

The Customs House building located at 1 Watt Street, Newcastle is the base of the Customs Department for the Port of Newcastle. Continuously occupied from 1827 by the Customs Department, the building has been of great cultural and historical significance to the Newcastle Region. It displays the architectural genius of James Barnett, renowned as one of Australia's most distinguished architects, symbolising the relationship between the Port of Newcastle. The building is a fine example of the late 19th Century with the Time Ball and the Clock.

REGIONAL HISTORY RESEARCH PAPER.

ESSAY.

With a growing shipping industry the Port of Newcastle received its first Customs Officer in 1827, who operated from a small cottage along the Hunter River. Before taking up residence in their present location, the Customs service was housed at a number of temporary premises. Local agitation and "Customs House, Newcastle." demands to have the temporary premises replaced by a permanent building. The Newcastle Chronicle highlighted the need for a new Customs building when it wrote, "... Having found the narrow entrance, and broken his way in climbing the stone steps, he finds himself in a gloomy, gloomy cavern, the extent of which he vainly endeavours to penetrate, as nothing but the blackness of darkness is in front of him..."

In 1871 the Government accepted a Tender from a Mr. Fox to construct a new Customs building. The contract price was 7,000 pounds and the construction was to be of fifteen months duration. "The wooden coal offices at the bottom of Watt Street, have, within the last few days, been removed from their original position... to the creation of the new Customs House being proceeded with by the contractor Mr. Fox..." Mr. Fox did not meet his obligations and new Tenders were called in May 1874 before the tender of Messrs. Jennings and Parliester was accepted.

Terry Muir.

1. The beginnings of Customs, Newcastle Customs File number: 1812-110.
2. The Newcastle Chronicle, 14 May 1874.
3. Conservation Plan for Newcastle Customs, 1988, p.10.
4. The Newcastle Chronicle, 11 July 1874.

The Customs House building located at 1 Watt Street, Newcastle is the base of the Customs Department for the Port of Newcastle. Continuously occupied from 1877 by the Customs Department, the building has been of great cultural and historical significance to the Newcastle Region. It displays the architectural genius of James Barnet, renowned as one of Australia's most distinguished Architects, symbolising the relationship between Shipping and the Port of Newcastle. The building also exhibits technical achievement of the late 19th Century with the Time Ball and the Clock.

With a growing shipping industry the Port of Newcastle received it's first Customs Offocer in 1827,¹ who operated from a small cottage along the Hunter River. Before taking up residence in their present location, the Customs service was housed at a number of temporary premises. Local agitation and increased shipping pushed demands to have the temporary facilities upgraded. An article appearing in the Newcastle Chronicle highlighted the need for a new Customs building when it wrote, "... having found the narrow entrance, and broken his shins in climbing the stone steps, he finds himself in a square, gloomy cavern, the extent of which he vainly endeaviurs to penetrate, as² nothing but the blackness of darkness is in front of him..."²

In 1871 the Government accepted a Tender from a Mr. Fox to construct a new Customs building. The contract price was 7,000 pounds and the construction was to be of fifteen months duration. " The wooden coal offices at the bottom of Watt Street, have, within the last few days, been removed from their original position preparatory to the erection of the new Custom House being proceeded with by the contractor Mr. Fox..."³ Mr. Fox did not meet his obligations and new Tenders were called in May 1874 before the tender of Messrs. Jennings and Pallister was accepted.

1. The beginning of Customs, Newcastle Customs File number 85/085120.
2. The Newcastle Chronicle, 14 May 1874.
3. Conservation Plan for Newcastle Customs, 1988, p.10.
4. The Newcastle Chronicle, 11 July 1874.

The design for the new Customs House was completed by James Barnet who carried on the tradition of the grand Custom House. The "Grand Custom House", evolved in Great Britain as a symbol of Royal prerogative and commercial prestige. Australian architects of the 19th century adhered to the British tradition by representing the grand Custom House as, "the business houses of a Royal and Imperial enterprise..."⁵

As construction neared completion The Newcastle Daily Pilot reported, "...when completed this edifice, will for elegance of design, bear comparison with any in the Colony. One week later, the building was completed which was celebrated by the contractors, the labourers and a small number of invited guests. Of the celebration it was said that, "... champagne flowed almost as freely as water, and everyone appeared to thoroughly enjoy themselves..." On completion the total amount expended on the new building totalled 6,401 pounds fifteen shillings and nine pence.

The public, [?] leas^d that their new Customs House was completed became frustrated by the passing of twelve months before the building was occupied. The new Customs House finally opened for business on the 5 November 1877. This brought much relief to the public who quite concerned by the fact that the building was occupied by goats who appeared to be the only party interested in the building as they, "... have found the large verandah an excellent place of shelter, and it may be imagined the condition they leave it in..."

One outstanding features of the Customs House is the Time Ball sitting atop the building's spire. Also designed by James Barnet it is a device that was used in major Ports of the world for rating ships chronometers in the 19th and early 20th centuries. The Ball was installed following the wreck of the barque Douglas on Elizabeth Reef when the Captain of the vessel believed his position was ten miles east of the reef. The Customs House Ball replaced the original Ball that was situated at the rear of the Telegraph office at the corner of Watt and Hunter Streets. The Customs House Ball first dropped on the 21 february 1878. It is positioned one hundred and twenty

5. H. Russell, British Tradition and Australia's Grand Customs Houses, University of Queensland, 1981, p. 2.
6. The Newcastle Daily Pilot, 19 October 1876.
7. Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners Advocate, 27 October, 1876.
8. Conservation Plan for Newcastle Customs, 1988, p.11.
9. Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners Advocate, 25 April, 1877.

feet atop the building's spire. At 12.55 p.m. the Ball was raised to the top of the mast. Five minutes later at 1.00 p.m., synchronised with the firing of a gun it would drop. This action allowed ships to set their chronometers. The Time Ball operated for sixty three years without overhaul and survived ninety four years before the top of the mast was damaged during a gale in 1972.¹⁰ In 1987 restoration work commenced on the ball and today it is fully operational.

Another feature which dominates the architecture of the Customs House is the Clock. The clock, manufactured by Mr. Tornaghi from Sydney, was installed in 1879. Mr. Tornaghi claimed, "... the clock will be found equal, if not superior to the clock in the Sydney Post Office..."¹¹ The townsfolk who had eagerly awaited it's installation, "welcomed the sonorous yet somewhat lugubrious tones of the long expected Town Clock were heard reverberating in the atmosphere of the city in regular succession..."¹² The novelty soon eroded as, "... the question now asked everywhere is whether Newcastle is compelled to have that sepulchral, trap-door, blue-fire, enter demon like gong, funeral execution, death like knell tolled every hour in the day... perhaps some foreign going Captain might be induced to take it to the North Pole and drop it overboard."¹³

The Customs House has survived with little incident apart from the fire of 1959. The fire damaged two floors of the building as well as the roof. The damage bill was 13,000 pounds.¹⁴

The historical value of the Custom House was noted when it received listing by the National Trust in 1968. This classification was upgraded in April 1976. It is an historic landmark in Newcastle in regard to its location, construction and structure. It stands as a symbol of the growth of the city of Newcastle and the regions ties with the shipping industry. Today the Customs Officers clear as many as seven hundred visiting ships a year.

10. Conservation Plan for Newcastle Customs House, 1988, p.61.
11. Newcastle Morning Herald, 7 July, 1879.
12. Newcastle Morning Herald, 17 July, 1879.
13. Newcastle Morning Herald, 24 July, 1879.
14. Conservation Plan for Newcastle Customs House, 1988, pp34-35.

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NEWCASTLE REGIONAL HISTORY RESEARCH PAPER.

Informant's name: Captain James Fletcher.
Subject: "Customs House, Newcastle."
Date of Interview. 6 September 1989.
Interviewer's name: Terry Muir
Reference: Open Foundation.
Number of Tapes: One. (1).

Informant: Captain James Fletcher.
Interview: Terry Muir
Reference: Open Foundation TM/JF 1.

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Q Good morning Mr. Fletcher.

JF Morning.

Q Captain Fletcher should I say.

JF Oh it doesn't matter, call me Jim.

Q Jim, Customs in Newcastle first began in 1827, do you know much about that at all.

JM Well, yes, the first idea of having a Customs in Newcastle came from the Commandant Gilman and in 1824 when on the occasion of a bit of smuggling by a man named Grimes in the brig Fame...had him communicate with Sydney asking for a Naval Officer to be installed in Newcastle. A Naval officer was virtually the controller of Customs at the time he was also the controller of all shipping in the Port virtually the Captain of the Port of Sydney and also the head of Customs in Sydney. And following that nothing happened for a number of years and John Rushmore was appointed Landing Waiter in 1827. Landing Waiter was an old term that goes back through the history of the Customs service to the early days. It was also called Tide Waiter at various times. We've had some notable landing waiters in Australia, one in particular was Frederick Garling a great Maritime artist who painted every ship of note that came into Sydney from 1836 to 1870. But it was a very important position - acting in small areas as what would be the Collector of Customs or Sub Collector.

Q So did Mr. Rushmore take up his position.

JM Well no he didn't take up his position because the unfortunate man become insolvent and being insolvent he was unable to become a Government service so they had to come to some other arrangement to replace him. At the same time as him becoming insolvent William Eckford who had been Pilot in Newcastle from 1818 had retired because of his age reaching the age of sixty. And - the heads of Government decided that they could save a lot of money by combining the position of Pilot with that of Landing Waiter. So as a result Arnold Fisk, a well known Ship Master in the Pacific and Tasmanian Trader, former settler in Tasmania had fallen on hard times, was appointed Pilot in Newcastle and Landing Waiter.

Q Yes, Mr Fisk only lasted one year though.

JF Yes, yes his health failed him unfortunately and he died leaving his wife and a large family, but he was so well thought of - amongst the shipping community and others that there was much subscription up and down the country or the support of his wife and family and they responded very well.

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- Q Of course Customs weren't housed in the building in which they are now. Do you know where they started.
- JF Yes, it's said that the first building that they used and it was probably correct was the building that was an Inn owned by Robert Coram Dillon, the Crooked Billett.(sic)
- Q The Crooked Billett you say.
- JF Yes the Crooked Billett.The Crooked Billett was situated in Morgan Street, what they termed Morgan Street at the time. And Dillon had held the Licence a couple of years - he was a co owner with John Bengle in the ship Eclipse which was carried away by convicts in Newcastle some time earlier and he also had property up in Hinton and ...
- Q I believe there was a number of people from the public voicing dissatisfaction with Customs premises. There was a lobby or something to have the new building built.. Do you know much about that.
- JF Yes, in the- somewhere about 46 they advanced a thousand pound to build a new building but nothing happened until the present building was built in 73.
- Q That was when they called for Tenders.
- JF Yes they called for tenders in 73 and the building was built under the direction of the Government Architect Mr Barnet.
- Q And they built it on the site of the old convicts lumber yard.
- JF Yes the old site is an historic site. It goes back to - originally it was a lumber yard where the timber was stored prior to shipment for to Sydney - the - timber being cut up the river by the convicts and floated down in logs.
- Q There's a lot of talk around town, or there was at the time, some people say that the building was made of bricks that came from the ballast of ships visiting the harbour. Is that correct?
- JF I think that's very unlikely. There have been ships(sic)houses) built by bricks got from the ballast at Stockton coming from the San Francisco earthquake and fire the latter part of the last century but for a building of this magnitude it's most unlikely and of course the quality of the bricks alone show that they haven't suffered the damage of being used before. I think you'll find that's just a bit of a fallacy.

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- Q One of the Custom's officers over the years, or a number of them there have been a number of important, people probably no more important than Sir Henry Parkes.
- JF Yes Sir Henry Parkes was there for a number of years in the 1840's. He writes a bit about his times in Newcastle he claims that he worked very hard there. However he resigned in about 46, there has been said, claimed that he resigned just to avoid being dismissed. However in later years when he was a Colonial Secretary he had his revenge when he suspended the Collector of Customs in Sydney, a Mr Duncan. Whether Mr. Duncan was an old associate in his previous days, I don't know. (laughs)
- Q So apparently he got his revenge anyway.
- JF Apparently he got his revenge against the Department, yes.
- Q Do you know whereabouts in Customs Mr Parkes served, in what building
- JF No I don't know where he was at the time...
- Q That's fine.
- JF The little I have on him, he doesn't say where he was residing.
- Q One of the main architectural points of the building is the time clock and time ball. Apparently you have a wonderful story about the Time Ball. Have you ever seen it in action.
- JF Oh yes, I've used the Time Ball when I was a junior officer in ships here. Of course at the time when I was at sea we got our time signals by radio but quite often when the ship was laid up for sometime and you would be standing by you'd have no radio officer and we'd check the chronometer at every available opportunity. That had to be done regularly and we would check the chronometer by the Time Ball at Newcastle when we were laying alongside the wharves there.
- Q Did you ever hear the gun fire.
- JF No I never heard the gun fired, I think that finished long before my time. But it has been claimed that it was a bit of a nuisance to some of the residents in that they claimed that it kept their children awake when it was fired but as it was fired in the middle of the day I can't see the reason for that.
- Q Do you recall the gale in 1972 when the clock, sorry the Time Ball was damaged.
- JF No I wasn't here in that time, (laughs), I'm not quite that old.

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Q No, 1972.

JF Oh 1972, oh yes the Signa gale, yes of course yes, I'd forgotten about that. No I do remember the gale in that time, it was a very vicious gale, very bad time. I'd retired but there were a lot of ships were in trouble including the major wreck the Signa; it's remains still there on the beach.

Q Another important part of the old, of the new Customs House was the Seamens shed. What was the function of that.

JF Yes on the eastern boundary there was a vacant block of land there, it was covered with bitumen and the seamen would assemble there waiting to be picked up for the ships. They would stand in line like a slave market and the Officer would come along and select whichever seamen he required for the ships. I've been on both ends of the line, I've been on the line myself and I've been one of the pickers.

Q There's also a story of a lavatory that used to be situated out the back of the building.

JF Yes, yes that was a very important part of the, of the Customs House. The appointments for the seamen to be paid off or signed on were quite usually for certain times and quite often they would have to wait or sometime before their appointment come off and with a result they would resort to the Great Northern or the George and they would ^{imagine} enrive a few and by the time they come to the Shipping Masters office which was in the Eastern wing of the building they would find need for a lavatory and this lavatory was in the centre of the Courtyard in the back of the Customs House. I can assure you that it was very well patronised..

Q You yourself worked in the building at some stage.

JF Yes I from time to time I served as assistant Harbour Master in the first floor and I loved the old building, it was very nice up there in the old days. It considered, consisted of two large rooms. The western room was the harbour masters room. It had a great long table in it, it could be used as a board room from time to time and the second room was the assistant harbour masters room. It had a great long table in it, thick cedar, it must have been about inch and a half, two inches thick in the top and about six foot wide and probably about fifteen foot long. All one plank down the centre or it was probably joined in two sections in the centre and it had been knocked about over the years quite a lot but in later years it was sent down to Sydney and they restored it back to it's pristine glory and it was a beautiful thing, I often wonder what happened to it.

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- Q Yes it would be interesting to know what did happen to those tables.
- JF It would be yes. The furnishings around the place were the architraves and the skirtings and all that were all cedar and they were all varnished. It was a beautiful building.
- Q When the new building was completed can you recall from your work and your history research that you've done, was Customs a respected organisation in Newcastle.
- JF Was it a...
- Q Respected organisation.
- JF Oh yes it was always, yes.
- Q What was their main duties in the 1800's
- JF Well their main duties were handling the business of Custom duties on goods imported and exported and for the preventive duties were important also but of course in the earlier days the smuggling was mainly spirits or something like that. Drugs were practically unknown until comparatively recent years. I can remember an occasion when I came back from a voyage across the pacific and one of our crew was picked up smuggling opium. Oh well opium was the only drug known in those days. Cocaine and all these other drugs of today were not known at all and anyway this fellow was prosecuted and they expelled him from the Union.
- Q The building itself has undergone some changes too.
- JF I beg your pardon.
- Q The building itself has undergone some changes. Things like the original picket fence have gone
- JF Yes - in my time the iron fence was still round there. It was very nice but it was getting pretty rusty and for some reason or another instead of restoring it they removed it some years ago. I think they removed it before the cleaning of the building. The building was steam cleaned down and then it was coated with silicone and has remained beautifully clean ever since..
- Q Do you know when that occurred...
- JF It was pretty filthy before that. I can't remember exactly when the building was done.

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Q Another change...

JF I should imagine about fifteen years ago now.

Q Another change to the building is the Courtyard out the front. That never used to exist. Apparently the water line used to be barely in front of the building.

JF Yes that's right. It's apparent it's all been extended with a- to it's advantage too, it looks much better now.

Q They filled that in with rock and reclaimed the land did they.

JF Oh you mean reclaimed land, yes. The beach ran very close, in the early days the beach ran very close to where the Customs House is now and extended around half moon circle to where the Pilots Station is and all that area has been reclaimed in there which is the railway land, was all reclaimed, - there was a little bay kept leading up between what was the Watt Street Wharf which extended out and where the Customs House is they retained that for some time as a boat harbour and there was a bridge underneath the wharf as they built the wharf down from the extension of the Watt Street down to the Pilot Station. They brought sand down from the sandhills and ballast from the ships and filled up and reclaimed the whole lot of the area and eventually they filled in the little boat harbour area that was between the wharf and reclaimed area.

Q So the majority of the rock and so forth involved came out of the ballast from the ships.

JF Yes, yes.

Q Do you know where that rock came from.

JF Well it came from all parts of the world. The same as the ballast around Stockton. All the ballast area around Stockton with the exception of that around the southern end which came out of the bottom of the harbour. The western side of Stockton is practically all ballast from all countries of the world.

Q There's a lot of talk about the ballast coming from San Francisco.

JF Yes there was a lot of ballast come from San Francisco with some very interesting artifacts coming in it- still being found from time to time. One of the most interesting artifacts we got didn't come from San Francisco, it came from New Zealand. It's a little gun that's up at the Maritime Museum at the present time. It was recovered by friends of mine and we took it up there and restored it and mounted it and it was said to be used in the Maori wars of the 1860,s and it was found in the ballast down there and other items that have come out have been bricks that have come out of it and there's one house in Hereford Street that is said to have been built entirely from bricks from the ballast.

Q That's quite interesting that isn't it.

JF Yes.

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Q Alright then Captain Fletcher, we might end it there. I'd like to thank you very much for your time.

JF Yes, I'm sorry I stumbled a little bit at times but you've got to make up for a bit of old age now and then. (laughs).

INTERVIEW SUMMARY

Name of Interviewee: Captain James Fletcher
Name of Interviewer: Terry Muir.
Number of tapes: One.
Date of Interview: 6 September 1989.

Captain Fletcher was born in Sydney in 1910 in the suburb of Annandale. From a young age he was interested in a life involving the sea and, as a sixteen year old, he gained employment as a Deckboy. From that time on he has always been involved with the shipping industry, an industry that, in 1949 brought Captain Fletcher to Newcastle.

In Newcastle he was employed by the Maritime Services Board as a Pilot and on occasions he fulfilled relieving duties as Harbour Master. He has intimate knowledge of the shipping industry and associated industries and speaks of the Port of Newcastle with great affection. During some conversations he referred to Newcastle Harbour as, "my Harbour."

Captain Fletcher is seventy nine years of age and although he has suffered three strokes he is very sharp and alert with sound recall. He has provided interesting stories providing a great insight to late 19th century Newcastle. The information he provided relating to the Henry Parkes incident, the lavatory at Customs House and the ballast highlight his wealth of information as well as his willingness and energy to pass on that information.

It is without doubt that Captain Fletcher's information and eagerness to participate in such ventures will assist any researcher who may come in contact with him.

I spoke with Captain Fletcher at length to establish his knowledge on the Customs House of Newcastle and found that his information was covered a mini history of the Port of Newcastle. The interview was commenced with a view to ascertaining the establishment of Customs in Newcastle. Captain Fletcher provided useful information regarding that subject as well as the bureaucracy surrounding the establishment of Customs. Once the establishment of Customs was discussed we spoke of the officials involved in the early days of Customs in Newcastle. Although this paper concerns the History of Customs House, I wanted to establish the growth of Customs which necessitated the building of the new premises.

The site of the new Customs House was discussed where Captain Fletcher provided information concerning the historical background of the site. The construction of the building was then discussed concerning the origin of the materials to construct the building. One article I read commented that the stones for the Customs House originated from ballast. Captain Fletcher discounted this as, "a fallacy." His view was supported by another article which stated that the bricks originated from Glebe in Sydney.

I then set about mentioning the most notable Customs Officer to Serve in Newcastle which was Sir Henry Parkes. Captain Fletcher provided some humorous information concerning Sir Henry Parkes' Custom's employment.

The architectural points of the building, the clock and time ball were then discussed. On that subject, Captain Fletcher explained how, as a young officer, he had actually used the Time Ball to set his own ship's chronometer. We then moved onto the Seamens shed of the Customs House and he spoke of the procedure adopted at that time to pick or choose a ships crew. Whilst on the subject of the crew he mentioned the lavatory that was situated at the back of Customs House in the centre of the Courtyard. He spoke of how frequently it was used by the sailors after leaving the Great Northern or George Hotels on their way to their appointments with the Shipping Master.

Captain Fletcher then spoke of the time he served in the Customs House as Assistant Harbour Master. He spoke of the grandeur of the building and it's elaborate furnishing, in particular, the cedar tables of the Harbour Master and Assistant Harbour Masters rooms.

Moving on we spoke of the changes the building has undergone such as the removal of the picket fence and the cleaning of the building. Included in this area was the chnaging face of the area surrounding the Customs House along the Harbour. He recalled how the water line was quite adjacent to the actual building before it was filled with ballast. Speaking of the ballast he recalled an interesting find when he and some associates located a gun that was believed to be used in the Maori wars of the 1860's.

EVALUATION OF THE INTERVIEW.

The interview was conducted at Mr Fletchers residence at Stockton. We were seated in his study at the front of his home. Appearing on the tape is some background noise which is attributable to passing traffic and an aircraft passing overhead.

Captain Fletcher was very relaxed throughout the interview and was more than happy to share his knowledge. Prior to the commencement of the interview he expressed some concern regarding his communication skills stating that he may stutter a bit. Throughout the interview I felt that his speech and spontaneity very good.

The one area that I felt was lacking was my questioning. Although the interview was planned, from listening to the tape, it is evident that I made a number of errors. The voice of the interviewer may come across slightly loud in comparison to Captain Fletcher's but he does suffer from a hearing ailment which necessitated the raising of my voice. Overall I believe the contents of the interview provide an historical insight to Customs House.

Captain Fletcher was most obliging and with his knowledge of Newcastle shipping and associated industry, I would recommend he be contacted.

Name of Interviewee:	Captain John Fletcher
Name of Interviewer	Terry Muir
Date of Interview:	6 September 1989
No. of tapes recorded:	One.

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I, Capt. James Fletcher give my
permission to Terry Muir

to use this interview, or part of this interview, for
research, publication and/or broadcasting (delete one of
these if required) and for copies to be lodged in
the Newcastle University Library

.....
for the use of other bona fide researchers.

Signed James W. Fletcher

Date 6-9-89

Interviewer Terry Muir