

CUSTOMS IN HISTORY



AUSTRALIA'S OLDEST CUSTOMS BUILDING

One of Australia's oldest buildings is the former customs station overlooking the entrance to Botany Bay.

The Macquarie Watchtower, an octagonal structure on the northern side of the entrance, served as a customs station from 1831 to 1904 and is the oldest existing building on the shores of Botany Bay.

Possibly built during Lachlan Macquarie's governorship of the colony of New South Wales, no record has been found to give a date of construction. The first evidence of its existence is unusual - a 'sonnet' published in the *Sydney Gazette* on 20 March 1822 which included these lines:

"...That here on this South Head should stand an English farm hut, and that there on yon North shore, a barrack Tow'r should peer."

Some historians believe that the octagonal tower could have been built as early as 1811. It was certainly known to have served as a military guardhouse and lookout before becoming a customs station.

The tower housed a few soldiers until the late 1820s under instruction to watch for ships entering or leaving Botany Bay and to prevent smuggling. It was then unoccupied for a few years. Records show that in 1831, the Director of Public Works was instructed to hand the building over to the Collector of Customs. In 1904, the last resident officer was pensioned off and the building was transferred to the Commonwealth.

After ceasing its customs duties, it was used as a dwelling until 1948. In 1957 it was badly damaged by fire. Some historians have questioned the accuracy of restoration in the 1960s, particularly the crenellations, following discovery of an early set of plans.

In 1967, the NSW Parks and Wildlife Service acquired the tower as an historic site along with the La Perouse monuments and the 1880s Bare Island Fort. Plans drawn up for its full restoration await sufficient funds.

The Watchtower is closed to the public but guided tours can be arranged through the La Perouse Museum. Call 02 9311 3379.

HARD DAYS IN THE CUSTOMS SERVICE

This 1846 doctor's certificate, found in Customs records, explains why a customs officer was unable to go to work.

"To whomsoever it may concern

I do hereby certify that I have this day visited Mr Peter Stewart and that he is afflicted with violent Inflammation of the Eyes which has gone on to such an extent that I have extracted eight Maggots from the left Eye.

I further certify that he is quite unable to leave his bedroom.

Fred^k Mackellar, MD
Parramatta Road, Febr 2 1846"

