

The quest for the golden fleece in Botany Bay

By Peter Chinn*

After Captain Phillip decided in 1788 that Botany Bay was not the place to found the colony, this large expanse of water on Sydney's back door remained for many years the poor sister to Port Jackson. Being shallow and exposed to the whims of the elements, it saw only sporadic and minor shipping throughout the 19th century and the first half of 20th century until the establishment of

trading ports. But it was a long, hard struggle.

The first use of Botany Bay for commercial shipping began in 1880 when a pier, known locally as the Long Pier, was constructed by the Department of Works near Banksmeadow. For some 50 years it served vessels importing coal, presumably to fuel the boilers of the factories in what was then a growing industrial area of Sydney. Exports were reported to be negligible.

Around the time of the closure of the Long Pier in 1930, the infant Australian oil company, H.C. Sleight Ltd - which for many years marketed Golden Fleece petroleum products until taken over by Caltex - saw the possibilities of Botany Bay as a point of entry for its trade. The company built a storage depot on the banks of Shea's Creek (now more commonly known as the Alexandra Canal) and had it licensed as a Customs warehouse.

Before World War II, the Shell refinery at Clyde was the only such operation in NSW and virtually all petrol was imported. While most imports were in bulk, a significant amount was also imported in four gallon square drums, packaged in crates. Oil companies did not have the sophisticated means of distribution or the networks that they have today and packaged petrol was the usual medium for supplying areas distant from the cities.

The major oil companies had their storage installations around Sydney Harbour, served by adjacent deep-anchorage wharves. Whether H.C. Sleight had difficulty in obtaining a suitable site in the harbour or more favourable conditions prevailed in a Botany Bay operation is a matter for



A Golden Fleece petrol bowser statue, the company's product mascot, now on display at the National Museum of Australia.

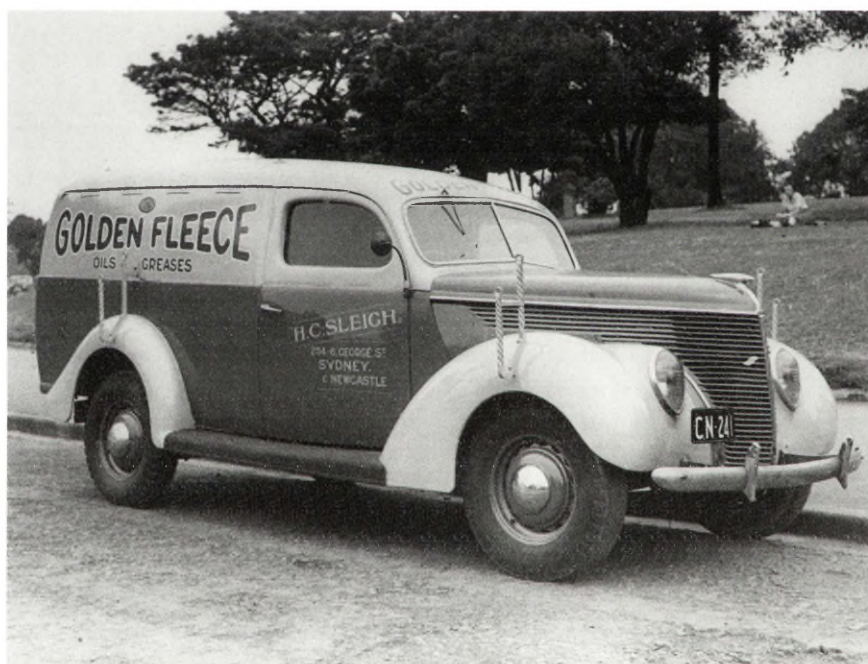
the Caltex refinery at Kurnell in 1955 when channels were dredged and a large wharf was provided for the giant tankers entering the port.

The creation of the huge Port Botany complex on the northern shores of the Bay in the 1970s led to enormous growth in trade to the extent that the port has eclipsed Port Jackson in terms of volume of cargo handled and setting its place as one of Australia's major

conjecture. But by July 1930, the company had completed construction of its Shea's Creek installation and sought approval from Customs to permit the tanker Mexico, with a cargo of petrol from the US, to anchor in Botany Bay and discharge its cargo.

This was a case of putting the cart before the horse, so far as Customs was concerned, because Botany Bay was not a proclaimed port under the Customs Act and underbond cargo could therefore not be legally discharged in those waters. Botany Bay had been appointed a port in 1906 but the appointment was revoked in January 1925.

High-level discussions ensued



A Golden Fleece motor van. For years H.C. Sleigh marketed Golden Fleece petroleum products until taken over by Caltex.

between the manager of H.C. Sleigh, Mr Archbold, and the Collector of Customs in NSW, Mr W.H. Barkley. The company undertook, in the event of their request for permission to discharge bulk motor spirit at Botany Bay being granted, to:

- provide suitable transportation facilities to and from vessels in Botany Bay for a Customs officer, as required by the Collector, and
- pay all expenses incurred by the Customs Department for the services of an officer to enter and clear the vessels, and to remain of board until discharge of the motor

spirit was complete.

Agreement being reached, the Collector recommended to the Comptroller-General that "Botany Bay be established a port for the specific limited purpose of discharge of bulk motor spirit and that a wharf [at Shea's Creek] be appointed for the like purpose." The appointments were proclaimed in the Commonwealth Gazette of 18 September 1930, four days after the arrival of the Mexico in Botany Bay.

On the day the port was proclaimed, Harold C. Sleigh, managing director and founder of the company, wrote a letter of appreciation to the Collector in which he stated:

"Be it said to your credit and our appreciation that you are responsible for creating Botany Bay a Port of Entry. The sympathetic interest of all your officers concerned has been most helpful on the occasion of the first overseas vessel Mexico at Botany Bay. I do sincerely appreciate everything which you and your officers have done and would ask you to personally accept my thanks and convey the same to all members of your Department concerned."

In November of that year, a Customs warehouse licence was approved for the Shea's Creek installation and a Customs

Locker (Customs officer stationed in a warehouse) was stationed there full-time during Customs hours.

Being an entrepreneurial and go-ahead company, H.C. Sleigh Ltd saw opportunities in the importation of bitumen and, in October 1931, approached the Collector for permission to discharge this commodity through Botany Bay which would, of course, require amendment of the terms under which the port had been appointed.

Facilitation was apparently a word not in vogue in the upper echelons of Customs management at the time, though to be fair this should be considered in the context of the period: the Great Depression and the policy of protection of Australian industry. For reasons unstated in his minute, the Collector considered that "it would be very undesirable to extend the purpose for which the Port and wharf were gazetted, nor does there appear to be any special reason why the importation of bitumen from the U.S.A. should be facilitated".

Mr Barkley also considered that agreement to H.C. Sleigh's request "would almost certainly be followed by further similar applications and would necessitate an amendment to both Proclamations". He recommended to the Comptroller-General that the request be refused.

With bitumen, as it were, blackballed by Customs, H.C. Sleigh let five years pass before approaching the Collector once more, this time for permission to import small consignments of lubricating oil and kerosene in drums through Botany Bay. Again the request was denied because it was not intended to extend the specified limited purposes for which the port was appointed.

No doubt due to the financial stringencies of those times and the systems of controls which required Customs Lockers at licensed warehouses as well as an officer on board ship throughout discharge of cargo in Botany Bay, there was a genuine concern by the administration that extending the terms

of appointment of the port would lead to a proliferation of operations similar to Sleigh's at Botany Bay.

The Collector, G.F.A. Mitchell's, final word on the request (on 9 November 1936) read: "The Port of Sydney, within a few miles of Botany Bay, offers all the necessary facilities for the discharge of cargo from overseas, and the appointment of Botany Bay as an unlimited port is not warranted."

That year, the administration of the Port of Botany Bay was transferred from the NSW Department of Navigation to the newly formed Maritime Services Board, a body which soon after adopted a policy to foster the development of the port for handling of bulk and special cargoes, particularly liquid fuels, and so to divert some of the tanker and oil-lighter traffic from the busy waters of Port Jackson and the thickly populated residential and industrial areas surrounding them.

Despite the encouragement afforded by this policy of decentralisation, it was not until 1948 that the next major step was taken in the development of Botany Bay as a seaport. Bitumen & Oil Refineries (Australia) Ltd (Boral) had opened an oil refinery at Matraville and, in May of that year, the first tanker arrived in the port to discharge a cargo of crude oil for the refinery. These vessels tied up at the tanker moorings some 800m off shore, connecting with a submarine pipeline direct to the storage tanks at Boral. Shipping to serve the refinery grew to 40 vessels a year.

1955 was a big year in the history of Botany Bay. Anglo United Petroleum Ltd, which marketed Total petrol, established a storage terminal at Matraville which was also served by a submarine pipeline from the bay moorings. This was a licensed Customs warehouse with a Locker in full-time attendance.

That year, the huge Australian Oil Refining Ltd (AOR) refinery (owned by Caltex) began operations at Kurnell, and with it, a permanent Customs presence with the appointment of a Sub-Collector of Customs for Botany Bay. Before this,



Mr Harold C. Sleigh's storage depot on the banks of Shea's Creek, for which he successfully gained approval to have licensed as a Customs warehouse, giving rise to the establishment of Botany Bay as a port of entry.

shipping control for the port was affected from the Customs House in Sydney.

AOR established a bulk distribution terminal on the Banksmeadow foreshore to which refined products were conveyed by submarine pipeline. H.C. Sleigh had long since closed the Shea's Creek depot and built a facility at Matraville, which was similarly served by pipeline from the Kurnell refinery. As the years progressed, other oil companies set up in the area to be linked to the AOR pipeline network.

With the massive port development of Port Botany in the 1970s, the nexus with exclusively bulk petroleum movements was finally broken. The port was permitted by proclamation under the Customs Act to receive cargo without restriction. The opening of Port Botany saw for a time two sub-collectors serving the port. The Sub-Collector Port Botany looked after shipping in that complex, and the redesignated Sub-Collector Kurnell attending to Customs responsibilities at the refinery and in the Sutherland Shire.

During the 1980s, the Customs presence at Port Botany ceased as a sub-collectorate although the cargo control functions remained. In August

1995, Kurnell also closed as a sub-collectorate with the Customs House in Prince Charles Parade being retained for occasional Customs use.

The ability and willingness of Customs to both adapt to, and be at, the forefront of change has been a continuous thread in Customs long history. With Botany Bay Customs met the requirements of commerce and legislative responsibilities and through more effective use of resources will continue to do so, albeit without the presence that the needs of earlier times dictated.

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