

The Old Spot Hotel, Gawler: a development history

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The licence of The Old Spot Hotel at 77 Murray Street, Gawler has traded since 1 April 1840, making it the sixth oldest hotel trading outside of the city of Adelaide. The hotel has been rebuilt on site at least three times. Including the year the hotel was established in 1840, the dates of major additions and rebuilding took place in 1847, 1855, 1864, 1879, 1891, 1903-1904, 1913 and 1914. The ground floor of the main part of the present hotel comprises fabric dating from 1864, while the boundary walls to the rear of the hotel, possibly dates from 1855, as does the former single storey billiard room and which has been an integral part of the hotel since 1879. The Old Spot Hotel was a single storey structure until the main part of it was rebuilt sometime between 1903 and 1904. While the hotel has a rich social history, this article addresses a complex developmental history.

When the hostelry was established as the Golden Fleece Hotel by its first publican David Scheibener, it was described as ‘one room which served as bar, bedroom etc and one tent’. This was not unusual for early bush hotels where the cost of building a structure was secondary to the prohibitive cost of securing a licence. The one room hut had claim to fame for being the first structure in the newly surveyed town of Gawler. The humble inn conveniently located near the junction of the north and south Para Rivers on Lot 199, was on one of the main thoroughfares to the Barossa and northern district, and attracted passing trade for six months without any competition. Indeed a J Smith recalled the Old Spot as being ‘the scene of much drinking and rowdyism’. The hotel and environs are captured in an early illustration dated 7-8 July 1843 when Henderson and Captain Frome’s expedition party stayed there overnight ‘at a small inn’ on their way to the northern Flinders Ranges.

However, business did not go well for David Scheibener for he was in serious debt to FS Dutton. And because he was unable to pay, he was sent to Adelaide Gaol on 8 September 1840 as a debtor. Scheibener’s predicament was not unusual at this particular time for there was an economic crisis in the new colony that lasted from about 1840 until 1842 in which time many early hotels closed down when owner-publicans became insolvent.

Author of *Hotels and Publicans*, JL Hoad, records that Scheibener held the licence until 30 March 1841, but he was in prison behind bars from early September 1840 and not behind the hotel bar. His absence from his hotel was an ideal opportunity for the establishment of the second Gawler hotel, the Old Bushman, which began trading three weeks later on 23 September 1840.

These two hotels were in competition with each other until March 1847 when the Prince Albert Hotel was established as the third pub in the town. From then until 1869, eleven more hotels were licensed in the town and district. Of a total of fourteen hotels, ten still trade in the district.

The second hotelier of the Golden Fleece, Frederick K Oliver, leased the hotel from Scheibener for thirteen months until June 1842. While Scheibener was in prison, his

property was vested in the care of John Hance, the Official Assignee of Insolvent Estates. Although the hotel was put up for public auction through auctioneers Lambert & Son on 28 June 1843, where Miss Sarah Calton was the successful bidder at £269/2/6d, she was officially the licensee a year before in June 1842 when she changed the inn's name to Calton's Hotel.

Of Calton's Hotel, Sarah Calton advertised on 18 June that, 'she has opened as an Hotel and Boarding House. Parties residing in the neighbourhood or travelling to and from the northern districts, will in future find, as this long-neglected place, every comfort and accommodation which they may need, and at a moderate charge.' In November 1845, she bought adjoining Lot 198 from Thomas Stubbs for £30.

On 16 September 1846 the *South Australian Register* recorded that it had authority for stating that 'the proprietors of Calton's Hotel, in Gawler Town [are contemplating] to erect, at a cost of probably not less than £2000, a new road-side inn upon a plan and arrangement resembling some of the much-admired establishments of a similar kind in Van Diemen's Land.' In March 1848 the hotel changed its name to the Old Spot.

A year later on 24 May in 1849 Sarah and her brother, Henry Calton, put the hotel up for public auction through Samson, Wicksteed & Co, By this time the hotel was very extensive, indicating that it was rebuilt in 1847 as first announced in late 1846.

The South Australian Register for 12 May 1849 published a large advertisement of the forthcoming auction describing the hotel to include:

private and public sitting-rooms, tap-rooms, and immense number of bed-rooms, bar, lodge-room, billiard-room, kitchens, stables, sheds, and a cottage adjoining, fronting Murray-street; in short, every convenience for carrying on a business not to be equalled by that of any house in the colony... The premises will be found to include: Travellers' room, Dining-room, Private sitting-room with two bed-rooms adjoining Bar, bar parlour, Lodge-room, Large dining room, Tap-room, Billiard-room, 34 bed-rooms, Stables, and out-houses of every description. Eighty or ninety comfortable beds can be made up.

However, the hotel was not sold at this time. Sarah's brother Henry, who was licensed as the publican between 1846 and 1850, left South Australia sometime after this date to travel to the Victorian goldfields while Sarah Calton, as owner, leased the hotel to JF Schmidt until mid 1851.

Gawler of 1851 was described as having about 220 houses for a population of 1000.

The principal street of the town running north and south, is Murray Street; it is closely filled with shops and trade buildings of all descriptions, though none, with the exception of one recently built (Barkers), and one in the course of erection, are above mediocrity. Public-houses are sufficient in number; those of a character to accommodate travellers are Calton's Hotel and The Bushman, near the end of the town, both old establishments, and both capable of improvement according to the advance of the colony.

In the same article it was stated that 'a Local Court is held in the town, at Schmidt's (late Calton's) hotel. In another article for this period the hotel was described 'its long low straggling buildings, with gable ends presenting themselves in every direction, its spacious verandahs, built of pine, pise and shingle, put one much in mind of a

wayside in at home'. In March 1852 Sarah Calton sold the property to Thomas Martin for £1050.

Reminiscences of Gawler in November 1854 and which were recorded in the *Port Adelaide News* in January 1880, recall the town as 'a hot and dusty place:

the beginning of a township, lying on a flat formed by some old-time hill scourings brought down by winter torrents of the North and South Para...on the left side of the track intended for the main street, there is the two-storied and balconied Globe Hotel, at which is busy Host, Square... On the other side is the Old Spot - a rambling, low-built old bush house, kept, if I can see rightly, by Host Pile.'

This was James Pile, who eventually went bankrupt.

Earlier in November 1852 Thomas Martin obtained a mortgage of over a thousand pounds from builder, George C Wyld, from Hindmarsh. It was stated by the Hignett Heritage Survey and the Heritage Branch assessment of the hotel in the early 1980s, that Wyld demolished the hotel in 1855 replacing it with a single storey stone structure of 13 rooms with stables, described in the Gawler Directory of 1861 as a 'very unsightly edifice'.

In trying to assess what was on the site of the hotel after its probable rebuilding in 1855, a legal document dated 6 March 1856 and held within the Real Property Act Application at the General Registry Office for this property, referring to a mortgage debt dating to 1840, describes the Old Spot as 'together with 6 messuages thereon'. This most likely refers to the shops alongside and fronting Murray Street that were built at the same time as the rebuilding of the hotel.

Rate assessments for the Gawler Municipality start in 1858. For the Old Spot, located in the East Ward, an annual rateable value was recorded as £175. This figure remained so in 1859, but in 1860 for one reason or another it dropped by £75 to just £100. A year later in 1862 the rateable value for the hotel fell even further to only £70. Alongside the entry for this year was written 'very inferior'.

Although rates were reduced during recessions, such as the serious one of the early 1860s, even allowing for this, the reduction for the hotel by more than 50 per cent, points to other serious reasons. In this case, it was the insolvency of the publican, Edward Martin. Hoad states in his publication of *Hotels and Publicans* that this hotel was possibly not licensed between early 1863 and 6 April 1864. Indeed this is confirmed at the annual meeting of the Bench of Magistrates that oversaw the renewal of licences in March 1863. At the meeting, Edward Martin of the Old Spot Hotel, Gawler, was refused a licence 'on account of the state of the premises'. The closure and the fact that his precarious financial situation was officially declared in the *South Australian Gazette* in November 1863, possibly explains the parlous state of the hotel.

By late 1863 or early 1864, the owner of the Old Spot Hotel, James Martin, or his next publican, rebuilt the hotel. The 1863 rate assessments for the Old Spot Hotel declared it as 'unfinished'. With Joseph Young as the incoming publican, the annual rateable value of the hotel for 1864 was given as £150. Clearly major works of some sort had taken place for the *Adelaide Observer* for 19 March 1864 declared 'a good many hotels have changed hands in Gawler lately and the Old Spot has been opened by Sgt Young. The house has been in great measure rebuilt, and is now a first class

building, very different from its old appearance before it became the property of Mr J Martin.’ However, the shops alongside of the hotel date from the mid 1850s.

The hotel traded without any more major alterations for fifteen years. Then in a ten year period from the early 1870s until the early 1880s, South Australia experienced a speculation building boom period, that enabled many more hotels to be established throughout South Australia, while a large majority of existing hotels were substantially rebuilt. In 1879 the Old Spot Hotel had major additions and alterations to the rear of the premises, that also included a 2 storey addition of three bedrooms over the kitchen area.

Five years before the hotel additions, however, a parcel of land on site of Lot 199 and part Section 4 measuring (174ft x 46ft 6in) adjacent to Lot 198, was sold to James Pile (a former publican) in April 1874. This was sold to the Gawler Corporation in 1878. This sale reduced the size of the hotel’s half acre property from 197ft x 174ft, to 153ft x 174ft. This meant that the hotel’s Murray Street frontage was now 153feet.

On 18 November 1878 when the Gawler Town Hall was officially opened, photographer Sweet took a photograph of the building that also included in the view, the one storey Old Spot Hotel.

The 1879 additions were made by publican, Richard James who took over the licence in March 1878. The local Gawler newspaper *Bunyip* for 28 March 1879 described the Old Spot Hotel in detail:

during the last past few weeks, its worthy host, Mr R James, has spent no small sum in making alterations... In external aspect it presents much the same features of yore. Only that the painter’s art has served to make it more attractive and pleasant. The front has been thoroughly painted, as well as the new billiard room just added. The want of a large and commodious billiard room having been long felt by Mr James’ customers, the shop recently occupied by Mr McFarlane, saddler, and adjoining the premises being empty, he promptly secured it, and by placing the windows nearer the street and closing up the old door, has constructed a room second to none in Gawler. Of the internal arrangements of this I shall have occasion to speak more fully after describing other matters which first claim attention.

The bar has been thoroughly renovated and improved; in fact so much so that frequenters of the house who have been absent for a brief period on returning can scarcely recognise it, while visitors for the first time consider it neat and comfortable. The decorations reflect the highest credit on their designer, Mr C Cox, and the workmen under him, they having been performed with great taste and skill. The ceiling is an admirable imitation of tessellated work, the walls have been wainscotted to the height of four feet, above which they are papered with elegant paper, a portion of which representing columns in relief is a masterpiece of decoration. Sundry minor alterations have here also been made, such as new flooring laid down, a screen erected near the entrance, the bar counter lengthened, and sundry shelves placed into an orderly and convenient position. The passage has been painted, varnished and garnished, its colours now being a light grey with a marone ground.

The dining room has been completely renovated, and the necessary paper and paint have improved its appearance greatly. On the right of the passage are the

bedrooms, four in number, though in all there are eight rooms devoted to this purpose. Three of these are outside, and reached by steps leading to a balcony; all are, however, fitted up in the most modern, tasteful, and comfortable manner, and are exceedingly creditable to the enterprising host and hostess, under whose supervision bed-chamber arrangements, as well as other matters pertaining to the hotel are carried out. Everything in them, from the carpets on the floors to the curtains overhanging the beds, being scrupulously clean.

Indeed, I consider after personal inspection in the department the 'Old Spot' will compare favorably with any house either in or out of Adelaide. The most attractive apartments of the whole, and which are likely to prove valuable adjuncts to it are the commercial room and a spacious sample room. These two rooms have been especially constructed for the use of commercial travellers, and gentlemen having business of a similar character to settle, and they will no doubt be largely patronised by those for whose benefit they have been set apart. The commercial room is an exceedingly beautiful apartment, the paper being of the latest pattern out, just imported from England. Both walls and ceiling present a highly imposing appearance, and the manner of arrangement of the beautifully designed paper on walls and ceiling has a splendid effect. In this, as in other parts, Mr Cox has evidently exercised both taste and judgement, and he has certainly achieved a triumph in this crowning evidence of his skill. Little need be said of the upholstery, which is in admirable keeping with the rest of the adornments.

The Sample Room is spacious, and was, with the additional rear of the house, the balcony and three bedrooms before alluded to, bath houses, kitchen and other accommodation of similar kind, erected by Messrs Taylor & Forgie, contractors, the masonry and plastering being performed by Mr Peek. They have all been well executed; indeed, wherever Messrs Taylor & Forgie have taken contracts in hand they have not only faithfully carried them out, but given perfect satisfaction to those concerned...

The last speciality of the establishment is the Billiard Saloon, which, as before stated, was formerly a saddler's shop, but has been altered to suit the position it is intended to occupy. No expense has been spared to make it a first class billiard room, and it will be opened shortly... The walls of the room have been plastered, ventilation and lighting attended to, the floor newly boarded, and in view of the coming winter to ensure the comfort of players a fireplace has been erected...

There are other matters, such as extensive stabling, &c., at the rear of the premises which might be advantageously touched on in conclusion, but sufficient has been said to show the 'Old Spot Hotel' is now complete in every particular...

It is important to note the journalist's description that, 'In external aspect it presents much the same features of yore. Only that the painter's art has served to make it more attractive and pleasant'. This being so, this testifies that the hotel was still a one storey hotel as seen in the State Library photograph B10586 of November 1878.

In 1891 while the hotel had further additions, the hotel remained a one storey structure if one is guided by the sketches published in the *Bunyip* for 18 December of

that year that shows an exterior view and two interior sketches. One sketch shows the dining room and the other the Commercial Room. The alterations or additions are unspecified but there was a rise in the annual rateable value by £132 to £162. However, the rise in rates was most likely tempered by the state of the economy at the time for it had been in depression since the early 1880s, and continued through to the mid 1890s.

James Martin who was owner of the hotel since 1864, died on 27 December 1899. On 5 January 1900 when the *Bunyip* newspaper gave a lengthy obituary of him, there were various photographs showing his foundry that is adjacent to the Old Spot Hotel. One photograph that was taken over the rooftops of the Old Spot Hotel shows some of its rear buildings. Importantly, the hotel is clearly seen as being only one storey. After Martin's death the hotel was managed by his trustees, Sir JW Downer, John Felix Martin and Bruce Rudall until April 1908. On that date it was transferred to the Bank of Adelaide (formerly the Union Bank). In November 1908 the hotel was transferred to George Lines who had been leasing the hotel since September 1907.

Often much information can be gained from reviewing council rate assessments and the Certificates of Titles for changes in ownership and leasing arrangements. But unusually, for the period between 1896 and 1909 there is no change recorded for the annual rateable value in the Gawler Rate Assessments that would have suggested some building changes to the hotel. Further, while there were changes in ownership and occupancy in the same period, this made no difference to any significant additions or alterations at the hotel. Even the local newspaper *Bunyip* that was usually quick to notice architectural changes in significant local buildings, made no mention of such changes to the Old Spot Hotel. Moreover, adverts inserted in the *Bunyip* newspaper over many years by the publican for the hotel, never changed in content that might have suggested improvements, nor were there tender notices in the *South Australian Register* or the *Bunyip*.

Yet, information from two photographs clearly depicts that the hotel was rebuilt between 1900 and 1906 when it was in the custody of Martin's trustees, Sir JW Downer, John Felix Martin and Bruce Rudall.

The hotel's rebuilding date appears to be 1903-1904. The January 1900 photograph portraying the hotel as single storey was published again in the *Bunyip* on 23 December 1904, with the caption 'Old Spot before its rebuilding'. Before the end of each year, the *Bunyip* sometimes published an illustrated calendar for the following year. On 21 December 1906, the calendar featured a Murray Street view that portrayed the Old Spot as a two storey hotel.

The main part of the hotel was rebuilt to become a two-storey structure with a façade graced by a highly decorative cast iron verandah, balcony and balustrade. A photograph with a train in focus that is circa mid 1900s, shows the cast iron decoration of the verandah/balcony extended to include the billiard room that was incorporated into the hotel premises since 1879. From 1890 locomotives and other rolling stock were manufactured at the James Martin Foundry and regularly shunted along a spur line in Calton Street. The tracks on which they travelled passed the hotel as they made their way along Murray Street to join main railway tracks at the railway station west of the town.

There were several major additions to the hotel up until the First World War according to the Gawler Rate Assessments. The annual rateable value rose from £195

to £298 in 1913 and again in 1914, it rose even higher to £370. It has not been determined precisely what the changes were to the hotel.

During the First World War in 1916 the introduction of six o'clock closing, changed many ways in which hotels operated. No longer could leisurely evening meals be served, and many service clubs sought alternative venues rather than experience the many difficulties of hiring rooms in hotels after hours. Early closing also had an effect on the existing architecture internally and externally.

Following the introduction of early closing, many hotels amalgamated the smaller bar rooms into one large public bar. This was because of the crush that was created for about two hours each day by working men eager to obtain a drink before closing time. The incidences of spilt beer and vomit created by the practice of 'shouting' saw lino laid flush with walls and floor. For the same reason, externally, many hotels were faced with tiles to a height of about seven to eight feet high.

Measured drawings of the hotel for 26 July 1917 convey a complex structure with many public rooms and outbuildings. Incorporated into the hotel in 1879 and adjoining the right of way is the billiard room of a former saddler's shop.

In 1937 the publican sought permission to de-licence the 'old billiard room' adjoining the hotel so it could be leased as a grocery shop. This application was allowed providing the communicating doors between the proposed shop and lounge and dining room were permanently sealed. However, it is not certain that these plans went ahead and the former billiard room was ever used as a shop.

Until May 1943, the four shops adjacent to the right-of-way were included in the Certificate of Title that also included the hotel premises. Several shops alongside the hotel were recorded in the first Gawler Rate Assessments for 1858. Between 1858 and 1877 there was reference to five and sometimes six shops adjacent, each with a house attached and remnants of the present shops alongside the hotel date from this era.

In January 1943 there was an application on behalf of the Old Spot Hotel to de-licence the shops from the premises. It does appear that the former billiard room was de-licensed from the rest of the hotel until 1965 when it was re-licensed as a saloon bar.

A few months later in May 1943, the land comprising the four shops (73ft 4in x 74ft) was sold to Michael Antoni Mattei. This reduced the hotel's Murray Street frontage of the hotel property from 150ft 6in to 60 feet. The roadway between the shops, although a private road with a right-of-way over it, remained a licensed part of the hotel, while the private road to the rear of the shops was deleted from being licensed, as it was no longer part of the hotel premises. For the time being, this sale of a portion of the hotel property, left the balance of it L-shaped, still with its original depth of 174 feet that stretched from Murray to High Street.

Although the hotel still retains its circa 1855 boundary walls, it is not known when the stables to the rear of the shops that were once attached to the boundary walls, were demolished. The demolition of the second storey comprising three bedrooms that was formerly located over the current kitchen area is not known.