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XXXVII - THE GRAVESEND CUSTOMS SERVICE

One of the most important services in Gravesend connected with shipping is His Majesty's Customs, for the town offers conveniences for their work at the entrance to the greatest port in the world such as are seldom offered in others. That is the reason why there was a Customs organisation at Gravesend at a very early date, far earlier than in most ports, for the Crown was usually quite content to trust to the greed of some concessionaire to squeeze the last penny out of the unfortunate ships. In Gravesend it was different; as early as 1373 things were put on a proper basis and Richard Pope was appointed the first "Searcher". His main duties were to prevent the export of wool and gold and import of cloth from Flanders, for in those days nobody thought of smuggling liquor and it was far more important to check illegal exports than imports.

In those early days the "Searcher's" office was as close as possible to the Town Pier, which was logical as that was the only public landing place in the town. At a rather later date it was in the Christopher Inn, roughly on the site of the present Pier Hotel, where the authorities had two rooms for many years. A tavern, even the principal one in the town, seems a curious headquarters for the Custom House organisation, and one cannot help thinking that it would greatly reduce its popularity with ordinary waterside patrons.

SECOND PLACE

In Tudor days the Custom House in London was built and Gravesend had to take a second place to it, but the local office was saddled with numerous duties which London could not touch, for instance, collecting the coal tax levied on every cargo of coal coming into the river for the purpose of rebuilding the city after the Great Fire of 1666. As an additional precaution the Mayor and citizens of the town were made responsible for the amount. In the early 18th Century the local establishment secured great kudos, and many fees, by its ability to clear ships on a Sunday when the London Custom House was closed. Naturally this was a great convenience to shipping.

When the Customs officers' fees were abolished in 1806 and the business of clearing ships was transferred from Gravesend to London, the Customs' officers were not the only ones who suffered. It made a huge difference to the prosperity of the town, for ships no longer anchored off it for an indefinite period and spent large sums on the famous Gravesend vegetables. The Governor of the Fort, who had collected a little perquisite from every ship to cover the expense of the sentry on the Blockhouse firing his musket as a signal for the captain to stop and get his clearance, found this source of income disappear. Considering the morals of the age it is not altogether surprising to hear that the Customs men deprived of their fees and the soldier deprived of his perquisites got their heads together and for some time afterwards the officers contrived to collect the duties to which they had not the slightest right in the name of the officer commanding the fort, who was glad enough to share the proceeds with them.

THE WHITEHALL PLACE BUILDING

The old Custom House building was in Whitehall-place, built in 1782, and the glassed-in lookout from which watch was kept on the lower river, still standing supported by a chimney stack, may be seen by any passer-by. The Excise Department was soon crowded out of this building and took quarters in the New Inn just as the Customs had taken rooms in the Christopher, but in 1819 all Customs and similar work was concentrated under one roof, the present Custom House Building which is so conspicuous on the riverside.

With infinitely more ships to deal with than they had in the early 19th Century, the Gravesend Customs Force does not now occupy anything like the whole of this big building, but that is on account of the change of routine in Customs work in 1896. Until then the station had a very much bigger staff, barrack rooms were provided in the building for about a hundred men, and the routine was quite different.

A CHANGE OF ROUTINE

The historic office of "Searcher" at Gravesend was abolished in 1825. It had long been a sinecure and the work was brought into the ordinary Custom House routine which was quite capable of doing it and doing it far more efficiently than under the old system. The title also was a misnomer, for the searcher did no searching and the man who actually performed that duty was known as a "tide waiter". But such anomalies are not uncommon; nowadays the "Searcher" is an indoor man who deals with bonded stores, etc.

Any move that made for increased efficiency was badly needed, for the smugglers of the eighteen twenties were extraordinarily daring as law-breakers so often are for some years after the end of the great war. As one example out of many, the coaster "Nancy", formerly the "Farmers' Delight", a little vessel of 100 tons burthen, was captured off Gravesend in 1828, having run through several cordons of authority with a full cargo of 2,000 tubs of over-proof brandy valued at £20,000. It was her fourth run, so that there had been plenty of profit in the business, and there was no reason why she should have been captured on this occasion for the Customs officer had been completely deceived and was leaving her when the crew took fright and made off in the boat, leaving the captain to face the music. One cannot help wondering whether this was not a means of getting even with him for some past offence; anyhow it was quite sufficient to make the Customs boat return when the cargo was discovered and the captain duly landed in gaol. But the gaoler left him in the charge of his 70 year old wife with no other guard, and it is not surprising that he escaped with the help of some friends.

THE STAFF IN 1833

In 1833 the Gravesend staff consisted of four inspectors, three tide surveyors who were relieved every quarter in order to prevent any collusion with the smugglers, sixteen watermen for pulling the boats that were then employed, and an indefinite number of tide waiters as required. Six years later a change had been made and the full control was in the hands of an Inspector of the River, who had under him three tide surveyors and as many watermen and tide waiters as were demanded at the time.

The rank of tide waiter is a very ancient one, the junior grade in the Service, after which there was promotion to the ranks waterman, boatman (second and first class) preventive man, second preventive officer, and finally preventive officer.

THE HULK "DOLPHIN"

While the force had an establishment on land, they also had a hulk for many years, moored head and stern approximately off the present Customs Pier. As long ago as 1832, and possibly long before that, there was a hulk in position with six pulling boats attached to her. But the one best known was the old "Dolphin" which lasted well within living memory, having the Coastguard hulk "Star" moored just below her.

Local tradition weaves all sorts of stories round the history of the "Dolphin" which was, as a matter of fact, quite an ordinary vessel but very useful for her purpose. She accommodated the floating staff and housed the boatmen who then went up river with every ship which came in from abroad, staying in her until all her cargo was discharged. For this purpose she had pulling boats moored alongside her and often had quite a large crew on board. She was abolished in 1890 and the present Customs Pier built for the far greater convenience of the boats.

A VARIED LIFE

In those days, when the boatmen went upstream with their ships, there was certainly more variety in their lives than there is now. They had to take their bedding with them and be prepared for an indefinite stay on board, which would sometimes run into three weeks or more. Their quarters depended on the feelings of the skipper of whose ships they were in charge and their comfort entirely on circumstances. When the incoming ship was going to be moored in a tier to discharge her cargo into barges, or alongside one of the well known wharves in the city, or was one of the regular traders whose master had every desire to treat them as friends, their lines had fallen in pleasant places and even the necessary routine hail to the passing inspector's boat might be arranged by deputy. But if they got into a ship whose captain very much resented their presence, and which was discharging her cargo in one of the out-of-the-way creeks, it was a very different matter. They were allowed so much a day for victualling and they might need it all instead of being

able to make quite a handsome profit out of it. Another possibility of profit that may be mentioned was in the train fare that was allowed them for their return to Gravesend; more often than not there was an outward-bound ship which would cheerfully give them a trip downstream for nothing, and shillings went a long way in those days, especially when they were perfectly legitimately earned.

THE OLD PULLING BOATS

In the days before steam launches the Customs boats had to rely on sail and oar, and very efficient the men were in handling them. The usual boat pulled four eighteen-foot oars, and was a good stout craft fit for work in the sometimes choppy waters of the Reach. Further upstream, a smaller type known as the Brightlingsea boat was used, and still higher up the Thames skiff. The actual rowing was done by Customs watermen, who were not on the establishment but officially "extra men", although their service might last for many years. Their uniform was confined to the cap.

Nowadays there are no pulling boats left at Gravesend, the work being done by steam and motor launches from the pier, but it may be mentioned that when the steam launches were first introduced it was considered unsafe to use them after dark and they were then tied up alongside, while the pulling boats came out again.

THE STEAM LAUNCHES

The first steam launch on the London River was appropriately named the "Pioneer", while others in the very early days were the "Lena", "Portland", "Alert", "Nimble", "Scout" and "Active", all of which were well remembered and which did excellent work. Some were better and more reliable than others, some were fine little ships while others afforded little protection to their people. Some were remarkably fast and kept clear of accidents, while others could do little more than steam the tide and were the curse of their engineers. But even the worst was an improvement on the old pulling boats and they led to the fine fleet of today.

Other cutters that are remembered are the "Cerberus" and "Sirdar", which were London-built steam launches dating from the beginning of the century and were good, sturdy little vessels which were able to do their work for many years and which afforded reasonable comfort and protection to the officers who were using them. The "Sirdar" was broken up by Wards of Grays about 1931 and the "Cerberus" sold to the North East Coast, where she is still doing useful work. Another launch is the "Solent", which was transferred to Gravesend from Southampton and converted from steam to motor power in a rather unhappy fashion. As the Customs service had no use for insufficient material she was sold out.

THE THREE "VIGILANTS"

Many will also remember the three "Vigilants" which were attached to the London Station but which did a lot of longer distance work. The first was a little clipper-stemmed vessel of the type popular at the end of the 19th Century. The second had a straight stem and was built by Cox of Falmouth in 1902, quite a graceful-looking little vessel but too narrow for her job and prone to roll terribly. The third came after the war and was far bigger than her two predecessors, which were little larger than the launches. She was more than half a yacht and worked well down stream and round the coast, carrying the Commissioners of Customs on their summer inspections, towing launches and doing a hundred and one other jobs in a very efficient manner. Unfortunately she was "axed" for economy and sold to the Swedish Navy as a Coastguard cruiser, to be finally wrecked on service.

Later steam launches still doing excellent work are the "Enterprise", "St. George", "Defence" and "Active", little ships which are familiar to everybody who knows Gravesend Reach with their black hulls and tall yellow funnels, flying the defaced blue ensign at the staff. It has been suggested on more than one occasion that they should be given more distinctive colours after the fashion of the Customs services in other countries, but the efficient manner in which they carry on their work does not suggest that this is necessary, and if a foreigner who is a stranger to the port does not recognise them for what they are when first he arrives, he does so very soon afterwards.

THE MOTOR LAUNCHES

Now that marine motors have become so reliable it is only natural that they should have been taken up by the Customs, and the heavy overhead costs of keeping steam up for indefinite periods avoided. Attached to the Gravesend service the motor launch "Kittiwake" patrols the lower reaches and the "Falcon" the Lower Hope, but it must be remembered that the particular jobs on the station are all interchangeable according to the needs of the moment. The new "Lynx" is a very smart and efficient motor launch of the Thornycroft type which does an immense amount of work: her sister the "Otter" was transferred to the Tyne.

THE FLOATING PERSONNEL

The larger launches are under the command of "mates in charge", a relic of the picturesque days of the big Customs cruisers, but the smaller ones are in charge of "deckhand steersmen". These mates in charge, in addition to engineers and engineer mechanics, are on the establishment and therefore participate in the deferred pay pension scheme which was recently established, as well as the senior engineer-in-charge who does not go afloat. The stoker deckhands are not established and do not participate. Some of the older mates in charge are in possession of Board of Trade Home Trade certificates, but that sound practice will tend to disappear; for whereas the cutters were formerly manned by watermen, mostly old tug men who took this ticket, the more recent entrants all came from the Navy, being long service pensioners who start as deckhands to qualify as mates in charge.

The ordinary crew of a launch is mate in charge, the engineer, perhaps a stoker although not invariably, and the deckhand, who is an ex-Navy man. They take eight-hour watches, rotating to secure a change of time, and feed themselves.

THE LAUNCHES' DUTIES

The Gravesend station includes quarantine launches and boarding launches, which are interchangeable according to the work to be done. The quarantine launches are responsible for the safe collection of the quarantine form which has to be filled in by every ship working outside home trade limits. Normally the pilot boarding her at Dungeness or the Sunk hands it to the captain who fills it in, signs it, and passes it across to the Customs launch when she come alongside off Gravesend. If necessary the quarantine launch also embarks the doctors of the Port Sanitary Service, but nowadays they have a very efficient motor launch of their own. The duties of the boarding launches are self-explanatory.

BOARDING AND RUMMAGE CREWS

The launch service is a separate establishment from, but auxiliary to, the waterguard with which it is inseparably connected. The launches are regarded as a means of conveyance only, to take the boarding and rummage crews to the ships which require their attention. The former has to put the surplus ships' stores under seal, measure deck cargoes and do a hundred and one other routine jobs which naturally fall to the Customs. The rummage crews do the more picturesque work of searching for smuggled goods which can be in any number of cleverly conceived places of concealment. The rummage crews are free to stay on board the ship as long as they find it necessary but with a keen crew half a day is generally sufficient for the biggest and most suspect ships. The boarding and rummage crews change about in turn so that every officer has his share of each.

One very important, modern duty which must not be forgotten in connection with the boarding crew is the listing and proper care of dogs and cats on board for quarantine purposes, with the present precautions against rabies.

IN WAR TIME

During the war (1914-18) the Gravesend Launch service had to undertake many extra duties in co-operation with the Navy and its jobs of maintaining the blockade. There was one launch in Northfleet Hope to examine the clearance papers which were given to every vessel, even a barge, leaving London. Others were used by the landing department and still others gave outgoing ships safe routes through the mine-fields. In addition there was, as a matter of course, infinitely more to be done in their own department

and greater care than ever necessary in its execution on account of the dangerous possibilities if anything got through.

The Gravesend Customs Force is essentially of the Waterguard or Preventive Force, their work being primarily in the suppression of smuggling and there is no regular landing staff on the station. Until 1922 under the famous Goschen Minute, the landing and waterguard staffs were one service, but then divided to the great improvement of their efficiency.

GRADES AND UNIFORMS

The Waterguard or preventive staff wear full uniform and are employed for the prevention of smuggling and the supervision of non-dutiable cargo, while the landing staff, responsible to London covers the general dutiable cargo being landed in the ordinary way and has its uniforms confined to the cap.

In the Waterguard service the junior grade is the Assistant Preventive Officer who carries no gold lace on his sleeve. Formerly he had a cap badge with writing on it but he is now given the regular Crown of the service, although it is smaller than in more senior ranks. Assistant Preventive Officers are appointed by open competitive Civil Service examination and its coming to be recognised more and more that the service offers a remarkably fine job to youngsters of the right type in these depressed days. The Preventive Officer wears one ring, curling round on itself after the fashion of the naval sub-lieutenant, and a crown on his cap. The Chief Preventive Officer wears the lieutenant commander's sleeve rings, two thick with a thin one between them, and has a laurel wreath round the cap badge. There was formerly a second grade Chief Preventive Officer, but this has now been abolished. The Surveyor of His Majesty's Waterguard, surely as round-sounding a title as any man could desire, is a superior rank of comparatively recent foundation and carries no uniform. The seniors of the Gravesend Station are a Surveyor and three Chief Preventive Officers.

RUMMAGING ROUTINE

The normal rummage crew consists of one Preventive Officer and three Assistant Preventive Officers, who report to the Chief Preventive Officer if anything wrong is discovered, providing it is possible to do that conveniently; if not they have full discretionary powers to act for themselves and ample experience to take the responsibility. In particularly big ships, or those which are more strongly suspected than usual, it may be necessary to carry out a "mass rummage" by two or three crews combined, but it is wonderful what one crew can do with industry, experience and - perhaps most of all - practical psychology. Some ships are searched while they are under way on their way up to their berth, but more usually they are searched in the docks. A rummage and baggage crew is continuously maintained at Tilbury for the examination of passengers' luggage in the incoming liners, this being reinforced from the Gravesend Station whenever it is necessary. There is a Customs depot in Tilbury Dock, on the North End, and a new Customs Office is now being built alongside the New Entrance. The "baggage crews" are there to look after passengers' luggage only, which can be quite a task with the present craze for smuggling in compact commodities like silk goods and watches, but every effort is made to keep the force as elastic as possible and rummage crews are utilised for the baggage crews' work whenever it is necessary. His Majesty's Customs are far more concerned with the rapid handling of passengers and the punctual dispatch of the boat train than most passengers imagine.

In an emergency only, ships arriving at the Thames can report at the Gravesend Customs House instead of in the Head Office at the Pool, but that business usually has to go through the Long Room and Gravesend duties are confined to those already mentioned.

A BIG DISTRICT

The district extends along the waterside from Southend, where there is a Preventive Officer in charge, to Dagenham on the north side of the river, and to Erith on the south. It includes Sheppey with Sheerness and Ridham Dock, and also Chatham Dockyard and the City of Rochester, going up the Medway as far as Maidstone. There are sub-stations at Erith, Tilbury Dock, Thameshaven and Garrison Point, Sheerness, so that the area covered is a very large one and keeps the staff fully employed. Upriver the station co-operates with that at Woolwich.

At Gravesend there is quite a busy little works which carries out the quarterly overhand of all the floating material belonging to the Customs in the Thames, in addition to certain repairs, although others go out to contracts.

THE PRESENT BUILDING

The present fine Customs House building was erected on the site of the old Fountain Tavern, moved across the street, in the old Block House Fort field. It was originally built for the Excise Department in 1815-16, but they were joined by the Customs in 1819 and the freehold building in Whitehall Place formerly used as a Custom House was sold by auction for £2,200 in 1826.

This new Custom House was formerly far bigger than it is now; in the eighteen seventies it had a number of low buildings leading down towards the Rotunda watch-house on the river front which were pulled down. It also had in addition to quarters for the boatmen in the early days, extensive living accommodation which was occupied by the Waterguard Superintendent of London until the retirement of Mr. Donaldson quite recently. Since the residence has been suppressed the Excise Department has come back again.

When the routine for boarding was changed the Custom House was very much larger than the work demanded and the upper part of the east wing was used for many years as headquarters for the Royal Engineers as well as a temporary telephone exchange for some time.

On the roof there was formerly a watch hut constantly manned, having water laid on and had reasonable comforts, and during the War an anti-aircraft machine gun was mounted on a concrete pedestal there.

THE COASTGUARD STATION

In connection with the Customs, on account of its old duties, must be mentioned the Admiralty Coastguard which took over premises to the west of the Custom House, originally occupied by the Board of Ordnance although they were outside the boundaries of the Blockhouse Fort. In the eighteen thirties there was a military ferry running from their landing bridge to Tilbury Fort belonging to the Board of Ordnance and used for official purposes only, whilst in the early eighteen forties what is now known as the Coastguard Garden was still marked as a military landing place and baggage store. Later the Admiralty Coastguard took it over and it was the headquarters of a division under a commander, although the men were housed in HM Coastguard watch vessel No.11, originally H.M.S. "Start" of 358 tons displacement. The hulk system, however, was not at all a satisfactory one from any viewpoint except the original idea of preventing the Coastguards mixing with the civil population who might be inclined towards smuggling, and the Gravesend hulk was very properly abolished in the eighteen nineties.