

# Victorian Heritage Database Report

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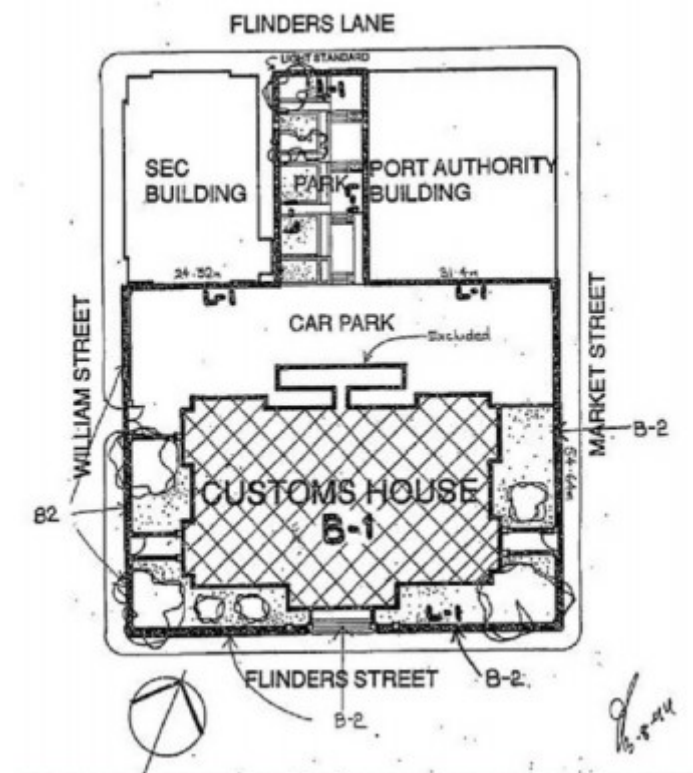
## FORMER CUSTOMS HOUSE



FORMER CUSTOMS HOUSE SOHE  
2008



1 former customs house 400 flinders  
street melbourne front view nov1984



h01047 plan h1047

### Location

400 FLINDERS STREET MELBOURNE, Melbourne City

## **Municipality**

MELBOURNE CITY

## **Level of significance**

Registered

## **Victorian Heritage Register (VHR) Number**

H1047

## **Heritage Overlay Numbers**

HO661

## **VHR Registration**

September 8, 1994

## **Heritage Listing**

Victorian Heritage Register

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## **Statement of Significance**

Last updated on - June 2, 2000

What is significant?

The Former Customs House was constructed in two separate stages between 1856-58 and 1873-76. The initial design was prepared by Knight and Kerr, and the final design, which incorporated the earlier building, was prepared by Johnson, Clark and Kerr from the Public Works Department. The three storey rendered brick building rests on bluestone foundations. The ground floor facade is rusticated and the two upper floors are surmounted by a simple projecting cornice running around the whole building. A flight of stairs leads up to the entrance doors, above which four ionic columns run through the two upper floors in support of the fascia and cornice. The site is delineated by a fine wrought iron fence with bluestone posts and base. The Customs House was converted to Commonwealth Parliamentary Offices in 1965 and became an immigration museum in 1998.

How is it significant?

The Former Customs House is of historical and architectural significance to the State of Victoria.

Why is it significant?

The Former Customs House is of historical significance as a symbol of Melbourne's 19th century economic and trade development and as a tangible reminder of the former location of the city's port facilities. After the gold rushes, Victoria became a strong advocate of protection, reflecting a desire to foster the industries that had been created by the demands of a growing and increasingly wealthy society. Protection was enforced by way of customs duties on imports, making the customs house a vital component of colonial economic management and development. The grand and imposing character of the Former Customs House reflects this important role. Although NSW favoured free trade, after Federation in 1901 the country as a whole moved towards a policy of protection and the Melbourne Customs House became the headquarters of the federal Department of Customs. The location of the Former Customs House reflects the early development of Melbourne's port facilities. In the

19th century shipping docked much further up the river, as evidenced by the remnant store facilities at Banana Alley just to the east of the Customs House. The Customs House overlooked the now reconstructed turning basin in which ships were turned to make their way out of the river. The building, together with the Banana Alley vaults, the Waterside Hotel and other hotels, is a remnant trace of what was once a bustling maritime precinct.

The Former Customs House is of architectural significance as one of the finest examples of a customs house in Victoria. It is an extraordinary example of the Italian Renaissance style, (with remnants of Greek Revival influence) a style greatly favoured for official buildings in Melbourne during the 1860s and 1870s. The building displays an exceptional level of craftsmanship in the execution of stone and plaster detailing. The richly embellished Long Room mirrors the Ionic columns and entablature of the Southern facade. The wrought iron fencing, which surrounds the building on three boundaries, is an important element in the definition of the Customs House reserve, which was set aside for the purpose as early as 1835.

The Former Customs House is of architectural significance as an example of the work of three of the Victorian Public Works Department's most talented and accomplished architects, Peter Kerr, Arthur E. Johnson and John J. Clark. The Customs House provides evidence of the important role played by the Public Works Department in the provision of public infrastructure throughout the rapidly developing colony.

## Permit Exemptions

Installation of two banners to the south facade advertising the exhibition "*Bollywood Dreams*" from 28 June 2006 to 28 January 2007 after which the banners and mounting brackets are to be removed

Construction dates	1856,
Architect/Designer	Knight & Kerr,
Heritage Act Categories	Heritage place,
Other Names	IMMIGRATION AND HELLENIC ANTIQUITIES MUSEUM,
Hermes Number	4689
Property Number	

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## History

Contextual History:History of Place:

The first customs houses were located at Port Phillip and were tents, portable buildings or makeshift huts. Prefabricated buildings designed and fabricated in Sydney were shipped in wooden crates to accommodate the few Customs officers. This was necessary in the remote settlement where skilled tradesmen and suitable building materials were not available. The one remaining example is at Geelong, in the Botanical Gardens of Eastern Park, where it was relocated from its original jetty site.

Following Separation from the mother colony of NSW in 1850, and the growth of settlement in the new colony of Victoria, additional customs houses were required. Examples such as Portland and Geelong were built in locally available solid materials (bluestone at Portland, Barrabool sandstone at Geelong), to ensure security of the bond store and a demonstration of the importance of the government function of controlling and taxing the import of goods and stock. The Georgian buildings of the 1850s reflect a preoccupation with policing society, and the security of staff and revenue.

The 1860s recession which followed the economic boom aided by the gold rushes, resulted in simpler, more basic customs house establishments at Port Fairy and Warrnambool, still constructed in the locally available basalt (bluestone).

The customs houses at Melbourne and Williamstown of the 1870s reflected the importance of their locations.

Constructed in rendered brickwork in classical revival style, these buildings serviced commercial functions, and were more publicly accessible. They reflected the maturity of the society, as the customs department became part of the mercantile community, closer to commerce and prosperity.

During the 1880s, further expansion of settlement and the development of the agricultural areas in the north and west of the State led to the need for inland customs houses at border locations along the Murray River. The two major north-south route crossings are marked by handsome polychrome brick buildings in the "gothic" style at Echuca and Wahgunyah. In addition to these, timber buildings with cattle proof verandahs and bridge gates were constructed on the bridges themselves, to aid the work of the Stock Inspector and Sub-Collector. One of these survives at Yarrawonga, where it has been relocated to the river bank. It included one office and a public access room, and is a weatherboard building with corrugated iron roof and window awnings.

Living quarters were provided for Customs officers at a port where there was an absence of housing nearby. For example, accommodation was provided at Wodonga, and quarters for six officers were constructed at Point Henry.

## Conclusion

The pattern of provision of customs houses follows in microcosm that of the provision of railways. In following the settlement pattern, provision was at first by means of temporary timber prefabricated buildings, then in locally available stone; bluestone in the basalt areas, for example at Portland, Warrnambool and Port Fairy, and Barrabool sandstone at Geelong. The use of the austere Georgian style in stone emphasised the importance and dignity of the customs and excise function, and the functional arrangements of the earlier buildings with a secure bond store located beneath the public access or Long Room, reflected the preoccupation of the times with policing and fortress-like security. Later the customs department became part of the commercial activities of the colony and the buildings provided were more accessible to the public. The customs houses of the 1870s and 1880s reflected the architectural fashions of the day; classical revival designs in rendered brickwork at Williamstown and Melbourne, and polychrome brickwork in the "gothic" style at important border crossing points on the Murray River - at Echuca and Wahgunyah. As with the railways, timber was used where political pressure required expeditious solutions, for example on the inland border crossings, where stock had to be inspected and customs dues collected. These designs were in weatherboard with corrugated iron roofs and window awnings, and galvanised iron fireplaces and chimneys.

Associated People: Owner W T CHIDZEY;

## Extent of Registration

### AMENDMENT OF REGISTER OF HISTORIC BUILDINGS

Historic Building No. 1047.

Former Customs House, 400 Flinders Street, Melbourne.

(To the extent of:

1. All of the building known as the former Customs House, Flinders Street, Melbourne (B-1) including all the wrought iron fence, gates and steps (B-2), but excluding the covered way addition at the rear, marked on Plan 605796 endorsed by the Chairperson, Historic Buildings Council and held by the Director, Historic Buildings Council.
2. All of the land described in Certificate of Title Volume 5775 Folio 898 marked L-1 on Plan 604796 endorsed by the Chairperson, Historic Buildings Council and held by the Director, Historic Buildings Council.)

[*Victoria Government Gazette* No. G36 8 September 1994 p.2437]

*This place/object may be included in the Victorian Heritage Register pursuant to the Heritage Act 1995. Check the Victorian Heritage Database, selecting 'Heritage Victoria' as the place data owner.*

*For further details about Heritage Overlay places, contact the relevant local council or go to Planning Schemes Online <http://planningschemes.dpcd.vic.gov.au/>*