

4.7 MELBOURNE HOTEL CHARLESTON 1867 TO 1878

Charleston was one of the centres of the West Coast gold rush which had its origin in mid 1866. It was located in an area called the pakihi which means wasteland which covered the coastal area from Westport to Greymouth. In the main it was thick coastal scrub with little if any cleared land.

The rush started in May 1866 after a party led by Bill Fox had found payable fine gold on the pakihi and returned to Greymouth to inform Warden Kynnersley. Fox and Kynnersley chartered the *Woodpecker* and on 8 May 1866 sailed with 18 prospectors to Woodpecker Bay in the lee of Seal Island and landed their stores on the beach near Potikohua (Fox) River. The *Woodpecker* returned with stores and more diggers and soon there were over 300 men scattered up the coast. The pakihi rush had begun. Word quickly spread over the West Coast and people descended on the Buller district in their thousands.¹

A township of 20 stores had grown overnight at Constant Bay, the site of Charleston. This was a very small bay at one of the very few openings on the wild coast line. The bay was barely 200 metres across and the opening between two large rocks was much smaller. While the bay today has become silted up after many years of runoff from sluicing the gold claims,² it still provides a good view of the difficulties of gaining access to the new town.

The first vessel into Constant Bay was the ketch *Constant* a ship of only 13 tons bringing supplies for the prospectors. The *Constant* was owned by Reuben Waite and gave her name to the bay. The Captain was Charles Bonner and owing to his early visits the settlement became known as Charlie's Town, which was amended in time to Charles Town and finally changed to Charleston by Greenwood when he made his first survey of the town in 1866/67³.

Access to the town was very difficult because of the thick coastal scrub. It was to take some time for a track to be cut through from Westport some 13 miles away. Some people attempted to walk with pack horses along the beach. However, horses were limited in what they could carry and swimming of waterways was often necessary.

Until the track was cut, access by sea was the only alternative for reaching Charleston and this was not without its difficulties. Very small vessels could enter the bay in favourable weather, tides, winds and surf. Large boats could not enter and had to anchor off shore and ferry their supplies in small surf boats.

Newspapers reported some of the events. For example:

*"There has been a schooner out there this week past, but being unable to get into the Pakihi owing to the surf has returned to the Buller."*⁴

"At present the supplies for the Pakihi are all derived from seaward importations. In ordinary fine weather, cargoes can be landed without much difficulty at the Pakihi, and if surf boats were employed it is probable all the goods would be shipped direct. At present goods are

¹ Westport- Struggle for Survival by Bruce Macdonald p21

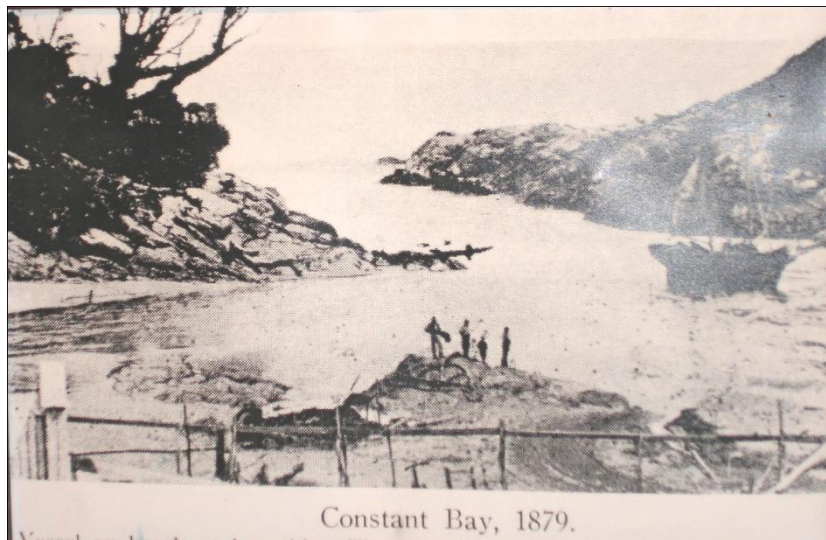
² The House that Sam Built by John Hewstone, Peter Sydor and Ian Cameron

³ Charleston by Irwin Faris p34 & 38

⁴ Grey River Argus 20 October 1866

landed by ordinary boats and prams which are, even in the most favourable weather dangerous. The entrance to the small cove which forms the landing place is through a narrow channel between two high rocks , and the sea rolls through the opening in heavy waves. Several accidents have already occurred and in two instances, life was lost. On Wednesday, a boat coming in struck against the rocks and was immediately capsized and one man was drowned.”⁵

“The schooner Mary Anne which had been beached at Constant Bay (Pakihi) has been completely knocked to pieces by the heavy surf.”⁶



Constant Bay 1879



Constant Bay 2009

⁵ Grey River Argus 7 November 1866

⁶ Grey River Argus 8 November 1866

To their credit, the newspapers tended to be cautious towards the new rushes and often referred to inflated accounts of the finds made and comments such as *"We are told that although the appearance of the country and the results which have been obtained are all very encouraging and warrant belief that a good goldfield will be opened there is absolutely nothing to justify the excitement that appears to have been occasioned in Greymouth."*⁷

Still the numbers arriving increased and swelled the Pakihi population. *"Our advices from the diggings are to the 26th inst, on which date there were about 1200 persons on the ground and numbers swelling the crowd every day most of whom, says our informant are doing nothing but see what turns up.....As appears to be an inevitable feature of every new rush, the bulk of the population at the Pakihi spend the first few days after their arrival in rushing about making enquiries or watching the results of the few parties who set in at once. This state of things was although exceedingly profitable to the dealers in strong waters is not the quickest mode of testing a new goldfield."*⁸

Such articles were not always consistent and often referred to the *"pennyweight of gold per shovel full or ½ dwt. to 1 dwt. to the dish."* This was all the diggers saw and it was enough to justify their interest.

By November 1866, the newspaper summed up the situation, acknowledging Warden Kynnersley for providing information, as follows: *"The conditions of affairs may be thus summed up- sufficient payable ground has been opened up to constitute the Pakihi an established goldfield.....but it is equally certain that nothing up to the present time has been discovered to support anything like the large population now assembled."*⁹

Against this background, Charleston continued to grow. With the completion of the track from Westport access became easier and the township continued to develop although it was to be years before an appropriate road was established. By 1 May 1867, the Post office was opened and the town was officially named Charleston.

Three days later on 4 May 1867, the Melbourne Hotel opened its doors. It was located on Section 400 Camp Street now the main road between Westport and Greymouth. It had been built by Mr. George Somner and James Johnstone. George Somner was a former proprietor of the Masonic Hotel at Greymouth and later a builder at Westport. Johnstone was the proprietor of the Greymouth Melbourne Hotel and the new hotel traded as *"Johnstone's Melbourne Hotel"*.

From at least 6 April 1867 Somner and Johnstone advertised in the newspaper that *"having purchased that splendid allotment adjoining the Camp opposite Harry Mann's Hotel will open a first class hotel in a few days..."*¹⁰

On the opening day of 4 May 1867, Somner & Johnstone advertised that *"from 10.30am to 12.30pm all comers would be properly entertained at the proprietor's expense."*¹¹ This was obviously seen as a more appropriate way of expressing that there were drinks on the house!

In addition the editor of the Charleston Argus referred to the opening: *"We notice by reference to advertisement, that the spirited proprietary of Johnstone's Melbourne Hotel purpose (sic) opening that establishment this morning. With their customary*

⁷ Grey River Argus 30 October 1866.

⁸ Grey River Argus 30 October 1866

⁹ Grey River Argus 7 November 1866

¹⁰ Charleston Argus 6 April 1867

¹¹ Charleston by Irwin Faris

*liberality they will entertain all comers free of charge between the hours of 10.30 and 12.30 noon, when all are cordially invited, Messrs Somner and Johnstone having been among the first to supply really first class accommodation for parties resident in or visiting Charleston it is to be hoped that their spirit of enterprise will meet with the appreciation and support it certainly merits.”*¹²

According to Irwin Faris “The next landlord was J. Hamilton believed to be in September 1867 and in January 1868 the hotel was acquired by Harry Kennedy of Kennedy and Heighway. The half interest of Samuel Heighway was sold at auction on 6 February 1868 and the Kennedy and Heighway partnership was dissolved in March 1868.”¹³

It is not clear what was occurring at this time and it is hard to see how the J. Hamilton mentioned could be John Hamilton. However, it could have been possible that John Hamilton took over the lease from James Johnstone, who John would have known from Greymouth, and that Somner & Johnstone (or perhaps only Somner) sold the freehold to Kennedy and Heighway.

However this is unlikely because on 1 July 1868 Kennedy’s trustee in bankruptcy brought an action against Johnstone to recover 100 Pounds.¹⁴ The case was heard by Magistrate T. A. S. Kynnersley and the case provides some of the details of what occurred in the first few months of 1868. The evidence in the case reveals that Johnstone sold the hotel to Kennedy and Heighway in February 1868. Both Kennedy and Heighway paid 100 Pounds cash each with the balance to be paid at 2, 4, 6, 8 and 10 months making a total purchase price of 700 Pounds.

In April, Kennedy ran into financial difficulties after an action was brought against him for debts in Marlborough and he also gave 100 Pounds to Johnstone on condition that a Bill of Sale for Heighway’s share of the hotel was destroyed. In view of his imminent insolvency on 6 April, Kennedy sold his share of the Hotel to McCarthy immediately before the first payment was due. (This was either Philip McCarthy or T G Macarthy the brewer who was very well known in Charleston and later at Wellington.) Unknown to Kennedy, Johnstone obtained a second Bill of Sale from Heighway and when the April payment was not made he foreclosed on Heighway and sold to McCarthy on 17 April “for a trifling amount of 200 pounds.” At this stage McCarthy was the sole owner of the hotel. However, it was reported that Kennedy had been in possession since the hotel was sold to McCarthy “as manager for Mr. McCarthy” and also that he was making a deal with McCarthy for the whole hotel.

Kennedy’s action against Johnstone was successful and he recovered his 100 Pounds and costs. Within 3 weeks he was advertising in the newspaper as the proprietor of the Melbourne Hotel. He advertised it as the “*Largest and Best Hotel in Charleston.*”¹⁵ We do not know whether he bought the hotel from McCarthy or he was continuing to operate it on McCarthy’s behalf.

¹² Charleston Argus Saturday 4 May 1867

¹³ Charleston by Irwin Faris

¹⁴ The Westport Times and Charleston Argus 3 July 1868

¹⁵ The Westport Times and Charleston Argus 21 July 1868.

THE MELBOURNE HOTEL, CHARLESTON.

This is the Largest and Best Hotel in Charleston: is situated in the immediate vicinity of the Camp and Government Buildings and Post Office.

THE HOTEL has been fitted up regardless of cost, and contains Private Sitting, and Bed Rooms, tastefully furnished, and replete with every convenience. There is a Large Dining Room attached to the establishment, where Public Meetings may be held on application to the proprietor.

Also, a Large and Spacious Billiard Saloon, furnished with one of the best Tables on the Coast, and attended to by an experienced Marker.

COBB & CO'S COACHES arrive and depart from the Melbourne, so that parties travelling by the same can rely on being warned in time for their departure.

Terms Moderate.
H. KENNEDY,

**Harry Kennedy's Melbourne Hotel
Westport Times and Charleston Argus 21 July 1868**

However, Kennedy was not there long and on 1 September, Gilmer Brothers started advertising as the proprietors of the hotel. This is reasonably consistent with Faris' suggestion that "*the whole interest was purchased by Gilmer Brothers for 900 Pounds on 21 September 1968*"¹⁶ and the difference is likely to represent the delay in completion of the legal documentation.

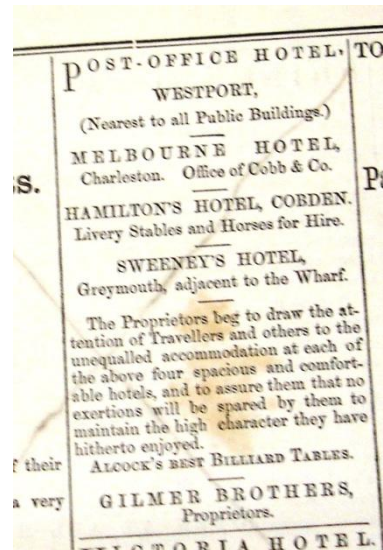
The advertisement appeared under the name of Gilmer Brothers, Proprietors.¹⁷ This was about a month earlier than Gilmer Brothers advertised their name in relation to their operation of Sweeney's Hotel in Greymouth.

¹⁶ Charleston By Irwin Faris

¹⁷ The Westport Times and Charleston Argus 1 September 1868



Gilmer Brothers Ad 1 September 1868



First Chain Style Ad 21 November 1868

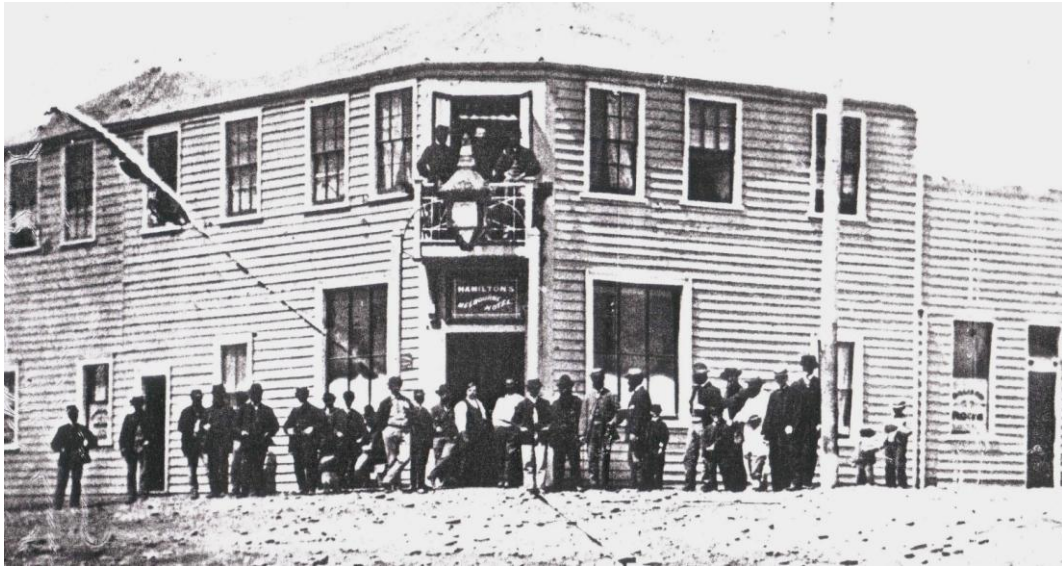
On 21 November 1868, the advertisement changed and for the very first time in any newspaper Gilmer Brothers advertised their chain of hotels at Westport, Charleston, Cobden and Greymouth.¹⁸ It was to be some six months before a similar chain style advertisement appeared in the Grey River Argus.¹⁹

An old photograph of the Melbourne Hotel carries the name of Hamilton's Melbourne Hotel. We presume this change in signage was made following the purchase from Kennedy. We would also presume that the name represents the name of John Hamilton as the senior member of the Gilmer Brothers partnership, not the least in years, but also at this early stage he was playing a key role in funding their activities which were increasing rapidly in both their scale and scope. **We believe the three people on the balcony are from left Sam Gilmer, Hamilton Gilmer and John Hamilton.**



¹⁸ The Westport Times and Charleston Argus 21 November 1868.

¹⁹ Grey River Argus 11 May 1869.



Hamilton's Melbourne Hotel Charleston Opening 1868.

The hotel was a two storey hotel one of only three in the town and it and the European were considered to be the best in the region.²⁰ The hotel had 12 bedrooms and was located at the top of the hill overlooking Constant Bay and with spectacular views of the ocean. As usual it was strategically located adjoining the Camp Reserve and was the closest hotel to the diggers camped there. Earlier we mentioned that many arrived and spent a lot of time working out how to get involved in the diggings and while doing this spent time and money at the hotels.



1879 Town Plan

Within a relatively short time the 12 bedroom Melbourne Hotel had expanded, absorbed the building next door on Section 401 Camp Street. This was previously occupied by the Albion

²⁰ The House that Sam Built by John Hewstone, Peter Sydor and Ian Cameron.

Hotel in 1867 with James Booth its proprietor. Later it became the Brighton Hotel and had a further change to the Pioneer Hotel with Daniel Dennehy the proprietor. It was used as a Sample Room where commercial travelers displayed their latest wares.²¹

After being acquired by the Gilmer Brothers partnership the Melbourne was run by John Gilmer. Sam was at Westport and there were commitments for John Hamilton at Cobden and Hamilton Gilmer was very active in Greymouth at Sweeney's.

Electoral Rolls, provide a reasonable guide but are limited because of a failure of people to register and change their details if they moved, and also because of the time lag in their publication.

The 1868 roll does not indicate any Hamilton or Gilmer at Charleston. Sam was registered at Westport and Greymouth and John Hamilton at Cobden. The 1868/69 roll shows John Gilmer at Charleston and he is shown there until 1872. There were no entries for 1872/73 for Buller District and in 1874 John is shown at Westport. We know that Sam returned to Ahaura in 1873 and it seems reasonable to assume that John went to Westport to replace him with his brother Robert taking John's place at Charleston. However, it is likely that there was a short time when both Sam and John were both at Westport with Sam at the Post Office Hotel and John at the Clarendon.

It would have taken some time for the rolls to catch up. Robert Gilmer appears on the roll at Charleston in 1875/76 and this is the first roll he has appeared on even though he had been in New Zealand since at least 1870 or probably earlier. **We have a reference to Robert being at Westport on 23 July 1872²²** and also a legal document executed by Robert at Charleston on 13 November 1873.

The euphoria at Charleston was not to be longstanding and there were early signs of a decline in gold production. *"From 1873 the gold supply seriously diminished and the mining returns became comparatively small, good results being difficult to secure."*²³ The Grey River Argus of 1 July 1874 provided a comparison of production for six months to December 1872 with the first four months of 1873. The point was to highlight the importance of water supply to production. The six month period averaged 2500 ounces per month which was produced with good water supply. The monthly average for the four month period of 1873 was 1000 ounces and the water supply was said to be bad.

While this may have been the case it was evidence that the easier finds were over and other more difficult and costly means of production were required. The call was for government to supply more water to the diggings. Alternatively this might have been privately provided but only if it was believed shareholders would get a good return. The paper reported the December 1874 gold production delivered to the Bank of New Zealand at Westport was 1200 ounces. Clearly production was falling.

We have little details of life or activities at the hotel because there are very few newspapers surviving. However, a fire was reported in Greymouth and it indicates that the hotel was very lucky to remain in place.

²¹ Charleston by Irwin Faris

²² Grey River Argus 28 July 1872

²³ Charleston by Irwin Faris p28

The following particulars of the fire which lately occurred in Gilmer's Melbourne Hotel, Charleston, are given by the local papers :— It occurred about four o'clock in the morning and appears to have broken out in the commercial room, setting the ceiling on fire and extending through the ceilings of every other room on the ground floor. Strangely enough the scrim and paper burnt away without igniting the timbers, and timely warning having been given assistance was soon on the spot and danger averted. There was of course, in the confusion, some damage done by the removal of effects, but the whole cost of replacement will not exceed a few pounds and is covered by insurance.

Grey River Argus 27 July 1875

Gilmer Brothers left Charleston about June of 1877. At that time they had purchased Dawson's Hotel at Reefton and Robert left Charleston to manage the Reefton business. It is of interest that the Gilmer Brothers advertisement in the Inangahua Times continued to mention the Charleston hotel until 15 August 1877. At this time they were not advertising in the Grey River Argus but when it was resumed on 8 December, Charleston was excluded and Reefton was included along with Greymouth, Cobden, Ahaura and Westport.²⁴

The hotel was sold to Owen McArdle who was later to be the Secretary of Hamilton Gilmer's Junction Brewery in Wellington and also his partner in other business ventures. The sale transfer shows that it was sold for 300 Pounds substantially less than the 900 Pounds paid for it ten years before. The transfer is dated 6 April 1878 and it also shows the seller as Robert Gilmer of Reefton. This was well after Robert left Charleston.

Charleston was in decline and this showed in the number of hotel licenses. In 1869 there were at least 80; in 1873, 26; 1882, 8; 1903, 4 (European, Melbourne, West Coast and Welcome Inn). The surviving hotels were generally acclaimed as the best hotels. The Melbourne Hotel was destroyed by fire in 1904 and was not rebuilt.²⁵

There has not been a building on the site since that time. During a visit in 2009 we were shown a model of a planned development of five star accommodation with an accompanying restaurant. This is planned by a caving adventure group. The site is one of the best along the coast and offers lovely views. However, it is a very quiet area and the hotel on the adjoining site closes at 3 pm most days and is on the market.

²⁴ Grey River Argus 8 December 1877

²⁵ Charleston by Irwin Faris.