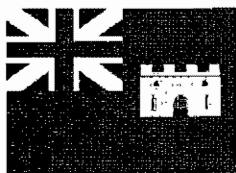


Customs & Excise History Network

Newsletter No. 26

Spring/Summer 2009



Stop Press: H.M. Customs & Excise fails to get telegram from the Queen!

If it had still existed, Customs & Excise would have celebrated its 100th birthday on 1 April this year, but it was not to be. How ironic that the Inland Revenue Department, far less ancient than either Customs or Excise, should have reached the ripe old age of 156 before it merged with Customs & Excise four years ago to create H.M. Revenue & Customs.

During what currently seems like a period of unprecedented change in the department and its method of doing business (who would have used *that* word in 1909?), I thought it would be worth looking at what the burning issues were when Customs and Excise amalgamated in that year.

The Finance Act of 1908 had announced that the Excise branch of the Inland Revenue was to merge with the Customs department. The staff of the former, via their journal *The Revenue Review*, made it quite clear what they thought of the idea, using such words as 'wiping out', 'ill-advised' 'catastrophe' and 'doom'. In their view, not only was the Excise a more efficient organisation than the service to which it was to be joined, but the bigger partner. There was no doubt in the minds of Excise officers that they saw the merger as a takeover by Customs, since they were being annexed from their parent department. Interestingly, Tory M.P. Mr. Sears, a great supporter of the Excise, moved an amendment to the Finance Bill proposing that the Customs should be taken into the Inland Revenue – a prescient idea that had to wait nearly another century to take effect, and one that fell on deaf ears.

The Revenue Review, in a May 1908 article headed "EXCISE AND CUSTOMS AMALGAMATION" stated:

The revolutionary proposals of Mr. Asquith to amalgamate the Excise and Customs Departments, or, as he expressed it, to hand over the Excise branch of the Inland Revenue to the Customs, have thrown both Services into a state of the greatest anxiety [echoes of 2005? – Ed.]. Economy and efficiency is Mr. Asquith's motto. Efficiency he has had as far as the Excise Service is concerned. What economy means for members of the Department we can guess.

Needless to say, the men of the Customs were none too pleased about some of the hurtful things that were being said about them and their employer. One Surveyor wrote to *The Times* to complain, but the Excise journal made it clear that it was the Customs system they objected to, not its staff. In reply, Sears wrote:

My criticism is founded on the unnecessary multiplication of authorities and the costliness and inefficiency resulting from the duplication of official work...Secondly, it is directed against the filling of the higher and more lucrative posts with men who are fortune's favourites under what is practically a patronage system, instead of being open to men of practical experience gained in contact with the practical work of the Service...practically all the highest posts in the Customs, inside and out, are filled by men with only clerical antecedents, with the result that it is behind the Excise in efficiency and economy of working.

The Revenue Review put some meat on the bones:

We dislike Customs methods as much as Mr. Sears does, we dislike the disciplinary methods of that

Department which are not, and never will be, acceptable to Excise officials; we dislike the system of promotion which places indoor clerical officials, with no outdoor training, in the higher positions, to the practical exclusion of the trained experts of the out-door branch; we dislike the demoralising effects of the overtime system; and we dislike the lax system of warehouse supervision, but we do not for one moment make any reflection upon the efficiency of Customs officials...When amalgamation comes we do not want to lose our identity as Excise officials.

The Customs methods of supervision of warehouses are noticeably very much less stringent than ours; inferior officials such as Lockers and Watchers are more generally employed. The adoption of Customs methods would mean that many of our warehouse officers would be thrown on the redundant list.

These are clearly the words of men who were fiercely proud of their profession and its reputation and express feelings that are typical of people working in organisations that experience merger, then as now. The article ended with a comment that could have been written in 2005:

The combined department will be a powerful one in numbers, it can be relatively powerful in influence; its members will be moderate in their claims and loyal in their actions, and it is to be hoped that those in whose hands their welfare lies will recognise how much the success of the amalgamation scheme must depend upon its being launched with a contented and, consequently, efficient Service to carry out its duties.

One of the tasks laid to the new department was the administration of the Old Age Pensions scheme. To assist officers in this sometimes surprisingly difficult work, the following guidelines were issued to the Service and reproduced in Bertram Leftwich's 1908 book, *The History of the Excise*:

"In these days of artificial teeth and the improved nutrition and vigour consequent upon their use, the classical signs of old age are often wanting. Fortunately for the revenue, a large proportion of the claimants will have been unable to afford such luxuries. A single sign, such as white hair, is of no value, but a combination of several signs should be enough to turn the scale in a doubtful case. In old age the hair becomes white, sparse and lustreless. The teeth that remain show long exposed fangs due to atrophy of that portion of the lower jaw into which they are set. The bones in general, except at the joints, are wasted. This is well seen at the back of the hands. The back is bent, the eyeballs show a cloudy ring at the outer margin of the cornea, just where the white of the eye begins. The universal loss of elasticity is shown in the gait, which is stiffer, and may be tottering; in the wrinkled and parchment-like skin, and in the tortuous veins and arteries....."

The mind boggles as to how the venerable, 96 year old Customs & Excise would have been described when it finally passed away four years ago!

Material provided courtesy of John Pink

Grave Smuggling Tales # 6 – Daniel Skayles

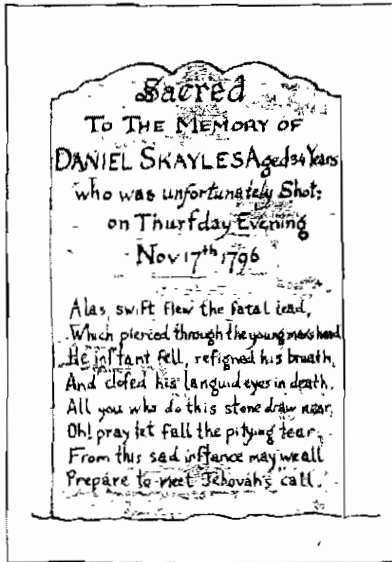
Only inches away from the north wall of Patcham church, just outside Brighton, stands a tombstone to one Daniel Skayles, shot in November 1796 at the age of 34.

The local newspaper of the time, the *Sussex Weekly Advertiser*, contains only meagre details of the incident:

"One night last week, a desperate man named Leach, belonging to the Shoreham Custom-House boat, shot the servant of a smuggler through the head with a pistol. The deceased belonged to Patcham, and went by the name of Five-in-Nine."

It is interesting to consider that a smuggler should have had a servant! It was very common for members of smuggling gangs to have nicknames but what can this one have referred to - perhaps that Skayles was one of a gang of nine free-traders?

There is an alternative explanation of the events surrounding the shooting, as related in the Journal of an eighteenth century schoolmaster named Walter Gale. According to him, Daniel Skayles was a "desperate smuggler" (whatever that means!) who was travelling one night from Brighton as one of a large group of men. Gale stated that the smugglers met up with a patrol of Excise Officers and dragoons, who proceeded to do battle with them. One of the Excise Riding Officers called out to Skayles, ordering him to release his "booty". When the latter refused, the officer promptly shot him through the head.



One can attempt to explain the discrepancies between these two reports in several ways. There may have been more than one smuggler killed. However, the following points make this proposition unlikely. First, only one death is reported in the newspaper and no mention is made of others being wounded in the skirmish. Indeed, in Mr. Gale's words, "the smugglers fled in all directions," perhaps indicating that they were, unusually, outnumbered by the revenue forces. Secondly, the *Sussex Advertiser* stated that the victim was shot in the head - consistent with both Mr. Gale's version and the epitaph on Skayles' headstone.

With regard to *who* shot the poor smuggler, the newspaper actually gave the man's name as Leach, stating that he was from the Shoreham Custom House, which means the murderer can't have been an Excise Riding Officer! Of course, all this is academic as far as Daniel Skayles is concerned. Whether at the hand of Customs, Excise or dragoon, he was left just as dead!

From a tombstone in Woodbridge churchyard, Suffolk, perhaps the shortest epitaph ever?

***Here I lies,
Killed by the XI's***

Think about it! Though not quite as brief, a 21st century equivalent might read:

***Here I be,
Taxed to death by HMRC***

CUTLER STREET BONDED WAREHOUSE [LONDON PORT] – 1769-1973

Chris Carr e-mails from Broadstairs:

I was promoted from being a DCO to UO under O.W.O. 39/61 and following the usual six months training I was sent to the overseas mail office at the Royal Agricultural Hall [RAH or Aggie Hall] in November 1962. Whilst I liked the work there it was obvious that I did not fit in as, for personal reasons, I declined most of the overtime that was offered. This resulted in me being sent to Cutler Street Warehouse in February 1963 for "one day's tobacco stocktaking" along with two other UO's. On completion later that day the resident Surveyor asked that one of the three of us volunteer to stay on as a resident UO. I jumped at the chance as it was much nearer my digs and so began my real introduction to bonded warehouse work, mainly tobacco, wines & spirits and oriental carpets. After two years as a UO I applied for and obtained the status of FO [Cutler St. District] and stayed there until I became an OCX at Dover Postal Depot in July 1971.

During that time I became quite used to the peculiarities of the OCX staff there and also the multiracial traders in the oriental carpet trade. In addition I obtained information on the growth of the warehouse 1768-1796, extracts from over 80 BO's 1884-1964, notes from the India Office Library and India Office Records together with various photocopies and notes of all BO's viewed, not viewed or known to have been destroyed, plus a few personal photographs taken in the rooms of the carpet traders.

Please, would someone like to take all this information, perhaps do some more research and then publish?

You can contact me by post at 1 Villiers House, Francis Road, Broadstairs CT10 3RG, phone 01843 600 885 anytime between 0900 and 2100 [please leave contact details on the answerphone if no reply] or email to qbperfins@tiscali.co.uk

I look forward to hearing from someone soon!

Chris Carr [HMC&E 1948-1989]

News from the Museum

The new gallery – SEIZED! - had its first anniversary on 17th May 2009, and during the first 12 months we welcomed more than 313,000 visitors. Since opening we have seen a huge number of visitors come each month - up to 42,000.

The new gallery may be smaller in size than in its predecessor on the ground floor, but evaluation is showing that visitors are staying in the gallery. The interactives are proving particularly attractive, with the Cutter and import game proving the most popular. Young visitors have even come back specifically to play the Cutter interactive. People have been observed spending up to 10 minutes doing one interactive. Compare this to the old gallery (which was extremely popular) when the average time spent was 20 minutes for the whole museum!

We continue to add to the gallery. A video called *A Rummager's Tale* looks at the role of modern deep rummage. The CITES case has been revisited to reflect the horror of endangered species being brought in to the country.

Other gallery elements are still being worked on – a video will explain how gauging tools were used. War noises (both historical and modern), will reinforce the area looking at war and is being placed near the entrance to help draw visitors down in to the space. A child's trail is being developed, based on a character who will lead younger visitors around the displays.

To support the gallery we are developing the web page. There will be stories, objects, and videos from SEIZED. The aim is to encourage the site to be used as an off site resource, as well as be a publicity tool to encourage people to come.

The Education team have recently developed a new and exciting programme looking at knife crime, aimed at teenagers and young adults, while later in the year we are hosting the International Association of Customs Museums' annual conference in Liverpool.

Did you know?.....That under the *Quails Protection Act 1937*, it was an offence to import live quails of the variety *coturnix coturnix* between February 14 and July 1. [McCoy's Dictionary of Customs and Excise 1938].

You never know what might prove useful in a pub quiz!

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**