

It is more than thirty years since the Collector and the Collector's Office of London Port were together in one building. In pre-war days the Custom House was the headquarters of the Department as well as of London Port, and the increased Customs business resulting from the Import Duties Act, 1932, caused the Collector's Office to overflow into accommodation at Adelaide house. Later on, the destruction of the East Wing during the London blitz enforced further changes, and if the heart of the Collection can be said to have remained in the Long Room the head was certainly at Adelaide House.

Now the East Wing has been restored and from 28th March 1966 the Custom House will enter a new phase of its history as the headquarters of the Collector, London Port.

It has already been announced that Her Majesty the Queen has graciously consented to open the East Wing during a visit to the Custom House on the afternoon of Wednesday 8th June, 1966. Detailed arrangements are still being discussed by the Commissioners with the Collector, but it is intended to exhibit in the Long Room a selection of interesting articles and documents from the Departmental Library. The Collector appreciates the special interest of the staff in this event, and hopes to be able to arrange for as many as possible to see the ceremony.

It is interesting at such a time to look again at the story of the past. Our Department is rich in tradition and possesses valuable archives which are to be stored in special air-conditioned rooms in the East Wing. The Librarian has prepared the following historical notes.

CUSTOM HOUSE, LONDON

So far as is known, the London Custom House has always stood on about this site. The argument has been advanced, on purely archaeological grounds, that the Roman Custom House (or portitorium) stood about here.

In a charter which can be assigned to about the year A.D. 742, Ethelbald, King of Mercia, granted to the Bishop of London certain exemptions from Customs duties in respect of goods imported for consumption in one of his religious houses. Ethelred ("The Unready") allowed a particular body of privileged foreign merchants to clear their goods and expose them

2.
for sale "in the King's Wharf in Thames Street". Doubtless it was the house or office on the King's own Wharf that later became THE Custom House, or the headquarters not only of the Customs of the Port of London, and indeed not only of the Customs of the United Kingdom, but during one period at least of the Customs of the British Empire.

Geoffrey Chaucer, "the father of English poetry - if not of the English language" was appointed in 1374 to be a Customs official, and as such he worked on the site. We know quite a deal about the Custom House in which he worked, but it was eventually replaced by a larger building during the reign of Elizabeth I, during a period of great expansion of overseas trade and maritime adventure.

Elizabeth's Custom House was burned down in the Great Fire of 1666 and Christopher Wren was commissioned to rebuild. It was Wren who embodied the Long Room to be the central internal feature of the House. The Custom House however was lost by fire in 1714 - the only building of Wren's to be lost in his own lifetime. When it was rebuilt, Wren's idea of a Long Room was retained by Ripley, and since then has become the main feature in every Custom House in the country, and indeed over a good part of the world.

Ripley's Custom House in its turn was burned down in 1814 and most of the records were destroyed. Laing was commissioned to build a new one, covering a site much extended to the West. The total cost of the new building was about £300,000.

A few years after it was opened to the public the central portion - including the great Long Room - subsided and had to be extensively rebuilt, Sir Robert Smirke being commissioned for the task. The building as Smirke left it is substantially as we see it today, except for the loss of the East Wing in the bombing of 1940/41. It is pleasing to note that notwithstanding the intensive incendiary bombing of the neighbourhood the roof of the Long Room was saved. (The Long Room measures about 199 feet by 66 feet).

The "Harpy" - connected with the Quay by the rising pontoon - is the headquarters of the Waterguard Service in the Pool of London. There has been a tendency over the centuries for the names of Customs cutters and other craft to take on local associations, and a number of "Harpies" have been stationed in the Pool. In time the craft became stationary at the Custom

House moorings, then became a hulk and then the complete fixture it is today. 3.

It may be recalled that it was here to the Custom House Quay that poor Coleridge came to throw himself into the Thames to end his life. It may be recalled also that he changed his mind.

EAST WING REBUILDING

The architect, Mr. H.G. Yexley, A.R.I.B.A., Dip. Arch., has provided the following notes on the rebuilding:-

Following the destruction of most of the original East Wing by bombing, the Ministry of Public Buildings and Works decided to clear the site and rebuild the original facades on top of the old foundations, which were sound. It was considered that the original balanced design of the East and West Wings on either side of the central block would be seriously disturbed if the River, and Lower Thames Street, facades were not reproduced as an exact copy of the original East Wing.

Since the old facades have comparatively few windows it was decided to form a large central courtyard, sufficiently open and wide to give good daylight conditions in the offices round it, which would also have the advantage of being free from traffic noise.

The ceilings heights in the original building were excessively tall, and an additional floor, called the Upper Ground Floor, was introduced. This led to a reduction in the heights of the remaining floors.

The Basement was not considered suitable for office use and it has been utilised for car parking. It is protected by a flood gate which was recently effectively tested.

The planning and disposition of the offices was carried out in conjunction with the future occupants of the building. Staff facilities were carefully considered and provision has been made for a Restaurant and Coffee Bar with a fully-equipped kitchen. A Recreation Room, Common Room, Rifle Range and Rest and Treatment Rooms are also provided.

From the inception of the design for the East Wing it was felt that the East Wing should have a room which, in its own way, might be considered a modern equivalent of the great

4. Long Room in the central block. This room is the Ground Floor Entry Room, which, with its columns and panelling, has attempted to achieve some dignity and spaciousness. The screens which enclose the public waiting space have in some measure destroyed the clarity of the open hall which was intended.

The original very thick outer stone walls have been greatly reduced by modern constructional methods. The building has precast concrete floors and columns which are faced externally with brick or stone. The construction can be clearly seen in the central courtyard, where the walls are mostly in glass. The bricks were specially made in Kent to match those on the original building.

The internal walls are plastered, and most of the rooms have acoustic tile ceilings to reduce noise. Natural woods have been used extensively for their pleasant appearance and, to avoid painting, "Utile", an African hardwood, and Teak have been used.

There are four electric passenger lifts in the building and the projecting lift motor house is a striking feature of the courtyard.

Heating and hot water for the whole Custom House is provided by the new oil-fired boiler in the Basement.

Electric lighting is mostly provided by fluorescent fittings and has been designed to the latest standards for office accommodation. The illuminated ceiling is a practical and decorative feature of the Entry Room on the Ground Floor.

Some parts of the building are ventilated by air ducts and there are several ventilation plant rooms in the building.

The furnishings and scheme of decoration were chosen to give a quiet background for the work going on in the building. A limited range of colours, and the use of a constant floor covering in blue, have been selected to provide harmonious vistas from room to room.

The building contractors, Messrs. Humphreys Ltd., have carried out the work without strikes or major disruptions, and it is hoped that the future history of the East Wing will be long and peaceful.

While the East Wing was being rebuilt and equipped, changes have been taking place in the Long Room. Trunking has been let into the floor to carry power, lighting and telephone cables, and the floor has been re-surfaced. A new enclosure for cashiers has been built to provide security without spoiling the open aspect which sets off the proportions of this famous room. Six new, large, chandeliers have been installed with the intention of providing more than adequate illumination throughout the room without recourse to desk lighting. The preservation of the room as a historic building precludes the use of modern steel furniture, but suspended filing is to be fitted in some of the existing wall cupboards to maintain the efficiency of the Long Room Branches.

Most of these alterations have been made during working hours and the Long Room staff are to be congratulated on keeping the public business going in the most trying conditions.