



Cutler Street PLA warehouse early 20th cent.

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Introduction - Early history and development of the PLA Bonded carpet warehouse

The Honourable East India Company's (HEIC) principal warehouse in the City of London was the Cutler Street complex, constructed in the late 18th century just outside the walls of the medieval city. To cope with the ever increasing volume of trade, the HEIC sponsored the making of Commercial Road in order to facilitate the transport of goods from the East India Dock to the City

The HEIC's monopoly expired in 1833. By 1838 its financial situation led to its merger with the West India Dock Company.. In 1858 the British Government assumed the governance of India. And, in 1874, the HEIC was closed down. The combined business was, with the rest of London's docks, taken over by the Port of London Authority (PLA) in 1909, which also absorbed the HEIC's warehouses in Cutler Street.

The self enclosed form of the Cutler Street warehouse is not visible on some maps circa 1795, but may have been built up in stages as storeys were added. When originally erected the Cutler Street warehouses had a ground floor, three upper storeys

and, possibly, two basements. In due course, a fourth storey was added and, later still, a fifth. These additions are seen most clearly when approaching the buildings from New Street (i.e. from Bishopsgate). For security the perimeter walls had no windows at ground level.

Exactly how the buildings were utilised in the 19th C. is not known to us. What we do know is how it was used for from the early 20th. C. onwards. The two basements were used for the wine and port trade (including bottling). The ground floor was used for general warehousing e.g. tea, opium, spices and other 'dry goods'. The upper floors, especially those closest to the warehouse's New Street entrance, were increasingly dedicated to the housing of Oriental carpets and rugs. At its peak, in the second quarter of the 20th. C, these goods occupied some 150 rooms. All but two of these rooms were "IN BOND", a system which allows for the importation of dutiable merchandise which can be stored without the Customs Duty or other imposts having to be paid. This should not be confused with the workings of a FREEPORT system.

Oriental carpets always were a precious commodity but did not arrive in any great volume until after London's Great Exhibition of 1851. As the trade grew, so merchants from the East - mainly from Constantinople - were attracted to London's Cutler Street, particularly around the closing years of the 19th C. because of London's status and the evident security offered by these substantial warehouses.

It was so important a place that the Superintendent who was responsible for the warehouse in the years before the Great War commanded not just an annual salary of £1000 but also the use of one of the two fine Georgian houses within the perimeter walls at the main entrance (the Customs had the other). Even his deputy was on £300 a year. In 1908, when the OCM the world's

largest Oriental rug corporation was established, it naturally stored its imports in a building immediately outside the main entrance of the complex.

The final years

With property values rising dramatically from the 1960s onwards, the Board of the PLA regrettably decided in the 1970s that it would be expeditious for the corporation to sell off the Cutler Street warehouse complex. A deal was apparently struck with Baltic Exchange for the sum of around 8-9 million pounds and all the tenants were given notice to quit. The deal failed to materialise, probably due to the roller coaster financial climate of the time. With all its tenants gone, the Cutler Street buildings remained unoccupied for a couple of years until they were acquired by a property development company who refurbished them, not altogether sympathetically. Now known as Cutlers Gardens, the complex has very recently undergone a second refurbishment connecting it to Devonshire Square (home of the centuries old LEVANT COMPANY. 'Cutlers Gardens', as it is now called, has had its postal address changed from London E.1 (i.e in the East End) to London EC.2 (i.e 'within the City of London') What was initially done was not to everyone's taste but a recent refurbishment of the appearance of the site has certainly been for the better.

Prior to the closing of the Cutler Street warehouses, two major rug importers (L. Kelaty Ltd, and A. Oundjian [London] Ltd) had already found separate independent premises away from the City of London. The former acquired the old Gainsborough Film Studios near Islington and, thanks to an exclusive contract with the USSR, the firm so prospered that it reputedly became one of Britain's largest privately owned companies.

A dozen of the more active Oriental rug dealers who had remained with the PLA found alternative accommodation in a single warehouse complex in Kentish Town in 1973, and called themselves 'The International Oriental Carpet Centre' (IOCC). The remaining dealers took up the PLA's offer of a refurbished building in Wapping which was unsuitably located. When this failed, some of these dealers managed to find accommodation with the IOCC in Kentish Town. These included the old-established firms of Harounoff & Co, and The Teheran Carpet Co. Ltd.. They were joined by the Bolours who had recently left Teheran and were in no way related to the Bolours of Hamburg ; and one branch of the Ambalo family from Kabul. When the IOCC's lease in Kentish Town expired in 1994, most of the dealers relocated themselves into premises between Finsbury Park and Tottenham which had once been a confectionery factory belonging to Maynards famous for their Trebor Mints and Maynards Wine Gums! The new complex adopted the name 'THE ORIENTAL CARPET CENTRE' (OCC).

This second move in 1994 served to accelerate the decline of London's once very substantial entrepot trade in Oriental carpets which had begun to show itself after the move from Cutler Street two decades earlier. By the time these lines were written, the decline has almost wiped out trade, and not just in London but world-wide. Had the break with its Cutler Street roots not taken place, it might well have been that the decline would have been at a slower rate but it is now obvious that it could not have been avoided. Even the huge warehouse complex in Hamburg's Speicherstadt, known world wide as the "Freilager", has seen its trade diminish and virtually vanish.

Co-written 2007 and substantially revised IX 2012 by Jack Haldane and Clive Rogers .

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George V customs seal attached to imported Oriental rugs.
This seal typical of the time in use at the Cutler Street Bonded warehouse. Probably unlike lead seals used in private merchants elsewhere eg OCM



Porters with goods including a rug depicting George V . *Right : Alf Pitts ('Pitto') a porter.*
Photo : Rawlings Collection English Heritage





Left Photo : Rawlings Collection English Heritage
Joe Everett (wearing hat) who worked for A. Oundjian (London) Ltd.

Right 1920/1930s customs seal attached to imported Oriental rugs from Iran.
" Douanes Persanes "

Anecdote from Paul Hansford as reported February 2011

*" I was a young DCO (departmental clerical officer) in the Customs office attached to Cutler Street warehouse from 1958 to 1961. I worked mainly in the IDA (Import Duties Act) section, dealing with general goods, which was glorified bookkeeping, but I also worked in the tobacco and wines and **spirits** offices. I had little to do with the carpets, but I do remember Mr Knivett (I forget his first name, if I ever knew it) who was the Customs Officer for carpets at the time. He had been there a long time, and the*

only thing of anecdotal curiosity I remember of him is that he required his salary (paid in cash at that time) to be paid in ten-shilling notes - because it (ten bob notes) looked more!



I remember that once when I was going round the warehouse I found a few cases of feathers, relics of the old days. In the Vintage Wine warehouse bottling was done by hand; the men doing the bottling always lost weight noticeably when they came off working on the port."

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Two views taken inside the Port of London Authority's Bonded Warehouses in Cutler Street, which house most of the country's oriental carpet dealers. The stocks of carpets in the warehouses have been valued at about £5m, and it is claimed that London is the world's largest entrepôt centre for oriental carpets. The carpets arrive from Persia, Afghanistan, China, Pakistan, and the U.S.S.R., while the buyers are from as far flung and certainly more numerous countries.

Enhancing London's position are the facilities of the market which include such functions as break bulk, grading and sorting and processing; "London Washing" has obtained the status of a byword for quality in Europe. The picture on the left shows a buyer examining a finely woven Isfahan rug, each square inch consisting of over 400 knots. On right a parcel of Belouts (Afghan) rugs are being displayed.

Press cutting from The Times on Monday 1st Oct. 1962 The buyer examining the goods was I.F.S. Collins, (the OCM-trained professional buyer for the Oxford Street branch of the John Lewis Partnership) with his Cutler Street agent. The article demonstrates that London still exerted a powerful presence in the international carpet trade at the time of writing. It was however already losing its place to Hamburg and other markets.

Extracts from [Port of London Authority Monthly](#) magazine covering 1937-1980s :

Carpets/storage of in Port of London vol 4 p 284 - 285

Carpet trade/London as world centre ref. to Times article vol 4 p 287 - 288

Carpet washing/oriental/finishing vol 8 p 283 - 287

Carpets/water damaged/Cutler Street vol 5 p 153

Cashmir carpet/at Cutler St. vol 34 p 11

Cutler St./how it supplanted overseas carpet commerce centres/ history vol 37 p 206

further information vol 38 p 248 - 252

Eastern bazaar at Cutler St./ History of the carpet trade vol 12 p 167 - 170

Household goods vol 12 p 252 + 256

Hungarian carpets handled at Cutler St. vol 34 p 41 - 42

Kashan rug/studied by professor at Cutler St. vol 35 p 33

Kirman rug/at Cutler St. vol 34 p 11
Magic carpets/oriental rugs and carpets in Cutler St. warehouse
vol 26 p 53 - 55
Oriental carpets/record stocks at Cutler St. vol 33 p 12
Persian carpets/in Cutler St.warehouse mid-war negotiations for
purchase of vol 19 p 64
/"Persian Carpets I" vol 33 p 265 - 268
/"Persian Carpets II" vol 33 p 305 - 308
Rugs vol 2 p 379 - 382
Sale of Carpets/Cutler St. vol 36 p 321
Trade Fairs (Textiles)/overseas vol 37 p 206
Unique carpet at Cutler St. vol 6 p 375
Yugoslavia and its trade with London/Carpets vol 34 p 83

All available Museum of London archives from the London Museum (of
Docklands)Also possible further photographs in the collection. Open by
appointment on Thursdays. The PLA Monthly is also available at the
British Library which may be easier to get to.
Contact as 18/3/2015 Vicky Holmes <vholmes@museumoflondon.org.uk>

**This list is continually updated. Fresh information and supplements to existing
records are most welcome. Dates are especially needed.**

Please contact us via updates@orient-rug.com