

History is all around us.

There are many ways to explore the history of the area close by.

1. SYDNEY CULTURE WALKS APP

Access free wi-fi at Customs House and download the City of Sydney's free walking tour app to access over ten self-guided history, art and architecture walking tours. Or pick up a free brochure of *Passage: Customs House to Millers Point* from the Customs House information desk. ▶ sydneyculturewalks.com.au

2. BARANI / BARRABUGU: YESTERDAY / TOMORROW

Barani Barrabugu is a guide to Sydney's Aboriginal history that also celebrates a continuous and living culture in the heart of our city. Pick up the free brochure from the Customs House information desk. ▶ sydneybarani.com.au

3. CITY OF FORKING PATHS

Immerse yourself in the world of fact and fiction as artists Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller lead you on a free twilight video walk through The Rocks. Download the experiential artwork on your smartphone and depart from Customs House at sunset. ▶ cityartsydney.com.au/artwork/the-city-of-forking-paths

4. THE ROCKS DISCOVERY MUSEUM

A free, family-friendly museum which tells the story of The Rocks from pre-European days to the present. Displays incorporate archaeological finds. ▶ rocksdiscoverymuseum.com

5. MUSEUM OF SYDNEY

A changing program of exhibitions, events and conversations that explore the character, cultures and soul of this city, often with a First Nations lens. ▶ mhns.wa.au/visit-us/museum-of-sydney

6. STATE LIBRARY OF NSW

Explore free exhibitions, interactive digital experiences, and a rich program of fun activities for the whole family. ▶ sl.nsw.gov.au/galleries

Customs House

31 Alfred Street
Sydney NSW 2000

Tel: +61 (02) 9242 8551

cityofsydney.nsw.gov.au/landmarks/customs-house

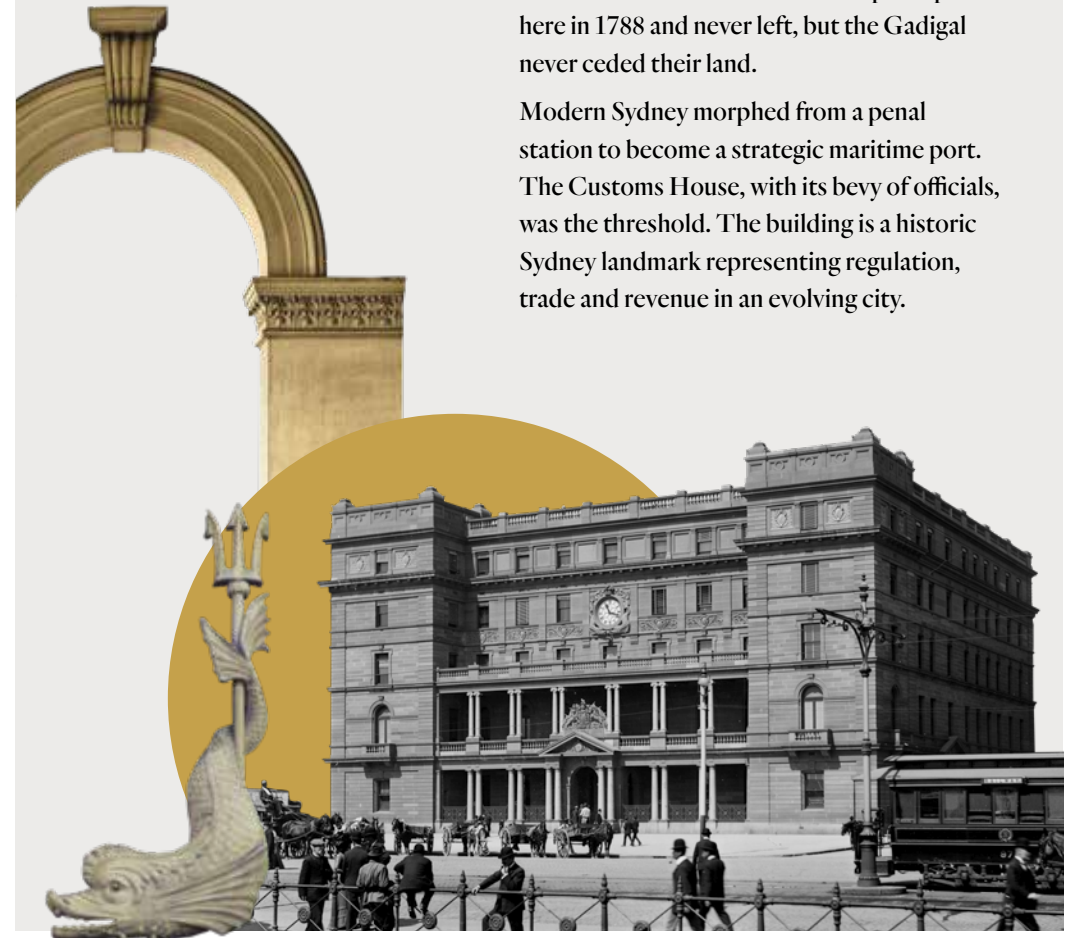
CITY OF SYDNEY 

The Customs House, Sydney



We are on Gadigal country. For thousands of generations the Gadigal of the Eora Nation have lived and traded around this harbour cove. It is a site of 'first contact' with the British invaders. The British set up camp here in 1788 and never left, but the Gadigal never ceded their land.

Modern Sydney morphed from a penal station to become a strategic maritime port. The Customs House, with its bevy of officials, was the threshold. The building is a historic Sydney landmark representing regulation, trade and revenue in an evolving city.



Customs officials were the minders of money, men and morals.

The Collector of Customs oversaw the increasingly complicated administration of shipping, trade and immigration. Customs clerks worked in the Customs House, on every ship, on the wharves, and in the bonded warehouses.

The original two-storey sandstone building was designed by colonial architect Mortimer Lewis. The building was expanded and modified over the years to meet the regulatory requirements of Customs officials. The current Customs House embodies the work of four major government architects, as well as modern conservation architects.

The Customs House was once surrounded by public houses, shipping companies and general maritime activities. When the port was busy, Customs House was crowded and noisy, the scene of disputed dealings

and raised tempers. By the 20th century the bustling quay, with its tram and ferry network, had become a symbol of the city and a tourist attraction.

Detection of smuggling and contraband goods were all in a day's work for diligent Customs officials. Incoming ship manifests had to correctly describe their cargo for the payment of duties (or taxes). Searchers scrutinised every nook and cranny of a ship. The collection of excise and duty on goods was the chief form of government revenue for over a century and bankrolled the development of the nation.

Customs regulations also controlled medicinal and illicit drugs, passports, patents and trademarks, copyright, and plant and animal quarantine. One constant question from customs officials has interrogated passengers across the decades: 'Anything to declare?'

The Australian Customs Service used the building until 1990. The Federal Government leased the building to the City of Sydney in 1994 and in 2019 the City of Sydney bought the building.

Further reading: dictionaryofsydney.org



State Library of NSW



Museum of Applied Arts & Sciences



NSW State Archives



City Archives



City Archives



City Archives



City of Sydney

1843–45

The Customs House was designed by Mortimer Lewis and built on the waterfront. The jagged line of dark granite in the square marks the original highwater mark.

1883–89

Customs House was enlarged by James Barnet. He added a grander portico entrance, an extra floor, a clock and two wings along the sides.

1896–1903

Walter Liberty Vernon oversaw extensions to Customs House at the turn of the century.

1903

The Customs House now had 5 floors, a colonnaded balcony and exuberant decoration in the French neoclassical style.

1915–17

George Oakeshott introduced further floorspace and a lift. The most visible modifications to the public were the foyer redesign and a caretaker's flat on the roof.

1956–62

Circular Quay Railway Station and the Cahill Expressway sever the Customs House from the waterfront.

2019

Customs House is purchased by the City of Sydney.

