

THE OLD MOUNT KEIRA INN
59 PRINCES HIGHWAY, FIGTREE

Introduction

Early in May a young woman from West Wollongong came to the door of the Museum to enquire if the Society knew anything about an old building located on the Princes Highway at Figtree, adjacent to and just south of the Hellenic Club. She suggested it might be the old Mount Keira Inn and pointed to a number of references in *Old Pioneer*. After initial research by the author and Joe Davis she was proven correct, and an important item of the built heritage of Illawarra was "rediscovered". Joe was further successful in locating a turn of the century Photograph of the Hotel, plus a second article by *Old Pioneer* on Hugh Higgins, the original publican. The photo was located after much intelligent searching by Claire White of the Local Studies Library.

After visits to the site by Michael Roberts and Ray Brown of Bulli, and later Steve Dillon and David Winterbottom, the Town Planner, the building in question has proven to be *the oldest surviving colonial period Inn/Hotel* in the City of Wollongong, dating from the early 1850s.

Brief History

The Mount Keira Inn was built alongside the old Dapto Road just south of Wollongong around 1846 by Hugh Higgins, a recent immigrant from Ireland. *Old Pioneer*, in his two articles on the hotel, dates its construction at 1846 and 1851-2. It is possible that both are correct as the building may have originally served as a residence prior to its conversion to a roadside Inn during the mid fifties. *Old Pioneer*, in a 1924 *Illawarra Mercury* article, describes its origins as follows:

"...Down at the Main Road, where the Mill Brook [Byarong Creek] crosses the road, about the year 1846 Hugh Higgins erected the Mount Keira Inn. At this period the Inn was a single storey brick building with a deep verandah in front. The building was back a long way from the road, and between the road and the building a beautiful garden of roses was growing. On the inside of the garden a carriage drive passed in front of the Inn."

It is largely in this form that the building survives to this day, though some-

what run-down and altered.

Hugh Higgins had arrived in Australia with his wife Sarah and three young children as bounty immigrants aboard the ship *Arkwright* on 8 February 1840. Hugh had been a shoemaker of County Sligo, Ireland, prior to his arrival in the Colony. It is unclear when the family settled in Illawarra and purchased their property at Figtree. (NB: The town of Figtree was not gazetted until the late 1800s, however from the earliest days of white settlement the area around the large fig tree at Figtree was identified by this name. During the 1840s the site of the inn was known as Keera Vale or part of the Mount Keira Estate, and in this century as part of the suburb of West Wollongong, further adding to our confusion).

The Higgins' were not in Illawarra for the census of March 1841, though they were living at Figtree by 1846. A daughter Sarah was born in 1841. Their next child, Anne, was baptised at St. Francis Xavier's, Wollongong, on 15 October 1846. The church register therein listed Hugh as a farmer of Figtree. Two more daughters were christened at the Wollongong Catholic church - Julia, on 24 May 1848, and Rebecka, on 7 July 1852.

It seems likely that the Higgins' settled at Figtree in 1846 and began farming. The initial owner of their block had been James Stares Spearing, wherein it was part of his 1000 acre Paulsgrove estate. This land had been granted in 1825 and partially worked (W.G. McDonald, *The Paulsgrove Diary - Illawarra 1833-1834*, Illawarra Historical Society, 1988, 72pp). When Spearing left the district Paulsgrove was subsequently sold to Colonel John Thomas Leahy (in December 1835) and became known as the Mount Keira Estate.

Following the Colonel's death in 1840 the whole estate was subdivided in 1842. Lot No. 7, of 11 acres, eventually came into the possession of Hugh Higgins, and it was upon this site that the Mount Keira Inn was built. It was a triangular shaped block, situated on the Dapto Road by Byarong (Millbrook) Creek. To the east and south of the lot was another creek and swamp.

Byarong Creek, which formed the southern boundary of the allotment, was initially known as Millbrook Creek, owing to Spearing's erection of 2 water-powered mills on its western reaches during the late 1820s. The upper part of it was also known as Hell-Hole Creek due to the murder of a convict there in 1826. By the time the Higgins' arrived in Illawarra the Mount Keira Estate was occupied by numerous freehold and tenant farmers, growing wheat and corn, plus grazing cattle.

From 1846 to about 1849 Higgins worked on his farm at Figtree, and possibly built a residence for his family on the Inn site. The mid forties had been a time of depression in New South Wales, therefore life would not have been easy for these recent immigrants from Ireland who had a young family to support.

In 1849 Hugh Higgins, along with hundreds of other Colonials, headed to the San Francisco goldfields to try his luck and seek his fortune. His comrades included Edward Hammond Hargraves - a former resident of Illawarra who later 'discovered' gold in New South Wales. This episode in Higgins' life is a briefly referred to in another account by Old Pioneer (*Illawarra Mercury*, 11 April 1924):