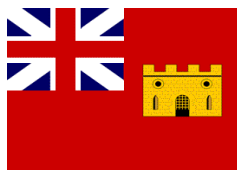


Customs & Excise History Network

Newsletter No. 29

Autumn/Winter 2010



Three Mills Bonded Warehouse – recollections

I commenced in HM Customs and Excise on 4 January 1961 in London Central Collection, and was at once sent to Bow Excise 1st District. Here I was to be in what was called ‘the waiting room’, the period when it was recognised you knew nothing until you joined the Officer of Customs and Excise Training Centre in the Custom House, Lower Thames Street. You were supposed to take in the atmosphere and see what the life and practice was like. The Surveyor in overall charge was HW Mitchell and the first Officer I met was the lively and mercurial Welshman Jack Vaughan who some may recall later in Headquarters who retired as a Collector somewhere. Two days later I was sent to Bromley Station Three Mills Bond until early February when I went for training.

Thus I was only at Three Mills for three to four weeks, but it was so early in my career that it made quite an impression on me. Not that long out of Sixth Form at Grammar School, it was like a totally different world. The entry to the Bond was essentially as it is today. The office was the two storey building still there on the right hand side beyond the large building as you enter the site; I think the office was a large room on the ground floor. There were five Fixed Officers appointed there plus numerous Unattached Officers (U/Os, as I was) who helped out. Nobody seemed to me to do very much and I was less than useless to them knowing nothing; I stamped forms as far as I recall. The Fixed Officers never appeared to leave the office much and talked and joked together quite a lot; it was mainly the U/Os who went about the buildings. The Fixed Officers had not volunteered to be there; they had been sent to what was considered an uncongenial posting after about seven years as U/Os. Nobody stayed in any part of the Bow Districts for any longer than they had to. The Fixed Officer who appeared to me to run things was Mr Hines (FH Hines who by 1967 had moved to Chelmsford Excise). Like so many Fixed

Officers in the Excise at that time they held the Surveyor who visited occasionally in semi-contempt and did their best to ignore him. Everyone as I remember was cordial to me; I remember no contact with the company employees. I do not recall Watchers (Revenue Assistants) although there must have been at least two to tally casks. There was a canteen for everyone but I cannot recall what it looked like.

The following are the memories, mainly incidents which I recall:

There was a regular competition in the office to jump up to what I suppose was a picture rail fitting going right round the room, hold on and to see if you could get round without letting go. Some very adept at this could get round twice I think; all rather silly. There was some form of prize. I failed hopelessly at it.

Bottling seemed the main activity apart from cask control and dipping, and that was mainly Cyprus sherry. There was no distilling at that time, only receipt and despatch. The bottling lines were staffed by women (always known as ‘girls’) of all shapes, sizes and ages. A U/O was in charge who supervised what went on, measuring every so often whether the declared amount in each bottle was correct (subsequently I had much experience of bottling lines). I went onto one of these lines with a new U/O. Mr Hines took us both to this particular bottling hall and had all the staff lined up in front of him. He then gave them a roasting, stating that if they behaved inappropriately he would ask the company to have one or more dismissed; it was clear he did this as there had been trouble in the past. The Customs office on the bottling floor was a glass box, commonly encountered in bonded warehouses, and I was told not to stray very far from it. I soon found out why. On the second day all the lights went out, apparently turned off by the bottling girls; there was hardly any natural light so we were in the

almost dark. The U/O not far away shouted to me 'Run, get in the box'. We both managed it and could hear lots of scratching fingernails on the glass!

Little else can I recall except the large Excise ledgers all round the walls of the office in which

the official accounts not only of bottling but what went in and out of the Bond. I went to Three Mills about twenty years later on a form of inspection and the bottling halls had been recast and were staffed almost entirely by men whose ethnic origin seemed to be overwhelmingly from Pakistan; all very different.



1997 Photo of Three Mills Courtesy of English Heritage Ref: K971567

Working out the VAT numbers

From 1969 to 1972 I was given leave of absence without pay by HM Customs & Excise to go to university to read for a degree, having commenced as an Officer of Customs and Excise in January 1961. This was supported by the Collector London North Collection, B F Sander, he undertaking to take me back during vacations to supplement my grant. Going to university like this was a relatively new idea then and not supported by most senior figures in Collections. BF Sander was seen as a progressive with new ideas and so was widely distrusted in the traditional department.

Good as his word, I was re-employed in London North centre, I think in the Africa House Holborn office, early in July 1971. I was told that a special job was coming up later in the month for me to do. On 25 July four Officers, not U/Os, were assembled in the office of M, Surveyor Special Verifications (a form then of fraud investigation in larger companies). The other three whose names I can't recall were also between jobs, all aged about 30 and had been in the department for some years. On this first day B F Sander came and told us we were to be engaged for the next month on a highly secret job which must be mentioned to nobody. He said if what we were doing leaked out he'd throw the book at us and he clearly was in earnest. VAT then was a politically sensitive issue due to commence the following April [actually the year after, in 1973 - Ed.]

We were to take Bloomsbury Inland Revenue District, the smallest and most compact in the country, and walk it street by street noting the names of every trader. I don't recall if we were given the actual IR list but did know the number they had identified in each street. We went out daily for three weeks from Wednesday 28 July and individually walked the lot. If anyone asked us what we were doing we should say nothing and go back immediately to tell M. The whole job could have been done in less than two weeks but that was not M's idea (born in 1915, so not that long off retirement). He was a unique figure in a time warp. A short stocky loquacious man, Jewish, clearly dominated by his wife and daughters, I can still recall him distinctly even

today. He wanted to string the job out as long as possible and none of us had any reason to finish quickly. In World War II M had been a fighter pilot and a Squadron Leader, not expecting to return from a mission sometime. The RAF and its terminology was his life, and in many ways he had stopped 'living' in 1945; everything later was unimportant. This meant that he was using old RAF expressions all the time nearly 26 years after the war had concluded; I experienced other C& E officers who did this to a degree but not to the extent that M did.

We were only to go out in the morning. If it rained even in the slightest we were to return to the office ('Warm and dry home at base' was repeated to us every day so that it became a catch phrase). In the end it got strung out so much that we only went out walking the district for an hour a day. At 12.15 prompt he insisted we went to the pub with him and he bought us all four pints of beer each (he clearly had a source of private income) and we had to listen to his endlessly repeated RAF stories. After the first week it became painful but he would not let any of us get out of it, nor to drink any less than four pints. Just before 3pm we went home from the pub.

When this exercise was over I gave little further thought to what I saw (as did the others) as a marginal exercise that was just the department showing the flag. It was following the perennial distrust of the IR and insisting on not taking anything they state without physically checking it. Bloomsbury district was so small, in the middle of the city, and in no way representative. What we did was haphazard and relied on signs and notice boards on streets - a waste of time exercise, the like of which we had all undertaken in the past.

Three or four years later I heard the result. I asked two officials separately working in a VAT policy area how they had estimated the number of traders there would be on commencement of VAT. Both said that IR district numbers were taken as a guide but that one district had been physically checked by walking it and the figures obtained compared and extrapolated to get the numbers for the rest of the country. It was a most important exercise and was believed to have been basically correct. I made no mention of my connection with any of this but was flabbergasted, but perhaps not wholly surprised, that a major policy determination had been made on such a random and unscientific basis.

NOTE. I told versions of this story when I was in VAT Policy Directorate in the 1990s, and most significantly late in the decade at a reception when presentations were made by the Chairman of the Board, Valerie Strachan, to mark 25 years of VAT. Certificates were given to those in HQ who had been in VAT for the whole time, or been there at the start. The former did not apply to me but everyone said I was uniquely qualified for the latter being a pre-VAT figure involved in its creation. That was not what it felt like at the time.

Both articles courtesy of Alan Ruston July 2010

Smuggling Tales from around the World #1 (From the *Bristol Mercury*, October 1 1886) - Editor

A Geneva correspondent writes: - "The ingenuity of smugglers has never perhaps been more strikingly illustrated than it was a few days ago on the Swiss-Italian frontier. An innocent-looking wagoner, with a wagon-load of cheese, arrived at the Italian Custom House at Chiasso. He had come from Lugano and his destination was a small Italian village called Marignan. The cheese weighed altogether three tons, and the wagoner, who was 'child-like and bland', whistled blithely as he duly presented his papers, which certified that he was employed by the firm of ----- to convey the cheese, which formed part only of a much larger order, to its purchasers at Marignan.

The papers were examined and found *en regle*, and before resuming his journey the wagoner stepped into a neighbouring café with one of the douaniers, for the day was hot and a cigarette and a glass of wine could not fail to be acceptable. But the delay for refreshments was destined to prove fatal to the wagoner's hopes, for during his absence another douanier wistfully gazed on the tempting load of cheese, and thinking that a slice from such a quantity would never be missed, and at the same time would, in conjunction with a morsel of garlic and a piece of black bread, afford him a delectable supper, he whipped out his knife and selecting a prime looking cheese he proceeded to cut into it, or rather he did not cut into it, for either his knife was blunt or the cheese was uncommonly hard. This peculiarity induced him to consult with a colleague and together they proceeded to make something more than a cursory examination of these remarkable cheeses. Lo and behold!

They proved to be not cheeses at all, but solid, compact rolls of tobacco, artfully done up in cement; this again was covered with canvas which was painted to represent cheese.

Of course, the 'find' was instantly confiscated and the blithe wagoner was transferred from the comforts of the café to the hardships of a gaol. It is said that both the consignor and consignee will be called to account, and that the fine likely to be inflicted will not fall short of £1,000.

Behind the Scenes at the Museum - the latest news from our friends in the north

Despite challenging times we are continuing to complete some exciting new projects. Hot off the press is the upgrading of the gallery's orientation to make the route to and around the gallery clearer and enhance its presence. It will be completed in early October 2010. The display highlights some of our unique concealments seen in startling x-ray complemented by a short film that focuses on revealing the hidden spaces in our objects – e.g. the false leg and the electric guitar. New counterfeit material and dangerous electrical goods will also be exhibited in a refreshed fakes display. To complement the new enhancements we are developing a family trail based on a character called Matt (after the patron saint of Customs). This is due to go on gallery in October 2010 half term and invites our younger visitors to find Matt and engage with our displays.

Recently we have welcomed some notable additions to our collection. The first was following the eventual sad closure of Greenock Custom House. We were invited to survey objects to complement material for the national collection. One such object was a whisky bottle off the SS Politician (of Whisky Galore fame). This can be seen on our blog and will be placed on display in Feb 2011 to mark the 70th anniversary of the sinking of the vessel. Another object was an elephant's foot which had been crudely painted and made into a stool; its hairs can still be felt. It is now part of our handling collecting and has a shocking impact when used during events.

Following formal financial transfer from HMRC to the UK Border Agency we have begun to collect publications related to immigration. We spent several days near Heathrow surveying immigration documents to identify appropriate material, one fascinating such addition being Albert Einstein's landing card from the 1940s.

*As a result of our recent change of name to **Seized! The Border & Customs Uncovered**, we would like to update members' details to ensure we are getting to the right people. We would also like to see who would prefer to receive the newsletter by email. Therefore please would members complete the enclosed form or email us your updated details and indicate your preference for a hard copy or email version of the newsletter. Email address: karen.bradbury@liverpoolmuseums.org.uk.*

Finally we would like to say a huge thank you to Mark Bullen who since October 2002 has edited our newsletter. This has taken time, patience and commitment and without his hard work this newsletter would not be possible. This is Mark's last as a serving officer but we are delighted that he has kindly agreed to continue as editor in retirement. We would therefore like to send our sincere thanks to Mark and all members for their contributions.

Please note that that the Waterguard web site now has an Obituaries page - <http://www.hm-waterguard.org.uk/People-Obituaries.htm>

Contributions from the next of kin and friends of ex-Waterguard staff are being sought. Neil Bailey - neilhbailey@gmail.com - will be the contact point for your contributions.

You can obtain a set of back numbers, from 1996 till now, in a thermal binding, by sending £5.50 (inc. p&p) to John Pink, 6 Anns Court, Grove Road, Surbiton KT6 4BE email: johnpink2@o2.co.uk also www.jrphistory.co.uk

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

Please send any items for the newsletter to the editor: 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 and from 11 March 2011, at: lynda.bullen@waitrose.com