

The Custom House, Gravesend



Custom House, Gravesend. Llwyd Roberts' Historical Walk Through Gravesend and Northfleet 1935.

Ships passing up and down the Thames today are monitored by the Port Control Centre of the Port of London Authority who ensures safe navigation from the tidal limit at Teddington all the way down river to the North Sea.

Before 1908 when the PLA was established by Act of Parliament, it was the job of the 'Searcher' to instigate controls over shipping at Gravesend. All ships had to stop to be searched and to assess the duties payable on their cargoes. John Page was the first person to be appointed to the position by Edward III in 1356.

An Act of Parliament in 1559 prohibited the landing of cargoes at any wharf on the Thames except at 'legal quays' on the north bank of the Thames between the Tower of London and London Bridge. Ships were also required to stop at Gravesend for a health check. Captains swore on the 'Plague Bible' that there was no sickness amongst the crew or passengers. A customs official known as a Tide Waiter then boarded the ship to make sure that it only stopped at the legal quays. This practice continued until the opening of London's enclosed dock system after 1800.

In 1649, a Custom House was first proposed to house the Tide Waiters who were then using several of Gravesend's inns as offices, but it was not until 1782 that the first custom house, Whitehall Place, was built opposite the present Custom House.



Front elevation drawings of Custom House, Gravesend from 1835. National Archives.

In 1812, changes in the law meant that ships no longer had to stop at Gravesend to pick up a customs official. Consequently, the number of customs officers was reduced and they moved from Whitehall Place to share a building with the Excise Service in this building, the Custom House built 1815-6, by the King's Office of Works, possibly designed by James Wyatt Surveyor General and Comptroller until 1815. Drawings in the National Archives show the buildings in 1835.

The Custom House frontage building and the range leading down to the river with the spine wall separating this eastern part of the site from the main open area north of the Custom House building and there was a 'public passage' between them leading from the large double doors on The Terrace elevation. This is shown on the 1835 plans and the spine wall may have been to separate the Customs and Excise operations.

Inside the most important feature a cantilevered stone central staircase and a lookout room on the roof giving an unrestricted view of the Thames. By the mid 19th century the large open



1866 First Series Ordnance Survey. National Library of Scotland.

area north of the main building was used as a 'Baggage Store'. On this area the old boathouse had been built, while a diagonal wall had been erected to create a private garden on the north side of the main building, and the Gazebo constructed at the far end of the passage beside the river.

The building was listed grade II in 1975, and was included in the Riverside Conservation Area designated in 1980. It ceased to be used by HMRC in 2018 after a strategic review of their properties led to a relocation to more suitable premises. In 2023 consent was given for its conversion to residential use, which involved a careful conversion to retain historic features.