

WATERGUARD TRAINING CENTREThe History and Traditions of the  
Waterguard Service

No period is known in English history when the Customs were not already old. There is archaeological evidence for supposing that even in Roman times the portitorium (or Custom House) stood on practically the same site as the London Custom House to-day. In Colchester Castle (which was originally a Roman structure) a panel may still be seen, which has the best archaeological and historical evidence to support it, showing the port of Colchester in Roman times. On one side of the quay lies the characteristic Mediterranean sailing vessel, of the same type of rig as that in which St. Paul did the journeys that are recorded in the Acts of the Apostles. On the other side of the quay stands the Custom House, and above that the Watch House.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the Customs is one of the very oldest arms of government in this country. It is very much older than the Army, and very much older than the Royal Navy. For purposes of Waterguard history, an account of the Customs down the ages can conveniently be divided into three periods, the first, from earliest times until 1671 when the Board of Commissioners was appointed; the second, from then until 1891 when the Waterguard was reconstituted in its present form; and the third, from then until the present day.

Early History - to 1671

As early as the year 742 A.D. Ethelbald, King of Mercia, is known to have granted the Bishop of London exemption from the Customs duties on certain goods being imported for a particular religious house. The text of this charter makes it clear that the Customs were already old or well-established dues. Their real origin is too old to discover for certain now, but the best opinion held that they were originally a toll-in-kind, imposed by custom. Hence, when they were later commuted for a money due, they were known as the "customary dues", or the "Customs".

Originally they were appropriated, at least in part, to the maintenance of the royal household, but by Norman days they had become a definite money due. At various times throughout the Middle Ages, the crown seems to have "let" the Customs "out to farm". This practice took various forms, but at its simplest an individual or a syndicate (e.g. a company of merchants, a borough corporation, or a group of "gold-merchants" or bankers) would undertake to pay the crown a "firm rent" in return for the privilege of collecting the Customs at a particular port, or group of ports.

The "smuggler" in these earliest days, may have operated by bringing his vessel into the remoter creeks; but as the organisation developed, he would no longer be able to rely upon escaping notice altogether. He would therefore have to have recourse to bribing the men whom the "farmers" had put in to collect the Customs for them. The main deterrent, however, to smuggling as we understand it to-day, was the fact that their particular form of rig (the square rig) the smuggler could not rely upon bringing a vessel in on any wind, and sailing her out again more or less forthwith, on the same wind.

The principal disadvantage to the Crown under the early ("farming") system was that the Collectors' staffs at the waterside had no particular reason to concern themselves with issues other than duty, for example, with security during time of war, or quarantine during time of plague.

However, some sort of system of control over shipping and trade was certainly established. Certain ports were approved for foreign trade, certain other ports for coastwise only. Ships were required to report their arrival and their cargo; they were subject to rummage, and had to obtain a permit to depart. In general, the groundwork was well established.

## Later History 1671 - 1891

After certain experiments, particularly by Cromwell, Charles II took the Customs finally out of farm in 1671. A Board of Commissioners was set up, and from then on all officers were responsible to the Crown directly through the Board.

The later seventeenth century saw two other developments important for the Waterguard, (1) the development of the fore-and-aft rig, which enabled vessels to sail in and out on more or less any wind, and (2) the engagement of England, through William of Orange, in the Continental wars, which forced up the rates of Customs duty. Thus, by reason of the technical developments or rigging, smuggling was greatly facilitated; and by raising so considerably the level of duties, smuggling was much encouraged; but on the other hand, by the re-organisation of the service, a disciplined force of professional Customs officers was brought into being, responsible immediately to the Crown.

The Service at the waterside was quickly developed. The Customs put a preventive service afloat. Particular ports were approved for the handling of dutiable cargoes of specified kinds. The minimum size of ships allowed to bring dutiable goods was fixed, also the minimum quantities (in one receptacle or packing) of spirits and tobacco. The object was to ensure that the ship was sufficiently large to be readily recognizable at sea, that her draught would be such that she could not run her cargo to shallow stretches or open beaches, and that the unit of cargo was large enough to be readily seen on board, and too large to be carried very conveniently by smugglers.

During the wars with Holland and Spain in the time of Queen Anne, continental trade had probably been brought to a low level, and more especially during the war with France (1793-1815). Although "legitimate" trading was practically stopped, there was considerable illicit trade between France and the Channel Islands and Great Britain.

The preventive service afloat, developed the "cutter rig", and declared war on the smuggler. The main trouble was, of course, that the smuggler found his greatest profit in time of war, operating not only against high duties, but also against the war-time restrictions and prohibitions. This was the very period when (before the time of police) fewer troops were available at home, and when the preventive service afloat would have to go off to the assistance of the Royal Navy.

During the Napoleonic war, for example, those English smugglers whom the romancers delight in, were being paid by the enemy to find a way through the British blockade. They were carrying into France British sovereigns for which Napoleon was willing to pay 27 or 28 shillings each. If they brought back their "swag" in the form of cheap brandy, it was because French francs were not only useless to them - they were evidence of their treachery. Napoleon himself said he kept English smugglers in his pay because they brought him English newspapers through the blockade, and news of where exactly the new Martello towers were being built. They smuggled letters to and from the spies he kept in England, and helped his spies to escape to France.

After Waterloo, a determined effort was made to suppress smuggling, which had increased to alarming heights. On the suggestion of the Admiralty the Customs Preventive Service afloat was transferred to the Royal Navy (1816) and a military "coast blockade" was imposed on Kent and Sussex. Neither of these experiments was really successful, and both served to interrupt the hitherto unbroken tradition of a revenue service with its own tradition. After so short a period as six years, the revenue cruisers were returned to the direct control of the Board (1822).

Where the army and navy had failed, the Waterguard went back. By their great devotion to duty - and there are some stirring tales of this period -

by their waterside experience, their keen application to the job, their detective skill, and their sheer physical courage, the Customs Waterguard before the middle of the century had broken the great smuggling racket.

It is particularly to be noted that it was precisely at this period, when the Customs Waterguard was practically at war in more than half of the maritime counties of this country, that they were at the same time building up, within their own organisation - at first informally and later more officially - just those services that are now the greatest pride of the seafaring community, the longshoremen, and the country at large, namely, the wreck salvage and life-saving services round the coast, the schemes for signalling from shore to vessels in distress, the provisions to finance and aid the organisation of regular pilotage, lighthouse and lightship service, and so forth.

When once the Customs had managed to reduce the coast to something like law and order, they shed, in 1856, those various non-revenue duties - which had by now become quite considerable - to a separate body, to be known as "The Coastguard", a confusing term, for the word had already been in use in the Customs with a slightly different meaning.

In the second half of the century, a period of relative quiet set in. Because of their very success in the suppression of smuggling, the Waterguard Branch came to be thought of less relative importance in the Customs service. In consequence, they were amalgamated with the Landing Staff and for a time lost their separate identity.

#### Current History, 1891 - date

As a result of a fairly comprehensive inquiry into the Customs Out-door Service in 1890 - 1, the Chancellor of the Exchequer (by a name now known as "the Goschen Minute") decided to separate the Landing and the Waterguard staffs, and to reconstitute the Waterguard service as a separate branch of the Customs establishment. The Chancellor had particularly in mind the value of rummaging which, he said "may be considered the first line of defence of the Customs revenue". Even in 1891, it could be said that "the size and the complicated construction of modern vessels tend to render such searching more difficult".

"It is necessary therefore to provide carefully for its due supervision, and the evidence of experienced officers, who had spent their lives in Waterguard work was given to the effect that rummaging cannot properly be supervised except by officers who have had practical experience of this duty themselves."

It will readily be seen that the importance of preventive work is conditioned by fiscal circumstances; the wider the range of dutiable goods and the easier these goods can be obtained and concealed, the more important is the duty of the rummager. To this must be added that since the re-introduction of duty based on the value of the article, evasion of Customs duty may be effected by false declarations as to its value - even by false claims that the particular article has been previously taken from this country and thereby qualified for re-admission free of duty.

Another important consideration is the vast increase in overseas travel. Even so recently as 1891, the foreign-going passengers were mainly of the wealthy and higher social classes, statesmen and diplomatic personages, important merchants, and military officers proceeding overland to a Mediterranean port thence to embark for distant Colonial destinations. In modern times, however, persons of almost every class are making journeys abroad by sea and air. These matters will be dealt with fully in other lectures but the reason for introducing them here is because the Waterguard has developed a technique - an attitude of mind - and that may proper be designated a tradition, in regard to their relations with the travelling public and the sailor of the Royal Navy and Merchant Navy, the yachtsman and fisherman. In an attempt to put this tradition into words, I would say the Waterguard realizes :-

First, that Preventive work is continuous - there is no off season - it is a war against the wrongdoer, in which there is no armistice; consequently where other workers may regard their duty discharged by the performance of this or that task, or defer a job until a later time or date, the Waterguard Officer must always recognise that a duty once neglected may later be beyond performance; the contraband be through; the irregularity committed without hope of discovery or recovery. This understanding is reflected in the Preventive Staff axiom, "The job first leisure and refreshment after;

Second, that Customs officers although armed with wide powers of search, etc. are public servants - civil servants in both senses of those terms - and that the unpleasant experience of "passing the Customs" must therefore be made as little irksome as possible to the traveller, that is, the work be conducted with good manners, consideration and tact.

Third, ships are the homes of sailors, and that while it may be necessary to trespass on the privacy of seamen - even to search diligently amongst their personal possessions - the duty can be performed with tact and consideration. Above all, scrupulous fairness and inviolable honesty must always distinguish the Customs Officers' relations with his "clients". The tradition for this relationship has been well and truly established and maintained, and is the only reason why it is an unheard of thing for Waterguard Officers to be obstructed in the performance of their duties.

A word of warning here. In the home, the school, and in imagination, it is customary to view life and people as they should be - rather than as they actually are. When you mix with men and deal with them in the hurly-burly of daily affairs, it is probable that you will be disappointed in this or that person or state of affairs, and disillusionment can be very painful. It cannot be claimed that every member of the Preventive Staff has all the desirable characteristics I have mentioned, therefore I warn and advise you to look always to the highest, to take as an example only the best, and by these means you will add your quota to the total credit of a body of servants, who, from rough beginnings, have built up a reputation for loyalty, integrity and obedience, of which all true Waterguard men are justly proud.