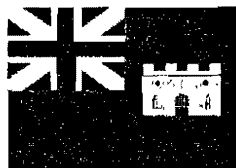


Customs & Excise History Network

Newsletter No. 28

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A Note from the Editor

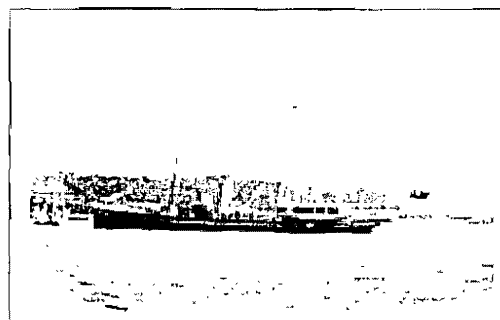
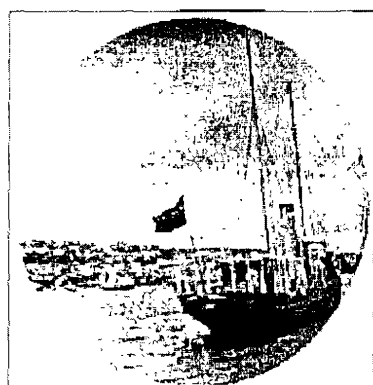
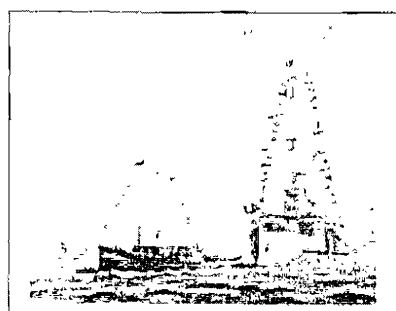
This newsletter deals exclusively with the (much abbreviated) history and current position of HMCC *Vigilant*, the Customs steam powered vessel gloriously saved from extinction some twenty years ago, but whose story since has been somewhat less glamorous. I have taken or adapted much of the material from the website of the *Medway Maritime Trust* (www.medwaymaritimetrust.org.uk) and I would like to express my thanks to their Chairman, Martin Stevens, for allowing me to do so. Illustrations are a combination of MMT's and the former H.M. Customs & Excise unless otherwise acknowledged.

Mark Bullen

HMCC *Vigilant* - Past & Present

In 1901 the Inspector General of the Water Guard reported on the condition of the then operating 35-year-old *Vigilant*. He recommended that a new larger vessel should be built, not only capable of patrolling outside the Thames Estuary but to cruise between Dover and Yarmouth. A tender form was issued on 29th June 1901 for the supply of a Single Screw Steam Cruiser, including provision for separate compartments not only for Captain, Engineer and crew but for "any other officials".

Below – Three early views of *Vigilant* including, left, her controversial appearance at the 1911 Spithead Review.
(From a painting by Andrew Dandridge)



Vigilant, the seventh Customs Cruiser to bear that name, was to be 124 tons, 100 feet long and 16 feet wide, with a triple expansion engine powered by two furnaces achieving a speed of about 10 or 11 knots. Built by Cox & Co. in Falmouth, she entered service in August 1902 and was based at Gravesend. Initially, her duties consisted of the control and clearance of ships using the Port of London, but after a year of routine work, Mr. Parry, Deputy Chairman of the Board of Customs, used the vessel for an "inspection" of every port from Gravesend to Penzance. This happened to be in the holiday month of August and not letting a precedent go to waste, members of the Board enjoyed a similar cruise every year thereafter!

In 1911, to celebrate the coronation of King George V, a Review of the Fleet was held at Spithead. The Admiralty had published an order that after 8am, on the morning of the review "no vessels, other than those flying the White Ensign were allowed to approach or enter the lines of warships". However, Sir Laurence Guillemard, Chairman of

the recently created Customs and Excise, informed the Admiralty that *Vigilant* would proceed down the lines as the Department held a charter from King Charles II which gave it greater powers than the Navy in home waters. So, at the appropriate time, flying the Customs flags, and in spite of heated objections, *Vigilant* proudly sailed between the impressive battleships and anchored at their head. It is a salutary thought that she is the only surviving vessel of the 1911 Review.

In 1920 Customs sold the *Vigilant* for £1850, after which she was converted from steam to diesel and became a cruising yacht, renamed *Shalimar*. During the Second World War she was laid up, but being in American ownership she escaped requisition and possible destruction. After the war she continued to cruise. Renamed *Eileen Siocht* she was bought by a "delightful lady" called Mrs. Nancy Kelly who is said to have had a deep affection for the vessel and used her as a houseboat.



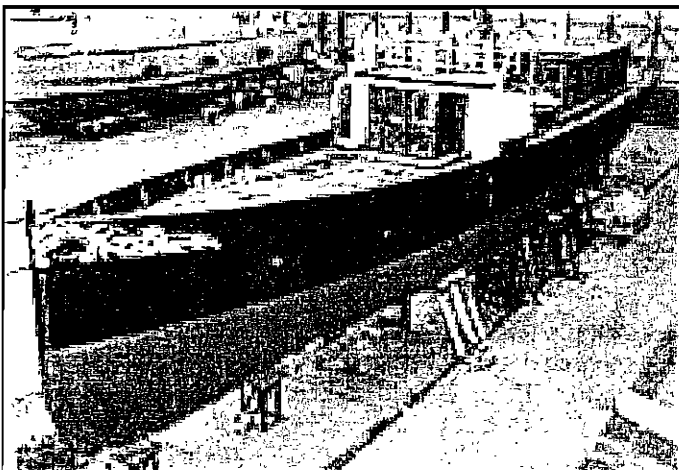
Originally berthed at the *Lady Bee Marina* in Shoreham, she was later moved to a mud berth on the other side of the River Adur. In 1988 Nancy's health caused her to start thinking about a move ashore and she asked a local estate agent to advertise *Vigilant* for sale.

(Pictured at Shoreham in the early 1990s – *Portcullis*)

The Vigilant Trust

The estate agent contacted HM Customs and Excise to ask for details of *Vigilant's* early life and David Hewer, an ex-cutter officer, then Head of Customs Maritime Branch, got to hear about it. Following a visit to the vessel, he came away enthused and immediately set about forming a charitable trust to launch an appeal among his colleagues in Customs & Excise. The asking price was £30,000 but when Nancy became ill the Trust had not raised sufficient funds. She had to sell the vessel with the berth to a property developer, who immediately asked £100,000 for *Vigilant*. During the following year the price reduced in stages until the original selling price was reached. By this time the Trust had enough money and in March 1992 a deal was struck and the elderly vessel became the property of the Vigilant Trust.

Perhaps fortunately, nobody knew at this stage that restoration was not going to be completed in one attempt. *Vigilant* was found to be completely perforated at the waterline along her entire length. An amazing effort and a gruelling schedule of work by Customs & Excise's David and his colleagues achieved results. From a vessel unable to float and stuck on a sandbank *Vigilant* was patched and eventually towed to a slipway at shipbuilders Vosper Thornycroft in Portchester.



Funds were raised from several sources including the National Heritage Memorial Fund, Portsmouth Naval Base Property Trust, the Science Museum, the European Community, and from individual members of the Customs & Excise Service who elected to contribute via their payroll [I was one of them – Ed!] Repairs to the hull were effected while a Business Plan was prepared.

From thislooking pristine and safe in Vosper's shed in Portsmouth (Vosper Thornycroft)

Rejected Business Plan

It is invariably the case that when funders offer money they not only require "partnership funding" but also a "business plan" to ensure continuing maintenance. This was the case with *Vigilant*. An impressive plan was presented with the co-operation of Portsmouth Council to make *Vigilant* part of the Portsmouth tourist trail which would of course include *HMS Victory*, *Warrior*, the Historic Dockyard etc. They donated some money and a berth but the plan was rejected on the grounds that the public would not be willing to pay extra money because of the presence of *Vigilant* and she would therefore be unable to support her own upkeep in the years that lay ahead.

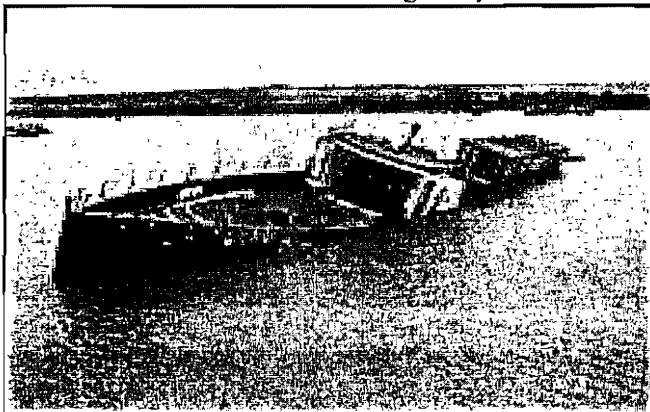
David Hewer, Chairman of the Vigilant Trust, expressed his point of view; "This is a familiar story to anyone who has ever tried to obtain funding for an historic vessel and is, in effect, a 'catch 22' situation which agrees that the ship should be funded for restoration but denies that very funding on the grounds of upkeep costs."

Harry Pound's Shipbreakers

Owing to the lack of space, Vospers then had to ask the Vigilant Trust to remove the vessel from their yard. A deal was struck with the nearby Harry Pound's Shipbreakers yard in Portchester to tow the hull there. Meanwhile, many of *Vigilant*'s fixtures and fittings had been removed and placed in store. The deal with Pound's was that the hull could remain in their yard free of charge while the Trust continued to try to raise the needed funds, and only if they eventually failed would Pound's get it for scrap

This situation went right to the wire when Pound's yard was sold for redevelopment and the Trust was advised that all potential scrap had to be disposed of. In the meantime *Vigilant* had sunk at her mooring!

To This.... in Pound's marine graveyard!



Things were looking pretty grim when suddenly, out of the blue came the cavalry! **The Medway Maritime Trust** came to *Vigilant*'s rescue with one week to spare after being put in touch with the Vigilant Trust by the Advisory Committee of National Historic Ships. They offered a permanent berth for *Vigilant* in Faversham and the Vigilant Trust were able to provide sufficient money to fund the pumping out, preparations and towage required. This was all organised by the Medway Maritime Trust and the assistance that they have provided now offers *Vigilant* a future again.

Vigilant had been sunk for some time at Harry Pound's Shipbreakers in Portsmouth and many people were saying "why doesn't somebody do something"? Perhaps the obvious answer was that most people who would be inclined to do something were already involved in their own historic ship projects.

Medway Maritime Trust investigates

The Medway Maritime Trust didn't exactly have time on their hands, but while they were waiting for a giant crane to lift their paddle tug *John H Amos* onto a pontoon, they at least had time to investigate. It was reported that Pound's were willing to sell the *Vigilant* but further enquiries revealed that they did not own her; the vessel was still owned by the Vigilant Trust.

The Vigilant Trust had been set up so that trustees were responsible for everything as individuals. Many trustees were willing to cut their losses in such a difficult situation. Having agreed free moorings, Pound's now required £3400 for mooring and "safe-keeping". Whilst the Trust had enough money in the bank to pay for a rescue, they desperately needed a long-term safe haven.

Faversham Historic Ships Trust (in formation)

Martin Stevens, Chairman of the Medway Maritime Trust, had been working on a scheme to make Faversham in Kent a safe haven for Historic Ships, so this seemed to be an ideal opportunity to kick-start the scheme. Martin arranged for the Vigilant Trust to pay Pound's the £3400, an amount which included the pumping out of *Vigilant*

and towing her to the shore. Pound's never did this. Some time passed while they argued the point until Pound's required more money. If that was not forthcoming they would claim *Vigilant* as their property

On one of many visits to Portsmouth, Martin Stevens learned that *Vigilant* was due to be cut up "within days" but the yard required written instructions to prevent this happening. With no authority to issue such instructions, Martin took the bull by the horns and wrote on Medway Maritime Trust notepaper, telling Pound's to desist from their action and that *Vigilant* would be removed. Luckily this worked.

He contacted GPS Marine Contractors and asked for an inclusive quote to tow *Vigilant* to Faversham. This was to include everything from removal and transportation of loose artefacts to waterproofing the temporary deck, insurance, surveys, obtaining load-line exemption, and the tow itself. The *Vigilant* Trust agreed to pay GPS.

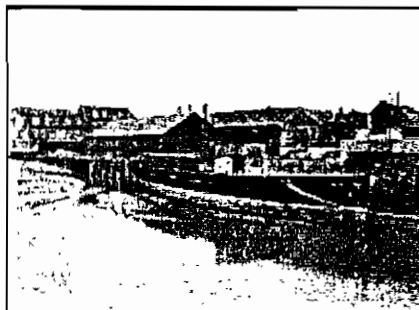
The dispute which centred on the pumping out of *Vigilant* was solved by Martin and his brother who deployed two 2 inch Honda pumps and managed to make *Vigilant* float on a rising tide. He used his van to pull her to the shore but when the clutch started to smell he persuaded a man with a crawler digger to complete the pull. Before the tow departed Martin made two more visits. It was important that the people of Faversham should not be put off by "a wreck" arriving in their creek, so *Vigilant* received a coat of shiny black paint.

The Tow to Faversham

A small tug removed *Vigilant* from Pound's Yard and the GPS tug *Alexandra* did the main tow. Because of the "one way system" in the Channel, the *Vigilant* was towed towards Boulogne before crossing back again for Faversham Creek, which is seriously silted, a smaller GPS tug *Felucca* was assisted by the Faversham Iron Wharf tug *Pet*.

New Trust, New Ownership

The next stage is to set up a new Trust. The *Vigilant* Trust had been formed with full responsibility resting on the individual trustees. The new "Vigilant Restoration Trust" will be formed as a company limited by guarantee and then given charitable status. Let us hope that in the hands of this new caring owner, *Vigilant* will still be around to celebrate her 200th birthday in the 22nd century.



Safe, at last?

Behind the Scenes at the Museum

Our new name has been agreed - *Seized! The Border & Customs Uncovered*, or formally *UK Border Agency National Museum*. The name aims to incorporate the essence of our new wider role, while remembering our existing collection. UK Border Agency are now our new principal partner, and HMRC will continue to have formal links with the museum.

We offer a drugs awareness education programme to schools which has been running for the last 15 years, and it has just received national recognition from Kids Count (youth parliament). The programme was awarded the best contribution to youth issues, and Joyce (education manager) and Karen went down to the House of Commons to collect the award.

Recently Steve (Curator of Collections) and Lucy (Assistant Curator) acquired a couple of large additions to our collection. We were invited to go to Heathrow and survey various immigration documents, which contained some interesting stories amongst the procedural matters. All really useful information, and the aim is that it will form the core of our expanding library to cover immigration. The other collection additions were a result of the Greenock Custom House closure, when we went to collect significant material for the national collection. A couple of highlights were a whisky bottle believed to have come of the SS *Politician* (*Whisky Galore* fame) and an elephant foot that has been made into a stool (it even still has the hairs on the skin!).

You can obtain a complete set of back numbers, in a thermal binding cover, by sending an A4 SAE plus £5.90 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, *UK Border Agency National Museum*, c/o *Merseyside Maritime Museum*, Dock Traffic Office, Albert Dock, Liverpool, L3 4AN.

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