

Woodman Inn

Discussion about the significance of the Woodman Inn inevitably focuses on its name, the date of its construction, the period of operation, and its location. That these are open to discussion is due to the short period of its operation, the paucity of details relating to the actual building and its management, the absence of maps, and the very early period of Kew's history in which it operated.

It is worth considering what the 'village' of Kew was like before describing the 'Woodman', as it was colloquially known. While there had been land sales in Kew as early as 1845, the construction of the Hawthorn Bridge across the Yarra River did not occur until 1852, opening up Hawthorne, and potentially Kew to vastly increased commuter traffic. Increases in transport also brought about an increase in land sales, and so it was that in 1851 Nicholas Alexander Fenwick purchased 122.5 acres (Lot 87), which constituted much of what became central Kew, north of Bulleen Road (High Street). This land was to be subdivided into thirteen smaller lots, based on the survey of George Wharton. It was to take another two years however for Kew to open its first retail shop in August 1853.

The first mention of 'The Woodman' occurred in March 1854, when Joseph Willoughby of Prahran applied to the Licensing Board for an application to open a hotel in Kew. His application was to be refused by the bench until the next licensing day. In 1854, with population of Melbourne increasing dramatically due to the Gold Rush, the Licensing Board was under pressure, having to deal with a multitude of applications for licenses. Willoughby's next application, on 19 April was to be deferred again.

These deferrals were perhaps too much for him, as on 20 April, *The Argus* reported his death at his brother's house in Prahran. The report identifies his previous employment with the firm of Bartlett & Willoughby [plumbers], of 164 Great Bourke Street, and gives his age as 49 years. Joseph Willoughby's last Will and Testament, and the accompanying Probate records can be viewed at the Public Records Office Of Victoria. These identify him as a 'Carter'. The executors of his Will are named as his brother James Willoughby, the proprietor of the Economical & General Provision Stores in Prahran (later known as the Red Flag Store), and William Hawkins, Innkeeper of Melbourne, who in 1853 was the publican of the City Arms in Elizabeth Street.

While Willoughby's death might appear to indicate his disappearance from the Woodman Inn narrative, this was not to be the case.

What is one person's loss is often to another's benefit, as finally, the Licensing Court granted approval for the 'Woodman Inn' to be a licensed premise on 5 May 1854. The license was granted to Mark Fitton¹.

Mark Fitten had arrived in Port Phillip in January 1848. He is recorded as an 'Assisted British Migrant' on the 'Marion'. All that is known of his movements in the six intervening years is that he had worked in a hotel in Melbourne. He promoted this on the day following the granting of his license, when he advertised in *The Argus*:

WOODMAN HOTEL, Kew. MARK FITTON, (late barman at the Newmarket Hotel, Great Bourke-street East) begs to Inform his friends, and the public generally, that he has obtained a license for the above house, and trusts to secure their patronage, by good liquor, moderate charges, and strict attention to the comfort of all who may favor him with a call.

Within a day, the name given to the establishment had changed from an inn to a hotel. It was to change back and forth throughout the period of its operation.

¹ Mark Fitton's name is spelled in two ways. The article uses the name as given in a specific resource referred to.

The Inn, that had experienced a difficult gestation, was to have a short life, and was not to survive 1855. The year however began well, and on 1 January a report appeared that would appear to endorse the value of its location on a key road:

The Woodman Inn is already noted as a stopping off point in the pretty suburban village of Kew for travellers on their way to the Anderson Creek Diggings. The Inn is said to be the first house after leaving the Red Lion Inn, and is said to be about four miles from Melbourne.

Later historians have similarly noted the importance of the Inn's location on the corner of Princess Street and Bulleen Road, although they have embellished their accounts in the absence of hard evidence.

James Bonwick, writing in 1858 does not refer to any hotels, let alone churches or schools. F.G.A. Barnard in 1910, who is generally accurate, gets the name wrong, calling it the 'Woodman's Arms', suggesting that its '... name doubtless indicated the principal occupation of the early inhabitants, for trees were plentiful and there was always a ready sale for firewood in the growing town of Melbourne'. While Kew may have been heavily wooded, an analysis of the occupations of early settlers in the area hardly suggests that they might have been characterised as woodmen.

Dorothy Rogers (1973) makes no fanciful claims about the origin of the hotel's name or about the clientele. She does repeat Barnard's incorrect name of the hotel and introduces three new pieces of information. Firstly, that the hotel was one block removed from the corner of Princess Street and Bulleen Road. Early photographs of the Woodman's Store do not support this contention. Secondly, that bullock wagons used to get bogged outside the hotel, sometimes for days, in wet weather. While this might have been the case, it did not make Fitton's enterprise any more profitable. And, thirdly, that Nicholas Fenwick, and later his executors preserved the freehold. While this might be correct, there might also be a case for believing that Joseph Willoughby's Will indicates a case to the contrary.

The most recent history, the *City of Boroondara: Thematic Environmental History* (2012) suggests that the hotel, again misnamed, '...catered to eponymous woodcutters for a short time before closing down'. Contemporary accounts offer no support for this view.

During the remaining six months of its operation, the business of the Inn was more prosaic than what later historians might surmise. Between January and March 1855, a number of advertisements appear in Melbourne newspapers referring to the Inn. On 8 January, Mark Fitten advertises for two men to crosscut 50 loads of firewood.

Other advertisements are placed naming the hotel, but remains unclear whether these are only using the hotel as a quasi-post office. This is certainly so when Mr Bonwick's black horse is let out of his paddock, and a reward of £5 is offered for its safe return. Applicants are advised to go to Mr M Fitton of the Woodman Inn to collect the reward. An advertisement for two bricklayers on 14 March may be for a job at the Inn, but also could be for elsewhere in Kew. When a bundle of valuable documents is lost near Kew, advertisements are placed in *The Argus* over successive weeks, requesting their return to the Woodman Inn. There is no suggestion that they relate to the establishment.

Newspaper accounts were not only of a commercial nature. On 7 March, it is recorded that the wife of Mark Fitton gave birth to a baby girl at the hotel.

By April 1855, the benefits of relative isolation were over. Edward Glynn was to be awarded a license to operate the Harp of Erin hotel on 8 April, in the same court session in which Fitten's license was renewed.

By June 1855, it was all over. The executors of the Willoughby estate struck. On 14 June it was reported that: 'The Executors of the late Joseph Willoughby v Fitton, Under Dstraint for Rent. Alfred Bliss and Co. will sell by public auction, on the premises, known as the Woodman Inn, at Kew, on Friday, 15th inst, at twelve o'clock, the whole of

the furniture, stock'. The circumstances surrounding the Willoughby-Fitton relationship remain unclear. Was it a relationship between the owner of the freehold and the licensee, or was Fitton merely the front man for the real license-holder?

The public record remains silent until January 1856, when on 17 January an advertisement appears in *The Argus*: 'To Let, at Kew, the House and Premises, lately known as the Woodman Hotel. Apply to Pearson, 3 Swanston-street, near the Bridge'. This is the only the reference to the size or appearance of the Woodman Inn.

Later historians are in general agreement that the building later became in succession 'Woodman's Store', 'Nicholas Brothers' Junction Stores and Kew Timber Yard', and 'Merfield's Chemist'. The actual spot where it stood is partly covered by the park in which the Raoul Wallenberg bust is located, but with the widening of Kew Junction, much of the land on which it stood is lost to the relentless flow of cars hurtling south down Princess Street.

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