



The Customs House Circular Quay

Customs House ('The' Customs House) is an historic Sydney landmark in the city's Circular Quay area. It is located on Gadigal Country, a place of national significance. The Gadigal of the Eora Nation are traditional custodians of this place we now call Sydney. For thousands of years, they hunted, fished, and traded around this cove.

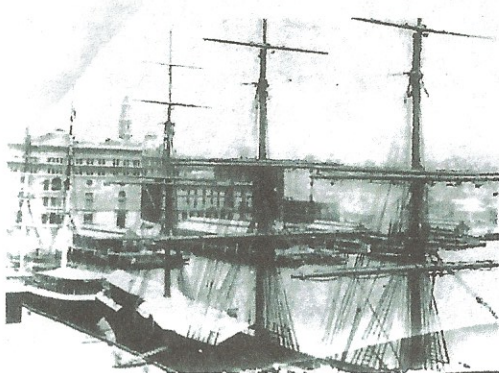
Initially constructed in 1844-1845 on this site, The Customs House served as the headquarters of the Customs Service until 1990. Ownership was transferred from the Commonwealth Government of Australia to the City of Sydney Council in 1994, when it became a venue for exhibitions and private functions. It now houses the City of Sydney Library, the City model, three levels of exhibition space and premises for commercial businesses, bars and restaurants.

Image: *Looking S along what was then Castlereagh Street towards Bridge Street, 1853*

View showing horse drawn carts and pedestrians near Customs House (built in 1845). Signed in lower left 'Fleury, del, 1853'. However the engraving is actually by Frederick Charles Terry.

City of Sydney Archives SRC5010

In 1844, maritime trade in Sydney was rapidly increasing and the existing cramped Customs' premises at The Rocks had become inadequate. Governor Sir George Gipps, the Collector of Customs for New South Wales from 1834 to 1859, was the driving force behind the construction of a new premises. Colonel Gibbes persuaded the Governor of New South Wales, Sir George Gipps, to begin construction of The Customs House in 1844.



Designed by Colonial Architect Mortimer Lewis, the two-storey Georgian structure had a facade that included 13 large windows with a clear view of shipping activity in Sydney Cove. The new Customs House opened for business in 1845. At this time, the population of Sydney was approx. 30,000. The site of The Customs

House was reclaimed land on the right bank of the estuary of the Tank Stream, which by then was covered. Work on the Customs House proceeded at the same time as the new Quay, with the building project doubling as an unemployment relief measure for stonemasons and laborers during an economic depression afflicting the colony at the time.

In 1887, the building was partially dismantled and expanded to three levels under the supervision of Colonial Architect, James Barnet. Barnet joined the Colonial Architect's Office in 1860, a position he held for twenty-five years. He designed and supervised the construction of some important public buildings in Sydney including a new wing to the Australian Museum, the General Post Office, Colonial Secretary's Office, Public Works and Lands Buildings, Customs House, Public Library, the Medical School at the University of Sydney and the Callan Park Lunatic Asylum. Barnet's extensions included an additional storey, two side wings and the Long Room.

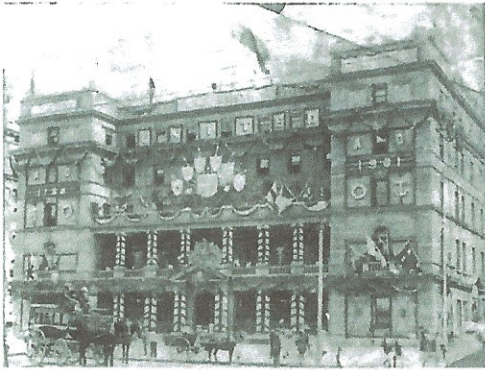
Image: Circular Quay, Mort & Co. building on left, Customs House in centre, 1887 – 1910 (photographer unknown)

The new three-storey customs house can be seen through a forest of masts. The Sydney economy is booming. The quay is filled with ships bringing immigrants and cargo and loading wool for the English market.

City of Sydney Archives - Graeme Andrews 'Working Harbour' Collection

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, once again there was pressure on accommodation. Customs administered tariffs to protect Australian industries and assisted with the implementation of Commonwealth Acts and Regulations including naturalisation, copyright, contract immigrants, the immigration restriction act, and opium restriction. The bubonic plague in 1900 created additional pressure, with Customs Officers overseeing requirements of quarantine officers, disinfecting ships and policing the waterfront for rats.

Walter Liberty Vernon made two phases of alterations to the building between 1896 and 1903. Vernon was the Government Architect who had



replaced Barnet. Vernon's alterations included additional two floors and the addition of the clock, colonnade and pediments.

The Commonwealth Department of Works made various additions to Customs House over the next century, particularly during the period of the First World War, with a

renovated and decorated customs house greeting members of the armed services as they returned from the war.

A conservation and refurbishment project for Sydney City Council was undertaken between 1995-98. Tonkin Zulaikha, with JTCW (Jackson, Teece, Chesterman & Willis) remade the pedestrian square in front of building and converted the former courtyard to sky lit atrium.

Customs farewelled the house on 15 June 1990 and moved downtown, far from the wharves and bond stores. With containerisation, computerisation and aviation, a waterfront location was no longer required. In 2004, they moved once again, this time to another customs house at Mascot.

Image: *Customs House celebrations, 1901* (photographer unknown)

A display of flags and decorations on the front of Customs House to mark the start of Federation.

City of Sydney Archives SRC14538

The most recent refurbishment was in 2003 after the Olympics. This renewal project included moving the City of Sydney Library from Town Hall to Customs House, placing a scale city model under a glass floor of the atrium, the Barnet Long Room was transformed into a function room and space was made available for bars, restaurants and offices, and three levels of exhibition space.

With all the extensions and changes to the building over the last 150 years, some significant vestiges of the original Gibbes-Lewis building remain.



CITY OF SYDNEY  33

Custom House

Image (top): *Customs House from the Cahill Expressway, 1962*

City of Sydney Archives – 48/2873 (City Engineers Photographic Negatives, 1953- 73)

Alfred Street, Circular Quay, 2006

City of Sydney Archives - NSCA CRS 904, Public Affairs Photo Library, 1989+