

YE OLDEN INN

(By the Old Pioneer)

Seventy two years ago - away back in the year 1852 - by the side of the Main South Coast Road, to the south about a mile out of Wollongong, an inn (to be later known as the Mount Keira Hotel) was built. The years 1851 and 1852 were memorable years in New South Wales. They were the years when the gold fever was causing men to give up their occupations and trek in endless streams to the Bathurst district.

Prior to the building of the hotel, the proprietor (Hugh Higgins) had considerable experience in gold mining in California, having left for Frisco with Hargraves and others some years previous.

[Ed: Edward Hammond Hargraves had left Sydney for the American gold-fields in July 1849. After a rather unsuccessful stint financially (though rich in the knowledge gained of the techniques used to win gold) he returned to the Colony in February 1851]

It will be understood that the advice of the proprietor of this roadside inn at Figtree was eagerly sought by the many residents who were trying their luck at Summer Hill Creek and other spots in the Bathurst district.

[Ed: Edward Hammond Hargraves "Discovered" alluvial gold at Summer Hill Creek near Bathurst on 12 February 1851. It was announced publically in the Sydney papers on 3 May and the New South Wales goldrush began]

The gold rush of fifty one produced many changes in the Illawarra district, and men who were content to work for 10/- per week and keep as farm labourers were rushing west, where fortunes were made and where opportunities to all men were equal.

Men with only a thought for the harvest dropped into Higgins' inn on their way to Wollongong, and in the morning following all thoughts of the farm were forgotten, and the lure of gold carried them, with hundreds of others, over the Blue Mountains. Then came the return of the successful men to their farms and the nights spent at the old inn, and the tales told of the successes and the hardships to be endured.

This was over seventy years ago, and this inn, with its garden of roses of the old days, has lived through the ever changing years. Today we hear that an effort is being made to deprive the old land-mark of its license [refer *Illawarra Mercury*, 28 March 1924]. There are yet a number of old people at the Figtree who will remember the old inn in the heyday of it's youth. and their wish will be that, as it has endured throughout the years of the district's birth, in the years to come as the population of Wollongong comes out to meet this monument of a district's history, that it may be improved and stand as a land mark and a memory of the days when men dreamed of the district's greatness.

"Oh, woodman, spare the tree!"

It is possible that after returning from San Francisco with his pockets full of gold Higgins upgraded his house at Figtree and transformed it into the Mount Keira Inn, thereby changing his occupation from struggling farmer to easy-going publican.

According to incomplete licencing records, Higgins held a licence for the Mount Keira Inn from about 1855 through to 1867, though he may have been operating prior to that if we believe the account of Old Pioneer. It was during this period that he would spin tales of his goldfield adventures and lead other locals to down tools and head for the various New South Wales and Victorian fields.

The Mount Keira Inn was located in a prime position on the main road leading south from Wollongong. During the 1850s and 60s the area around Figtree was sparsely populated and also served by the nearby Figtree Inn. Higgins' house would therefore have been a small concern, and this may account for its meagre reference in the historical record. On the other hand Australians were always big drinkers, and the Mount Keira Inn may have been needed to serve the many farmers in the vicinity. We should also remember that coal mining began at Mount Keira in 1849 and Higgins may have catered to this section of the population, himself being an experienced gold miner.

Higgins was unfortunate in one of his early experiences with the Inn, for just prior to the annual licencing meeting of 1856 a man died at his premises from intemperance. Though Higgins stated the man had only consumed one glass of port at the Mount Keira Inn (arriving there already intoxicated) he was held partly responsible for the death. The matter was brought up again during the 1857 licencing meeting, by which time Hugh was getting rather annoyed with this blight upon his reputation. He threatened to withdraw his publican's licence if the Magistrates continued to raise the issue, and it was immediately dropped. As far as we know, there were no more threats to his livelihood and he continued to operate until 1868.

After working as a publican and innkeeper for more than 14 years, Higgins gave up his licence for the Mount Keira Inn (now known as a Hotel) at the end of 1867. Hugh, then aged 67, may have sought a quiet retirement after a long active life. He died on 4 March 1877 aged 70. His wife Sarah had preceded him, passing away in February 1874 at the age of 62.

From 1868 until 1877 the building was unlicensed and served as the family residence. The *Illawarra Mercury* obituary notices of Hugh Higgins and his wife state that they passed away at 'Mount Keira House', Dapto Road. This may in fact have been the old inn building. Another Mount Keira House was the former residence of Colonel Leahy, north west of Higgins' property, however it was situated on the Mount Keira Road.

Hugh's daughters appear to have sold the old inn to the Clarke family almost immediately upon, or just prior to their father's death, for in 1877 the Mount Keira Hotel was re-opened with John William Clarke as publican.

John Clarke successfully held the licence of the hotel for six years, up until his death on 30 June 1882, when his wife Maria took over for a period of two years. Maria was the daughter of George Graham who at one stage operated the nearby Figtree Inn.

From 1885 to 1891 a variety of publicans operated the Mount Keira Hotel, though the Clarke family still owned the property. These licensees included William S. Hall (1885), James S. Mackay (1886-7), George E. Goosey (1888) and John Aylin (1889-91).

In 1892 the Clarkes re-entered the scene - William Clarke was licensee from 1892-98, Maria Clarke during 1899-1900, and George Clarke from 1901-12. In 1912 George Clarke transferred the license to his brother-in-law William Bills. The last publican was Charles Peter Hensen who operated the Mount Keira Hotel until 1927 when its licence was transferred to the new Crown Hotel Wollongong.

A story from the period when George Clarke was publican appeared in the *Illawarra Mercury* on 14 June 1876, with accompanying pictures of the Mount Keira Hotel, plus a portrait of George and Annie Clarke, his wife. It told of the birth of twins at the Inn to the Marceau family, and how one of the Clarkes rescued the children who were initially thought to be still-born.

The Hotel finally closed in 1927 and the site once again returned to being a residence.

As to the history of the building itself - initially it was a single storey, of brick construction with a large verandah. In 1876 the roof of the "cottage, formerly the Mount Keira Hotel" (Wollongong Argus, 8 February 1876) was reshingled. At some point thereafter a second storey (possibly of timber) was added, and it is in this form that it is seen in the photograph in Wollongong Library dating from the period 1901-12 when George Clarke was the publican. At the time of the photograph a single storey shop/dwelling had been erected on the south west corner of the hotel, just by the southern figtree. It is possible this was used as a store.

According to the recent account of a local resident, the second storey of the hotel was removed around 1930, shortly after the liquor licence was transferred to the Crown Hotel. Some of the materials from the second storey were used in local house constructions. The date of removal of the adjacent store building is unknown.

A feature of the Inn throughout its history was the garden and two giant figtrees flanking it to the north and south. According to Old Pioneer the figtrees were sold to Hugh Higgins by a Mr. James for 1/- around 1865. A local resident tells of the use of dynamite to remove the northern-most figtree during the 1950s. From its earliest years the Inn also possessed a distinguished rose garden, no doubt aided in its growth by the close proximity to Byarong Creek.

After the Mount Keira Hotel lost its license the site was subsequently subdivided. A Golden Fleece Service Station was built adjacent to, and slightly north-west of, the old Inn, possibly during the 1950s. The northern figtree was blown-up at this time.

The Service Station was closed during the 1970s and the site was sold to members of the local Greek community. The Service Station building was subsequently transformed into the Hellenic Club, and the old Mount Keira Inn was converted into two flats. A false front consisting of large concrete bricks was put on the building to enclose the old verandah, and the original front windows were removed. The site has remained in this form until the present day.

Present and Future Fate of the Site

The former Mount Keira Inn is at present a single storey structure (much as it was when originally constructed in 1846) which has been divided internally into two and operates as adjoining flats. A brick wall has been built at the front (western side) of the building, and the original front cedar windows have been removed, however they are still on site and can be readily restored.

Internally the building is substantially in original form and of sound construction. Restoration would not provide any major difficulties, though a qualified restoration architect has yet to be consulted.

During 1990 the owners of the Hellenic Club submitted plans to Wollongong City Council for major expansion and upgrading of the Hellenic Club and adjacent area. This development would impinge upon the old Mount Keira Inn building, and possibly result in its demolition. At present there are no barriers to such action on the part of the owners of the site (i.e. the Hellenic Club). The land containing the Inn and Hellenic Club is presently zoned 6(C) Tourism.

The aim should be to preserve the building and work towards future restoration along the lines of the 1850s Inn.

Archaeological Significance

The old Mount Keira Inn site is substantially intact, with the only major sub-surface disturbance being recent sewerage works in the south-west corner of the site, away from the immediate environs of the building, and towards Byarong Creek.

As the site of a commercially operating Inn/Hotel from about 1855 to 1927, there is the possibility that the site would contain numerous wells, the old hotel cellar, and garbage dumps which may be rich in artefacts (bottles, implements, etc.).

For this reason, it is suggested that the archaeological significance of the site also be given consideration.

Summary.

As the oldest surviving colonial period Inn/Hotel within the precincts of the City of Greater Wollongong, the old Mount Keira Inn is of such rarity and regional heritage significance that all measures should be taken to preserve this building.

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