

The Prospect Hill Hotel

The Prospect Hill Hotel was the fourth of nine hotels to be built in Kew in the nineteenth century. While the building remains, it now operates as a Dan Murphy liquor license outlet. Built in 1858 at one of the higher points in the suburb, on the corner of Bulleen Road (now High Street) and Little Derby Street (now Cobden Street), for many years the hotel and the surrounding businesses formed a separate business centre from the rest of Kew.

During the nineteenth century, Kew's hotels and churches vied for the best positions, atop hills or at the centre of junctions of communication and commerce. The geographic advantage offered by a position on Prospect Hill as a location for a hotel can be appreciated through comparisons. The Prospect Hill Hotel is 72 metres above sea level, while The Harp of Erin hotel in East Kew, and Raheen in Studley Park are 57 metres and 61 metres above sea level respectively. Only the nearby churches in Highbury Grove and the Sacred Heart Church in Cotham Road managed to clamber a few metres closer to heaven.

Dorothy Rogers, writing her *History of Kew* in the early 1970s, states that the first structure to be built on the site was a small wooden building. By 1864, when the hotel was advertised for sale, a very much more substantial building stood on the site. The bar was described as '24ft. 6in. x 10ft., with a cellar of same size underneath (cut out of solid rock)'. In addition the hotel boasted 'bar parlours, bedrooms, kitchen, outbuildings, stabling, and a garden at rear'.

The first six years of the hotel's operation were eventful. In the first year of its operation, the publican, John Litton Reed was to join with Patrick O'Shannassy of the Kew Hotel in organising and promoting the Kew Races. The Races were held over two days in May, near the Harp of Erin hotel in what is now Kew East. There were three races on each day including the 'Publicans' Purse' for 20 sovereigns. The latter was open to all horses. Entries for this race cost £2 2s, and four entries were required for the race to proceed. At the end of the second day, the Races were to culminate in a 'ball', the location of which is still to be identified. Sport and music were to be recurrent themes throughout the hotel's history.

Between 1858 and 1862, the hotel hosted a number of key political and social events. In its first year of operation, it hosted the inaugural meeting of the Boroondara Mutual Benefit Building & Investment Society. One also wonders at the accuracy of Rogers' information about the size of the first hotel on reading reports such as that which describes a rally of the inhabitants of the district at the hotel in 1858, opposing the decision to locate a lunatic asylum at Kew. Hotels were natural venues for political meetings, and as early as 1859, the hotel was hosting political rallies for candidates for the seat of South Bourke. It is not surprising therefore that the publicans of Kew also had political aspirations, and that Reed and O'Shannassy stood, albeit unsuccessfully, for the first Municipal Council of Kew in 1860.

By 1862 there was to be a changing of the guard, when the Licensing Court approved the transfer of the liquor license from Reed to John Ormond. The short two-year tenure of Ormond was to have high and low points. The former was a sporting landmark in the district, when the first Kew Cricket Club was formed in 1863. Gentlemen from Kew, including the mayor, John Carson Esq., met at the hotel on 2 December, electing office bearers. Ormond was elected Treasurer. All must have gone well as the club met for a celebratory sit-down dinner at the hotel at the end of the season. Times were not always to be so good, as when Ormond was charged with allowing disorderly conduct in 1853. A drunken brawl had taken place between the hotel door and the horse trough, and

Ormond had watched from the door without interfering. The question the court debated was whether he had encouraged the assault. He was to be acquitted on this occasion.

Throughout 1864, the lease of the hotel was regularly advertised as available. In June the freehold was also advertised as for sale. John Ormond's departure is unrecorded, as is the arrival of the most significant family in the hotel's history: the Scanlons. Unusually, the Scanlons' presence begins and ends in court. In 1866, Denis Scanlon, the new licensee, attended the Kew Police Court to protest his inability to control his child ward, who was a vagrant. Approximately 71 years later, the executors of the Scanlon estate, who still owned the freehold, entered mediation with the then licensees in an attempt to reach agreement about the proposed rebuilding of the hotel, which the Licensing Board supported.

Newspapers sell copy by reporting the sensational rather than the mundane, so the reports that linked Denis Scanlon over a ten-year period to court cases involving drunkenness, vagrancy, brawls, the illegal selling of liquor out of hours, robberies, and stabbings might not be unexpected. Some make good reading such as the 'wild bullock' that escaped from outside the hotel in 1866, running amok in Kew before finally being brought to ground in Studley Park; or the brawl in the hotel bar in 1871 that began when one patron insulted another's cows. Some cases threatened Scanlon's livelihood, as when police objected to the renewal of his license in 1873. Things reached a climax in 1876, when Patrick Cregan stabbed Scanlon on two separate occasions. At Cregan's first trial he was acquitted because he was judged insane. The doctors disagreed and released him. Cregan stabbed Scanlon and two others again. On being brought before the court, the judge dismissed the case and returned the knife to the assailant! It was clearly too much for Scanlon. Owning the freehold proved to be safer than standing behind the bar. By 1878, he had sold the license to John Kearney, the licensee of the Harp of Erin hotel.

John Kearney was to hold the license between 1878 and 1884. Being the licensee of the hotel was clearly a risky prospect, as within a year, he was in court as a witness against William Merritt, who was charged with three cases of assault at the hotel, including one against Kearney himself. Merritt was to be fined £30, and in default was gaoled for three months.

With names like Scanlon, Kearney and Cody, to name just three of the long-serving licensees of the hotel, one might have imagined a strong Irish Catholic connection, as there was with many of the other hotels in Kew. This does not seem to have been the case. Perhaps what appear to be Irish names were in fact the names of Ulster men, which might explain why the hotel became a centre for various lodges in Kew. In 1882, the Loyal Kew Lodge met at the hotel for the first time, followed by a sit-down dinner for 50. By 1889, the Masons had their own permanent rooms at the hotel, from which it was reported that they set out one day on a funeral procession to the cemetery for a departed colleague. This procession was small scale in the general scheme of things. In 1885, the Oddfellows announced that they would hold a march, led by a brass band and the local fire brigade cart, departing from outside the hotel and ending at the Kew Asylum.

Between 1887 and 1923 the licensees of the Prospect Hill Hotel were various members of the Hurley family. Bridget Hurley, and then after her marriage to William Cody, as Bridget Cody, would be licensee singly or jointly between 1885 and 1917. Subsequently, her son James would take over the license.

In the early part of this period, particularly in the 1890s, reporting about the hotel in the daily press altered. The only court hearing involved a request by Bridget Cody for a reduction in her license payment in 1892. Every other report about the hotel involved sports and sporting groups: The Kew and the Collegian Harriers, the Boroondara

Harriers, the Essendon and the Auburn Harriers, the Grace Park Bicycle Club, the Melburnian Hare and Hounds and the Medical Harriers. Each of sporting group used the special geographic location of the hotel as a starting point in long distance runs or rides. This surge of interest in sport and athletics was very much of the period. The Victorian Amateur Athletics Association had been formed in 1891 following the creation of the Melbourne Harriers in 1890.

The twentieth century in contrast was to be one of steady decline, with a few high points along the way. Bridget's husband, William Cody, who had quite cleverly performed the dual role of municipal councillor in Kew and Collingwood, was to die in 1906. Thereafter, the focus shifted to survival of the fittest, and endless claims of superiority between the Prospect Hill, the Harp of Erin, the Council, and the Greyhound hotels. All offered billiards. The Prospect Hill claimed superiority with its electric lighting, fans and public telephone for patrons.

1910 was the Jubilee year of the municipality, and the event was extensively celebrated. The journalist reporting for the *Box Hill Reporter* approvingly noted that 'On the summit of the hill, the electric illuminations at the Prospect Hill hotel were a scene of dazzling splendor visible from miles around'.

One might imagine that hotels would feature prominently during periods of war, either as places where the war effort might be promoted or where the armed forces might celebrate. Strangely there are no reports connecting this hotel to aspects of either World War I or II. Perhaps in the twentieth century, the pub was losing its place as a community hub. There are whole decades where there are no references to, or articles about the Prospect Hill Hotel in newspapers, even though it continued to function as a licensed premise. The 1920s is a case in point. Perhaps the need to chase a declining clientele forced each of the hotels to consider renovation or rebuilding. Some did not even get this far. Of the six Kew hotels that had entered the new century, the Kew Hotel and the Council Family Hotel had closed by 1920 and 1922.

The architect, R. H. McIntyre, who specialised in refurbishing and rebuilding hotels, refurbished the Greyhound Hotel in 1928, the Prospect Hill in 1935, and the Harp of Erin in 1955. The Clifton Hotel was also to have its Victorian façade replaced in the 1930s. The extent of the redevelopment of the Prospect Hill Hotel is difficult to gauge. The initial proposal by the licensees was for a limited refurbishment. This was opposed by the district licensing-inspector who claimed the hotel was sub-standard and that it should be rebuilt. The licensees and Robert McIntyre came back with more extensive proposals for a two-storey brick building costing £8,000. The corner entrance of the hotel betrays its 1930s makeover, yet the façade facing High Street still looks uncannily like a nineteenth century building.

Following the redevelopment, there is an endless change of licensees, betraying either, a lack of commitment to the area by publicans, or that hotels were no longer making sufficient return on investment.

In 1954, one last highlight occurred, when the local branch of the Salvation Army invaded the hotel's beer garden to hold their hymn singing. The drinkers were invited to join in. While they '... were a bit staggered at first ... they [soon] took to it like a drinker to his beer'.