumed administrative control of the Western Australian ports, Broome, Derby, Yampi and Wyndham north of the 18th parallel. Back on the waterfront, radios, watches, essences, obscene photos, marijuana and cannabis were the chief items smuggled.

New wharf procedures introduced in August 1968 saw a departure from the traditional practice of having Customs Officers stationed at individual wharves. Henceforth, the wharves were to be controlled from the F Shed area control point. In the following year, the first container vessel berthed at Fremantle, ushering in a new era in cargo operations.

In 1970, a new Customs House was built at Perth Airport which by then had replaced Fremantle as the principal point of entry for overseas passengers. The seventies saw the introduction of computers into the workplace and the old Prevention and Detection Branch was reorganised and renamed Special Services. Narcotics became a principal concern of the Department as hard drugs like heroin were being increasingly detected at the Customs barrier. Coastal surveillance, drug detector dogs, Customs launches and Nomad aircraft were introduced in an effort to combat the drug traffic. The approaching America's Cup and anticipated influx of air passengers prompted the building of new

Customs Houses at Fremantle and Perth Airport in 1987.

The eighties can best be described as a period of change. In 1981, a major restructuring of Customs activities introduced a single employment category of 'Customs Officer' into the ACS, to replace the Third and Fourth Division groups. In the following year, Assistant Customs Officers, the first of this new category, were appointed following a national recruiting campaign. A new program management organisational structure for the ACS along corporate lines became effective from 1 September 1987. Executives in charge of six sub programs: Industry Assistance, Inland Revenue, Import/Export Control, Barrier Control, Passenger Processing and Investigations, reported to the Comptroller-General. Regional Managers were responsible for each of the programs in the States and reported directly to their respective National Managers in Canberra. Collectors, the traditional Heads of their States were assigned the somewhat ambiguous role of corporate watchdogs. Industrial unrest surfaced during the eighties in work bans, strikes and stand-downs as union members and management clashed over wage increases and staff cuts.

The eighties also showed a marked increase in Customs prosecutions, which jumped from thirteen in the period July 1981-June 1982 to 111 in the period July 1987-June 1988. Between July 1981 and June 1988 there were fifty prosecutions in Western Australia relating to imported motor vehicles, resulting in fines and reparations totalling \$834,506. Today's Customs Investigators face the daunting task of finding fraud in an increasingly complex commercial and technological environment. At Shark Bay large seizures of cannabis in 1983 (880 kilograms) and 1986 (2 tonnes) highlighted the vulnerability of the Western Australian coastline.

The Customs story is about the Tide-Waiters and Government Residents of yesteryear. It is the story of pioneer Sub-Collectors and Excise Officers operating in an often hostile climatic and social environment. It is as much the story of smuggling on the wharves as it is of the silent toil of Invoice Examiners. The milestones of the past are the signposts of the future. Ultimately, the Customs story is about the people and traditions of the Service. Care must be taken however, that both do not become casualties in the pace of change.