

# THE LABOUR IN VAIN HOTEL

## A BRIEF HISTORY

BY ANDREW T T BAILEY



The 'Labour-in-Vain Hotel', or 'Labor-in-Vain' as it was more commonly spelt, was built by George Hyde. Hyde was a resident of Fitzroy from as early as 1844, when the suburb was still mostly bush and known as New Town. At that time he followed the calling of a shoemaker, and had a shop near Joseph Broadstock's famous Derwent Wine Vaults at Pink's Corner. In today's terms, roughly somewhere near the north western corner of Charles and Napier Streets.

By 1849 he had moved to Moor Street, right near the corner of Brunswick Street. Moor Street had only just got its name, being formerly known as William street. Here he had opened a grocery store, in what was then the budding suburb of Collingwood. He conducted the store for a number of years selling, hay, oats, bran and Maize, in addition to groceries. Mrs. Hyde ran the drapery department, where the ladies could procure a great variety of prints in fast colours, selected especially for the oncoming season.

During 1852-3 he erected bluestone premises on the Brunswick Street corner, consisting of eight rooms with room for a bar, plus a store-room and detached kitchen. There were stables at the rear of the building and on the same land, a detached timber and brick tenement of three rooms. By the end of 1853 Hyde had purchased three adjoining lots of land that together had a 135 foot frontage to Brunswick Street by 80 feet to Moor Street.

The corner block, which he bought from Henry Arnold, cost him £5,500.

Hyde, who was described as a highly respectable man, and an assessor to the Corporation (Melbourne City Council), applied for his publicans' license in April 1853. The license was finally granted on the 11th of May, after being postponed for fourteen days in order to allow him to finish building. The hotel soon became a well-known wayside stop for travellers on the track to the Plenty River. Hyde served his customers, amongst other things, Wild's No3 Pale Ale, which was brewed at the local Collingwood brewery on the corner of Otter and Bedford Streets. Mr. Wild's Ales were held in good repute, and one of the better selling colonial beers in Melbourne at the time.

Hyde was a community minded man who took an interest in council matters. He even donated ten shillings to the Collingwood Commercial Cricket Club to improve their ground.

In December 1866 George Hyde died after having successfully run the Labor in Vain for over 13 years.

Our beloved inn subsequently passed into the hands of William Scott, a District Master of the Grand United Order of Oddfellows. We have yet to unearth much about Scott, except that his father was, for what it's worth, John Scott, keeper of the Royal Institute in Edinburgh. At the end of his three year stint at Labour In Vain, Scott died of effusion of the brain, caused by disease of the liver and kidneys. Although the author is not qualified in medical matters, it would appear that our Mr. Scott may have imbibed as habitually as the present proprietors. Scott left his good lady wife with the task of attending to the hotel.

It soon became apparent that Mrs. Scott didn't aspire to be a publican. The furniture and fittings were auctioned in July 1870, only nine months after her husband's death. The list of effects that comprised the fittings included a number of antiques that would, if one still possessed them, be worth as much as the present building. The tables, chairs and couches were of cedar. The rooms were decorated with oil paintings and engravings - not to mention the curtains and cornices. The bedrooms were fitted with iron double and single beds, chests of drawers (cedar, no doubt) and washstands complete with porcelain jugs and basins and in the bar a five-pull beer engine, pewter pots and glassware. The list goes on.

In August that year Alexander Kelly became the proprietor of the 'hospice'. Once again the landlord's time as publican was so short it is difficult to find out any thing at all about his time here.

On the 11th of May 1871 Kelly was in a dog cart driving his own horse, which was usually a quiet animal. His horse apparently shied at a hay cart, and ran into another cart. Kelly was thrown out, and in the process got his foot caught between the wheel and the step. He was dragged along the street some distance before being released. Kelly managed to hobble back to the pub, where the surgeon was called and subsequently treated his badly crushed foot and ankle. The injury, however, was

rather more severe than first thought, and the leg had to be amputated a few days later after an artery opened up. Kelly, who was 51, died of loss of blood, leaving a wife and ten children.

Jessie Kelly, not content with the menial task of bringing up ten children, opted for publicanhood as well. She applied for the license in November, which she was granted, and ran the pub for the next four years.

The hotel was the venue for many an odd affair in the early days, not all of which were particularly enjoyable. One unpleasant example began on a morning in July 1873, when a boy named Arthur Keasley, whilst on his way to his work at the cemetery, found the body of a newly born infant in the nearby Carlton Gardens. (The poor lad, as if his job wasn't already morbid enough.) The body was brought to the Labour In Vain where an inquest into the infant's death was conducted by a Mr. Candler. The jury returned a verdict of 'concealment of birth against some person or person's unknown'. Cases such as this weren't uncommon in our hotels. No doubt the jury retired to the bar afterwards for a well earned drink.

The research into the happenings at the Labour In Vain is still being conducted and we would be glad to hear from anyone with any anecdotes.

## THE NAME

The name has a general appeal because it invokes in us something that we've all experienced at some time or another. The phrase also features in the bible in Psalm 127 verse 1.

'Unless the Lord builds the house, its builders labor in vain. Unless the Lord watches over the city, the watchmen stand guard in vain.'

However, why George Hyde chose the name Labour in Vain for this hotel, we'll most likely never know.

## THE SIGNBOARD

Hardly anything has been written on the subject of the Victorian pub signboard, and although they no doubt existed, evidence of their semblance is virtually non extant.

From reminiscences penned in 1917, the signboard for the Labor-in-Vain supposedly depicted a white woman (or two) scrubbing a piccaninny, and that of our neighbours across the street was similar in every respect except the child had a white patch on it's back representing what "Perseverance" could achieve. Although there is no reason to doubt the story, we must bear in mind that this only description is derived from childhood memory.

Such a sign, however, was used for Labour in Vain Hotels in the old country, and it is highly probable that it was copied for the colonial namesake.

Jacob Larwood and John Camden Hotten in their book published in London in 1866 entitled *The History of Signboards* write of our English counterparts

The LABOUR IN VAIN occurs among the trades tokens, and such a sign gave its name to Old Fish Street, which Hatton in his "New View of London," 1708, p. 405, calls "Old Fish Street, or Labour in Vain Hill." The sign represented two women scrubbing a negro; hence it was called by the lower classes, the DEVIL IN A TUB. "To wash an Æthiop," is a proverbial expression, often met with in ancient dramitists, for labour in vain.\*

\*Massinger's *Parliament of Love*, ac. ii., sc. 2; *Roman Actor*, ac. iii., sc 2, &c.

When the Duke of Edinburgh visited Melbourne on the Galatea in 1867, the city and suburbs were decorated to welcome him. The *Argus* of 27th November lists the businesses that hung paraphernalia or special signboards outside their places of trade. These ranged from sculptured coats of arms, huge portraits, ornate wreaths, crowns and blazoning flags to more humble offerings such as Chinese lanterns and stars.

In amongst the businesses listed in Brunswick-street we find the first reference to the Labor in Vain hotel actually having a signboard. The listing read "Labour-in-Vain Hotel - The ordinary signboard, with small star underneath."

We have yet to see a photo or illustration of any early Melbourne pub displaying an inn sign out the front, and await pictorial evidence with anticipation.

## THE PROPRIETORS

(Some dates are from directories which are often inaccurate)

1853-1866	Hyde, George
1867-30 Aug 1869	Scott, William
1869	Scott, Mrs.
1870	Kelly, Alexander
22 Nov 1871-1874	Kelly, Mrs. Jessie
1875-1878	Moore, Kyran
1879-1887	Walsh, William
	(Late of the Railway Hotel, Kyneton)
1888-1901	Malone, James
1902-1906	Barron, Mrs. D.
1907-1912	Barron, Daniel A.
1913-1919	Archdeacon, James
1920 -1921	Shaw, W. E.
1922	Carter, Julia
1923	Fitzgerald, Mrs. N.
1924	Kelson, Mrs. M. M.
	Renamed the CHAPMAN HOTEL
1925	Tomholt, Christian M.
1926	Jones, William (NO HOTEL)
1998 - 2005	Bailey, Rolfe & Thompsons
2005 -	Leopoldseder family

In July 1925 the license reduction board announced that 34 suburban hotels were to close by the end of the year including the Chapman Hotel, Brunswick-street, Fitzroy.

In 1927 the hotel was being gutted and turned into two shops which became occupied by Mrs. E. Neasey, a Confectioner (in what is now the corner bar) and Mrs. E.

Laird, a Butcher (side bar). The 1'6" bluestone walls of Hyde's original building remain to this day.

On April 18, 1998 after 72 years the Labour in Vain was reopened as a Public House, and it is the intention of the current proprietors to see that it remains that way.