

4.6 POST OFFICE HOTEL WESTPORT 1867

Westport was established a few years before Greymouth. In early 1861, the existence of payable gold had been firmly established in the Buller. More prospectors were starting to make their way to the area and shortage of food was to become a problem because of limited access to the area. Reuben Waite, a Collingwood storekeeper, with a keen eye for speculation was busy organizing a supply of stores for the new gold diggings. With another storekeeper, T. S. Rogers, he chartered the ketch *Jane* to take supplies to the Buller River and with 16 prospectors arrived in June 1861. They set up shop on the banks of the river but the supplies were quickly sold out and he returned to Nelson for fresh supplies.

A cluster of tents and shanties soon grew up on the eastern bank of the Buller River forming the first permanent European settlement on the West Coast. Waite and Rogers each set up a shop and the settlement became a supply centre for the diggers in the district.¹

The paddle steamer "*Tasmanian Maid*" entered the Buller River on 29 January 1862 the first steamer to visit any West Coast River. She unloaded her stores and her 60 passengers swelled the population of the Buller to about 200².

Subsequently, the first sections of land were being sold in October 1863 some two years before Greymouth.³ However, Westport like Greymouth was isolated. Access by land was difficult without roads and with very difficult mountain terrain to cross. The easiest access was by sea. As a consequence, the original town and business centre were laid out at the lower reaches of the Buller River where it enters the sea.

The town grew quickly with diggers flocking to the district and in April 1866 gold was discovered on the terraces behind Westport resulting in the Caledonian Rush. By 1867 Westport was surrounded by a prosperous group of goldfields and many businesses were being established to support the growing community.

As previously mentioned, on 25 July 1866, John Hamilton was a passenger on a steamer from Greymouth to Westport. We speculate that this was an exploratory business trip to assess whether there were any opportunities there.

A little later in the year, on 7 November 1866, tenders were requested for the erection of a hotel at the Buller, Nelson Province for Mr. Samuel Gilmore (sic) by W.B. Armson Architect⁴. It seems fairly clear that this tender was specifically for the building of the Post Office Hotel at Westport the following year and also that Sam had carriage of the project.

Hamilton's Post Office Hotel was opened in September 1867. It was built on Section 37 on the corner of Molesworth and Gladstone Sts. Typically, the hotel was located on a corner and in a strategic position immediately opposite the Camp Reserve which in this case was not a location for itinerant miners but more importantly the government offices. It was close to the wharf, opposite the Post Office and Telegraph Office. Also on this site was the Customs House, The Survey Office, Court House and Police Station and other government offices such as the

¹ Westport – Struggle for Survival by Bruce Macdonald

² Westport – Struggle for Survival by Bruce Macdonald

³ The House that Sam Built by John Hewstone, Ian Cameron, Peter Sydor

⁴ West Coast Times 7 November 1866

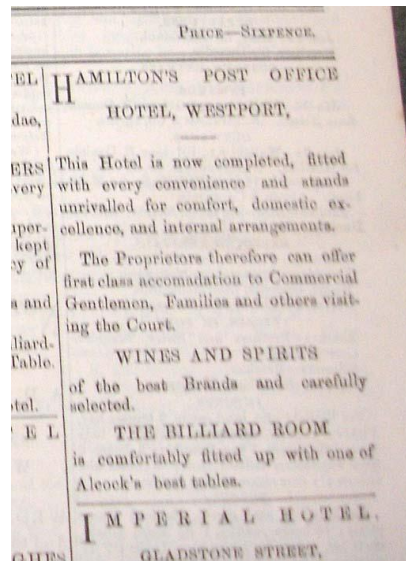
Harbour Board. The Post Office had been established in 1866 and consistent with other hotel locations was located where business was being done and close to travellers. Gladstone Street was the business centre of the town.

The opening of the hotel was announced in a newspaper advertisement under the heading of *"Hamilton's Post Office Hotel, Westport."* It mentioned Sweeney's of Greymouth and Hamilton's Hotel at Cobden and this shows that it was a Gilmer Brothers venture and the concept of chain of hotels with common standards of comfort and service was beginning to appear.

HAMILTON'S POST OFFICE
HOTEL, WESTPORT,
Is now completed, and will be conducted on the same approved principle as at their Hotel at Greymouth, known as "Sweeney's," and "Hamilton's" Hotel, Cobden.
Further comment is unnecessary, but it may be mentioned that one of Alcock's Billiard Tables, admitted to be the best ever imported, will very shortly be fitted up.
The Beds are unequalled on the Buller, and to meet the growing demand for increased accommodation an extension of the premises has been already commenced. Hot, Cold and Shower Baths will be provided.
The Dining-room is now fairly started, and will be found a leading feature at this establishment.

Post Office Hotel Opening 14 September 1867

From the wording of the advertisement it seems that when the hotel was initially opened it was not fully completed and work was still being done on the Dining Room. A later advertisement on 25 January 1868 conveys the message that it is completed.



Advertisement 25 January 1868

We are very fortunate to have an 1869 photograph⁵ of the hotel which shows Sam Gilmer leaning against the doorway under the lamp with his arms folded. The others to the left of Sam are Eugene O'Connor, George Fella, John Munro, Sam Gilmer, and to the right are Stan Taylor, George Cervais, A J Turner in the top hat.



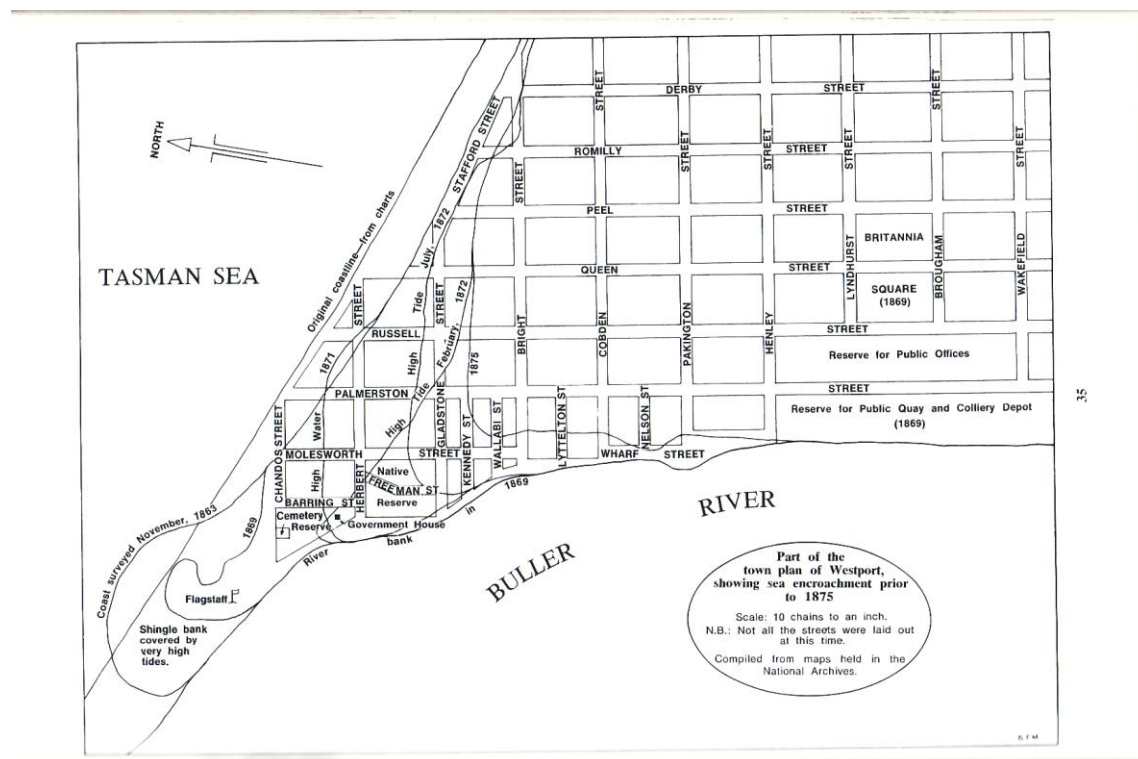
Sam Gilmer was the initial licensee of the Post office Hotel and we believe he was at Westport until 1873. John Gilmer took over from Sam in 1873 after the dismantling of the Clarendon Hotel

⁵ Westport: A Struggle for Survival by Bruce Macdonald. Photo from Howard Collection

and John stayed at the hotel until to 1893⁶. Electoral Rolls show that from Sam Gilmer was at Westport on the 1868/69 roll until 1871/72 roll. He was not on the 1873/74 roll.

Sam Gilmer was an active and forthright person and he participated in activities in the town that would have promoted the hotel. There are few remaining Westport newspapers and those that have survived have not been digitized. However, we have identified that Sam was a member of a committee to conduct the *"Grand Supper and Ball"* in support of the Westport Hospital. Others on the committee included Eugene O'Connor and George Somner who had previously been a partner with James Johnstone in the Melbourne Hotel at Charleston.⁷ In 1868 Sam was also elected to the Westport Hospital Committee.

Westport was to suffer a number of catastrophes with flooding of the Buller River. The first of these was in 1863. Initially, encroachment of the sea on the town was put down to residents removing the vast quantities of driftwood at the North Spit thus weakening the natural barrier against the sea. Consequently a notice appeared in the Nelson Gazette of 27 June 1868 stating that *"a penalty not exceeding Five Pounds was payable for the removal of, without permission of the Harbourmaster, of driftwood from any Crown Land within one mile of the Buller River mouth"*. This action was too late as on 14 October almost all the jetties were destroyed and 30 chains of Gladstone St was taken away in a heavy flood. Thankfully this did not include Hamilton's Post Office Hotel but the floods were a great cause for concern at this early stage.



Town Plan Showing Flood Levels

⁶ Westport Genealogy and History Group

⁷ Westport Times & Charleston Argus 28 October 1868