

4.0 EARLY GREYMOUTH

Early Gilmer activities were focused on Greymouth which is located on the south side at the mouth of the Grey River. The Grey is prone to frequent and heavy flooding and is also subject to an onshore prevailing wind which makes the mouth hazardous at the best of times. Many a ship was mauled and devoured by the sea while attempting to cross the bar. Development was slow to start at Greymouth because of distances, expense and more tempting gold finds in other regions but inevitably people came.¹

On 22 July 1864 Reuben Waite, a storekeeper from Collingwood brought 70 diggers on the chartered paddle steamer “*Nelson*”. They crossed the bar and put supplies ashore and he opened the first store on what was to become the corner of Waite St and Mawhera Quay. The ship took back 40 tons of coal and a big rush to the West Coast started in February 1865. By July the town had been surveyed and pegged out. Land was not cheap and prices were double those of Nelson. A Post Office opened on 20 October 1865 and thereafter the Grey River Settlement was known as Greymouth.² John Hamilton and the Gilmer’s were therefore there at the very early stages. However, not everyone was satisfied with the way the town was developing and at the extent that government was providing the necessary services. The newspaper described conditions in Greymouth at the start of 1866:³

“The social condition of Greymouth may be said to be improving- that is so far as the accommodation provided by private enterprise is considered. Several commodious hotels constructed and fitted up have been and are being erected, so that we are well prepared for the rush hitherward from Hokitika, which is generally anticipated and of course devoutly wished.

The Government have however done nothing at all for the place There are no moorings for vessels and the snags which obstruct and endanger the shipping are allowed to remain undisturbed. The streets, one and all are full of holes and stumps of trees, there are no footpaths and no drainage. Three solitary policemen, one of whom is always indoors at the depot, constitute our protective force, the Magistrate holds his Court a mile off, and the new post office is being placed as much as possible from the business part of the town.

The Local Improvement Committee is doing its best to bring about a few necessary works of utility and convenience and its efforts have been well seconded by the inhabitants, but nothing can be done until the Government in its wisdom, thinks fit to reply to the various applications which have been made to it. For all useful purposes, the Canterbury Government might as well be stationed at Kamskatcha as Christchurch and as for its “Commissioner” at Hokitika, he is simply an obstruction. He is supposed to hold large discretionary powers, and yet he cannot decide upon any question of the least public importance without referring to Christchurch, so that you can imagine what amount of circumlocution must attend the administration of affairs in the Canterbury portion of Westland.

With Cobden just across the river the newspaper had a viable contrast to draw attention to:

¹ The House that Sam Built by John Hewstone, Ian Cameron, Peter Sydor

² The House that Sam Built by John Hewstone, Ian Cameron, Peter Sydor

³ Grey River Argus 4 January 1866

“The Nelson Government was proverbial in its somnolency, but it has set an example to its neighbour which ought to be followed viz., in vesting its resident officer with sufficient powers to enable him to meet the emergencies which naturally arise in a mining community.”

Against this background, John Hamilton and his Gilmer nephews started their business on the West Coast. We know that there was a formal business partnership between them and the business name was “Gilmer Brothers.” The existence of the partnership was not immediately apparent in their early activities but it was clear when they started advertising under that name in late 1868. There was a formal dissolution of the partnership in February 1882 which was followed by wide advertising of this event in many newspapers in Wellington, Nelson and the West Coast. This clarified the formal nature of their relationship and activities.



Cobden and Greymouth Today