Colonial hotel is still serving

By Ian Willis

The Plough and Harrow Inn at 75-79 Argyle Street is the second oldest hotel in Camden and is still on the original site. The Camden Inn (1841) was the first hotel in Camden. Located at the Great South Road, the Plough and Harrow was part of the fabric of Macarthur’s private village of Camden within the Cowpastures. By the early 20th century, travellers who arrived at the inn were moving down the Hume Highway, renamed from the Great South Road in 1928, with increased motorised traffic.

Inns, pubs and hotels have been part of life in New South Wales since European settlement. The colonial government issued the first licences for public houses in Sydney and Parramatta in 1796 to discourage ‘riotous and disorderly’ uncensured premises.

The Plough and Harrow Hotel around 1910 with a group of travellers in new-fangled automobiles attracting quite a crowd. (Camden Images)

The original building for the hotel was a single-storey cottage-style building strongly influenced by Georgian-style buildings. Colonial pubs were obliged to provide accommodation and meals for travellers, and most had stables for horses.

In 1855 Arnold leased the building to innkeeper William Riley at £150 a year. Riley leased the land and the ‘messuage’, including a cottage and adjacent buildings. The weekly cattle and horse sales were held at the rear of the Plough and Harrow, now Larkin Place, and helped boost trade. Convivial company at the hotel was provided by licensee M. Hennessy and the lady of the house, Mrs Hennessy. Hotel owner CF Arnold had recently renovated the sale yards conducted by auctioneers RH & JF Inglis.

The local pub was often a clubhouse and in the early 20th century, the Plough and Harrow hosted the Camden Jockey Club.

In 1930, the Plough and Harrow licensee was GH Berner, who purchased the lease from the Estate of Charles J Arnold, and the mortgagee Tooth & Co. The rent for the hotel was around £19 per month. Beer sales between 1921 and 1929 had their lowest point in 1924 and peaked in 1929. The licensee in 1927 was Frank E Donnelly. SP bookies were part of the scene in country hotels, and the licensee at the time, FE Donnelly, and employee, VA Cook, were fined for allowing illegal gambling on the hotel premises in 1922.

In 1937 the hotel was owned by Camden Hotel Pty Ltd, with a nominal capital of £200. The shareholders were: JM Edwards, MW McIntyre, HV Single and BF Watkins and a registered office in Sydney. In 1938 Cumberland County freehold Pty Ltd bought the freehold and the licensee, JC Coffey, then JW Leary, leased the hotel for £15 per week.

Modifications in 1939 and 1940 reduced bedrooms from 25 to 16, and created a building that has remained largely unchanged. The building had a tiled gable roof with timber gable screens, brick chimneys, new windows, and doors through the old columns were in place along the ground floor verandah. The windows to the hotel’s ground floor were double-hung, with timber shutters to the French doors on the first floor. The entrance door was timber and glass panelled, and the ground floor verandah and steps were tiled. Beer, wine and spirit sales peaked in 1940 with increased patronage from the personal of local defense establishments, including Narellan Military Camp, Camden Airfield and Eastern Command Training School at Strode Park. The hotel was connected to electricity from Port Kembla and allowed the use of refrigerated cabinets for beer sales, and by 1949 the hotel was connected to the town sewerage system.

The end of the 6 o’clock swill and early closing ended in 1955 but had identifiable effect on the level of beer, wine and spirit sales. Early closing at 6 o’clock was part of the restrictions from World War II and came into force in 1916 after the soldier riots at Liverpool camps and in Sydney.

During the 1970s, beer, wine, and spirit sales peaked in 1974 and gradually dropped off throughout the rest of the decade. The decline was primarily caused by the opening of the Camden Bypass in 1973. By 1979 beer, wine and spirit sales were 20 per cent of the level of 1974. In 1996 the name of the hotel changed to The Argyle Inn when former Qantas executive Geoff Dixon purchased the property for $3 million in 2006 and invested $1 million in refurbishments. In 2012 the property was transferred to the Dixon’s family’s D & G Investments for $4 million and the family restored the pub to its original name, the Plough and Harrow Inn.

The hotel is an example of a relic of early Camden in a main street primarily dominated by modern shop fronts, within the town centre’s Heritage Conservation Area.

References for this article are @ https://camdenhistorynotes.com/2023/02/26/an-early-colonial-camden-inn/