

5.2 JOHN HAMILTON COMMUNITY ACTIVITIES. Grey Valley Hospital

John Hamilton, like Hamilton Gilmer, had a close affinity with the activities of the Grey River Hospital. He was acutely aware of the need for good facilities in the region and was an active collector for subscriptions to the hospital and was a consistent contributor himself.

In the early days of Cobden if there was an accident the person would be first taken to Hamilton's Hotel at Cobden so John would have seen a number of people in need of assistance. Some of them died and the hotel was the location of a number of inquests. At Ahaura the new Gilmer Brothers hotel was now assuming a similar role.

With the continuing development of the Grey Valley and the growth of Ahaura, the community began to see a need for a facility much closer to their activities. In 1870, roads were still poor and travel to Greymouth took time especially as the best mode of travel was a three hour boat trip down the Grey River. This could well have followed the carriage of a patient by a relay of stretcher bearers from a remote mining area. In the event of accidents this travel time could make the difference between life and death, assuming the patient was well enough to travel in the first place.

In March 1870, there was an important public meeting at Pinkerton's Hotel, Ahaura. It was chaired by Warden Whiteford and the purpose was to consider the advisability of establishing a hospital at Ahaura for the use of people of the Grey Valley. The meeting carried motions to establish a hospital for the Grey valley District and also that a committee be formed to establish the feelings of the community and invite their cooperation. The committee included both John Hamilton and John Hamilton "the Greek".¹

A later meeting was held at Napoleon to obtain wider support. This was obtained with considerable discussion about the location of the site such that it was central enough to meet the needs of the district. In the end the selection of the site would be a decision of the government. The meeting was assured that the government would provide 2 Pounds for each Pound subscribed by residents and it would be necessary to canvass the area for subscriptions. Committees need to be formed in each area to facilitate this fund raising. The meeting supported the establishment of a hospital in "*a central location*"² and a committee was formed to support this.

The community held an amateur musical and dramatic evening on 26 May as a benefit for the proposed Grey Valley Hospital. The Argus reported in detail on the programme and the local personalities involved.³ The venue was crowded and the performance went without a hitch despite the limited opportunities for rehearsal. The performance raised 20 Pounds net of expenses and was so successful it was to be repeated at a number of mining districts starting at Napoleon the next Saturday.

While these activities were proceeding, we should remember that John was also continuing his activities at Cobden. In particular he was heavily involved in the details of the price war his Horse Hire business was having to protect its market position. While Ahaura was only 25 miles from Cobden travelling and communication between the two places was not as quick and as easy as it is today.

¹ Grey River Argus 31 March 1870

² Grey River Argus 10 May 1870

³ Grey River Argus 31 May 1870

A further meeting of the committee was held on 23 July 1870. John Hamilton (Gilmer) was elected Treasurer and a resolution passed that subscription lists be called in and Warden Woodfoord said he would have plans prepared for the building and submit them to the committee and in the meantime he would communicate with the government about the site. A sub committee which included John Hamilton was appointed to consider relief in cases of emergency.

At a meeting of the committee on 25 August 1870 plans were presented for a main building with wings on either side. The committee decided to proceed with one of the wings at once as funds were available to make a start. The Building for the present would be 25 X 58 feet capable of accommodating 16 beds, with surgeon's and warder's rooms and kitchen and offices attached. It was decided that yearly subscription tickets should be issued entitling subscribers of one Pound and upwards to admission subject to the rules, at any time during the twelve months they were in force. Subscribers of 5 Pounds or upwards would have the privilege of recommending two patients for admission. This was to be communicated to the Grey Valley people and a collector appointed to canvass for subscriptions.⁴

With the passing of a further six weeks there was no further progress which the paper attributed to the government delay in selecting a site. There was obvious discontent with the government throughout the district and the hospital was just one of the issues.⁵

At a committee a month later John Hamilton presented a financial report which showed the committee had funds of 98 Pounds 4 Shillings. The collector also presented his accounts and then resigned because of business pressures and because there was now ample funds to establish the hospital. The committee was also losing patience at the delays and resolved that tenders be called at once for the erection of one wing of the proposed building in accordance with the plans they had received. John Hamilton spoke in favour of the motion that was carried unanimously. A subcommittee that included John Hamilton was set up to recommend, accept tenders and act on behalf of the committee. Arrangements were also made for the committee to visit the proposed site which according, to the newspaper, was near Ahaura on the road to Napoleon about a quarter of a mile from the township⁶

The committee met again on 11 November and reviewed the plans for the building now proposed. It would contain one ward of 45ft 6in. by 26ft capable of accommodating 13 patients with a doctor's and dispenser's rooms and offices attached. The cost was estimated at 450 Pounds. A letter from the government was received which requested details on the size of the building, the cost of management, the amount likely to be subscribed towards the erection and the amount likely to be obtained towards maintenance. The government required this information before they would make a definite decision on the amount of the subsidy. The committee unanimously resolved to proceed to call for tenders according to the agreed plans with the closing date to be 25 November.⁷

The committee received tenders at a meeting on 15 December 1870 and tenders were accepted for the work and a subcommittee appointed to oversee the erection of the building.⁸ By 8 April the hospital building was approaching completion and the committee had decided to

⁴ Grey River Argus 25 August 1870

⁵ Grey River Argus 6 October 1870

⁶ Grey River Argus 5 November 1870

⁷ Grey River Argus 11 November 1870

⁸ Grey River Argus 20 December 1870

mark the opening “*with an amateur musical and dramatic entertainment and grand ball and supper.*”⁹ This was to take place on 25 May and tickets were being sold and performers began their rehearsals.

On 11 May it was reported that a considerable number of tickets had been sold already throughout the mining districts. Also, “*it having come to the knowledge of the committee that certain objectionable females resident in Napoleon and Half-Ounce districts had expressed an intention of being present at the ball, it was unanimously decided that the managing committee would reserve to themselves the right of refusing admission at the doors to any person they chose.*”¹⁰

The committee had also received an offer from the Nelson government for the maintenance of the hospital and it was prepared to accept it as long as the conditions were not onerous.¹¹

As planned the concert and ball took place on 25 May and it was reported as “*in every way a success. The performance of the concert was exceptionally good for amateurs.*”¹² There was a large number of visitors from all over the Grey Valley, including Greymouth. A very detailed and lengthy account was published by the Grey River Argus on 31 May 1871.

A further meeting of the committee was held on 2 June 1871 to “*make a settlement of accounts in connection with the late concert and ball*”. The Hon. Treasurer’s financial statement was received and an unanimous vote of thanks was passed to the treasurer, Mr. John Hamilton (Gilmer), for his services to the institution up to this time,”¹³ The proceeds were believed to be in excess of 100 Pounds after expenses “*a handsome amount but not sufficient to clear the debt off the building.*”¹⁴

⁹ Grey River Argus 8 April 1871

¹⁰ Grey River Argus 11 May 1871

¹¹ Grey River Argus 18 May 1871

¹² Grey River Argus 27 May 1871

¹³ Grey River Argus 6 June 1871

¹⁴ Grey River Argus 8 June 1871