

THE DELINQUENT POSTMAN: 1852 STYLE

If it is any consolation to modern users of the postal system, early users had their problems too. Two old letters this contributor has dug out tell a brief but sad story.

Apparently in 1852 the postmaster in Wollongong was a man named Ham-

mond. He ran into trouble over some unexplained affair in which he wrongfully detained a registered letter addressed to a Miss McCauley. Such a thing would never happen today, of course; either they simply would not deliver it, or would send in lieu a curt note to tell you to come and get it. But at that time the tyranny of distance was such that all mail was precious, and was awaited with special eagerness. So complaint was made, the act found to have been unjustifiable, and Hammond lost his job. (Hard times those: fancy losing your job for mere disobedience or malpractice!) From this decision he appealed to the Governor, who referred the matter to the Bench of Magistrates in Wollongong, and they in turn supported the dismissal, in which W.H. Christie, the Postmaster General, concurred. The change was operative from 1st June 1852.

Meanwhile, there being apparently no such thing as a secret in little Wollongong, Mr George Hewlett had, as long before as 29th March 1852, applied for the coming vacancy, to which he was duly appointed. From there he went on to become a leading citizen, a major storekeeper, agent for the E.S. & A. Bank for 36 years, and in 1859 one of the first aldermen of the new Wollongong Municipal Council. He was a by-word for respectability, but even he had a minor lapse into delinquency, if one may credit (as I do) a story told to me in my boyhood.

One hot summer's day George was seen riding his horse down Crown Street in what must have been a mighty jovial mood, certainly for one so staid and respectable as he was. Indeed, he was all dishevelled and quite tipsy, to the amusement of the townspeople. It appears that he had ridden in the way of business to inspect an orchard at the back of Mount Keira. Not only was it a day of intense sultry heat, but he was, as ever, dressed in his conventional long black frock coat and top hat: was there anything else a banker could wear? So on arrival at the orchard he gratefully accepted a bottled refreshment specially dug out of the cool soil beneath a spreading apple tree. And very refreshing it was, too: so he had another, and another, little suspecting that he was being regaled on very old - and very potent - cider, of the rough sort known in Somerset as scrumpy, which would get a rabbit shickered at sight at a hundred yards. George was the unknowing bunny on this occasion; but, in fairness, from what one gathers, the lapse from grace seems to have been merely a belated, and quite innocent, sowing of his One Wild Oat.