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FREMANTLE CUSTOMS HOUSES

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The new Fremantle Customs House, 1987. Photograph by Bob Hodge.

Fremantle Customs House, now located on the corner of Henry and Phillimore Streets, is the fifth in a line of Fremantle premises occupied by Customs since early in the nineteenth century.

It is thought that the first Customs examining sheds and warehouses were sited nearby Fremantle's second jetty. The jetty was built in the 1850s near the fishmarkets now known as Lombardos. Only coasters and other low draught vessels could use the new jetty, so the process of lightering for the discharge of larger overseas vessels continued. Lighters were licensed by the Customs Department and owners faced stiff fines and forfeiture of their vessels if they did not comply with licensing requirements.

Passengers and cargo arriving in the colony travelled from the jetty along Cliff Street, then east into Fremantle and along the High Street. When daily boat services between Perth and Fremantle began in 1842, passengers could make their way to the fishmarkets jetty and then travel to Perth by river.

The first official Customs House in Western Australia, at the corner of Henry Street and Marine Terrace, was occupied in 1862. The *Western Australian Government gazette* of that year notified regulations for Customs House relating to hours of business, holidays and clearance of vessels. The building, acquired from a Fremantle merchant Captain James McDermott, who later drowned in a shipwreck in Mangles Bay, included upstairs living quarters for the then Collector of Customs, L W Clifton.

By the 1860s the increasing volume of trade prompted the building of Long Jetty. Completed in 1873 it extended 2830 feet (approximately 865 metres) and had a draught of up to twenty-one feet (six and a half metres). Long Jetty faced southwest from the end of Marine Terrace, in a direct line with Carnac Island. The jetty was extended several

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times to accommodate the growing number of larger draught vessels requiring berths.

The jetty was the main artery for Fremantle's commerce. As commercial activity increased the Customs House was relocated closer to Long Jetty in Cliff Street. The building had been constructed in 1853 as a commissariat of stone from the Rocky Bay quarries and today is the site of the Western Australian Maritime Museum.



The Customs story has always been closely tied to the export trade. Trade in sandalwood, timber, wool, guano, pearl shell, meat, gold, whale oil, wheat, livestock, fruit and in later years iron ore, gypsum, salt and mineral sands contributed to the growth of the Department, whose presence in the late nineteenth century stretched from Eucla in the south to Wyndham in the north. Business was booming and the Long Jetty was extended several times to cope with increased traffic. Disaster struck in October 1895 when a fire completely destroyed the Customs goods shed in Cliff Street, along with merchandise worth £75 000. Two years later, the first steam ships began arriving in the newly constructed Fremantle Harbour.

By 1903 the Customs Department was anxious to remain at the centre of shipping operations and accordingly shifted to temporary offices in the Australian Union Steamship Navigation Company's building in Phillimore Street. Meanwhile, plans went ahead for the construction of a new Customs House on the corner of Phillimore and Cliff Streets, the site of the original Fremantle Railway Station. It was agreed by Commonwealth and State Governments that the property be treated as 'transferred property', under Section 85 of the Constitution. (Owing to legal implications the site was not formally acquired by the Commonwealth until November 1957.)

A contract to build the new Customs House was awarded to Warner & Ashman in November 1907. The solid edifice constructed of brick and Donnybrook stone was completed on 12 August 1908. Complemented by the solid timber doors, the attractive curved brick arches in the windows gave the building an air of style and endurance.

The two storey building contained a main public room, which was flanked by smaller offices on the ground floor and overlooked by an impressive pressed metal ceiling. The upper floor provided for the Collector and junior officers; caretaker's quarters were also incorporated. The growth of the Customs Department led to building extensions in 1927.

Further additions were made in 1967, creating a three storey complex of offices, amenities and change rooms to accommodate



Fremantle Customs wharf staff, 1888.

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some sixty Customs preventive officers. In 1959, the pressure for accommodation was relieved somewhat with the transfer of the executive and administrative branches to the new Perth Commonwealth Building.

In the last few years, increasing trade, the need to relocate all Customs activities under one roof and the impending America's Cup resulted in the planning and construction of a new Customs House. The former Customs House closed for Customs matters late in 1986 and now houses some twenty-five visual artists, writers and film makers connected with the Fremantle Arts Foundation. Recognising the historical importance of the old building, the Australian Heritage Commission entered the facade in the Register of the National Estate on 21 March 1978.

The new Customs House on the corner of Henry and Phillimore Streets was opened by the Prime Minister, R J Hawke, on 7 February 1987. The House provides over 8000 square metres of office space, plus a 500 square metre warehouse. The pink and ochre colours of the two storey facade was selected to blend with turn of the century sandstone hues. The building, designed by Oldham Boas Ednie-Brown and constructed by Interstruct Pty Ltd cost \$16.45 million.

For the first time, Customs staff are located under one roof, with facilities comparable to the best in the Public Service, including change rooms, amenities rooms and a gymnasium. It is fitting that the new Customs House can continue its tradition of service in an area close to where the first sailing ships, people and goods were landed — the gateway to Western Australia for about 140 years. □