

5.5 WESTPORT FLOODS, REMOVAL and CLARENDON HOTEL

Hamilton's Post Office Hotel Westport

As previously mentioned, by 1872 there was considerable concern about flood levels. The original planners were not aware of the nature of flooding by the Buller and there were a series of severe floods which caused a rethink of the location and many activities were moved to higher ground.

The location of the Post Office Hotel at the corner Gladstone and Molesworth Sts turned out to be an unfortunate one. It was very close to the waterfront and the Port and the Buller River continued to flood regularly and increasingly flooded to higher levels. After a flood in 1872 which almost reached the hotel, on 15 November, Sam Gilmer employed a contractor who commenced moving the hotel to higher ground. The location chosen was the Corner of Palmerston and Wakefield Street site of the present supermarket.

We are fortunate to have a newspaper report of the move. This records the event in some detail and demonstrates the ingenuity at a time when very limited technology was available to assist with such a move. The hotel was moved some 1200 metres.

Conspicuous among the many house mov-
ings in Westport, says the *Times* of the 15th,
is the success achieved by Mr Arney, the
contractor, who has been plucky enough to
essay the removal of Gilmer's Post Office
Hotel, *en bloc*, in spite of the warnings and
prognostications that it could never be done,
that the building was too large, that it would
topple over, and generally play the mischief
and break things. Scarce ten days ago
operations were commenced, timber specially
cut in the bush and brought across the river
for forming a framework for the building,
and rollers and ways prepared whereon to
remove it. The foundations were dug
around, the whole building meanwhile rest-
ing on moveable blocks, and being raised by
means of screws some three feet above the
level of the original piles, and a framework
of timbers resting on rollers built under-
neath, then, when all was ready, the two-
story edifice, with furniture and fittings
standing within, was impelled by the all-
powerful screw-jacks, to move inch by inch
on to the street, up which it will now pro-
gress until it reaches in line with the Claren-
don corner, where it will remain for a season.
The removal so far, has been effected without
mishap of any kind, and the work has been
accomplished in a manner that indicates a
more than ordinary display of skill and fore-
sight.

Grey River Argus 20 November 1872

Gilmer's Clarendon Hotel ¹

The Post Office Hotel was not the only hotel operated by Gilmer Brothers at Westport. They also had the Clarendon Hotel. The article above mentions that the Post Office Hotel was to be moved to the Clarendon corner where it would remain for a season.

The Clarendon Hotel at Westport was originally owned by William Sloan. It was built in 1867, the same year as Hamilton's Post Office Hotel opened there. The Clarendon was located at the corner of Molesworth and Kennedy Streets, the next corner up from the Post Office Hotel. Sloan had the hotel until 1869.

Gilmer Brothers have been identified as owning the Clarendon in June 1873 with John Gilmer being the licensee. This is the first date there was evidence of ownership but it is possible that they bought the hotel from Sloan in 1869. If this was the case then the licensee would have been John Gilmer as Sam was still at the Post Office. This also would have meant that Robert Gilmer would have been managing the Melbourne Hotel at Charleston.

The location of the hotel was such that it became susceptible to the combination of the high tides and the flooding of the Buller River. Large flooding occurred in June 1873. However it was apparent that there were risks with the location in the months leading up to the event.

On 4 April it was reported that *"there was a heavy sea on the Westport beach on Thursday last, the sea washing well up into Kennedy Street, flowing underneath the floor of the engine house and necessitated the hurried pulling down, at the back of the Clarendon Hotel, of West's Bakery, the last remaining relic of Gladstone Street."*² The Post Office Hotel had been moved from the corner of Molesworth and Gladstone Street in the previous November.

Further on 12 April, *"Recent high tides have given premonitory warning at Westport that a repetition of the experiences of last autumn season may be soon expected. The encroachment of the sea on Kennedy Street is slow as yet, but steady. The Clarendon Hotel stands on the merest strip of solid foundation, and Mr. Horn, tobacconist, who occupied an adjoining site, has deemed it wise to shift his location and his store is now located on the wallibi track, moving leisurely towards Cobden Street. The tide comes rushing up at times half way across the street, and the occupants of the Kennedy and Wallibi Street block are getting uneasy."*

Again on 28 April, *"The sea is steadily encroaching at Westport, threatening the safety of other buildings. Particularly it will necessitate the early removal Gilmer's Clarendon Hotel and consequently more expenses to that firm. Only recently their Post Office Hotel was removed and since then it has been transformed into an extensive and slightly building at the upper township and on the opposite corner to the several government buildings. The new hotel which is rapidly approaching completion contains over twenty large sized bedrooms, several spacious sitting rooms, bar, kitchen, and the numerous other conveniences to be found in a well ordered first class hotel."*³

Despite this series of warnings the flood occurred on 4 June 1873. *"Great efforts were made to save the Clarendon Hotel and W J Patterson's store on the opposite corner. These buildings*

¹ Colin Reddy, Westport Genealogy Group

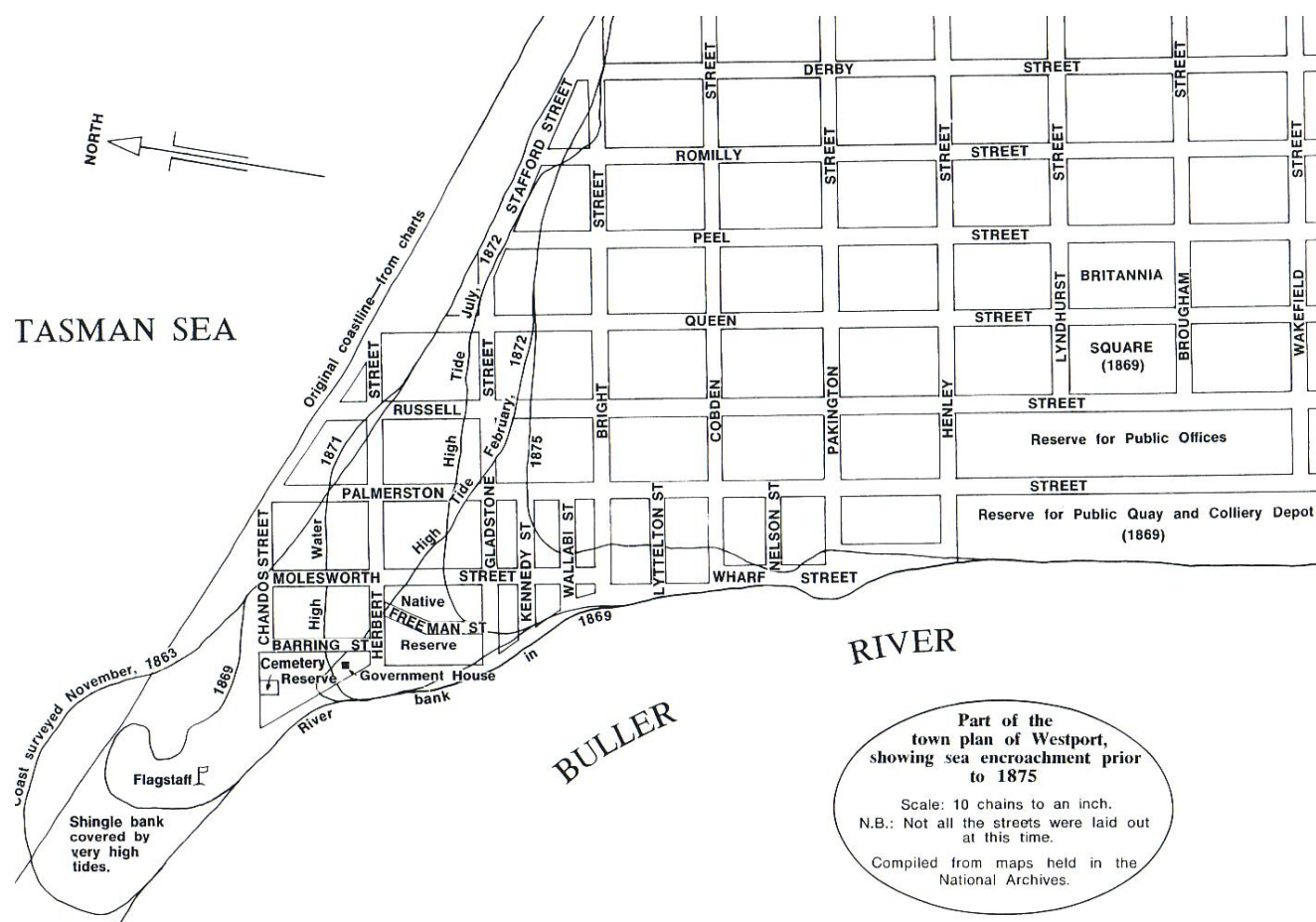
² Grey River Argus 4 April 1873

³ Grey River Argus 28 April 1873

were pulled piecemeal and the materials piled in the street as also Henri Pain's Cordial factory, Spence's store on the same block having been pulled down earlier in the day.¹⁴

This was quite different to the removal of the Post Office Hotel in November 1872 which had been moved and appears to indicate that there was insufficient time to actually remove the Clarendon despite the warnings.

With the onset of the 1873 flood, the Clarendon was dismantled and all of the materials were taken to higher ground. There are no further references to the hotel and it appears that it was never rebuilt. With the demolition of the Clarendon Hotel John Gilmer moved to the Post Office Hotel and Sam Gilmer went to the hotel at Ahaura.



Westport Plan Showing Flood Levels Pre 1875⁵

Gilmer Brothers' activities at Westport were also broadened. On 12 October 1872 the Nelson Provincial Gazette reported that the protection to J M Langdon granted in 1872 for the ferry across the Buller River had been cancelled and protection granted to Gilmer Brothers for a punt at the same place for a term of three years. The protection was cancelled as Langdon had

⁴ The Westport Times 6 June 1873 and Nelson Evening Mail 9 June 1873.

⁵ Westport Struggle for Survival An Illustrated History by Bruce Macdonald

neglected to fulfill the conditions under which the right had been granted.⁶ This was believed to be close to the site where a bridge was later built across the river. This franchise was extended in 1876 with *“protection for five years has been given to John Gilmer for a punt upon the Buller River at the crossing of the main road to Westport.”*⁷

A week before this news item, the Colonist⁸ carried an advertisement notifying that *“John Gilmer is authorized to place upon the River Buller at the crossing of the main road from Westport to Lyell, known as Nine Mile Crossing, a self acting Punt, travelling upon a wire rope across the river, and capable of carrying at least twelve Tons.”* We believe this was a different crossing to the one they obtained in 1872.

In any event Gilmer Brothers had a ferry operation for at least seven years across the Buller until at least 1881. The bridge over the Buller was built in 1888.



Buller Ferry⁹

⁶ Grey River Argus 27 December 1872

⁷ Grey River Argus 22 December 1876

⁸ The Colonist 14 December 1876

⁹ History House Greymouth

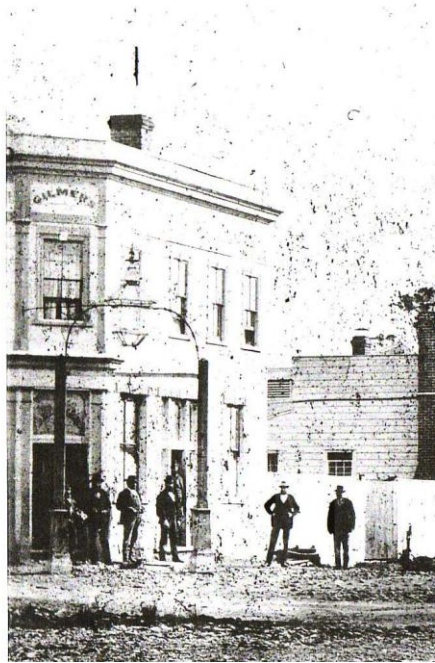
Gilmer's Grand Hotel Westport

After its removal, the Post Office Hotel hotel reopened as Gilmer's Grand Hotel in 1873. It was a two storey wooden and Stucco building with an iron roof. It had balconies around the front and on one side. It contained 30 rooms of which 20 were bedrooms. There was also a Billiard room, large dining room, a number of sitting rooms and four rooms for Commercial travelers to display samples of their goods.

John Gilmer continued to run the hotel for many years and he became identified with the hotel and built a solid reputation for the business consistent with that of Gilmer hotels elsewhere.

One correspondent reported:

*"Gilmer's Hotel on the West Coast is as familiar as a household word, and not the least comfortable of the many conducted under the same title is that at Westport of which John Gilmer is mine host. In saying so I desire to cast no reflection on any other hostelries. When I first visited Westport I went there because the exterior was prepossessing and it was close to the wharf and the railway station; and on the occasion of subsequent visits I returned in conformity with a rule I have always adopted viz, that of sticking to the houses in which when first visited as a complete stranger I am treated on the footing of an old friend"*¹⁰



Gilmers Grand c1873



c1873 Looking down Palmerston St Gilmer's on Right

The removal of the hotel secured it from future flooding and ensured it would continue to play a role in the Gilmer Brother's chain of hotels serving the West Coast gold mining locations.

¹⁰ Grey River Argus 18 December 1877