

Expansion of the Gilmer Brothers partnership and business into the Grey Valley began in late 1869 with the purchase and redevelopment of a Gilmer Brothers' hotel at New Ahaura. This town is about 25 miles from Greymouth on the banks of the Grey River. Shortly after the founding of Greymouth in 1865 a provisioning and supply depot was developed for prospectors and miners. There were daily departures from Ahaura of pack horses for the diggings further up-country.<sup>1</sup>

Initially, the town was built on the river but floods soon forced it to be relocated to higher ground, hence the name of New Ahaura. The Post Office was opened on 26 October 1867 and the town became the headquarters of the Warden of the Nelson South West Goldfields (instead of Cobden) and also the Police.<sup>2</sup>

### **Purchase of Hotel and Rebuilding**

The first indication that Gilmer Brothers were involved at Ahaura was in the Subscription Lists for the Grey River Hospital published on 25 November 1869.<sup>3</sup> This showed a contribution by collectors Gilmer and Hamilton at Ahaura collecting 9 Pounds 2 shillings and 6 Pence. Separately there is a mention of John Hamilton "The Greek" and his collection so there can be no confusion. The issue is which Gilmer is it? Hamilton was a collector for the hospital at Greymouth but with all the activity there, it seems unlikely to be him. Sam was at Westport. John was at Charleston, Henry was either at Greymouth or at Cobden looking after the hotel there while John Hamilton was working at Ahaura. This leaves Robert who we know was at Ahaura later that year.

Following this, in February 1870 Gilmer Brothers called for tenders for the supply of 30,000 feet of sawn timber at the Ahaura township. The amount of timber was very large and the work was obviously extensive.<sup>4</sup> The request for tenders also appeared in the West Coast Timber Industry Journal February 1870.

This was followed shortly after by a newspaper<sup>5</sup> report about the hotel which noted:

*"We understand that those enterprising caterers for the public, Messrs Gilmer Bros., have purchased the hotel at the New Ahaura Township, lately in the occupation of Mr. Gough. The price is, we believe, a very large one. The well known name of the new proprietors is a sufficient guarantee to the up-country public that the new establishment will be a decided benefit to the district."*

This report indicates the extent that the Gilmer Brothers business reputation had already been built. It also shows that their means of communicating information to the editor very regularly resulted in publishing of news stories about their activities that further served to enhance the reputation of the business and promoted the particular activity being undertaken. In today's terminology this is called Public Relations which is effectively unpaid advertising.

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<sup>1</sup> The House that Sam Built by John Hewstone, Ian Cameron, Peter Sydor

<sup>2</sup> The House that Sam Built by John Hewstone, Ian Cameron, Peter Sydor

<sup>3</sup> Grey River Argus 25 November 1869

<sup>4</sup> Grey River Argus 22, 24 & 26 February 1870

<sup>5</sup> Grey River Argus 3 March 1870

This editorial comment was followed shortly by an advertisement headed "*Preliminary Notice*" of *Gilmer's Hotel (Late Gough's) New Ahaura Gilmer Bros. Proprietors*.<sup>6</sup> The hotel was being renovated, remodeled and extended using the timber obtained from the February request for tenders.

These details also show that this was a Gilmer Brothers business venture rather than that of any one individual. However, the grant for the land on which the hotel was built at Section 24, corner of Clifton and Camp Streets, was made out to John Hamilton of Cobden, Hotelkeeper, on 28 August 1874, some four years later. It seems likely that the previous owner of the site, Benjamin Gough, had not bothered to apply for a land grant and the administrative backlog with an under resourced bureaucracy had significantly delayed the issue of the grant to John Hamilton.

As usual, the hotel was particularly well located in a prime position very close to the government activities in the town. It was also located immediately opposite the Camp Reserve making it the closest hotel to the large passing trade of miner's on their way up the Grey Valley to the diggings.

It is easy to conclude that the hotel was initially John Hamilton's because the title was in his name and it is very clear that his level of activity in the town's affairs was very high and had increased with the establishment of the new hotel. He obviously took a "hands on" role in establishing the business with others in the partnership being involved in Greymouth, Charleston and Westport. However, it was clearly a Gilmer Brothers business venture and the hotel was advertised with that name.

It seems likely that the partnership that existed did not particularly bother about the niceties of which name particular businesses were held. There were times when even the newspaper was confused as when the editor referred to "*The alterations and additions to Gilmer's Hotel are now completed and it is now one of the largest on the Coast.*" The same article went on "*We are to have a District Court held here as soon as the long room at Hamilton's Hotel is quite finished and suitable additions have been made to the already extensive Government buildings, for his Honor's accommodation.*"<sup>7</sup> We have evidence of meetings being held in the Court Room at Gilmer's Hotel so the same hotel was given two different names in the one article!

It is clear that the hotel was finished well before September 1870. On 9 August 1870 the new hotel was included as one of the five hotels in the advertisement for the chain of hotels now owned and operated on the West Coast by the partnership under the Gilmer Brothers business name. Even prior to this there is a reference to a public meeting<sup>8</sup> in July being held in the Court Room of Gilmer's Hotel Ahaura to discuss the development of roads in the Grey Valley.

At this meeting the vote of thanks was moved by Robert Gilmer (the first reference we have located of him in New Zealand). Robert was obviously helping John Hamilton in the early establishment of this business.

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<sup>6</sup> Grey River Argus 3 March to 26 April 1870

<sup>7</sup> Grey River Argus 15 September 1870

<sup>8</sup> Grey River Argus 19 July 1870



**Elizabeth & John Hewstone at the bar 2007**



**Ahaura Hotel 2009 New Roof and Paintwork**



**Present Owner Ken McTigue with Elizabeth**

In November 1870, John was included as a member of a committee to prepare for a public meeting with the Superintendent of the Nelson Government which was to take place at Gilmer's Hotel. It appears that the hotel had become a primary meeting place for larger meetings in a very short time, emulating the position that had been established for Hamilton Gilmer's Hotel at Greymouth and indicating a consistency in the methods adopted to develop their business relationships.

It is of interest that the mood of this meeting with the Nelson Superintendent was fairly hostile towards the Nelson Government. The community had a strong feeling that they were being neglected. Revenues were collected but were applied towards more settled areas like Nelson where there were more people but not the same need for development expenditure on infrastructure and facilities. Government officials at Westport were also a target.

Tracks had not been provided for miners as had been promised and the main trunk road to the coast had not been constructed. There were calls for bridges to avoid wading across rivers and also proper buildings for officials rather than using hotels. The newspaper reports of the Superintendent's response read as a defence of the status quo and the government's decisions.

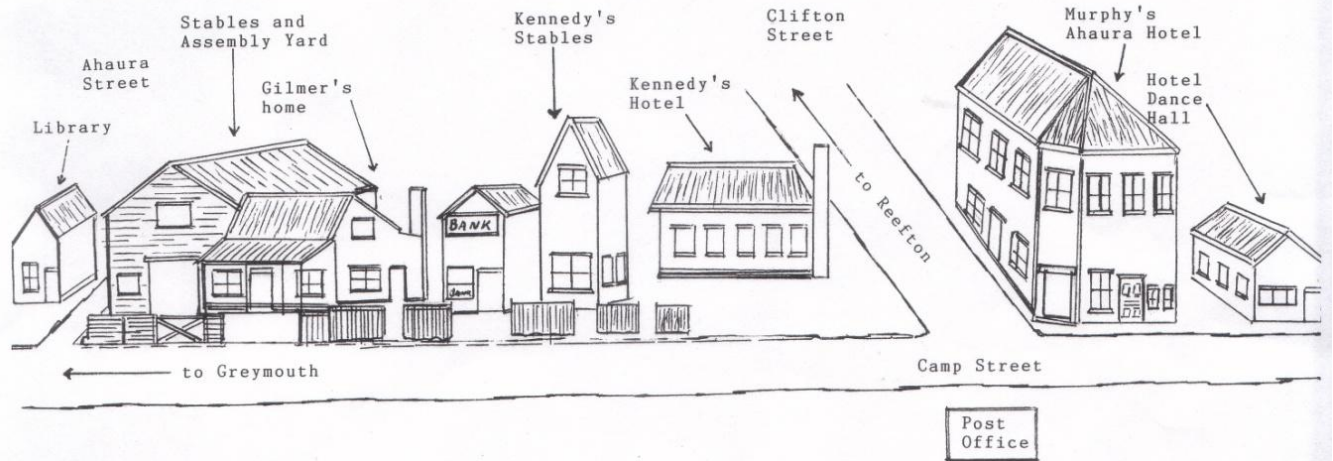
John Hamilton, Hamilton and Sam Gilmer all acquired additional land at Ahaura. John Hamilton acquired Sections 26 and 27 in Camp Road with Section 26 being used as the dance hall for the hotel. On the next corner of Camp Road and Grey Street a section was acquired by Hamilton and Sam Gilmer and this was later purchased from them by John Knox Hamilton.

On the same block immediately behind the Hotel was Gough's Hotel, owned by John Hamilton (the Greek) and beside that he had his store. He also owned a number of other sections on the block. Hamilton and Sam Gilmer had also acquired several other sections clearly indicating that they saw the town as having a promising future.

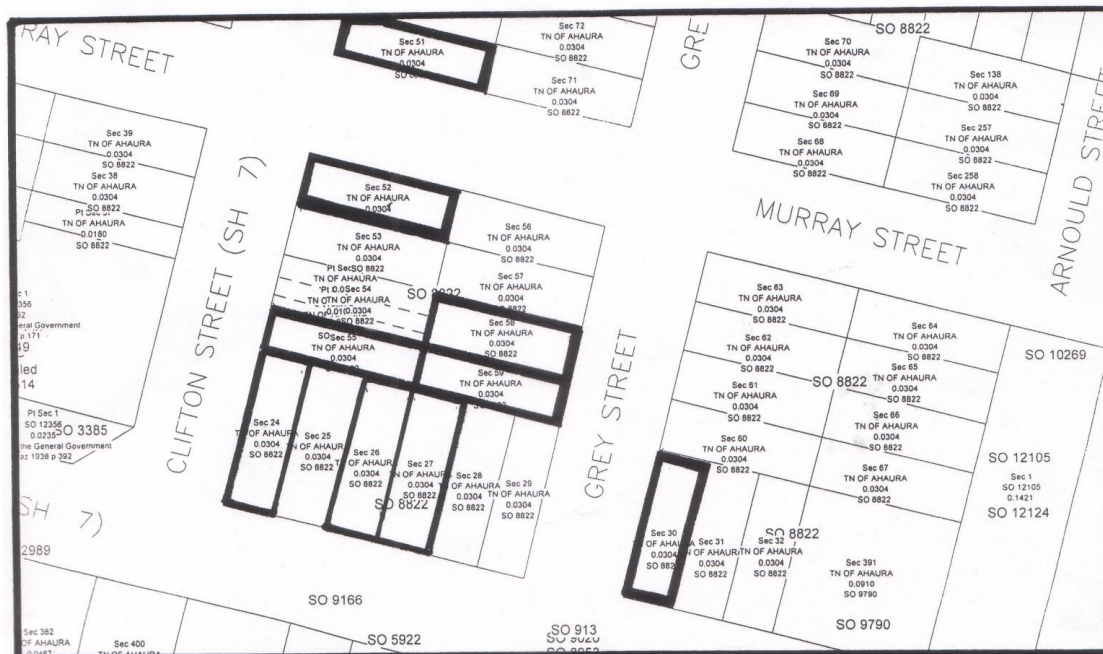


Sketch of Northern side of Camp Street, Ahaura, in 1901  
as it was remembered and drawn by H.Paul in 1971.

Original spelling has been corrected and authenticated  
e.g. Gilmer and Murphy, instead of Gilmour and Murphey.



Sketch of Camp St Ahaura 1901<sup>9</sup>



AHAURA : SECTIONS AS AT 1875/1876.

Hamilton Gilmer owned Sections 30/51/52

John Hamilton.1.owned Sections 24/26/27

John Hamilton.2.owned Sections 55/58/59 ("The Greek")

30 = John Knox Hamilton

24 = Hamilton's Hotel

55 = Gough's Hotel

Sections of Ahaura Town Plan of interest 1875/76<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> John Hewstone Nelson NZ

In the early 1870's Ahaura proved to be a key element in Gilmer Brothers serving the Grey Valley. Stables were established there and in 1872 at Reefton. The road was in poor condition and there was a good trade in hiring saddle horses to those making their way to the diggings. When the mail contract on the Greymouth to Reefton route was obtained in 1873, the Ahaura hotel was a convenient stop off point for their coaches. Passengers would alight for lunch and other refreshments while fresh horses were placed in the traces ready to continue the journey.

However, it was not long before interest in Ahaura waned. With most surface gold being taken and new gold finds elsewhere people moved to them. Ahaura did not turn out to be the boom town originally expected of it. Gilmer Brothers themselves looked further up the Grey Valley and paid attention to Reefton before looking further afield to Wellington.

It is difficult to be precise about who managed the hotel but we believe that Sam Gilmer went back to Ahaura in 1873 after Robert went to Charleston and John went to Westport. Sam would have also had the assistance of John Knox Hamilton, John Overend and Henry Gilmer was also relatively close by. However, we have identified that Robert was also at Ahaura in 1875 when he was treasurer of the Grey River Hospital Ball Committee.

**GREY RIVER HOSPITAL.**  
—  
**AN AMATEUR MUSICAL, LITERARY,  
AND DRAMATIC ENTERTAINMENT,  
AND BALL,**

**Will be held at AHAURA in AID of the  
FUNDS of the above Institution, on**

**FRIDAY, 18th JUNE, 1875, .**

**Under the management of the following  
Committee:—**

<b>W. S. Staite</b>	<b>J. M. Ollivier</b>
<b>R. Reeves</b>	<b>J. Hargraves</b>
<b>W. Clarke</b>	<b>J. W. Sutcliffe</b>
<b>R. Gilmer</b>	<b>M. H. Hayden.</b>

—  
**LADIES ADMITTED ON INVITATION  
BY THE COMMITTEE:**

—  
**Gentlemen's Tickets for admission to Per-  
formance, Ball, and Supper, 10s 6d each.**

—  
**R. GILMER,**  
**Hon. Treasurer.**  
**M. H. HAYDEN,**  
**Hon. Secretary.**

**Grey River Argus 22 May 1875**

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<sup>10</sup> John Hewstone Nelson NZ

Gilmer Brothers retained the hotel through the 1870's but by 1878, the firm had bought two hotels in Wellington. By 1882 the partnership was dissolved and it was clear that the hotel at Ahaura was owned by Sam Gilmer. At the June licensing committee meeting at Ahaura the license of Hamilton's Hotel, as it was called at the Licensing Committee, was transferred to John Overend.<sup>11</sup>

John Overend was a long term employee of the Gilmer Brothers' business. He had run the Ahaura horse stables, and worked at the Ahaura Hotel. He was witness at Henry Gilmer's wedding and at that time he was described as a horse dealer from Granville. Henry was obviously close to him as he named one of his children after him. It seems that this close association was formed when they worked together at Hamilton's Hotel Cobden and later when we believe Henry also worked at the Ahaura Hotel. John Overend looks to have worked in the Horse Hire business there as well.

On 7 March 1883 the newspaper<sup>12</sup> reported the transfer of the license from John Overend to Edward Murphy. Sam Gilmer had sold the hotel and closed the chapter on his close involvement in the activities of the Grey Valley.

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<sup>11</sup> Grey River Argus 7 June 1882

<sup>12</sup> Grey River Argus 7 March 1883