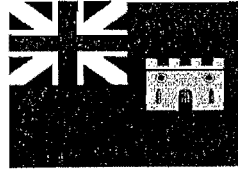


# Customs & Excise History Network

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## *Anything to Declare? – A Brief History of the H.M. Customs & Excise National Museum*

To coincide with the 17 May opening of the revamped gallery – *Seized! Revenue and Customs Uncovered* (not quite such a snappy name this time), I thought it was appropriate, and perhaps long overdue, to compile some notes on the history of the museum – a venue that has been giving visitors to Liverpool's Albert Dock so much pleasure for the last 14 years. That it still survives in these more stringent and business-focussed times is perhaps in itself a small miracle, but survive it has, going from strength to strength, not least because of the continued enthusiasm and dedication of its small team of staff. Well done, Karen, Steve and all of your present and former colleagues who have done so much to make the museum the success it has proved to be.

Most of the material for this article was taken from the Museum's comprehensive annual reports.

**Mark Bullen** - Editor [Apologies for another late Newsletter – life in HMRC is hectic these days]

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### **Part One – Background & Early Years**

Customs & Excise was an ancient organisation whose roots went back to the reign of Charles II, who established separate Boards of Customs and Excise in 1671 and 1683 respectively. Customs & Excise records still exist from this period, thanks largely to the Public Records Act of 1958 that eventually culminated in the vast majority of written records being deposited at the Public Record Office (now the National Archives). Prior to this time, these were kept in the sometimes less than ideal conditions found in diverse Custom Houses all around the coast. As well as these priceless documents, these buildings housed a veritable treasure trove of artefacts, many of them directly reflecting the nature of the work done by the Customs officers of yore. Custom Houses bore a whole variety of Royal Arms above their entrances; within their walls could be found antique furniture and clocks, weighing scales, weapons of various kinds and those ubiquitous and most prosaic of working instruments, myriad gauging tools. Once so taken for granted, these unusual tools now tell the fascinating story of a lost art, of an era when wines and spirits were stored in wooden casks whose contents had to be carefully measured by the use of half a dozen or so specially designed slides and gauges.

Whilst the Department was well aware that it possessed a huge collection of historic artefacts, it was not until the late 1980s that it began the serious and necessary task of cataloguing them. It was only once each Collection (Region) had done this that H.Q. began to appreciate both the scale of the problem and the historical significance of the items it held. Many artefacts were valuable in their own right (e.g. clocks, furniture and old firearms), but others, whilst of little commercial worth, were an immensely important part of Customs & Excise history. A more satisfactory means had to be found of guaranteeing that the most important of them were preserved for posterity; what better means was there of doing this than establishing a national museum?

Prior to the creation of the Liverpool Museum, there had been various local and, it has to be said, amateur attempts to set up regional museums. Two such repositories existed in Gravesend and Greenock Custom Houses, as well as a large number of foyer or conference room displays that were set up in Customs & Excise offices throughout the country. Whilst these were admirable attempts by interested staff to display items that might otherwise have mouldered away in damp basements or

cupboards, what was needed was a professional approach to creating and managing a collection, with proper standards of conservation, display and interpretation. Coupled with this was a desire on the part of the Board of Commissioners to improve the public image of Customs & Excise. People needed to be given a chance to understand what its work was about and its role in protecting society, both through the collection of duties and the prevention of smuggling, the latter of which posed a serious threat to the country's economy and social infrastructure.

And so it was that in 1993 H.M. Customs & Excise joined with National Museums and Galleries on Merseyside (NMGM) to establish a permanent home for their collection of historic artefacts. The Department provided more than £800k in capital funding and £200k for annual running costs, with the collection to be held in trust by the Board of Trustees of NMGM for an initial period of 21 years. The first part of the museum, displaying objects connected with the then current work of the Department, was opened by Chairman of the Board Valerie Strachan on 29 March 1994, with the second phase, concentrating on the history of C&E, following just over a year later. The museum's mission statement read:



*The HM Customs & Excise national Museum seeks to promote the public enjoyment and understanding of the history and work of Customs & Excise and related subjects through the collection, preservation and interpretation of material culture and related information.*

The original team of professional museum staff appointed to run the new venture comprised Graham Boxer, Steve Butler, Catherine Leggatt, Sue Johnston and Susan Bradburn. Of these five, Steve is the only one still in post, so that must make him the foremost expert in the country on Customs & Excise History! He has seen a lot of changes in that time, not least the merger of Customs & Inland Revenue three years ago to form the unified H.M. Revenue & Customs – hence the need to change the name of the new gallery.

The infant museum had four key target areas to hit:

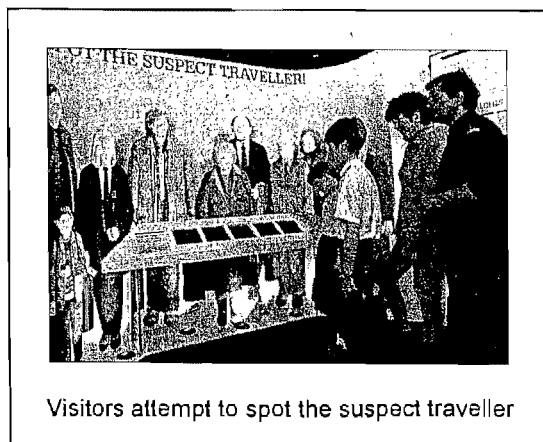
- 1) **Public Programmes:**  
To raise and maintain the public profile of the Museum through permanent displays, education & public events and temporary exhibitions.
- 2) **Collection Management:**  
To establish a collection of national status in content and management.
- 3) **Scholarship & Research:**  
To improve accessibility to the collection through research and publication.
- 4) **Management & Administration:**  
To efficiently manage the resources available to achieve these objectives.

These must have been exciting times indeed for this small group of staff, whose differing backgrounds and skills had to be quickly and thoroughly blended if they were to make the most of their opportunity of creating and making a success of this new venture. How would a museum dedicated to the work of a Government Department be received? Would they manage to achieve their stretching objectives during the first year of operation? Would Customs & Excise get cold feet? Would someone object to public funding being used to support such a venue?

The staff's primary objective was to establish what one might call a "conventional" museum by establishing permanent displays and raising public awareness through a marketing strategy and public events. First of all, they were lucky in that the museum was co-located with the very popular

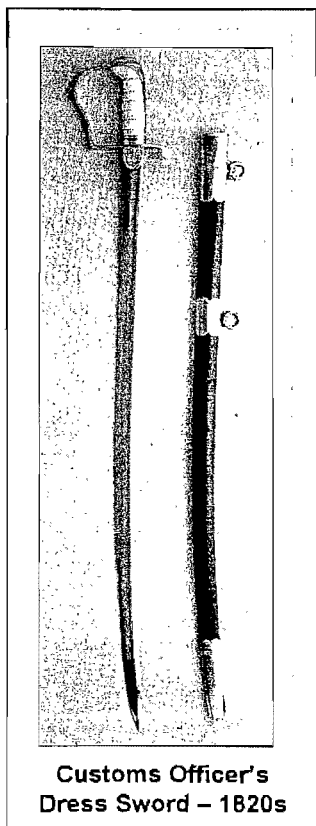
Merseyside Maritime Museum, so they would be able to feed off the many visitors already going there. By a happy coincidence, their building had also been a bonded warehouse, so close links with the Department were already in place. The future looked promising and the Museum set itself a target of 100,000 visitors during its first year.

From the outset, one of the Museum's greatest strengths was the decision to include as much interactive material as possible. In modern museums visitors, and especially children (who would form a large proportion of the target audience), like to handle and play with things, rather than just look at objects sealed in glass cases with accompanying written information. In this new and innovative museum they could "Spot the Suspect Traveller", find out how much duty was payable on a commodity by standing on a weighing machine, see an 18<sup>th</sup> century mannequin Excise Officer "talking to" his modern equivalent on the TV screen (I was very impressed



Visitors attempt to spot the suspect traveller

by this), drive a virtual Customs Cutter and, most popular of all, take part in a half-hour rummage session to find hidden contraband. No wonder the visitors rolled in – more than 300,000 in the first twelve months – an outstanding success by any measure. Even more encouraging were the exit surveys that showed that the vast majority of visitors had dramatically changed their understanding and perception of Customs & Excise by the end of their visit – exactly what the Board had hoped for. To cap it all, this first successful year was rounded off by the British Tourist Authority awarding the museum the accolade of *most popular newcomer*.



Customs Officer's  
Dress Sword – 1820s

### The Artefact Collection

The foundation stones of most museums are their artefacts and so it was with HMC&E's new Liverpool showcase. These were the objects that would bring to life the work of the Department throughout its fascinating and sometimes turbulent history. They would form the basis for both the permanent public displays and the remotely stored collection.

The team's first priority was to identify objects and works suitable for display in the Museum's permanent galleries. Most of these were transferred from Customs & Excise, although some were acquired by gift or purchase from outside the Department. In areas where the collection was weak, objects were borrowed from other museums and private owners. Even I became involved when Graham Boxer invited me to accompany him to a private house in Devon, where he attempted, and failed, to persuade the owner of the defunct smuggling museum at Polperro to sell or loan his extensive collection to the Liverpool museum. It seemed a great missed opportunity at the time.

Two important purchases made during the first two years were two aquatints, *Landing a Cargo* and *Making a Seizure* by J.G. Wells after Julius Caesar Ibbotson (1759-1817) as well as a splendid Customs Officer's dress sword from the 1820s.

Many of the items acquired were in various stages of deterioration, so an important part of the museum's job was to set up a conservation section where work could begin at preserving the items most at threat. One of these was a magnificent illustrated indenture for the farming out of the Excise by Charles II. This amazing document was apparently found lurking in the darker recesses of one of the Department's offices and made headline news in C&E's staff newspaper *Portcullis* at the time. In 1996 storage for the collection not on display was temporarily relocated to the Merseyside Maritime Museum, where a curatorial and conservation survey was undertaken. This involved the appointment of a temporary Documentation Assistant and two conservators over a six-month period. The survey's ultimate purpose was to select historically important items from the Department to put in the National Collection. More than 2600 items were

examined, of which nearly 2000 were taken on. Each was identified and marked with a unique accession number, entered onto a database, photographed, examined by a conservator for a condition report and conservation requirements and finally, stored in a manner appropriate to its condition.

### Research Fellowship

In May 1996 William Ashworth was appointed as a Research Fellow, a three-year tenure that eventually led to the publication of a book called *Consuming the People – The English Customs and Excise 1640-1845*.

### Education & Public Events

The provision of education and public programmes was one of the four key target areas for the new museum and the management team didn't disappoint. A number of day schools and themed talks were delivered as part of an adult education programme and a schools programme was set up by Education Officer Catherine Leggatt, who also formed links with local higher educational institutions.

The major event for 1995 was *Seasearch*, a family show involving the use of a submersible camera to show how Customs look for smuggling containers under water. The museum also presented a drama which served to demonstrate the present and past practices in smuggling and its detection. October 1996 saw the Museum playing host to the Department's National Drugs Awareness Week, part of the Government initiative on *Tackling Drugs Together*.

Meanwhile, a lot of effort was being put into developing links to the National Curriculum, resulting in the formation of a teachers' club.

### International Profile

Throughout these early years the museum was working tirelessly to raise its international profile, being one of only three European Customs Museums run by professional curators and managers. Staff attended annual conferences of the *international Association of Customs Museums*.

*To be continued.....*

**Steve Butler is currently considering the implications of the creation of the UK Border Agency and how the Museum might represent the work of the Immigration aspect of its duties, as well as that of its erstwhile "Customs Officers" whose work continues to intrigue visitors of all ages.**



Customs Officer showing rummage techniques to a group of young visitors, also in uniform!

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 2237) or e-mail Mark at: [mark.bullen@hmrc.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:mark.bullen@hmrc.gsi.gov.uk)