

# The life and destruction of Hawera's early hotels

In Victorian Taranaki public hotels dotted in the little towns around the mountain gave the impression of success and opulence.

Hawera has played host to numerous hotels since the 1800s, with seven enduring for more than a hundred years. They were a distinctive part of New Zealand's colonial inheritance but only the White Hart and Railway remain.

The first built was the Hawera and was commissioned by Shepherd and Young's Cobb and Co coach line which, from January 1871, carried mail and passengers from Wanganui to New Plymouth twice weekly.

It provided accommodation for the coach passengers, the company's equipment and its staff. Mrs Shepherd lived there following the death of her husband, Bill, at the end of 1871.

Hawera grew quickly during the 1870s and 1880s and more hotels were built by entrepreneurs to provide temporary accommodation for incoming families as they built homes of their own, for commercial travellers visiting their clients and for government officials on business.

The Egmont, Hawera and Commercial hotels were soon joined by the Empire in 1875, (the former Taplin and Muir's general store) and was quick to advertise its accommodation, meals and stabling facilities. The next was the Royal Family Hotel built opposite Mr Davidson's Hawera Store, offering comfortable accommodation for new families.

The Shamrock was established near South Rd and the Railway Hotel opened its doors as the first train steamed in from New Plymouth on October 21, 1881.

The five High St hotels vied for custom, advertising their attractions in the *Hawera* and *Normanby Star*. In the September 15, 1880, edition of the newspaper the Egmont Hotel's proprietor, A Owen, boasted of his premises' excellent accommodation for travellers and boarders, liquors of the very best brands and a livery and bait stables which hired buggies and saddle horses.

Mr F Wallis of Wallis' Commercial Hotel said people were attracted to his establishment by the sample rooms which were a useful adjunct for commercial travellers wishing to display their goods. Another bonus was a first-class Alcock's billiard table.

In the early 1880s it was usual for hotels, both public and private, to advertise they served "an ordinary" each day at noon or 12.30pm. This was a three-course meal offered to casual diners and had its origins in rural England where it was described as the "Farmers Ordinary".

Each of the hotels had livery and bait stables close by offering food and shelter to horses. Most hired out saddle horses suitable for gentlemen or lady riders, buggies, either single or double, and flat-topped wagons that could be covered against rain.

When the motor car arrived some licensees offered cars for hire. In 1910, Mr Goodwin, who lived next door to the Shamrock Hotel, advertised a new 10-horsepower car for hire.

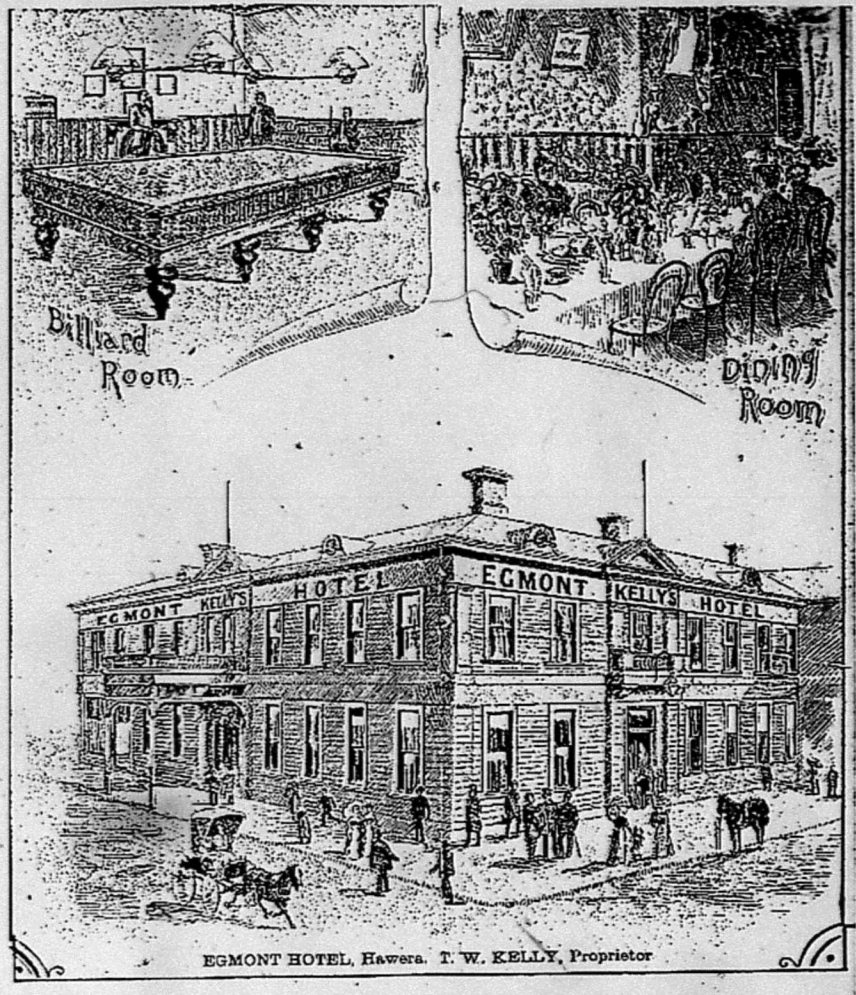
Photographs of the Empire Hotel in 1914 show the Empire Stables facing on to Princes St. In a later picture the same building with its characteristic big double doors is named as the Empire Garage selling and servicing Ford cars. Most of Hawera's first garages seem to be converted hotel stables.

Hotel names changed as new owners took control. The Hawera became the Central, and the Shamrock changed to the Dominion. In 1923 the Empire's new owner, Mr J N Anderson, renamed it the White Hart, a popular English hotel name.

Fire was an ever-present worry for hoteliers in High St because each building was wooden, despite some facades being solid masonry.

The Empire was the first casualty when it burnt down on July 5, 1884. The recently formed fire brigade battled in vain to save the structure. But even worse was the death of a boarder, who lost his way in the smoke and suffocated.

On August 30, 1895, a spilled oil lamp in a drapery store triggered a major blaze. The store was in the Egmont Hotel and the fire quickly spread throughout the hotel building. All but two of the 28 people asleep in the hotel managed to escape.



EGMONT HOTEL, Hawera. T. W. KELLY, Proprietor

**Popular spot:** The Egmont Hotel was one of the first built in Hawera.

A strong northwesterly wind drove the fire on to the Commercial Hotel and Faber's stables, destroying them.

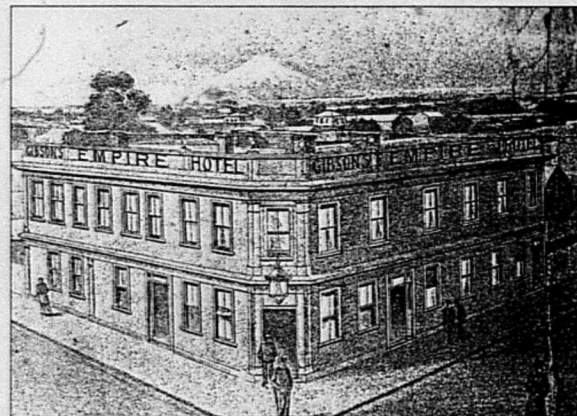
Fortunately all of the guests and staff there were able to escape unharmed.

This was a terrible fire that was beyond the ability of the fire brigade to control and it went on to destroy numerous shops and the livelihoods of their owners.

The last major hotel fire in the town was at the Central Hotel on Sunday morning April 28, 1912. The hotel and a large drapery store were reduced to ashes when the town water supply lacked sufficient pressure to save either.

Management of licensed hotels was not limited to men. The success of some was determined by the wife of the licensee.

The rebuilt Central was owned and managed by Mary Cramp, a woman of considerable experience in the hotel trade. She was licensee there for 30 years and in her later days returned to live on the premises.



**Fatal fire:** The Empire Hotel was the first Hawera hotel to succumb to fire when it was razed on July 5, 1884. A boarder who lost his way in the smoke suffocated.

## PEOPLE OF THE PAST



ARTHUR FRYER