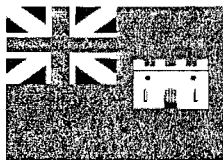


# Customs & Excise History Network

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## A DAY ON THE MEDWAY. (Happy memories of rummage in the 1950s)

(From the memoirs of R. W. Gregory)

We started the day on a B.T.C. Tanker (British Tanker Co.) later to be renamed B.P. (British Petroleum), berthed at the Isle of Grain. We were based at the Custom House in Lower Thames Street so it was always an early start as it took us the best part of an hour or more to get to Grain and those crew paying off after a trip to the Gulf always paid off as soon as the Shipping Master (Board of Trade Officer) could get rid of them. We had a fair day with the usual small seizures well within compromise penalties, until Bill Alexander decided to have a look at the Master and found that he was loaded with cigarettes and spirits. The quantities put him well outside a compromise penalty limits so he was arrested and taken to the Police station at Rochester.

By this time the offender was 'three sheets in the wind' but quite merry. Nevertheless it took time and we then saw him bailed and offered to take him back to the ship and collect him for Court the following morning. However, he asked if he could have a beer and we all went to the *Ship Inn* in Rochester. This was a notorious establishment frequented by Scandinavians from ships discharging wood pulp on the buoys on the River Medway.

There were always 3 ships on the buoys and the bar was crowded. The bar was 'L' shaped so you could look across it and see the far side of the room and Bill Alexander was walking amongst the drinkers showing them something. It transpired that he was showing them three watches we had seized that day and asking if anyone wanted to buy one. One of the seaman said that he would do an exchange for cigarettes, opened his coat disclosing 3 or 4 cartons tucked into his trousers. Bill took the cigarettes, whispered the bad news that he was Customs and all hell broke loose with Bill flying out of the bat wing doors into the street followed by an irate Finn who thought he was being hijacked; followed by a deaf mute doorman who was retained by the management to keep the peace.

Bill and I managed to pacify the offender and the deaf mute, Henry, a frightening creature dressed in T shirt, earrings, tattoos and leather wrist bands We returned with them to the pub to find that the P.O., Lewis Moate, and the 4<sup>th</sup> member of the Rummage crew were ankle deep in cigarettes that had been discarded by some of the other customers. We gathered the cigarettes and told the landlord that we would be back.

Our next move was to take our offender down to the jetty, hail a ship's boat and get afloat to the buoys. In the boat was the Bosun of another vessel coming ashore with a parcel of cigarettes. I

went back with him to his ship and the rest of the rummage crew went to the other ship with the first offender.

I searched the Bosun's cabin and told him that he would have to wait until my chief joined us and dealt with him. He tried to leave saying that he wanted to get to the pub before it closed so I jumped out of the cabin and locked the cabin door. There were ructions from within and when I went out on to the deck the Bosun was trying to get out of the porthole but had got stuck and could not get out or back in to the cabin - hence the screaming ructions.

I went up to the Master's quarters and he was not best pleased to see me. He was just reaching the end of a tête à tête meal with a girl whom I recognised as a typist from the Agent's Office, and was pouring her a generous measure of liqueur ready for the *coup de grace*, but could now see all his evil plans going awry.

Anyway, having dispensed justice on the other ship, the remainder of the crew joined me, the Bosun was pacified and, having seen the error of his ways, was duly 'weighed off', whilst we went back to the *Ship Inn* to continue our enquiries.

I cannot recall how many seizures we made as a result of the cigarettes recovered from the bar, toilets and the outside garden but of course by this time everyone had vanished. The Master of the Tanker, who by now was as full as an egg, wasn't quite sure what was happening, or even what day it was. Anyway he was really past caring so we took him back to Grain.

The pub licensee was a very worried man and asked if this would put his licence in jeopardy. It was pointed out that there had been a similar incident the previous year when the Gravesend Mobile had found a 10,000 carton of cigarettes in the garden of the pub. He said he would do what he could to find the owners of the cigarettes that had been discarded. The following day we picked up the Master of the Tanker and attended at the Magistrates' Court at Rochester. At the conclusion of the case, as was our wont, we took the Master to the *Ship Inn* for a beer where we were greeted by the licensee and a number of crestfallen Scandinavians putting up their hands to the cigarettes we had recovered the previous evening. It seems the licensee had visited the three ships overnight, told the Masters the circumstances and said that if the offenders did not own up to the cigarettes he would lose his licence and the pub would close.

When a foreign ship arrived the crew were not likely to have any Sterling currency. They were keen to get ashore as soon as possible. The Master may not have made any arrangements for the Agent to supply any cash, or it may be late in the evening or any number of things may have held up ship's funds but all the crew were interested in was getting ashore to the pubs and the "*ladies of the night*." whose motto was "No money! No honey!

So the natural answer to this was cigarettes which were readily available at duty free prices in the Kiel Canal whilst the ship was on passage and was instant currency in any pub.

In those days, the mid 1950s, the chances of a ship not being rummaged were fair as, whilst there were 3 Mobiles and 12 Station Rummage crews in London Port, it was not unusual to get 30/40 arrivals on one tide. This could be anything from a Liner with 2000 passengers and 800 crew to a Dutch schuyt with a Captain, mate and the idiot boy.

## Taxes on Everyday items # 1 – Bricks

**Brick Duty, Excise** - In 1784 Pitt the Younger introduced a tax on bricks made in Great Britain to help pay for the costs of the American War of Independence. It was payable by makers following counts of such green bricks as were on view in their yards. The starting rate of 2/6 per 1000 rose to 4s. ten years later and in 1803 to 5s. for the smaller bricks and 10s. for the larger. Since, to start with, bricks of all sizes attracted the same tax, this led to the inevitable result that bricks were made tax-beatingly large.

The duty was finally repealed in 1850.

Bricks were made in moulds and, not surprisingly, these were subject to strict regulation:

"And whereas bricks may be made of such a shape that it may be difficult to obtain with accuracy the true cubical contents thereof [and therefore be subject to differing rates of duty] every maker of bricks shall provide, to the satisfaction of the supervisor of excise, a mould adapted and proper for forming and turning out a brick ten inches long, three inches thick, and five inches wide; which mould shall be stamped or branded by him with the word "excise"." In order to test the size, officers were instructed to make three bricks from the raw clay to see whether the product was liable to the lower or higher rate of duty. Officers had the power to inspect the moulds and if the maker failed to produce this he was liable to a fine of £20.

However, not all bricks were subject to the duty, there being exemptions for those used to assist in land drainage: all such bricks had to be stamped with the word "drain" in or near the centre *"in so plain and distinct a manner that the same may be easily and clearly legible to any officer of excise"*. Anyone foolish enough to use these bricks for any other purpose ran the risk of a £50 fine.

In terms of Customs and Excise revenue receipts, figures from 1842 state that in that year the brick tax brought in a modest £451k, compared with £945k from glass, £1m from soap, £5m from spirits and £5.5m from malt. In contrast, a meagre £2.7k was raised from sugar duty.

## News from the Museum

The museum hosted an international Customs Museum conference in September this year. Drawing delegates from across Europe and some from further afield, the theme was education and learning. We were one of a number of countries who gave a presentation about their museum's learning programmes. We all gained from the shared experience and it was an opportunity to cement relations with our fellow colleagues in Europe.

The museum is regularly approached by radio and television. One of our media highlights, still to air, will be an appearance on the BBC Coast programme. Steve and Lucy (Asst Curator) travelled to Gower near Swansea with a collection of 18<sup>th</sup> C weaponry. The highlight for the programme was a beautifully restored Pilot Cutter, 'Olga', part of the Swansea

Museum collection. BBC's Nick Crane interviewed Steve at length aboard 'Olga' off the coast of Gower near Oxwich Bay. Be prepared for a 15 second piece to air that took 2 hours to film with a skeleton crew and senior producer struck down with sea sickness! It was a most memorable day.

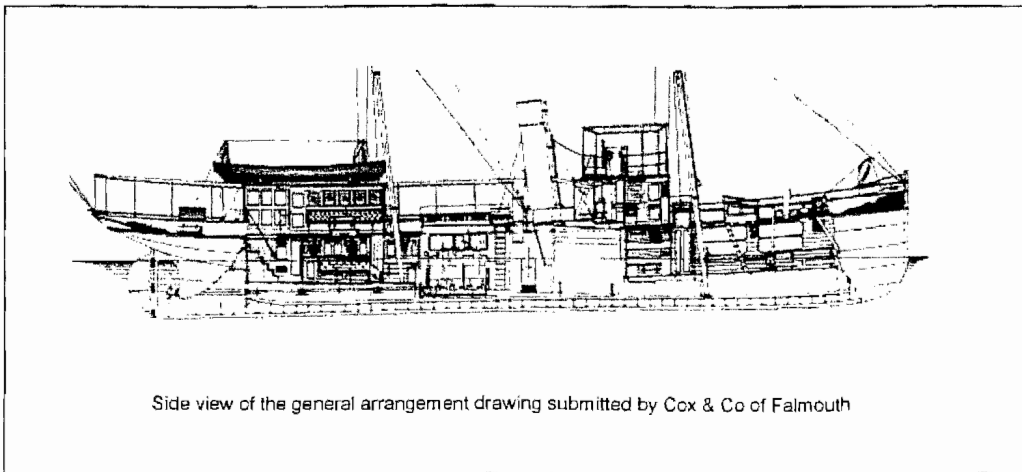
Steve's highlight was a high speed RIB ride to return to Swansea assisting a stricken pleasure boat en route.

Finally, the museum will be renamed. In essence, we have followed the uniformed officers in their transfer to the Border Agency. Of course, we will continue the focus on border protection and revenue protection. Our wider remit will include the story of immigration and modern controls.

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## Save Our Steamship – CUSTOMS BID TO RESTORE OLD CRUISER

So read a headline in the November 1989 edition of the Department's house newspaper *Portcullis*. In brief, HM Revenue Cruiser *Vigilant*, built by Cox & Co. of Falmouth in 1902, and the last such vessel to carry sails, had been discovered being used as a houseboat on the mudflats of Shoreham Harbour in Sussex. The centre spread carried the full story, together with a number of photographs of the vessel, bizarrely "moored" on the edge of a modern housing estate. The paper also carried one of the builder's original plan drawings (reproduced below), indicating that there was a lot more to her than was apparent from the outside. Thus began a long, troublesome and still not completed journey to restore her to her former glory. In those heady days of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, years before the merger of the Excise with the Customs, she had been used by the Board of Commissioners as roving inspection vessels, enabling them to tour all the major ports of their empire to check on their staff and their official activities. She had also taken part in the 1912 Spithead Review and is, remarkably, the only vessel still floating (just) of the many that took part that day.



Side view of the general arrangement drawing submitted by Cox & Co of Falmouth

The Department set up a Trust Fund to begin the process of purchasing and restoring her, but more of that next time. The Spring 2010 issue of this newsletter will comprise a special edition, devoted entirely to the *Vigilant's* interesting and convoluted history over the past 20 years.

You can obtain a complete set of back numbers, in a thermal binding cover, by sending an A4 SAE plus £3.90 to *John Pink, 6 Anns Court, Grove Road, Surbiton, Surrey, KT6 4BE*

If you would like to be on the mailing list, please drop a line to: *Karen Bradbury, Curator, HM Customs & Excise National Museum, c/o Merseyside Maritime Museum, Dock Traffic Office, Albert Dock, Liverpool, L3 4AX*

Please send any items for the newsletter to: Mark Bullen HM Revenue & Customs, 2 Rivergate, Temple Quay, Bristol, BS1 6EJ (Tel: 0117 372 2047) or e-mail Mark at: [mark.bullen@hmrc.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:mark.bullen@hmrc.gsi.gov.uk)