Minister's office in the old Customs House at Circular Quay, Sydney (circa 1980).

Airport move ends Sydney CBD presence

Peter Chinn charts the history of Customs Houses - and Customs accommodation - in Sydney.

The move to a new Customs House at Sydney Airport is significant in that it has ended the Customs presence in the CBD of Sydney.

This presence reaches back to 1800 when Governor King established the Naval Office, the forerunner to the Customs Service, responsible for collecting a levy on the importation of spirits, port charges and the control of shipping in Sydney Harbour.

In October 1800, Governor King appointed William Balmain, surgeon and landholder, as Naval Officer to run the small organisation which also had responsibility for lighthouses and the water police. The first "Customs House" (though the term did not come into use until 1827) was a simple shack of three rooms with a bark roof on the western side of Sydney Cove.

In 1827, the first organisational changes occurred when the old Naval Office was abolished and replaced by the Customs Office. The first Collector of Customs (and last Naval Officer) was appointed. He was John Thomas Campbell.

At this time, the establishment had been increased to 11 officers. As the original premises were inadequate and not befitting the image of the new organisation, Customs moved in July 1827 to the first Customs House, a recently vacated office of the Superintendent of Police, now the site of the GPO building in Martin Place.

With the growth of the colony and increased trade, so grew Customs and new accommodation once again had to be found. This time it was to a substantial building on the corner of Argyle and Playfair Streets (later to become Unwins' Stores) which still exists as part of the Argyle Centre. This was to be Customs House from 1830 to 1845.

By the early 1840s, it was realised that larger premises would be required and plans were drawn up for a two-storey Customs House at the centre of Circular Quay in Alfred Street, bounded by Loftus and Young Streets, which was close to the landing place of the First Fleet in 1788. This Customs House opened on 7 April 1845 and Customs was to remain on that site until 15 June 1990.

Extra accommodation needs due to the growth of the Customs department for the rest of the 19th century and into the early years of the 20th century were met by demolition of the 1845 building and erection of a three-storey structure with east and west wings surrounding a courtyard in 1885, followed in 1896-1903 by the addition of three storeys and other improvements. The last major work to increase accommodation at Customs House, Circular Quay, was the enclosure of the courtyard in 1915-17 to form the Invoice Room and public areas.

At this stage, it is probably useful to outline some of the functions that Customs had responsibility for in the earlier half of the 20th century. At Federation on 1 January 1901, the six Australian colonies surrendered their Customs departments to the Commonwealth of Australia to form the Department of Trade and Customs which was one of seven initial departments. The other departments were Attorney-General's, Defence, External Affairs, Home Affairs, Postmaster-General's and Treasury.

Apart from the usual customs and excise functions, the Department of Trade and Customs was also responsible for quarantine, lighthouses, mercantile marine, navigation, weights and measures as well as development of trade policy. Over succeeding years some of these functions were transferred to new departments. While additional responsibilities arising from emergency legislation were assumed by the department during World War I and during the years of the Great Depression, World War II saw a burgeoning of the department's functions most notably in price controls, rationing of goods and import licensing. Censorship of literature and films had long fallen under the aegis of Customs, embracing aspects of national security during World War II and becoming arguably the most controversial aspect of its functions during the 1950s and early 1960s when standards were subjected to vigorous opposition from publishers and civil libertarians.

On 10 January 1956, the Menzies Government abolished the Department of Trade and Customs which was replaced by the Department of Trade, responsible essentially for the development and implementation of trade policy, and the Department of Customs and Excise responsible for the traditional customs and excise functions as well as bounties, subsidies and the Registry of British Ships.

The organisation assumed the title "Australian Customs Service" in September 1982 and became a statutory authority under the Customs Administration Act in 1985.

But back to January 1956: Customs House at Circular Quay quite adequately housed all the branches of the State administration and indeed had room for an outsider - the Commonwealth Acoustic Laboratories (CAL) on the east wing of the third floor. Why? Because the thick stone walls of the building were considered ideal for the operation of the delicate equipment for testing hearing. The CAL had moved on by the early 1960s.

In 1959 probably the first of the revolutionary changes to Customs operations occurred: the introduction of "Commodity Control" for the petroleum industry. Until 1959 Customs officers, known as Lockers, and Excise officers had been stationed at licensed petroleum warehouses and refineries overseeing the production and delivery of dutiable products through maintenance of records and physical control which involved "Crown" locks on underbond stores and bulk liquid tanks.

"Commodity Control" took the officers away from these premises and with it the need to keep separate departmental records of underbond products, replacing it with a more efficient and effective system of direct access to licensees' records as well as the freedom of access to premises to undertake physical checks. This was a system subsequently extended, in broad principle, to most Customs and Excise operations involving the importing, exporting and manufacturing sectors.

Petroleum Products Branch was created in 1959 - a branch of some 40 officers. For the first time Customs House at Circular Quay was unable to meet accommodation needs. Offices were found in the recently-vacated premises of Radio Station 2SM on the 10th floor of "Australia House" at 38-52 Carrington Street, Wynyard.

In 1965-66 with further growth in staff, Customs leased the two top floors of the newly-built Flotta Lauro House (now Export House), a stone's throw from Customs House, in Pitt Street on the corner of Reiby Place. Investigation Branch occupied one floor and later the new Inland Services Branch was set up on the other. Refunds Section was another group located there at one time.

By the later 1960s Petroleum Products had left Australia House for the government offices at West Circular Quay where Queen's Bond had long been established in the dungeons at street level, later to be joined by Stores Section in the adjacent storage area.

Following the success of commodity control in the petroleum industry the system was gradually introduced into the licensed premises controlled by the Warehouse and Excise Branches as well as to operations of the Drawbacks Branch. These three branches as well as Petroleum Products were absorbed into a big, new organisation, Inland Services Branch, and set up operations in Flotta Lauro House.

However, before these moves could take place, Investigation Branch was relocated to the 12th floor of the Plaza Building in Australia Square and Refunds to Petroleum Products' old offices at West Circular Quay.

From the late 1960s to 1975, Training Section operated from a building in Arthur Street, North Sydney, while Special Services training was conducted at premises overlooking the water at Waverton.

During the brief years of the Whitlam Government (1972-75) it was decided that Customs should have a new Customs House on the corner of George and Essex Streets. A project officer was appointed to undertake detailed planning for all Customs needs. However, the government finally decided against a new building.

During this period there was a further scattering of branches in the CBD when rental accommodation was found in Stocks & Holdings Building in Castlereagh Street, near Park Street for Cargo Control and Accounting Section, Exports and Clearing Section, and for a brief period, Organisation and Systems Review Section.

In 1974, in a move to consolidate Customs accommodation in the CBD, a number of floors of a newly-constructed building at 117 Clarence Street were leased from 1975, taking in the branches from Stocks and Holdings Building, Flotta Lauro House, the two Training Sections from the north side, and an overflow from Customs House.

During the 1980s, Customs took over the rest of the floors at 117 Clarence Street. After the closure of Customs House at Circular Quay in June 1990, the Collector, other senior management and Customs House branches moved in. The building, although a de facto Customs House, was never so named and was to remain Customs principal office in Sydney until July 1992.
Investigation Branch moved out of the Plaza Building to the Customs House in December 1976 and sometime during the 1980s relocated to a new building at 333 Kent Street, just across the road from the main office in Clarence Street.

During the era of the Hawk-Keating Governments (1983-96) it was decided to erect a large government building - to be named Sydney Central, 477 Pitt Street, on the block bounded by Pitt, Hay, Barlow and Parker Streets, to house a number of Commonwealth departments. This land had been purchased by the Whitlam Government in the 1970s.

In July 1992, Customs vacated 117 Clarence Street and 333 Kent Street and after 33 years were all together again in the new multi-storey premises at 477 Pitt Street. Customs was not the sole tenant so the building could not be named a Customs House although, as a minor concession, "Customs" in large metal letters was put in place on a wall facing Hay Street.

While it seemed Customs was to be at 477 Pitt Street for the long haul, it was not to be. Several sections relocated to the Charles Ulm Building at Link Road, Mascot. A further shortening-up of accommodation occurred in March 2003 with dispersals of staff to Link Road and Marrickville.

By this time plans were well in hand for a new Customs House to be provided by Sydney Airports Corporation at Sydney Airport.

So, in December 2004, the scattered sections of Sydney Customs were at last reunited under the one roof.