



REGISTER OF HERITAGE PLACES - ASSESSMENT DOCUMENTATION

11. ASSESSMENT OF CULTURAL HERITAGE SIGNIFICANCE

The criteria adopted by the Heritage Council in November 1996 have been used to determine the cultural heritage significance of the place.

11.1 AESTHETIC VALUE*

The three principal buildings of the complex have considerable aesthetic merit for the coherent nature and sophisticated quality of their architecture that appropriately reflects their official status. The engaging manner in which Customs House fronts onto the road, in contrast to the residence which is set back a distance, demonstrates an aspect of the buildings' different functions. (Criteria 1.1 & 1.4)

Geraldton Customs Complex has aesthetic value because of its streetscape contribution. Francis Street, and the immediate context that forms the older part of Geraldton, contains a large number of buildings of historic character and considerable visual appeal. Customs House, with its formal facade is a particularly important streetscape element within this context. (Criterion 1.3)

11.2. HISTORIC VALUE

Geraldton Customs Complex was established by the Commonwealth Government to provide improved customs facilities at the port of Geraldton and reflects the growth of both primary and secondary industries in and around Geraldton in the 1920s and 1930s. (Criterion 2.1)

Geraldton Customs Complex is associated with the port of Geraldton, which has played an important role in the development of the region. Australian Custom's involvement in the port activity has historically been of interest to locals and the wider community. (Criterion 2.1)

The place was the primary base for the Australian Navy's operations in the region during World War II. Customs staff were trained in explosion and demolition techniques to assist in defending Geraldton from attack. (Criterion 2.2)

Geraldton Customs Complex is representative of the Commonwealth Customs Department's activities in Western Australia. Customs facilities established under Western Australian colonial administrations were taken over by the

* For consistency, all references to architectural style are taken from Apperly, Richard; Irving, Robert and Reynolds, Peter *A Pictorial Guide to Identifying Australian Architecture: Styles and Terms from 1788 to the Present*, Angus & Robertson, North Ryde, 1989.

Commonwealth following Federation in 1901. The first customs facilities in Geraldton were established c. 1865 in Gregory Street. (Criteria 2.2 & 2.3)

11. 3. SCIENTIFIC VALUE

11. 4. SOCIAL VALUE

Geraldton Customs Complex is a place that has sentimental importance to former Customs and Excise staff who have worked there, many of whom have signed their name on the section of planking bearing the name of the ship *Stanford*. (Criterion 4.1)

12. DEGREE OF SIGNIFICANCE

12. 1. RARITY

One of a number of Customs facilities established in Western Australia, *Geraldton Customs Complex* is uncommon as it represents a complex of customs related facilities that continue to be used for their original purpose. Others were established at Fremantle, Albany, Bunbury, Busselton, Esperance, Cossack, Broome and Derby. (Criteria 5.1 & 5.2)

12. 2 REPRESENTATIVENESS

There is evidence to suggest that *Geraldton Customs Complex* is representative of other customs facilities that were built in Australia to a similar design. The Sub-Collector's residence at Bunbury, for example, is understood to be built from the same plans as Geraldton. (Criterion 6.1)

Geraldton Customs House represents ongoing customs facilities in Geraldton since c. 1865, when the first Customs House was built in Gregory Street. Customs facilities established throughout Western Australia under colonial administrations and taken over by the Commonwealth following Federation in 1901. (Criterion 6.2)

12. 3 CONDITION

The three principal buildings forming the *Geraldton Customs Complex* are in good condition, evidently being maintained regularly. The only building fabric problem of any consequence relates to the paintwork which is blistering and flaking in select locations. Traces of rust also noted on the roof of King's Warehouse but do not appear to be problematic at this stage.

12. 4 INTEGRITY

Having been used continuously as a customs facility since it was built, *Geraldton Customs Complex* has a very high degree of integrity. Few changes have been made to the building fabric which irreversibly effects the place's significant qualities. Those building fabric changes which have occurred are generally in keeping with the historic functioning of the place.

12. 5 AUTHENTICITY

Much of the building fabric is in a state that compares closely to its original condition. The most significant changes to the place are the extension of Customs House, modifications to the King's Warehouse, change of colour schemes (internally and externally) and internal furnishings. Even so, it is surprising that a number of artifacts relating to the very early history of the place have survived to the present, including the front counter (fixed), a desk calendar, and section of timber bearing the name of the ship *Stanford*.

13. SUPPORTING EVIDENCE

This assessment was commissioned by the Department of Finance and Administration, Commonwealth of Australia. The documentary evidence has been compiled by Erica Rowley and Julie Mackay. The physical evidence has been compiled by Ian Boersma of Palassis Architects.

13.1 DOCUMENTARY EVIDENCE

Customs Operations and Duties in Australia - Brief Overview

Customs has always played a vital yet somewhat hidden part in the history of Australia. The responsibility for movement in and out of Australia of people, goods, ships and aircraft has always been that of the Customs Offices. In Australia a united Customs Department has existed only since Federation, for 72 years prior to this the individual States' policies and procedures differed but were ultimately controlled from London.¹ Western Australia was the only exception; they were self regulating from the time of first settlement.

Federation for the new nation of Australia was a time of great turmoil. The Customs Department was one of the first state based services to transfer to the Commonwealth, and under the new Constitution, all responsibilities of the individual state Custom services were to be amalgamated and 'passed to the Executive Government of the Commonwealth'.² Initially there were many problems and inconsistencies between state procedures, but the early adoption of policies from a report by H.N.P. Wallaston formed the basis for the National Customs Department.³

There was a belief that a united Customs Department would better enforce the 'laws designed to protect and promote the security and prosperity of the new nation'.⁴ The Department's perceived ability to regulate the immigration of non-white migrants, and the introduction of national tariffs to protect the new economic status quo, lead many to believe that the Customs Department would become the new strong arm of enforcement for the nation.⁵

The role of Customs in Australia is an important one. Indeed, customs and excise duties contribute up to twenty percent of the Australian Governments revenues each year.⁶ Over the years, the Customs Department has increasingly become more recognised for its control of the illegal importation and export of native wildlife, illicit drugs and illegal migrants.

¹ Roberts, C., *'History of Australian Customs Service in Western Australia 1832-1988'*, unpublished M.A. Thesis, 1989, p. 8.

² *'Australia's Constitution together with an Introduction and Overview'*, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, 1995, p. 29.

³ Roberts, op. cit., p. 9.

⁴ Day, D., *'Contraband & Controversy - The Customs History of Australia from 1901'*, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, 1996, p. 4.

⁵ *ibid.*, p. 4.

⁶ Roberts, op. cit., p. 8. This was the situation in 1988. Further research is required to establish whether this is still the case in 1998.

History of Geraldton Brief - Overview

In the 1850's, the Victoria District (incorporating the Irwin and Greenough River areas, Champion Bay - later Geraldton - and the area north to present Northampton) was the northern-most outpost of Western Australia.

The Port Town of Geraldton was declared in 1850, at the same time that transportation of convicts to Western Australia commenced. Geraldton was named after Governor Fitzgerald and the area in the vicinity of *Geraldton Customs Complex* was laid out early in the town's history. The streets in this vicinity bear the names of the Gregory brother's, Francis and Augustus. Augustus Gregory was Assistant Surveyor of the Colony and together with Francis in the 1840's and 1850's, opened up the Greenough, Gascoyne and Ashburton Districts for pastoral pursuits.⁷

People had began to settle around the Geraldton area in the 1840's. These settlers were generally experienced pastoralists who came across from the York District. This settlement around Geraldton was strongly resisted by Aboriginal people in the area.⁸ In the decades between 1840 and 1900 many explorers such as John Forrest, set out from Geraldton to explore the inland regions.⁹

Geraldton has been an established port town since this time. Its primary purpose has been to service the surrounding Victoria District's many differing industries as a point for export and as an early transportation route. Lead and copper mining commenced around the Northampton Region in the 1850's. Port Gregory was used as the mineral port whilst in 1879 the first public railway in Western Australia was opened from Geraldton to Northampton. Geraldton then became the main shipping point for produce of the area including wheat, wool and minerals.

Although the Great Depression of the 1930's impacted on the community of Geraldton there were several major advances for the town. In 1930, Cuming Smith - Mt Lyell Farmers Fertilisers Ltd. commenced operations producing superphosphate. Cray fishing also commenced about this time and the first harbour berth was officially opened for shipping, by 1933 the second and third harbour berths were completed. The main export item was wheat, contributing eighty percent (80%) of trade. In 1936, a bulk grain handling plant was added to the port's facilities.

First Geraldton Customs Facility

The first officially recorded Customs facility in Geraldton was built between 1863 and 1867.¹⁰ It faced Gregory Street and the 'cellars under were used as Her Majesty's Bond'.¹¹ Both the Bond Store and Court House were constructed of limestone with corrugated iron roofs and steep verandahs.¹² The address for this place is recorded at No. 283 Marine Terrace and the Bond Store was at right angles to the Court House which faced into Marine Terrace.

⁷ Stannage, T. (ed), 'A New History of Western Australia', University of Western Australia Press, Nedlands, 1981, p. 95.

⁸ Stannage, op. cit., p. 97.

⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰ Halley, E.M., 'The Old Court House Geraldton' The Western Australia Historical Society Inc., 1945.

¹¹ *ibid.*

¹² Photographic Archive City of Geraldton Negative No. 882FFF.

The buildings did not only cater for Government business. During the late 1920's these buildings were used by many community organisations including the CWA and Scouts. This bond store was demolished circa 1945 and the site is now occupied by the Department of Agriculture.¹³

During the period from c. 1929 to 1935, the Customs office operated from the Geraldton Public Office Building which was constructed in 1897 on the site of the former Police Barracks in Marine Terrace, opposite the Railway Reserve.¹⁴ Goods under bond were stored in a warehouse owned by Messrs Burns Philip & Co. Ltd. for a fee of forty pounds (£40) per annum.¹⁵

By late 1929 however, the space in the Public Building had become inadequate for Customs requirements. The massive growth of industry in Geraldton and the surrounding districts during the early 1920's lead the State Collector of Customs to begin lobbying the Federal Government for funds to purchase land and erect a new customs office and bond store complex in Geraldton.¹⁶

By the 1930's Geraldton had become a booming port town. The construction of three new berths in the harbour, the establishment of the new Shell installation plant and the increased export of superphosphate, wheat, vegetables and minerals added further weight to the argument for a new customs office and bond store.

Customs House, Kings Warehouse and Sub-Collector's Residence

The present Customs House and King's Warehouse located at Lot 65 Francis Street, Geraldton, were constructed in 1935. Correspondence in the Australian Archives Files provides evidence that the site was purchased in 1929 in the name of the Sub-Collector for Geraldton, Carson. Carson purchased the lot in his own name, stating in correspondence that because of the escalation of land values in Geraldton at the time, the attempt to purchase land by Australian Customs led to a further inflation of the price of the land.¹⁷

The purchase of the lot from Denis Ahern for £1,250 was finalised in August 1929.¹⁸ The Department of Customs then rented the land back to the former owner (Ahern) who was using the property to store building materials. A small stone cottage existed on the lot and this was demolished with the construction of the Customs Office. There was some discussion regarding the retention of the cottage but it was determined that the cost of making it secure was too high.¹⁹ The approval to proceed with the construction of the Customs Office and King's Warehouse was granted in 1934.

The drawings for the buildings were prepared by the Commonwealth Department of Works, Works Services Branch Perth. The building contract was awarded to T. P. Crothers, a local building firm for the sum of £1,935.²⁰ The residence, constructed in 1936, was built for approximately £1,650, the estimate being based on the cost of the staff residence for the Geraldton Post

¹³ Halley, op. cit.

¹⁴ Wilson, H.H., '*Geraldton Sketchbook*', Rigby, Adelaide, 1976.

¹⁵ AAC33/34-16.

¹⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁷ AA File 76-31

¹⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁹ AA C33/34-16

²⁰ *ibid.*

Master General.²¹ It is not confirmed whether T. P. Crothers was also awarded this contract.

Although there are subtle variations between the styles of the three buildings comprising the complex (Customs House, King's Warehouse and Sub-Collector's Residence) the original drawings show that they were designed and built at the same time, during 1935/6.²²

The Geraldton Sub-Collector had some input into the final design and construction including the use of clay tiles for the roof in place of the proposed corrugated iron sheeting and the inclusion of a water tank. His suggestion was based on the experience from elsewhere in Geraldton where corrugated iron had proved unable to withstand the stresses induced by the salt air. The brick used in construction were made locally, but were considered by Customs Officials to be of poor quality. It was determined to offset this by cement rendering the place.²³ Other requests such as a road set back and inclusion of verandahs were not met. By the 29 July 1935, the new buildings had been sufficiently completed to allow staff to move in.²⁴

With the outbreak of World War II, thousands of service men were stationed in Geraldton and the Navy's catalinas and other craft used the port. The Customs House played an important part in the Nation's war effort at the time. Throughout this period, the Navy used the Customs Office as its primary base in the region. The King's Warehouse was utilised as a co-ordination point for investigation after the disappearance of the HMAS *Sydney* in 1941.

Federal Customs staff were classified as 'Serving in a Reserved Occupation' during the course of the War and thereby were not enlisted in the armed forces.²⁵ Yet they also played an important part during the war. The Sub-Collector at the time interviewed the survivors from the wreck of the *Kormoran*, the German ship believed to be involved with the disappearance HMAS *Sydney*.²⁶ Furthermore, throughout the War years all supplies including goods and aviation fuel (undutied) for the Armed Forces stationed in Geraldton, were handled by the Customs Office.²⁷

The threat of an attack on the Geraldton harbour was considered to be a real possibility to authorities and the Customs staff under went training in explosion and demolition techniques to blow-up the Shell fuel installations in the event of an invasion. Indeed, this threat proved not to be so far fetched when Port Gregory was bombed in 1943. By 1944 however, the Navy was

²¹ *ibid.*

²² Copies of the original drawings can be found in HCWA File PD 3940.

²³ AA C33/34-16

²⁴ *ibid.*

²⁵ Jarvis, M. 'The *Deil's Awa' Wi' the Exciseman'* Early Days Journal and Proceedings of the Royal Western Australian Historical Society (Inc.) Vol. 10, Part 4, Nedlands, 1992, pp. 26-27.

²⁶ Jarvis, Melville, pers. comm. 11.02.1998. In relation to the involvement of the Geraldton Customs Office and Geraldton Police Department in the disappearance of the HMAS *Sydney*, it is interesting to note that the archival records for the period circa 1942 to mid-1950's are not housed in Western Australia. It may be that these records are held in Canberra by the Department of Defence as a consequence of the Naval occupation of the place during the War years. Australian Archives staff in Western Australia stated that the Geraldton police records for the same period are also not housed in Western Australia and that there is a possibility of them having been destroyed.

²⁷ *ibid.*, p. 26.

able to withdraw from the Bond Store and it returned to its old use as a Customs storage facility.

Historical photographs and the original drawings for Customs House and the King's Warehouse show them as two separate buildings, today the buildings are joined by an extension to the rear of the Customs Office. Drawings for these extensions are dated to 1979.

In late 1959 and early 1960, the Customs Office, King's Warehouse and Sub-Collector's Residence underwent major repairs including painting throughout, rewiring, repairs to the rendering and the enclosing of the verandah of the Staff Residence.²⁸

The place continues to be operated and used by Federal Customs Officers to this day. Pieces of its history are displayed throughout the building, including photographs, plaques, the original counter and a piece of the wreck of the *Stanford* remains mounted above the fire place from when Customs was involved in its salvage.

13.2 PHYSICAL EVIDENCE

Geraldton Customs Complex consists of three principal buildings which occupy 7 - 9 Francis Street, Geraldton, and includes an office (Customs House), bond store (King's Warehouse) and residence. A degree of consistency exists in the scale, massing and external detailing of the three buildings, rendering the complex a unified appearance.

Francis Street extends from Marine Terrace on the city's waterfront, south-east towards the outer fringe of the old township. Buildings along the street are characteristically of an early type, many appearing to predate the First World War. A weatherboard cottage of circa 1900 is located adjacent to Customs House on the north-west side, and is set back a short distance from the road. Opposite Customs House, and on the corner of Marine Terrace, is a small scale service station which would appear to date circa 1960. The Sub-Collector's residence is located on the south-east side of Customs House, set back some distance from the road and without a fence separating it from Customs House.

In terms of its architecture, the residence is carefully considered. Construction of the residence is summarised as follows:

- Marseille pattern terracotta tile cladding over timber roof structure;
- wide, boxed eaves;
- double leaf brickwork walls, externally rendered and painted, internally plastered;
- double-hung sash windows, upper sashes with multiple panes.
- timber floors;
- enclosed porch projecting to the street front, with large arched openings. This feature is related to the architectural style defined as *Interwar Mediterranean*;²⁹

²⁸ AA C59/60-909.

²⁹ Apperly, R. et al. op. cit., pp. 172 - 175.

- except for the porch, the residence is thoroughly domestic in appearance, and similar to other dwellings erected in Western Australia around that time (houses of a comparable design may be found in Nedlands, Dalkeith and South Perth).

Customs House is a long, narrow building that fronts onto the sidewall of Francis Street and extends back to join onto the King's Warehouse near the back of the property. The building has a formal facade featuring symmetry and simple classical motifs the sum of which relates to the architectural style defined as *Inter-war Stripped Classical*.³⁰ Side elevations of the office are of a plainer treatment, domestic in appearance. Construction characteristics of Customs House are summarised as follows:

- Marseille pattern terracotta tile cladding over timber roof structure;
- narrow, boxed eaves with coffered lining;
- double leaf brickwork walls, externally rendered and painted, internally plastered;
- internal wall dividing passage from offices stud construction, with louvred windows;
- double-hung sash windows, the sashes featuring margin glazing;
- double front doors with fanlight over, opening into the main reception area via a small vestibule;
- two stages of construction, externally evident from vertical joints in the side walls, internally evident from the detailing of the joinery, floor materials and ceiling treatment;
- timber floors in the old section, concrete floors in the newer section;
- coffered plasterboard ceilings in the old section, plain ceilings with coved cornices in the newer section.

The King's Warehouse is a utilitarian structure that appears to have originally been a large store room. In its present state the building has a number of divisions, some of which extend to ceiling height. Access to the building may be gained through a doorway leading from the Customs House passage or through a set of external double doors in the west elevation. In terms of its material character and massing, the building relates closely to the other buildings on the site. Its detailing is, however, plainer than either Customs House or the residence. Construction characteristics of the King's Warehouse are summarised as follows:

- corrugated galvanised iron sheet cladding over timber roof structure;
- narrow, boxed eaves with coffered lining;
- double leaf brickwork walls, externally rendered and painted, internally painted;
- internal dividing walls of stud wall and of concrete breeze block construction;

³⁰ ibid., pp. 164 - 167.

- double-hung sash windows facing east, with single pane sashes. Also high level horizontal rows of fixed pane windows on north elevation (to wet areas);
- asbestos sheet ceiling;
- floor of in-situ concrete on fill;
- double doors in west facing elevation (positioned to facilitate loading).

Gardens within the complex are limited to the area surrounding the residence, and is of little interest. Most of the south side of the Customs House and King's Warehouse is occupied by a bitumen parking area, the area behind the warehouse contains a lean-to garage and dog quarantine compound, and the strip of ground on the north side of these buildings consists of unkept grass and bushes.

Customs facilities were established in Fremantle, Perth and regional centres from the 1830s. Extant buildings in 1998 include: Albany Bonded Warehouse; Bunbury Customs House and Bond Store (1896; no longer used for customs purposes; newer buildings now used for customs purposes); Fremantle Customs House (1908; no longer used for customs purposes); Esperance Bonded Store (1911); Derby Customs Manager's House (1927); Busselton Custom Officer's House (1854); Broome Customs House (1889; now the Broome Historical Society Museum; newer buildings now used for customs purposes); and, Cossack Customs House and Bond Store (1895).

13.3 REFERENCES

Australian Archives (Western Australian Branch):

- File 76/31, Customs House and Residence Lot 65 Francis Street Geraldton.
- File 68/105, 65 Francis Street - Economic Review.
- Item C33/34-16, Geraldton Customs House Erection.
- Micro Fiche, original proposal plans for Customs Office, Kings Bond and Residence, Lot 65 Francis Street, Geraldton.

City of Geraldton Public Library, Photographic Archive, Negative No. 882FFF (Court House / Clerk of Courts Residence building exterior, Marine Terrace, c.1930).

Commonwealth of Australia - Department of Works - Works Services Branch:

- File K1201/1 WA 1160 Box 1 JOB 244/98 -
- File K1201/1 WE 13085 Box 02 JOB 244/98
- File K1201/1 WA 1206 Box 1 JOB 244/98.

Public Records Office:

Public Works Department Records Western Australia (PWDWA):

847, 848, 849, 850, 26391, 4641, 743, 5257/58/59, 5486 (Book 1), 5487 (Book 2).

13.4 FURTHER RESEARCH

Few details are available of operations that were handled by the Geraldton Customs branch and the numerous Customs staff who have worked at Geraldton. A record of significant events and persons associated with the place has the potential to increase visitor and occupant appreciation of the place, as well as establish its social significance.