

To: Cumberland Council

HERITAGE STATEMENT

Application Listed Building consent
OLD CUSTOMS HOUSE plaque
10 West Strand
Whitehaven
CA28 7LR

Background to application

The application to Cumberland Council for Listed Building consent is in relation to the Old Customs House, a Grade II historic building in the ownership and management of Ms Stephanie Skelly of the Georgian House Hotel, Church St, Whitehaven. Ms Skelly has submitted the application following an approach to her by Whitehaven Heritage Action Group (established in 1991), who wish to install a blue plaque to the front of the building to highlight and commemorate its historic significance.

Impact on the building

It is anticipated that any structural impact on the building would be minimal as it involves affixing a 400mm/500mm cast aluminium plaque to the exterior wall (location - see image) The manufacturer of the plaque, Croft Castings of Whitby, will in addition supply fixings (2 screws with cover caps, matching the blue powder coating). The cost is in the region of £500-plus.

There would be a positive impact on the harbour frontage, providing a focus of interest in relation to the historic importance of this building which played a leading role in Whitehaven's operation as one of the country's once busiest ports. Making the most of the town's heritage is the main priority of the Heritage Group, which has a long history of successfully achieving projects that improve and enhance Whitehaven's heritage offer, bringing benefit to both residents and visitors, and the local economy. All members are volunteers and as a group without core funding, raise money from donations and grant-givers to support their work. The funding for this proposed plaque has been sourced from a grant given by the Cumberland Coastal Communities Panel.

This project is part of the Heritage Group's ongoing proposals to restore existing blue plaques in the town centre and install some new ones. It is hoped to arrange an unveiling ceremony with invited guests in early 2026.

History of the building

The current building was originally two distinct structures. The George Inn (righthand section) of 1686-87, was built for distiller Samuel Brownrigg by Sir John Lowther, and was Whitehaven's first public house. It was altered in the 19th century and joined to the c1894 Customs House to the left. Much of the present external detailing however appears to be of a mid or later 18th century date. The two buildings were combined in the 19th century when they were also internally altered.

An Indenture document of 18 January, 1812, between William, Earl of Lonsdale and Edward Knubley, Collector of Customs for the Port of Whitehaven, represents a lease agreement for a yearly rent of £120, to make use of "Custom House, warehouse, offices and places for the lading and shipping, unlading, landing and lodging of goods, wares and merchandise." It shows a plan of a building on Custom House Quay on a site of 70ft width and a 92ft depth with a Weigh House and Surveyor's & Landing Waiter's offices at the front and warehouses and a large yard at the rear.

A further lease, dated 31 May, 1842 outlines an agreement between William, Earl of Lonsdale and Charles Scovell of Customs House, London - again, at a rent of £120.

The Georgian Society maintains that a mid eighteenth-century plan and section reproduced by the former Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England in their *Whitehaven 1660-1800* volume (p89) that shows a projecting staircase hall to the rear of the former George Inn in the same position as the present staircase, and an entrance hall in approximately the same position as that existing, suggests that, at least at ground floor level, the historic layout of the former George Inn survives relatively intact and the former Custom House's historic internal arrangements also appear to survive to a reasonable extent.

The George Inn on the right was built in the late 17th century and the left hand side was added as the Customs Office and King's Warehouse for the storage of contraband goods seized by the local customs officers. The goods would be later sold at public auction or, in the case of tobacco, burned (tobacco pipes at Bransty).

There is also a link to the poet Wordsworth as his uncle, Richard Wordsworth, once held the position of Collector of Customs at Whitehaven. Richard was the brother of William Wordsworth's father John, who was a former steward/agent to Sir James Lowther, one of England's richest men. John was employed to look after Sir James' interests in West Cumberland.

Richard was Customs Collector for 16 years between 1778 until his death in 1794...and would have just started the job when the raid on the harbour by John Paul Jones took place (22 April, 1778).

Indeed Richard and his colleague wrote the very next day to London seeking to draw the attention of the Lords of the Admiralty and the Secretary of War to the "alarming circumstances" that had befallen the town, when "a privateer of 18 guns and 120 men landed 30 men and set a vessel on fire and distributed combustibles in several others." "We are in great hurry and confusion," he reported. Very much a baptism of fire for the new Customs man!

For more than half of the 18th century, Joseph Deane held the post of Tide-Master for the port of Whitehaven. He was also a friend to the Washington family and corresponded with brothers Lawrence and Augustine, the elder half-brothers of America's first president George Washington. Appleby-born Deane would serve as the Tide Surveyor at Whitehaven from 1724 to 1777. His role involved ensuring the proper customs dues were paid on cargoes arriving in the port and clamping down on smuggling. He was also a Town and Harbour Trustee from 1740 until his death in 1780, aged 79.

While he lived in Whitehaven Joseph Deane, himself a father of four sons, would correspond with the Washington brothers Lawrence and 'Austin' while they studied at Appleby Grammar school and took a keen interest in their welfare.

The premises were for 40 years used by Age Concern Copeland, 1978-2018 (which became AgeUK in 2015) who rented the ground floor from Copeland Borough Council for a nominal sum, using it as a lunch

club for the elderly, offering art and craft classes, a charity shop and several support services.

In February 1985, when they had already been occupying the building for 7 years, an official opening, following an internal upgrade of facilities, took place with the then MP for Copeland, Dr Jack Cunningham performing the honours. Unfortunately the charity which had given a great deal of support to the area's elderly over many years, was forced to close in 2018 because of financial difficulties.

The building is listed under the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990 for its special architectural or historic interest. It was first listed on 13 September, 1972.

Details: C18. 3 storeyed, stuccoed, old slate roof, cornice and frieze, pilasters at centre and ends of facade. 8 windows across the front; the 3 bays to the left are symmetrical, with centre segmental headed carriage entrance. The 5 bays to the right are also symmetrical, a centre porch with slender reeded 3/4 columns with frieze and cornice. All windows are 12-paned, all in well-moulded architraves but the square windows on the top floor have been renewed.

Nos 10 to 13 (consec) West Strand form a group with No 1 Hamilton Lane.

Attachments:

*Image of proposed plaque;

*Image of Old Customs House showing proposed location of plaque;

*OS Map 1861 showing Customs House;

*Old photo of Customs House from 1800s