

Amid rumours that New Plymouth's White Hart Hotel is to be demolished the old building, reconstructed in 1886, still stands firm.

It is one of the city's oldest standing buildings and boasts some of the most beautiful hotel architecture left in New Zealand.

Demolition rumours have been fuelled by owners Dominion Breweries Ltd. The company says it has no plans to sell or pull down the building. Claims last week that the hotel was to come down resurfaced in the form of a typewritten note delivered to an architects' seminar in New Plymouth.

The note was also a plea for the building to be saved from the threat of demolition. It said the building belonged to a marvellous period in architecture and had been a landmark since the early settlement of Taranaki.

With that there can be no argument. But what is the his-

tory of the building apart from its beautiful exterior? What stories has it harboured to make it such a landmark?

Herald reporter Rawiri Wright delved into the background of the White Hart Hotel to provide this picture of the past.

White Hart Hotel has special place in Taranaki history

A resident ghost, a daylight holdup by an infamous highwayman and the starting point of New Plymouth's first military funeral are all landmarks in the history of New Plymouth's White Hart Hotel, on the corner of Devon St West and Queen St.

The 56-year-old building has had its face changed many times, but its history remains. Stories of its beginnings and its future continue to circulate.

The White Hart as it is today, is one of the most beautiful examples of hotel architecture still standing in New Zealand according to Douglas Baglin and Yvonne Austin, authors of New Zealand Pub Crawl.

In their book they also say the hotel is under threat of demolition, but its owners, Dominion Breweries, say this is not so.

House

But what of the old White Hart? What was originally a six-roomed house in 1844, did not become a hotel until 1859, according to J. S.

Tullett's The Industrious Heart - A History of New Plymouth. Builder and ship-owner R. Rundle lived in the house and among others to live or stay there were various newcomers to the province, waiting to get their own homes.

This earned the Hart the name of Home for the Destitute. In 1855, as the danger of war approached, the hotel was used as a military hospital. Soldiers from Marsland Hill barracks were treated in its wards and it earned another name change in the form of Bleak House and 11th Hospital, according to W. H. J. Seffern in the New Zealand Graphic in 1897.

In 1859 A. Smith obtained a licence to sell liquor at the hotel and to cater for travellers. Henry Shuttleworth held the licence from late 1859 until 1873 after at least twice trying to sell it lock stock and barrel at auction.

In 1886 the old house was sold for removal by Newton King and a new, larger White Hart took its place.

Further alterations and additions were made about 1901 by the then owner, Mrs Rebecca Tabor who had brought it from John Veda Dingle.

The changes included the exterior verandas on the

upstairs section and extension of the Queen St side of the hotel, from about the nearest door to Devon St West to the alleyway leading to the present upstairs lounge.

Former Taranaki architect Frank Messenger was responsible for designing the alterations and they were completed in 1900.

Another addition at this time was the life-size statue of the white hart above the Devon St-Queen St corner. The body was made of wood and the legs of metal and was made by a Mr Andrew at Wanganui Technical School. It was fitted with natural 12-point antlers.

One celebrated tale of the White Hart was during Taranaki's defence of the Ranfurly Shield in 1964. The hotel was fully booked with a visiting team's supporters and during that Saturday night, the White Hart lost part of its anatomy.

According to Tullett few passersby noticed that for the next 16 years the hart stood on only three legs. It was replaced in late 1980.

The resident ghost Oscar who, by all accounts, is a friendly spectre. Present manager Max Hore says he has had no reports of Oscar showing himself in the past two years.

The first military funeral in Taranaki left the steps of the hotel in June 1856. The soldier James Taylor (20) had fallen while coming down Marsland Hill from the barracks, breaking his neck.

Details of the hotel's history from the turn of the century are sketchy, but there can be no doubt that if the years since 1901 have been as colourful as the early days of the White Hart, as a standing memorial to the tender years of New Plymouth's growth, would take some beating.

Important

Taranaki Museum director Mr Ron Lambert, New Plymouth, says he would not be too saddened if the White Hart hotel was closed, as long as the building remained.

In the last 10 years, a large number of hotels such as the White Hart had been demolished, he said. The White Hart was important because it retained much of its original beauty.

If there were plans to close the hotel Mr Lambert would rather see the facade of the building restored to its 1901 state with either a period colour scheme or removal of the windows above the Devon St-Queen St corner.

The building was special because New Plymouth City bylaws require there be no veranda posts on street frontages, he said. "The hotel still has its posts and is one of the few buildings in the city to retain them."

If the building was in Auckland it would be a prime subject for re-development.

If the hotel was closed, it could be developed behind the scenes, and still retain its much-admired frontage.



The White Hart almost as we know it after the 1901 renovations. The additions were designed by Frank Messenger in August 1900. The hotel was also a stopping place for Cobb and Co. stages of the time. With the stag now in place and the Queen St extensions complete, the hotel became a popular place for many of the townspeople.



The White Hart Hotel, New Plymouth, as it is known today.

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The White Hart, in 1874 by Gottfried Lindauer, eminent Maori portrait painter who had a studio where the Smith and Brown building in Devon St still now stands. In the buggy are the publican and his wife, Mr and Mrs Robert White. The painting was housed in the Taranaki Museum for a period after hanging in the hotel for many years. It is now part of a private collection in Auckland.



Highwayman

Another high point in the history of the hotel was the Highwayman who, in 1892, walked in disguised as an elderly gentleman with a long sword, held up the drinkers and made off with "about 15 shillings and a bottle of whiskey."

The man, later identified as Robert Walliath (19) refuted the town to near panic with armed robberies. He was well known for his scarlet army tunic and Ned Kelly type mask.

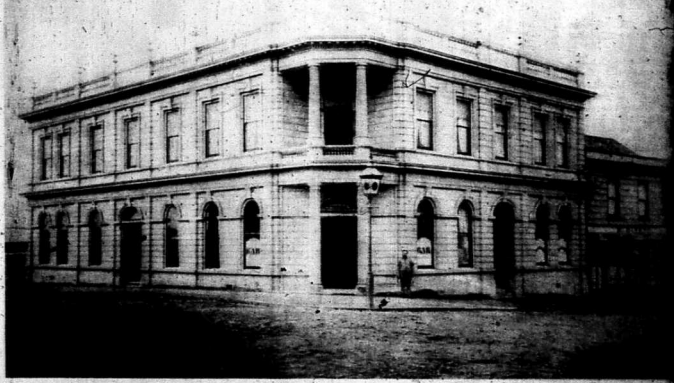
According to Tullett he got rid of his disguises after each holdup and returned to the scene to mingle with the crowd to talk about the Highwayman.

He was eventually captured in the Criterion Hotel, Devon St, New Plymouth, on July 26, 1893.

After his unmasking and sentence, the townsfolk rallied around in his support to have his sentence reduced. Walliath lived out the remainder of his life as a respected citizen and died in the 1960s.

Very little is known of

The "infamous" Highwayman (Robert Walliath) who held up the White Hart public bar in 1892. The photo was taken in New Plymouth jail after his capture in 1893.



One of the few remaining pictures of the White Hart following 1886 rebuilding. The hart had not then appeared. The picture shows clearly the Indian-colonial pillars. Additions and alterations were carried out about four years later.

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