

Then and Now 7 - Customs House



Top Picture - Customs House - 1808
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The drawing of the Customs House was drawn in 1808. The artist are Thomas Rowlandson (1756-1827) and Augustus Charles Pugin (1762-1832). The view is facing North, drawn from the South bank near London Bridge.

Look at both pictures and find these comparative details:

Customs House - 1808

1: This is a very similar view of the Port of London and London Bridge in Then and Now 6 but at right angles looking North instead of West. The Tower of London can be seen in the right hand edge of the drawing. The Customs House was the place where taxes were collected on goods, such as English wool, which was being sent (exported) to other countries or being brought into the country (imports). Several Customs Houses have stood here from about 1380. The one in the picture was designed by Thomas Ridley and built in 1715 but it was destroyed by a fire in 1814, the third Customs House on this site since the Great Fire of London in 1666 to be burnt down. The Customs House was rebuilt in 1815 a few metres West, further away from the Tower of London. Part of this building collapsed in 1825 and also had to be rebuilt.

2: Larger and smaller sailing boats can be seen in the picture. This was the furthest upstream that larger boats could go as London Bridge was only about two hundred metres to the left, upstream of the Customs House. This whole area on the North bank in the City of London was also known as the Legal Quays. This dated back to a law passed in the time of Queen Elizabeth I in 1559 which made it legal to collect customs (tax) at shipping quays or docks. The medieval London Bridge with houses was replaced with a new bridge in 1829. The drawing on the right dating from 1855 shows the Customs House and the new five span London Bridge.



Customs House and London Bridge - 1855 by Thomas Shepherd, copyright British Library

Customs House - 2014



3: The Customs House, rebuilt in 1825, is the building that stands on the banks of the River Thames today and has survived nearly 200 years. It is still used as a Customs House but is now known as Her Majesties Revenue and Customs (HMRC) and still collects taxes from firms in the City of London.

4: To the left of the Customs House today can be seen Billingsgate Market. This used to be the main fish market for London until it moved to Docklands in 1882. The building still stands but is now used for many functions such as product launches and parties.

5: The tall building behind the Customs House is 20 Fenchurch Street but commonly known as The Walkie Talkie. The photo on the left was taken from the top of 20 Fenchurch Street in 2015 and is looking South across the River Thames towards the Shard and London Bridge on the right.

Customs House is in the bottom left of the photograph. It is right opposite HMS Belfast. London Bridge is on the right and the Shard in the middle. You can visit the Sky Garden at no charge and get an excellent view of the River Thames.

6: Office buildings now stand tall where Wren's church spires once dominated the sky line of the City of London. The Shard (opened in 2012) is the tallest building in the United Kingdom at 309.6m tall, it is the fourth largest in Europe. It stands above London Bridge Station in Southwark. It has fantastic views from the observation deck. This photo on the right is looking North towards the City of London. You can see the Walkie Talkie at 20 Fenchurch Street on the right.

The view of London Bridge from the Shard

