

GILMER BROTHERS' GREYMOUTH 1870's

Introduction

The 1860's had seen the Gilmer Brothers partnership of John Hamilton and his nephews rapidly develop their business based on hotels serving the gold mining communities at Greymouth, Cobden, Charleston and Westport. In early 1870 work had started on a hotel at the Grey Valley town of Ahaura. A supporting Horse Hire business based at Cobden was well established and had grown despite market challenges.

While the establishment of a Mail Coach Delivery service and gold mining activities were being pursued the primary business focus was the Gilmer Brothers' hotels and particularly the core base in the town of Greymouth. The town was the hub and the port that serviced the Grey Valley. It was also the centre of political and business activity as well as providing support services for the Valley.

Greymouth was the town where Hamilton Gilmer continued to reside, keeping and developing close contacts with the political and business leaders in the town. During the first five years, Hamilton and Uncle John Hamilton had kept an oversight on the development of the business partnership.

The net result was that by 1870 the Gilmer Brothers business was very successful and extensively well known throughout the West Coast. As a hotel chain it had no competitors and was quite unique. By developing a chain of hotels Gilmer Brothers was able to build a widespread reputation for good standards common across the hotels and it advertised as such.

This story documents the activities at the Gilmer Hotel at Greymouth during the 1870's. Its focus is on the details of the activities of the major players Hamilton Gilmer and to a lesser extent Sam Gilmer. These activities were the simple means by which the business continued to grow, develop and prosper. Also highlighted are particular events referred to in newspapers which give us an insight into how they managed and were successful.

THE GILMER HOTEL GREYMOUTH

By 1870 the Gilmer Hotel had been through a period of five years of continuing growth and development. Physically, it had grown from a small hotel with limited capacity into an imposing structure with ample space to accommodate the full range of functions and activities that might be required. It simply required a person who understood how to market it to the fullest extent to community it had the capacity to serve. The person who had that pre-eminent skill was Hamilton Gilmer.

In terms of the structure of the hotel, by 1870 it had been almost developed to the appearance that it had throughout the rest of its existence through the next 30 or so years. There were two changes of note in the 1870's and only one of these was of significance.

The first of these changes was in 1870 with the establishment of a Billiard Room:

THE BILLIARD HALL.

ON SATURDAY NIGHT NEXT,
THE
NEW GRAND BILLIARD HALL,
THE
LARGEST AND BEST IN NEW
ZEALAND,
WILL BE OPENED
AT
HAMILTON GILMER'S HOTEL.
Entrance from Tainui street.

Grey River Argus 23 June 1870

BILLIARD AMATEUR

THE LOVERS OF THE GREEN CLOTH
Ought to at once
VISIT GILMER'S NEW BILLIARD
HALL,
Pronounced by all players to be the most
spacious and
BEST APPOINTED BILLIARD ROOM
IN NEW ZEALAND.
HAMILTON'S GILMER'S HOTEL
And
BILLIARD ROOM
Mawhera Quay and Tainui st.

Grey River Argus 2 July 1870

This room was very large and later hotel advertisements indicated it contained three Alcock Billiard tables. Entry was from Tainui Street and we believe that the room took the place of the three shops that were included in the September 1868 major upgrade of the hotel. There had been difficulty in renting these shops over a period of time and it appears that the view was that better returns from the floor space through a large billiard room.

The billiard room was one of the features of the Gilmer advertisements over the years that followed. Hamilton employed expert billiard players as markers and this provided a basis to stage competitions which increased patronage.

Hamilton was serious about using the Billiard Room and even brought a test case in the Magistrates Court to attempt to allow opening beyond the licensed hotel hours.¹ He was charged with allowing play until 4 am, well beyond the 12 o'clock hotel license. He was fined the minimum fine of 10/-. It is of interest that in April 1875 Richard Seddon in Parliament was proposing a Bill that allowed billiards to be played at any time so long as the table was licensed.

The second structural change to the hotel was in 1877. Tenders were called for the erection of a balcony to the hotel.²

The simple advertisement tended to understate the outcome from this work as the balcony was quite extensive. This could have been expected from Hamilton Gilmer because all of his

¹ Grey River Argus 10 July 1874

² Grey River Argus 28 April 1877

renovations to various hotels were grand. In 1878 there was a comment on a number of building improvements in Greymouth in which the Gilmer Hotel balcony was mentioned:

Immediately opposite the site of the bank is the extensive hotel of Messrs Gilmer Brothers, who have recently erected a capacious verandah along both frontages of the premises the full width of the footpath, sheltering the house from the bad weather, and giving an imposing appearance to the building. It has been most substantially built by Mr Gleeson, the posts being alternately of silver pine and totara, and the whole floored so as to afford an extensive promenade for the guests of the establishment.

Grey River Argus 17 October 1878

The following photograph³ taken many years later indicates the scale of the balcony and the hotel. It is unusual because it shows the scale of the building facing Tainui Street. Most other photographs show the Mawhera Quay frontage.



Gilmer Hotel Greymouth c1900

³ Photograph courtesy of History House Greymouth

Fire Risk at Gilmers – A Narrow Escape

Despite the major improvements in the structure of the hotel it was still a timber building and subject to a significant risk from fire. In 1869 there had already been a very large fire that destroyed a number of adjoining buildings on Mawhera Quay and the newly renovated and enlarged Gilmer hotel narrowly missed suffering the same fate. Later there were other events that could have led to complete destruction of the hotel. The first was a fire at their laundry in Tainui St which was quickly extinguished.

The laundry belonging to Gilmer Bros., situated in Tainui street, had a narrow escape from being burned down on Monday evening. Some of the wood work connected with the chimney had become ignited, and about half-past ten o'clock the flames were seen by a gentleman residing in the vicinity. He immediately hurried to the spot, and, climbing over the fence, succeeded in extinguishing the fire with a few bucketsful of water. There was a large quantity of clothes in the laundry at the time, and, but for the prompt action taken, would have proved a serious loss to the proprietors.

Grey River Argus 15 January 1873

The second was more significant with a fire in one of the hotel bedrooms which was also extinguished. However, had it continued to burn and the fire brigade called there would have been no water available to extinguish a larger fire guaranteeing certain destruction of the hotel.

The occupants of one of the bed-rooms in the Mawhera Quay front of Gilmer's Hotel found, shortly after he had retired to bed, that the furniture of his room was on fire, the candle flame or a spark from the same when it was blown out having communicated fire to the muslin window-curtains. He tried to extinguish the flames, but failed, and gave the alarm, when Mr King, who was on duty as night-watchman, ran to the room, and, with the dexterity of a member of the Fire Brigade, which he is, and in the discharge of his duty to his employers, strove and succeeded in extinguishing the fire. He did not succeed, however, before the bedding, the wall-paper, scrim, and some of the wood-work were burnt, and not without injuring his hands severely. Of course, there are all sorts of calculations as to what might have happened had the fire not been extinguished so promptly as it was, and, no doubt, they would have been serious, but fortunately nothing more did happen. The owners of

The Greymouth Volunteer Fire Brigade had a good practice last evening, 22 members being present. It was discovered that of the standpipes on Mawhera Quay three had been rendered useless through the railway and wharf construction. One standpipe has been covered by the Transit Shed, the one opposite the Albion Hotel was found to be choked with mullock, and the one opposite Gilmer's Hotel was so encumbered with timber, &c., that it could not be got at. In fact, if a fire should take place under present circumstances there is no supply of water available from the Oriental Hotel down to opposite Masters' store. This is really disgraceful and exhibits a most reckless disregard of the public safety on the part of the Public Works Department of the General Government. We would seriously advise the officer in charge to see that the stand-pipes are cleared without any delay.

Grey River Argus 25 September 1875

Grey River Argus 22 February 1876

BUSINESS STRATEGY

There were many hotels in Greymouth in the 1870's and it was a highly competitive market. In June 1874 the population was only about 2,500 people. Despite this low population in April 1874 the Licensing Court granted Licenses to forty hotels and at the same hearing deferred two applications, adjourned one and refused four. In addition there were six wholesale licenses granted and five other wholesale and bottle licenses granted.⁴

This was a total of 58 license applications or a ratio of one license for about 43 persons. Assuming one third were children the ratio was closer to one license for 29 adults. This is an extraordinary ratio and meant that only the best hotels would survive and the very best would prosper.

The basic business strategy had been to develop the hotel such it had the best facilities and largest rooms so that it became the venue of choice for an extensive range of community issues and organizations. Everybody held their meetings at Gilmer's Hotel. We do not know the details of the arrangements for these but it is likely that the hotel provided its meeting facilities free of charge and charged only for food and drinks.

The accommodation was spacious and well appointed and every facility was available. The people who met there were a who's who of Greymouth society.

The scope of activities of the clientele was very wide. Meetings were very often advised through the newspaper editorials as were the outcomes. This kept the name of the hotel continually in front of its readers.

The following meetings took place at the hotel on a regular basis:

Sporting clubs

The initial meeting of the Greymouth Rowing Club was held at Gilmers and. Sam Gilmer was appointed Treasurer and by January 1875 they had bought four and two boat sheds⁵. An "*entertainment*" was to be held to raise money to pay the debts. The club met at Gilmers monthly. Hamilton Gilmer always donated generously to the club regatta funds and the hotel provided a good viewing area for the regatta crowds from its front balcony.

The football club was formed at a meeting at the hotel and continued to meet there on a regular basis for years later. Team selections were discussed there and no doubt the hotel was a more than suitable venue for post match celebrations.

The cricket club met fortnightly during the summer. However, of more importance, one of the sporting clubs that visited the hotel on a seasonal basis was the All England Eleven Cricket Team. An All England Team visited in 1876 and a banquet was held at the Gilmer Hotel in their honour following which Hamilton Gilmer successfully sued the organizing committee (a couple of years after the event) for an amount of money that had not been paid.

⁴ Grey River Argus 22 April 1874.

⁵ Grey River Argus 24 November 1874 & 7 January 1875

The case shows the costs of the meal and also the amount of liquor consumed which was consumed for a relatively small number of people although the report of the banquet indicates that there were twelve toasts that were drunk to.⁶ This also demonstrates the kind of cash that flowed to the hotel for the many other more banquets that had been held often with substantially more people attending.

In the civil jurisdiction, Gilmer Bros sued A. R. Guinness, Dr Morice, R. Rae, W. Jones, T. Kenrick, J. Petrie, and J. Walton, for the sum of L21 12s, balance of account due for a banquet given to the All-England Eleven in 1876. —Mr Guinness, who confessed judgment for himself, appeared for the plaintiffs; Mr Warner for Mr Sheedy; and Mr Perkins for the others, except Mr Rae, who had admitted judgment the previous day.—Mr H. Gilmer proved that Messrs Nancarrow and Newton acted as a sub-committee on behalf of the All-England Eleven Committee, and had ordered a banquet for 40 persons, at the rate of 6s 6d per head, exclusive of wines. That he was not certain whether 40 were present, but his books showed that there had been consumed 3doz bottles beer, 1doz champagne, 2 bottles brandy, 3 do sherry, 3 do port, 3 do Colonial wine, 2doz bottles porter, 2 bottles claret, and 2 boxes cigars, for which he charged L18 12s, and L13 for the banquet. He had

Grey River Argus 19 July 1879

The **Greymouth Jockey Club** committee met to arrange its meetings and to organize its activities. Hamilton Gilmer had shown an early interest in horse racing probably with a view to mixing with some of his business acquaintances. He was member of the Greymouth committee in 1868.⁷

He had no further involvement with the committee until the 1874 race meeting when he was again elected to the committee.⁸ Following this he had no further formal role on the committee. However, throughout the whole period James Payne was continuously the secretary of the Greymouth Jockey Club and he had worked at the Gilmer Hotel for a short period around 1868 to 1870. The committee meetings were always at the Gilmer Hotel and Hamilton Gilmer would have had a good understanding of their activities.

⁶ Grey River Argus 23 February 1877

⁷ Grey River Argus 17 March 1868

⁸ Grey River Argus 4 February 1875

There was a similar involvement with horse racing at Ahaura at the same time. John Hamilton had returned to Cobden and there was a desire to retain the connection between the Ahaura races and the Gilmer Hotel. The many committee meetings which were held at the hotel around the events meant that they brought a great deal of custom.

Hamilton Gilmer was a member of the committee in 1872, 1874 as a steward and Treasurer and also 1875 as a steward. Also John Overend, a Gilmer employee, was a steward in 1874 and he was to represent the Gilmer Brothers interests in the race meeting in later years.

A HAURA ANNUAL RACES
1874 MEETING, MARCH 2ND and 3RD.

STEWARDS :

John Kennedy	J. D. Pinkerton
Jas. M'Laughlin	Jas. Holmes
G. H. Gilmer	W. S. Staite

John Overend.

JUDGE :

Caleb Whitefoord.

STARTER :

Geo. Mason.

CLERK OF THE COURSE :

Dr. Phillips.

HON. TREASURER :

G. H. Gilmer.

A HAURA ANNUAL RACES, 1875,
MARCH 23RD AND 24TH.

STEWARDS :-

Richard Reeves	G. H. Gilmer
Walter Burrows	John Kennedy
J. M. Ollivier.	

JUDGE :-

Charles Broad, Esq.

STARTER :-

Mr George Mason.

HONORARY TREASURER :-

Mr J. M. Ollivier.

CLERK OF THE COURSE :-

Mr R. Reeves.

CLERK OF THE SCALES :-

Mr T. H. Garth.

Grey Valley Argus 24 February 1874

Grey River Argus 25 February 1875

It should be noted that Warden Caleb Whitefoord was also the Judge for the 1874 race meeting. Whitefoord was a member of the Greymouth Licensing Committee which granted Hamilton a license for the Gilmer Hotel at Greymouth⁹ and two weeks later as Chairman of the Ahaura Licensing Committee granted him a license for the Gilmer Hotel at Ahaura.

It is clear that Whitefoord knew Hamilton Gilmer was holding licenses in two towns but he probably allowed this because he was known as a competent hotel keeper.

Later licenses were issued in the name of Gilmer Brothers business name. However, by 1880 this practice was changed with the courts insisting on an individual person who resided on the premises being the licensee.¹⁰

Annual Christmas Sports

The committee for the Annual Christmas Sports organized its events at Gilmer's Hotel. James Payne who was the Secretary of the Sports Committee for more than ten years had been a Gilmer Hotel employee in the late 1860's

⁹ Grey River Argus 22 April 1874

¹⁰ Grey River Argus 23 June 1880

Hamilton Gilmer had been a member of the committee organizing the 1867 sports. He had also participated, winning the Putting of the Stone (4 lbs) and the 5 Pounds prize; was second in both Putting of the 21 lb stone and the Hop Step and Jump, each event providing him with a 1 Pound prize.¹¹ Later in 1874 he also competed in the Ahaura Sports although not winning on this occasion. He was of course seven years older.

At putting the 28lb stone, Irish style, there were the following entries:—R. Larkin, J. Kennedy, P. Dun, and G. H. Gilmer. Dun was the winner at 33ft 10in; O'Neill second, at 33ft. For vault-

Grey River Argus 7 January 1874

Community Service organizations

The Grey River Hospital Committee met fortnightly at Gilmer's. This committee had among its members very influential Greymouth businessmen. This continued for a very long period well after Hamilton and Sam Gilmer had left Greymouth for Wellington.

The Volunteer Fire Brigade, Literary Association, Horticultural Association and others also met there. The Greymouth Choral Union with Warden Revell as President met at Gilmer's but practiced at the Court House.

Company Director and Shareholder Meetings

A large number of companies used the hotel's facilities for Director's and Shareholder General and Extraordinary meetings. These included many of the new gold mining companies from the 1860's and all through the 1870's. There were other businesses involved in building Greymouth's infrastructure that met there for example: Greymouth Gas Company, Greymouth Coal Company and the Dispatch Foundry. Once again these meetings were advertised in the local newspaper as being at the Gilmer Hotel and the outcomes were often reported in many editorials.

Political Meetings

The hotel provided facilities to accommodate large numbers and it was the venue of choice for those standing for government office to address electors whether for local, Provincial or Central Government. Many of these political meetings were issues based where discussions canvassed views and sought agreement to resolutions to be conveyed to politicians and/or governments.

Supper/Balls

The large dining hall at the hotel made it the superior venue for holding large banquets for organizations and visiting dignitaries. This hall had its origins in the significant upgrade of the hotel as a meeting venue for the Masonic Lodge in September 1868. This had brought a very large amount of custom to the hotel.

¹¹ Grey River Argus 28 December 1867 & 4 January 1868

The Masonic Lodge

The Masonic Lodge is a very special case as it provided a large boost to the hotel in its formative years. However, almost five years on from the September 1868 major renovation there was a major change to lodge operations. There were two lodges in operation in Greymouth. The first was started in March 1868 established under the English Constitution the second was established in 1871 under the Scottish rite.¹² Both lodges held their meetings at Gilmers but their numbers continued to increase and this led them to consider erecting a building over which they had sole control.

Accordingly, a company was formed of which all the members were Masons. They secured a site on 27 December 1872 and a foundation stone was laid. An architect was employed who *“designed the Hall in which the magnitude of its fine proportions and the artistic elegance of its architectural decorations stands an ornament to the town and an honour to the Masonic Society”*

A grand opening ceremony was reported on 23 May 1873. While this new hall clearly took business from the Gilmer Brothers business it did not have the full scope of the services provided by the Gilmer Hotel and while all lodge meetings were held in the new hall many, suppers, banquets and balls of the Masonic Lodges were still held at Gilmers. It would also not have been as professionally managed and operated as the hotel.

.Visits by the Governor

Visiting political dignitaries always stayed at the hotel and were entertained there. These included for example the Premier and also the Governor on more than one occasion through the 1870's. In both 1871 and in 1873 the Gilmer Hotel was a base for the visit of the Governor. For the 1871 visit, the Masonic Hall at Gilmer's was the venue for a Ball and subsequently for a supper which was held downstairs in the large billiard room:

a little after twelve o'clock the company proceeded to supper, which was provided in the large billiard room underneath the ball room. The arrangements for the supper were most complete. The Stewards managed to prevent any inconvenient crowding, and every one found a place at the table. The display on the tables was really wonderful, considering the difficulties under which the providore had labored, owing to the shortness of notice and other circumstances. Sir George Bowen was guilty of no undue praise when he said that neither in London or Paris had he sat down to a better table. After a sufficient edge

Grey River Argus 21 April 1871

¹² Grey River Argus 23 May 1873

It is of interest that after a previous visit of a Governor in 1867 the newspaper¹³ mentioned all of the people who had met with the Governor. Hamilton Gilmer was not among them. This was very early in his time at Greymouth but the 1871 experience indicated just how far the hotel had come in a relatively short period. At the time of this visit Sam was managing the hotel while Hamilton was in Ireland.

During a subsequent visit by the Governor (Sir James Fergusson) in 1873 the hotel was to play an equally prominent role. The Governor arrived at the wharf and proceeded to Gilmer's for breakfast after which he visited various places around the town before going to the Brunner Coal Mine where he was shown the mine by the Manager, James Dent (Henry Gilmer's father in law). He returned to Gilmer's where he was a guest at a dinner with a very large number of townspeople. He left at 10 pm so there was no time for a ball as there had been in 1871¹⁴.

Premier's Visit

The Premier Sir George Grey visited Greymouth and Reefton in February 1878. At Greymouth he and his party stayed at the Gilmer Brothers' Hotel. However, in this instance he met with deputations and was entertained at a banquet in the Public Hall.¹⁵

After leaving Greymouth the Premier was driven in the County Chairman's buggy to Reefton with the rest of his party travelling in Gilmer's coach. At Reefton they stayed at the Gilmer Brothers' Hotel. The hall at the hotel was also the venue for a public meeting at which it was said that 1000 people attended.¹⁶

SAM GILMER'S 1871 ACTIVITY

From early February 1871 Sam Gilmer replaced Hamilton at Greymouth as he had returned to Ireland to marry his neighbour Elizabeth Hamilton. Sam took over the running of the hotel and some of Hamilton's other roles such as the Grey River Hospital committee and the directorship of the Greymouth Gas Company.

Sam had been away from Greymouth since about 1867 when he organized activities at Charleston and Westport. His role on the Hospital committee had him working with a dozen prominent businessmen but there is some evidence he needed to get closer to others. In particular, Sam was elected to an office at the Trinity Church in April 1871.

¹³ Grey River Argus 29 January 1867

¹⁴ Grey River Argus 21 April 1873

¹⁵ Grey River Argus 23 February 1878

¹⁶ Inangahua Times 2 February 1878

At the annual meeting of the parishioners of Trinity Church, held on Wednesday evening, the following elections were made for the year:—Churchwardens, Messrs Revell and Hindmarsh. Vestry, Messrs G. King, C. Whitefoord, S. Gilmer, J. Blackmore, G. S. Smith, G. W. Moss, and J. Greenwood.

Grey River Argus 14 April 1871

Over their years at Greymouth this is the only reference to Gilmer involvement in church activities. We believe that this isolated event did not indicate that Sam had obtained a new religious zeal. Rather the more likely intention was for Sam to become better known among key people in Greymouth that might assist him in his role of running the Gilmer Hotel.

His colleagues at the church were all important people in Greymouth. The two Wardens, Revell and Whitefoord as well as King, Moss and Greenwood were all members of the Hospital Committee and the others were all very well known Greymouth businessmen. There was a large advantage to Sam in mixing with them.

As mentioned earlier Sam also had the honour of hosting the Governor to the hotel in April 1871.

ACTIVITIES AWAY FROM GREYMOUTH

The activities shown above need to be seen in the context of Hamilton Gilmer's family life and also the other activities which occupied Hamilton Gilmer's time and which caused him to be away from Greymouth. In particular 1873 was a year that caused him to travel quite a lot.

Hamilton and Elizabeth's first child Dorothea was born in January 1873 and a further four children were to be born by 1880. So the high level of business activity also needed to allow him time to be parent.

In April 1873 his half sister Margaret Ann died at Wellington and Hamilton travelled there to make all the arrangements for her burial. All the travel was by steamer and was much slower than travel today. We have estimated that Hamilton was away from Greymouth from 8 to 26 April or about three weeks.

A little later in the year there were significant issues at Westport involving the removal of the Post Office Hotel to Palmerston & Wakefield Streets and its re-establishment at the new location. There were also decisions to be made relating to the fate of the Clarendon Hotel in the face of the Westport floods. This hotel was dismantled rather than being lost to the rising water. Demolition took place on 6 June and the newspaper reported a Gilmer arrival from Westport on 13 June 1873.

A second trip to Westport would have been made for the opening of new Post Office Hotel. The photograph we believe is of the opening clearly shows Hamilton Gilmer was there. The newspaper recorded the arrival of a Gilmer and Hamilton on 8 July indicating that John Hamilton had gone with him. There were a further three Gilmer arrivals reported in the year and while they may not have all been Hamilton Gilmer he would have still had a busy year of travelling.

The pace of activity tended to quicken rather than diminish so that towards the latter part of the decade hotels were acquired at Reefton, Nelson and Wellington and the Charleston hotel sold. These stories have been already documented. All of these transactions involved Hamilton Gilmer and it makes one wonder where he found the time and energy.