

## 6.1 Gilmer Brothers Hotels Wellington and Nelson

### WELLINGTON

While still maintaining a high level of activity in the Grey Valley, at Greymouth, Cobden, Westport and Ahaura, the business of Gilmer Brothers made a move to Wellington. The first newspaper reference to a business transaction there was in March 1978 very soon after they had sold the hotel at Reefton back to John Dawson for 3,700 Pounds.

#### Empire Hotel

The purchase of the Empire Hotel in Willis Street was noted in the Evening Post of 20 March: *"we understand that Messrs Gilmer Bros of the West Coast have purchased the Empire Hotel together with the fine freehold adjoining, known as W & G Turnbull's old stores, for the sum of 14,000 Pounds."*

The report was carried all over the country with some newspapers providing a little more detail, for example:

The well known Empire Hotel has been purchased by Messrs Gilmer Brothers, of West Coast, for seven thousand pounds; also the adjoining freehold known as Turnbull's old stores for about seven thousand. The same purchasers bought the Duke of Edinburgh Hotel a few days ago.

#### Nelson Evening Mail 21 March 1878

Given the size of the payment the purchase must have been for the freehold of the hotel.

On 2 January 1878, on instructions from Jacob Lichtscheindl, *"the block of buildings ....lately in the occupation of W.G. Turnbull & Co"*<sup>1</sup> were offered for sale at auction. Lichtscheindl was also the licensee of the Empire Hotel and he had been there since April 1876, having taken over the lease from Philip Moeller following a large fire which had destroyed most of Turnbull's and the eastern and southern wings of the hotel. The site and remaining buildings were owned by Jacob Joseph which he had purchased for 6,300 Pounds<sup>2</sup> after the fire and the remains of the hotel were leased to Lichtscheindl. *"He intends to put the house into thorough repair and to open as speedily as possible."*<sup>3</sup>

In 1869 and 1870 Lichtscheindl had leased the Albion Hotel next door to Gilmer's Hotel Greymouth and previously had been at the European Hotel Charleston. He would have been well known to both Hamilton Gilmer and Sam Gilmer..

After the purchase there was a press report at Greymouth that the hotel was resold very quickly. From shipping reports we have traced the arrival of a Gilmer in Wellington on 16

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<sup>1</sup> Evening Post 2 January 1878

<sup>2</sup> Evening Post 28 March 1876

<sup>3</sup> Evening Post 31 March 1876.

March<sup>4</sup> and also Hamilton Gilmer was at Greymouth for a Borough Council meeting on 22 March.<sup>5</sup> These trips are consistent with the purchase transaction. However there are other reports of a Gilmer arriving at Nelson on 28 March and departing for Wellington on 30 March<sup>6</sup>. These could be to conclude a sale as indicated in the following report on 27 March:

**We learn that Messrs Gilmer Bros, who purchased the Empire Hotel, Wellington, a few days ago, have resold their bargain at a profit of L2500.**

**Grey River Argus 27 March 1878**

A potential buyer of the hotel was Jacob Lichtscheindl. Even if the hotel had not been resold by Gilmer Brothers, there is no indication that the Empire Hotel was ever operated by them. There was no application for a publican's license. In addition, Jacob Lichtscheindl continued to stay at the Empire Hotel until 1886.

### **Duke of Edinburgh Hotel**

Gilmer Brothers gave their immediate attention to the Duke of Edinburgh Hotel. This hotel had been occupied by Henry Hall and his wife since the 3 September 1867.<sup>7</sup> He had previously been at Osgoods Empire Hotel. Henry died on 23 August 1876 at the age of 39 and his wife continued on in the hotel. On 7 March 1878, it was reported that "*Mrs. Hall had sold her interest in the Duke of Edinburgh Hotel to Mr. Jameson of Civil Services Cooperative Stores. The price paid for the Lease, Goodwill, Furniture and stock was 4,500 Pounds.*"<sup>8</sup> Given the nature of Jameson's business it would seem unlikely he would play "a hands on" role in the operation of the hotel.

We do not have a date for the Gilmer Brothers purchase of this hotel but newspaper reports show it was in March 1878 and we know they were in occupation in August 1878<sup>9</sup>.

Sam Gilmer was involved in the Magistrate's Court on a cross assault charge with Mr. T.A. Shepherd a former Member of Parliament. The article reveals that Sam Gilmer is the landlord of the Duke of Edinburgh Hotel at the corner of Willis and Manners Streets. It also reveals that Sam "*resided in the Duke of Edinburgh Hotel with his brother.*" The most likely brother seems to have been Robert although by June 1878 Gilmer Brothers had taken over the Masonic Hotel and Robert had been granted the license. By then he would have been busy there at the early stage of his tenure.

In these early years in Wellington, Gilmer Brothers kept a relatively low profile and did not advertise in the way that they had on the West Coast. However, there were many newspaper references involving the Duke of Edinburgh as a place where sweep tickets could be obtained. While not promoting the hotel directly these advertisements ensured that there was continuing presentation of the Gilmer name and also the name of the hotel.

<sup>4</sup> Colonist 16 March 1878

<sup>5</sup> Grey River Argus 23 March 1878

<sup>6</sup> Nelson Evening Mail 28 & 30 March 1878

<sup>7</sup> Evening Post 3 September 1867

<sup>8</sup> Evening Post 7 March 1878

<sup>9</sup> Evening Post 27 August 1878

By mid 1879 it was clear that Sam, who was managing the hotel, had established some status among his peers in the publican community. A meeting<sup>10</sup> of 40 Wellington publicans took place because of Emeny's plan to sell drinks for 4d. A number of the publicans wanted to fix prices, something that would be quite illegal today. The meeting was told of Sam's intention to reduce the price of drinks. Three of them were sent to interview Sam who advised that if the brewery (Staples) continued to supply Emeny he too would sell drinks at 4d. Sam clearly had some status in the group that they thought he needed to be consulted and not only that, he made up his own mind and was not particularly interested in what the others were going to do.

Gilmer Brothers commenced advertising their presence in Wellington on 26 August 1878<sup>11</sup> simply by including the location in the normal Greymouth advertisement:

**GILMER BROTHERS' HOTEL**  
Greymouth,

Now by far the largest and most commodious upon the West Coast, offers the best accommodation.

To Commercial Travellers and Tourists offers spacious sample rooms, private parlor and the most extensive sources of commercial knowledge in the district.

To parties desirous of renting a large hall for concerts, &c., the Masonic room is pronounced to be the finest in New Zealand and possesses an entrance specially made and adapted for ladies. It can accommodate over 400 persons. The entire Hotel has been remodelled, and is equal in its interior arrangements to any in New Zealand.

The large Billiard Room possesses three of Alcock's renowned Tables, which are most carefully attended to.

A Night Watchman kept upon the Premises.

**GILMER BROS.,**  
Hotelkeepers,  
Greymouth, Westport, Nelson, Wellington  
Ahaura and Cobden,  
Forming a chain of communication unequalled in New Zealand.

Their mail coaches leave the above establishments every morning for Ahauru, Grey Valley, and Reefton.

All parcels must be pre-paid.

**GILMER BROTHERS,**  
Proprietors.

Grey River Argus 26 August 1878

**DUKE OF EDINBURGH HOTEL,**  
CORNER OF WILLIS AND MANHES STREETS.

**MASONIC HOTEL,**  
TRAFALGAR STREET, NELSON.

**POST OFFICE HOTEL,**  
WESTPORT.

**HAMILTON'S HOTEL,**  
GREYMOUTH.

**HAMILTON'S HOTEL,**  
COBDEN.

**HAMILTON'S HOTEL,**  
AHAUARA, GREY VALLEY.

In directing the attention of the travelling public to the above Hotels, the Proprietors would respectfully intimate that they establish a complete line of communication between Wellington and the West Coast Goldfields. Tourists can therefore obtain first-class accommodation at any of the places mentioned, while telegrams, letters, or parcels directed to any place on the route will be forwarded or carefully retained according to directions.

In connection with the Hotels, **GILMER BROTHERS** have extensive Stabling, and Horses and Vehicles of every description can be supplied at the shortest notice.

**WINES AND SPIRITS OF THE BEST QUALITY.**

**GILMER BROS.,**  
PROPRIETORS.

Evening Post 29 September 1879

<sup>10</sup> Evening Post 29 July 1879

<sup>11</sup> Grey River Argus 26 August 1878

In September 1879, the first Wellington advertisement of the Gilmer owned Duke of Edinburgh Hotel appeared in the Evening Post<sup>12</sup> which showed the six hotels in the Gilmer Brothers chain over the "*Gilmer Bros Proprietors*" business name. The advertisement excluded the Melbourne Hotel at Charleston which by that time had been sold and included the recently acquired Duke of Edinburgh at Wellington and the Masonic at Nelson. This advertisement was placed only for a few editions.



**Sketch of The Duke of Edinburgh Hotel<sup>13</sup>**

### **Royal Oak Hotel**

The next expansion was the purchase of the Royal Oak Hotel in mid 1881. While we believe this may have been an initiative of Sam, the newspaper report<sup>14</sup> indicated it was a Gilmer Brothers venture: *"We understand that Messrs. Gilmer Bros. the well known hotel proprietors, have added another to the long list of first class hotels owned by them, having purchased the Royal Oak, Cuba Street, recently erected by Mr. W. G. Emeny"*.

The hotel was on the corner of Cuba and Manners Streets and had been owned by W.G. Emeny since 1870 when he had it rebuilt by Robert Archibald. It was a timber building typical of many early Wellington hotels.

In June 1879 the hotel was destroyed by fire. The fire started in the Opera House and spread across Manners Street destroying the Wesleyan Church, the Workingmen's club, the Nag's Head and Royal Oak Hotels, the Market Hall of the City Council as well as some 20 other buildings over ten acres.<sup>15 16</sup>

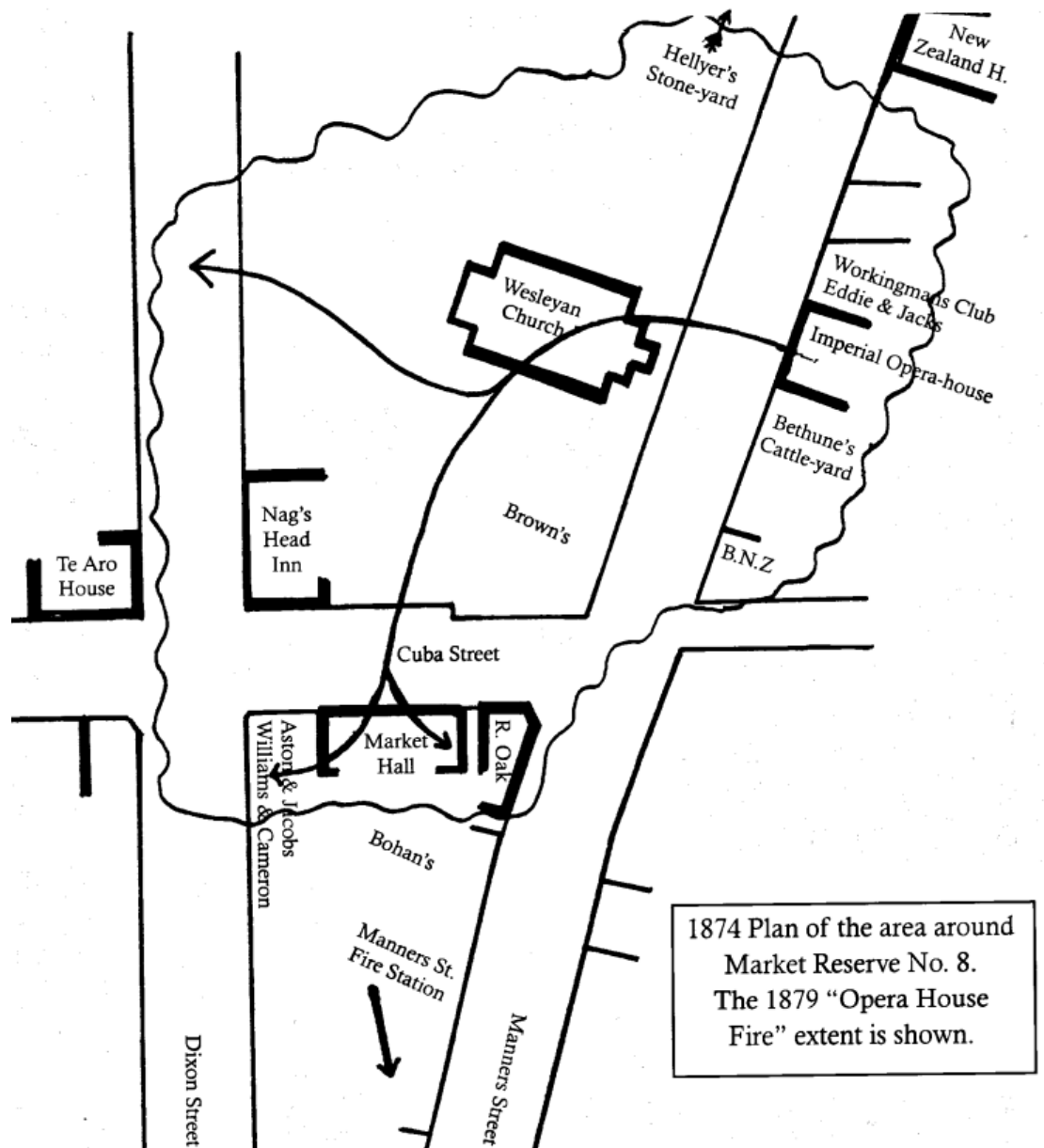
<sup>12</sup> Evening Post 29 September 1879

<sup>13</sup> The Hotel that Sam Built John Hewstone, Peter Sydor, Iam Cameron p103

<sup>14</sup> Evening Post 27 June 1881

<sup>15</sup> Evening Post 16 June 1879

<sup>16</sup> Colonist 17 June 1879



Path of 1879 Fire<sup>17</sup>

Emeny rebuilt the hotel using W.C. Chatfield as the Architect. It was a brick two storey building and also used a part of the Market Reserve leased from the Wellington City Council. It contained 24 rooms. The building was described as:<sup>18</sup>

<sup>17</sup> The Hotel that Sam Built John Hewstone, Peter Sydor, Ian Cameron p93

<sup>18</sup> Evening Post 25 March 1880

## THE ROYAL OAK HOTEL.

Mr. W. G. Emeny's new Royal Oak Hotel, at the corner of Cuba-street and Manners-street, will be opened this evening. It claims special notice, as being the first brick building of its kind in this city, and its erection may be said to mark a new era of hotel architecture in Wellington. The external features of the new hotel have already been described in our columns. The internal accommodation is equally superior, and will, we have little doubt, soon attract a large share of public patronage. The bar is at the angle of the two streets. It is not very commodious, but is comfortably arranged, the fittings and walls being of cedar and varnished red pine. The private entrance in Cuba-street takes us into a fine large hall, on which the bar opens by means of two small windows. Two snug private parlors are in the immediate vicinity of the bar, one looking into Cuba-street, and the other into Manners-street. A branch of the hall, by the side of the latter, leads to a private entrance from Manners-street. Opening from the hall are the commercial room in front and the dining-room behind, apartments about 25ft long, by 15ft or 16ft wide, and fully 13ft high. Both are well furnished,

and suitable for their purpose. The eastern end of the building is devoted to the private use of Mr. Emeny's family. The kitchen is provided with a very large Leamington range, capable of cooking for 60 or 70 people. In the public part of the house upstairs are eight single bedrooms and two double-bedrooms, all lofty and well ventilated, and all supplied with iron bedsteads and spring mattresses. There are also two sitting-rooms at the western end, one of them commanding a fine view of the harbor. The private rooms comprise one large bedroom for the servants and three other bedrooms. Bathrooms and laboratories are provided at each end, and are constantly supplied with hot water from the kitchen. Mr. Chatfield, the architect, has succeeded in designing a very comfortable hotel, if we except the bar, which we expect will have to be enlarged if business improves. All the furniture has been manufactured and fitted up expressly by Mr. W. G. Emeny, jun., a young cabinetmaker just entering into business for himself. The sideboard in the dining-room, and a cheffonier and book-case in the principal sitting-room are well worthy of inspection.

Evening Post 25 March 1880

Sam Gilmer clearly had a vision for further development of the Royal Oak Hotel. On 30 June 1881 Sam wrote to the Wellington City Council making application to rent Section 4. He followed up on 4 July with a request to also rent Sections 2 and 3.<sup>19</sup> Sam was successful in his request and the Council's Minute Book (p485 11 August 1881) records "*That the following tenders for the Market Reserve be accepted*":

*Samuel Gilmer Section 2 15 pounds 10 shillings per annum*

*Samuel Gilmer Section 3 40 pounds per annum*

*Samuel Gilmer Section 4 22 pounds 10 shillings per annum*

Later years were to see how Sam's vision for the hotel was progressively implemented.

The transfer of the Royal Oak License from Emeny was to William Gilmer rather than to Sam. Initially we thought there had been a mistake made as we had placed the year of William's arrival as about 1882. However, it is very clear from Dorothea's letter to Ireland in March 1879 that William Gilmer had conveyed the news to John Hamilton that Dorothea was already in New Zealand. This means that William arrived prior to March 1879 and it was probably earlier as Dorothea did not go to Wellington immediately after money had been sent to her for the trip.

It seems that William was another family member being trained in the hotel trade and this would allow Sam to stay close by at the Duke of Edinburgh and Hamilton to remain at

<sup>19</sup> The Hotel that Sam Built John Hewstone, Peter Sydor, Ian Cameron p97 & 98

Greymouth. Despite the expansion in the number of hotels all of them were under the management of a family member.

**terminated.**

The usual quarterly meeting of the Licensing Commissioners was held at noon to-day, and was attended by Messrs. E. Shaw, R.M., (chairman) J. G. Holdsworth and J. Moore. The following transfers were granted:—Ann Elizabeth Osgood to Thomas Unwin, Wellington Hotel (Mr. Gully for the applicant); Horace Ames to Walter Bishop, Newtown Hotel; John Robinson to William George Emeny, Army and Navy Hotel (Mr. Gully for the applicant); W. J. Seecombe to Alfred Booustra, Karori Hotel; Robert R. Suisted to Caroline Hellen, Pahautanui Hotel (Mr. Cave for applicant); W. G. Emeny to William Gilmer, Royal Oak Hotel (Mr. Gordon Allen for applicant); W. H. McClelland to Horace Ames, Panama Hotel. There was no other business.

Evening Post 6 September 1881

If there had been a mistake made there was an opportunity to remedy it when the license was renewed the next year. This renewal was also in the name of William Gilmer.

#### NOTICE OF APPLICATION FOR A PUBLICAN'S LICENSE.

**I**, WILLIAM GILMER, of Wellington, being the holder of a Publican's License in respect of house and premises situate at corner of Manners and Cuba-streets, and known as the Royal Oak, do hereby give notice that I desire to obtain, and will, at the next Licensing Meeting to be holden at Te Aro on the 8th day of June, 1882, apply for a certificate authorising the renewal of the said license.

Dated the 12th day of May, 1882.

WILLIAM GILMER.

Evening Post 12 May 1882

A third point of confirmation of William's involvement at the Royal Oak is the Wellington City Council Rate Book for 1882/83 for Te Aro Ward shows William Gilmer as the ratepayer<sup>20</sup>.

1	William Gilmer	Land	240	240	2	William Gilmer	Shop	240	240
2	"	"	"	"	3	"	"	"	"
3	"	"	"	"	4	"	"	"	"
4	"	"	"	"	5	"	"	"	"
5	"	"	"	"	6	"	"	"	"
6	Whitehouse Thomas	Shop	180	180	7	Whitehouse Thomas	Shop	180	180

### 1882/83 Rate Book Entry for Royal Oak Hotel

In October 1882 William was charged by police for a breach of the Licensing Act by selling liquor on Sunday.<sup>21</sup> The charge was dismissed as the sale was made to a bona fide traveller.

From these events we have concluded that William was at the Royal Oak from 1881 until about mid 1883.

### NELSON The Masonic Hotel

In 1878 Gilmer Brothers took over the lease of the Masonic Hotel on the north east corner of Trafalgar and Hardy Streets, Nelson.

The Lease agreement was dated 23 May 1878 and was in the name of Hamilton Gilmer, Hotelkeeper of Greymouth, Samuel Gilmer, Hotelkeeper of Reefton and Robert Gilmer Hotelkeeper of Wellington. The lease was for 14 years with payment of 250 Pounds per annum payable quarterly. The hotel was to be insured for 1000 Pounds.<sup>22</sup> There was an additional lease on 3 June 1881 for an additional 16 feet of land and a four feet wide path on the north side of the property. A third lease dated 12 October 1881 added a further 991 square feet to the frontage at Hardy Street. This lease required that any buildings erected should be the same character as the existing Masonic Hotel and carried a further annual rental of 35 Pounds.

Robert Gilmer applied for and was granted the transfer of the license from Thomas Cother at the June Meeting of the Licensing Committee.<sup>23</sup> The Chairman of the committee stated that "there were no hotelkeepers in New Zealand who had a higher reputation than Gilmer Brothers."

The Greymouth newspaper further commented that "this was a remark at which some of the Nelson hotelkeepers chose to take umbrage as reflecting on their own qualifications. There is no doubt, however, that the travelling public will not be slow to appreciate the introduction of the West Coast system of hotelkeeping at Nelson, where if travellers' tales are true hotel accommodation suffers by comparison."<sup>24</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Wellington City Council Rate Book Te Aro Ward 1882/83, Wellington City Archives

<sup>21</sup> Evening Post 18 October 1882

<sup>22</sup> The Hotel That Sam Built John Hewstone, Ian Cameron. Peter Sydor

<sup>23</sup> Nelson Evening Mail 4 June 1878

<sup>24</sup> Grey River Argus 19 June 1878





**Masonic Hotel Nelson c1895 Cnr. Trafalgar & Hardy Sts**

When John Hamilton's daughter Dorothea arrived in New Zealand in October 1878, Robert and her father sent her money to come to them. In her letters to Ireland she said the hotel in Nelson was her father's. She was not aware of the Gilmer Brothers partnership which was in place. However, the other important detail is that John was living at the hotel with Robert and this was almost 12 months after the hotel had been acquired. It seems that the senior members of the partnership had reservations about Robert.

Robert had an established clientele at this old Nelson hotel. As well as being the regular meeting place for the Nelson Masonic Lodge the hotel was a meeting place for a number of different sporting clubs. In June 1878 there were meetings of the Nelson Football Club and also the Tradesman's Athletic Club. In July a football team from Wellington stayed there. In September there was a meeting at the Masonic to form a cricket club for the town.



**Robert Gilmer 1879**

**Nelson Provincial Museum. Bloch Collection (c1860-1880) No. 1659**

As part of the Gilmer Brothers chain of hotels, which now also included Wellington, they could rightfully demonstrate that they were a significant hotel group on a scale unequalled in New Zealand. Prior claims based on their West Coast hotels alone did not have the same level of credibility and were probably received with scepticism. Their market position had now changed dramatically.

1878 was a year of a major change in strategic direction for Gilmer Brothers. We do not know the real drivers. No doubt they were inspired by their success and had grown substantially in confidence that they could be successful in a larger more discerning market of more affluent and educated people. They had seen others from the West Coast go to Wellington and be successful. Why not them?