

5. 7 REEFTON and DAWSON'S HOTEL

Through the 1870's Gilmer Brothers progressively increased their interest in the Grey Valley and Reefton. They had stables at Reefton since January 1872 and they were involved with the provision of passenger coach and mail services from 1873. Their gold mining interests, more lately with the Inglewood mine in July 1875,¹ had also brought them to Reefton and it was natural that they would be interested in establishing their core hotel business there. There were early indications that this was in fact occurring:

As a healthy sign, the Inangahua Times mentions that a well-known firm of Greymouth hotelkeepers have opened negotiations for the purchase of one of the best businesses in Reefton, and if the conclusion is satisfactory, will at once establish a branch of their business in Reefton upon an extensive scale. The firm referred to is that of Messrs Gilmer Brothers, who already have first-class hosteleries at Westport, Charleston, Greymouth, and Ahaura.

Grey River Argus 26 August 1875

This news report was almost two years before they were successful in purchasing Dawson's Hotel from John Dawson. Dawson's was by far the best and most successful hotel in Reefton. It had an excellent reputation and it was equivalent to the Gilmer Hotel in Greymouth as the place to stay.

Gilmer Brothers would settle for no less than the best but it appears that Dawson was not prepared to sell. However, In mid 1877 Gilmer Brothers purchased Dawson's Hotel from John Dawson.

From evidence given at a court case later that year we know that Robert Gilmer had been working at the hotel for three months since June 1877. This meant that Robert had left Charleston about that time which was some nine months before the date on the transfer of the Charleston land to Owen McArdle.

The land transfer for Dawson's Hotel shows a date of 5 July 1877 but these transfers were commonly produced well after the event. The transfer was in the name of Hamilton Gilmer but in giving evidence in a court case both Hamilton Gilmer and Sam Gilmer had both testified that the hotel was a partnership between the both of them and John Hamilton.

This is of interest because John and Robert Gilmer, who were both signatories to the Dissolution of Partnership in 1882, were not mentioned as partners in Gilmer Brothers in this

¹ Grey River Argus 24 July 1875

transaction. This tends to confirm our view that the major players were always John Hamilton together with Hamilton and Sam Gilmer.

At the time of the court case, Robert had just left for Greymouth although it was said that he could be back. It was also mentioned that Sam was absent quite often.²

Given that the hotel was taken over in June 1877, it is surprising that John Dawson renewed his license at the June quarterly meeting of the Licensing Court. This meant that the license could not be transferred to Gilmer Brothers until the September meeting. We have not found a newspaper report that this occurred but we presume it happened as a matter of course as there is ample evidence Gilmer Brothers were actively operating the hotel and there were many references to "*Gilmer's Hotel*" in the newspapers.

The land purchased covered Sections 173 and 174 on which the hotel was built. The price paid was 500 Pounds. There was a lane at the rear of the hotel and the parcels of land facing Shiel Street immediately behind the hotel were also purchased. All properties were on the same transfer and this represented the total cost of the land. There was most likely an additional payment to Dawson for the hotel business but we have no indication of what this might have been.

From January 1877³, prior to purchasing Dawson's, Gilmer Brothers were advertising in the Inangahua Times. They used an older version of the chain style advertisement. Initially the advertisement was on the front page but later it moved to page 2 immediately adjacent to the Editorial Banner and content. This was effectively the only part of the paper that was always changed with each new edition. On reading the paper it would be the starting point for daily readers. The advertisement was perfectly positioned.

It took until 17 August 1877 before the Reefton Hotel was included as Gilmer's Melbourne Hotel, Reefton. (Late Dorsen's)(sic). There was already an existing Melbourne Hotel in Reefton but this did not seem to worry them. The inclusion of this phonetic spelling of Dorson's lasted until 19 September 1877.

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² Inangahua Times 14 September 1877

³ The first available newspaper

HAMILTON GILMER'S HOTEL,
GREYMOUTH;
HAMILTON'S HOTEL;
COPDEN;
GILMER BROTHERS HOTEL,
AHAUUA;
and
GILMER'S MELBOURNE HOTEL,
CHARLESTON.

Are now being carried on under the
most efficient management on the
West Coast.

POST OFFICE HOTEL,
WESTPORT.

(Nearest to all Public Buildings.)

Commercial Travellers and Strangers
will find the above-mentioned Hotels the
best fitted and the most commodious on
the Coast.

Attached to each Hotel are ante-rooms
for the display of samples.

The Billiard Rooms and tables are in-
disputably *par excellence*, unequalled in
New Zealand.

The Livery Stables and stud of horses
are too well-known to need comment.
All these favourite Hotels are specially
built to suit the requirements of the
digging community.

Horses for hire at Reefton to Lyell and
other parts of the Coast.

**REDUCTION IN LIVERY
AND BAIT.**

Livery and Bait, per night	...	10s.
Per feed	...	5s.

Ad Inangahua Times 3 January 1877

HAMILTON GILMER'S HOTEL,
GREYMOUTH;
'HAMILTON'S HOTEL'
COPDEN;
GILMER BROTHERS HOTEL,
AHAUUA;
and
GILMER'S MELBOURNE HOTEL,
(Late Dorson's), REEFTON.

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For feed	...	5s.

NICHOL RAMSAY
(Late Ramsay, Edwards, & Co.)

Ad Dorsens Inangahua Times
29 August 1877

The new advertising then continued throughout the year until the end of January 1878 when all advertising ceased.

At the time they owned Dawson's Hotel their advertisements in the Grey River Argus had developed to the point of only showing the names of the towns in which their hotels were located without mentioning the precise name of the hotels. Reefton was included in the list of towns in the advertisement from 8 December 1877 at the same time as the Charleston hotel entry was taken out.

Theft at Gilmer's Hotel Reefton

In September 1877 there was theft from the till at the hotel which was followed by the arrest of a manager at the hotel named Harry Smith. Both Hamilton and Sam Gilmer were present at the time. Both of them were convinced that Smith had taken the money which was about 170 Pounds. Smith was arrested on the basis of Sam's information and there was a hearing in the Resident Magistrates Court.⁴

Smith was remanded for trial in the Supreme Court. The case was heard on 2 October 1877. The local newspaper reported that the cross examination of Sam Gilmer was *"most searching and severe and had not concluded when our reporter left the court at a quarter past three."*⁵

The Grey River Argus reported: *"Harry Smith's case occupied the Court all day. Sam Gilmer was 5 hours under cross examination by Mr. Guinness. The case is not likely to be concluded until after midnight. No chance of a conviction."*⁶

Smith was acquitted and the Jury met with him and presented him with a signed document that said *"we the undersigned members of the Jury in the case of the Queen v Harry Smith hereby express our full conviction that the said Harry Smith when discharged left the Court without the slightest stain upon his character; and we regret that he should have been called upon to answer such a charge."*⁷

Subsequently, on 29 October the Nelson Evening Mail carried a report that *"an action for malicious prosecution for damages of 1000 Pounds is about to be brought by Harry Smith v Sam Gilmer. The action is to be tried by special jury at Nelson."*⁸

A further report along the same lines was carried in February 1878 quoted the Inangahua Herald as stating that: *"Harry Smith acquitted of larceny on the prosecution of S Gilmer of Reefton has commenced an action claiming damages to the extent of 2000 Pounds for malicious prosecution."*⁹

Harry Smith also placed notices in the newspaper thanking people for their financial and other support and in these he referred to an action pending.¹⁰

We have not been able to identify if this action actually proceeded and if it did what the outcome was. It would have had little likelihood of success as the prosecution was brought by the police and not Sam. While Sam may have provided information and evidence this was taken up by the police. It was also heard in a lengthy and thorough preliminary hearing with the Magistrate placing the matter before the Supreme Court.

It seems that these reports are the work of Harry Smith to help restore his reputation and also to put some heat on to Sam Gilmer. There is no doubt the figure of 2000 Pounds would be enough

⁴ Inangahua Times 14 September 1877

⁵ Nelson Evening Mail 2 October 1877

⁶ Grey River Argus 3 October 1877

⁷ Grey River Argus 4 October 1877

⁸ Nelson Evening Mail 29 October 1877

⁹ Nelson Evening Mail 21 February 1878

¹⁰ Nelson Evening Mail 22 October 1877

to scare even Sam Gilmer. Harry Smith's action was resolved in the Supreme Court in Banco at Wellington on 19 March 1879. The suit was dismissed "*for want of prosecution.*"¹¹

Harry Smith did not seem to be damaged and in May 1878 was advertising a "*Jobbing*" business as Harry Smith & Peterson with premises opposite the Bank of New Zealand in Broadway Reefton.

John Dawson

Following the purchase of the hotel there were indications that John Dawson, was going to leave Reefton. He went through a process of settling his accounts and the newspaper notice in August 1877 indicated that he was about to leave the district.¹²

However, as early as the December meeting of the Licensing Court, John Dawson applied for a license for a new hotel at the corner of Broadway and Bridge Street. He submitted the plans to the Licensing Court together with a memorial of support from adjoining residents.

The new hotel would offer "*large accommodation*" with "*all the adjuncts of a really of a first class establishment.*"¹³ The hotel was to cost 1500 Pounds. A comment was made that there were very few hotels in the town that conformed with the spirit of the Act and most were little better than drinking shops.

The major issue was that the Bench had previously expressed its opposition to granting any new licenses and it was of the opinion that the existing licenses were not only sufficient but in excess of requirements. The application argued that the population of Reefton was increasing and that the existing hotels were often unable to accommodate the number of visitors. The meeting was adjourned for three reasons:

- To satisfy the Bench that the accommodation provided by the existing hotels was insufficient for requirements
- Because the Bench had already expressed its opinion that any addition to the number of licensed houses was undesirable
- Because it would be a breach of faith to existing licensees to grant any fresh licenses.

The bench stated that the evidence tendered had not been satisfactory and it "*had given the matter the most mature consideration and had come to the conclusion that another hotel was not required in Reefton.*" However, it provided an opportunity to John Dawson to satisfy the Bench and adjourned the matter for another month adding that the application would be refused unless a petition supporting it was signed by half of the ratepayers of the County.¹⁴

John Dawson was successful in obtaining a majority of signatures and on receipt of an affidavit regarding the petition the license would be granted. In the meantime Dawson could proceed with the building substantially in accordance with the plans submitted.¹⁵

¹¹ Evening Post 19 March 1879

¹² Inangahua Times 8 August 1877

¹³ Inangahua Times 5 December 1877

¹⁴ Inangahua Times 7 December 1877

¹⁵ Inangahua Times 9 January 1878

Dawson immediately called for tenders for erection of a two storey hotel in Broadway Reefton with tenders to close on 6 February. The plans could be inspected at Dalton's Hotel the Empire Hotel Westport at W. Arnott, the builder.

The proposal would have come as a surprise to Gilmer Brothers and John Dawson with a new first class hotel would be very strong and unwelcome competition. It is therefore perhaps no coincidence that in January 1878 they had reduced the number of advertisements placed and there were no more after the 28 January 1878.

In February 1878 the Premier Sir George Grey visited Reefton and stayed at Gilmer's Hotel. They held a public meeting in Gilmer's hall which was said to be densely packed with upwards of a thousand people.¹⁶ The Premier had previously visited Greymouth where he also stayed at Gilmer's Hotel.

However, in February 1878, the newspaper mentioned *"Mr. John Dawson has re-purchased his late premises from Gilmer Bros. and will enter possession shortly. The figure is said to be 3,700 Pounds which includes all improvements effected on the premises by Gilmer Bros."*¹⁷ On 5 March, the license was transferred back to John Dawson. Sam Gilmer was present at the Licensing Court hearing.¹⁸

With the purchase of the hotel, John Dawson had avoided the cost of building his new hotel. Later that year, there were two court cases that revealed some more of the details around this event.

In October 1878 George Brown brought an action against John Dawson. Among other things, this showed that John Dawson had paid George Brown 18 Pounds in commission on the purchase of the hotel from Gilmer Brothers. This indicated that he was actively seeking to buy the hotel at the same time that his tender process was more or less current.

The second case was an action brought by Charles Crocker against John Dawson for 173 pounds 14 shillings for breach of contract. Crocker had signed a contract with Dawson to build the new hotel on 11 February. On 18 February Dawson told Crocker that Gilmer's wanted him to buy the old hotel back and it seems by that time the deal had already been done. Dawson and Crocker were in dispute about compensation and ultimately the court awarded Crocker 122 pounds 1 Shilling.¹⁹

It seems that once Dawson was going to build his new hotel Gilmer Brothers were quite happy to sell and equally John Dawson was a very willing buyer. The sale transfer for the land shows a price of 2,000 Pounds compared with their original Gilmer Brothers purchase price of 500 Pounds. These figures of course do not necessarily account for the cost of the hotel business itself and the total purchase price paid by John Dawson could very well have been the 3,700 pounds mentioned in the newspaper. Gilmer Brothers had done very well on what was a transaction that involved them in Reefton for less than twelve months. They had also avoided the prospect of a hard competitive battle with John Dawson.

It is also possible that the sale to Dawson was on a time payment arrangement in view of the fact that the transfer of the title did not occur until June 1880 some two and a half years after the

¹⁶ Inangahua Times 25 February 1878

¹⁷ Inangahua Times 22 February 1878

¹⁸ Inangahua Times 5 March 1878

¹⁹ Inangahua Times 20 & 22 November 1878

sale date. Gilmer Brothers would have retained full title to the property until John Dawson had met his commitments.

In the period they were at Reefton, Gilmer Brothers had sold the Melbourne Hotel at Charleston. Robert had left there in June 1877 although the transfer was dated 6 April 1878. (Robert Gilmer was shown on the transfer as being a hotelkeeper at Reefton.)

By March 1878 both Hamilton and Sam were known to be in Wellington most likely with John Hamilton. Gilmer Brothers had purchased both the Empire Hotel and the Duke of Edinburgh. This was very quickly done after they had finalized their activities at Reefton. One cannot believe that this would have been a snap decision. Rather a major strategic move of this kind would have been under consideration for a lengthy period.

Also, they were focussed on Nelson. They had purchased the lease on the Masonic Hotel on 23 May 1878 and on 19 June the license was transferred to Robert Gilmer. With a rapidly expanding portfolio of hotels and understanding that the boom times of the Grey Valley and West Coast were waning, there was no longer interest in or room for Reefton.

Given the very short tenure and all the other activities they were engaged in, it appears that John Dawson may have been in financial trouble when he sold the hotel to Gilmer Brothers. The purchase price of 500 Pounds was very low relative to the cost of building a new hotel which in Dawson's case was 1500 Pounds. It was also very low relative to the price Dawson paid to buy it back. However, there was a business advantage of buying back his hotel because it was well known as his hotel and the number of hotel rooms was maintained at current levels.

Gilmer Brothers progressively sold up their land at Reefton. Section 2 which was the site of the Livery Stables was held until 1889. It was then sold to John Mitchell and William Campbell who had won the Mail coach delivery contract from Gilmer Brothers in 1880. This site would have continued to operate as Livery Stables after they had left the hotel. It was a simple business with little risk and could have been operated with trusted employees.

Other land had also been purchased. This was at Sections 921, 922 and 923 which is shown to have been purchased in 1879. The area of this land was 0.80 of an acre on which larger numbers of horses could have been fed and stabled. It too was sold on 12 October 1883 to Thomas Lee, a well known local Sharebroker. This gives the impression the land may have been viewed as an investment.

Dawson's Hotel was burnt down in December 1881, in a large fire that burnt a number of buildings.²⁰ John Dawson was very quick to respond. Two days after the fire the newspaper reported that:

*"Mr. John Dawson is the first of the sufferers (sic) of the big fire to prepare to rebuild. Carpenters have arrived from Greymouth and Mr William Arnott, builder, has the plan of the new structure in readiness for the workmen. The required timber and iron has been ordered and the construction of the work will be pushed on both night and day and a very few weeks will no doubt see Mr. Dawson reinstated upon his former site. In the meantime, the business is being carried on in the premises opposite and known as Kelly's hotel."*²¹

²⁰ Inanagahua Times 2 December 1881

²¹ Inanagahua Times 2 December 1881

The speed of this response appears to relate to the fact that Dawson had earlier in 1878 planned to build a new hotel in Upper Broadway. As mentioned earlier this was put off with his repurchase of his old hotel but the plans would have been immediately available.

There are many fine photographs of Dawson's Hotel Reefton. It was rebuilt as a grand hotel and it was the centre of many celebrations over the years. Unfortunately, we have not been able to locate a photograph of its predecessor Gilmer's Hotel Reefton.



**Dawson's Hotel 1870's Pre Fire (Hamilton & Sam Gilmer on right?)
(Courtesy Peter Lawn Blacks Point Museum Reefton)**



The new Dawson's Hotel after the fire.