

The Esplanade Hotel, Middleton Beach, Albany

by Judith Swain



The impending demolition of the Esplanade Hotel has been sad news for many Albany people. Their affection for the Esplanade was demonstrated when hundreds of local people attended the auction of contents held by Ross's on Tuesday 9th January, 2007 hoping to acquire a piece of memorabilia. Although it had not been Heritage listed many people regarded the Esplanade Hotel as part of Albany's heritage since the public-spirited Paul Terry had restored the ambience of the hotels of a century ago with his 1991 re-creation of the hotel.

In the mid-1890s a timber boarding house was built on the site by French businessman and citizen of Albany, Jean Galle. His intention was to operate the business as a hotel but local residents and the temperance movement, particularly the Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) opposed the venture. When J. H. Moody was granted a hotel licence for the site in 1898 the following castigation appeared in a letter in the Albany Advertiser of 14th July, 1898:

"While we objectors acknowledge that an hotel under good management like that of Mr Moody would have been an acquisition, we strenuously object to the granting of a liquor license, to a grog shop being planted on our pleasantest and most accessible pleasure resort, a resort where women and children have been accustomed to go without fear or restraint. Can they now? Are they not likely to be molested at any time by excited and drink-laden men!"

The real incentive to build a high-class hotel on the site was the influx of travellers and tourists as a result of the gold rushes. In 1898 the Town Council completed the road around the ocean side of Mt Clarence and Mt Adelaide from Stirling Terrace naming it Round Drive, renamed Marine Drive by the Council in 1946.

The first licensed Esplanade Hotel opened on July 7th 1898 with a grand celebratory dinner hosted by the owner, Mr. Charles Patterson, and the licensee, Mr. J. H. Moody and their wives; transport was provided from the town to Middleton Beach for a host of eminent guests. These included the Mayor, the Hon. W. G. Knight, the former mayor, J. Moir, the Resident, the Hon. J. A. Wright, Mr. A. Y. Hassell, MLA, councillors, bank managers and many well-known business men. A dinner of many courses was served in a flower-decorated dining room, then numerous speeches and toasts were followed by a musical soiree.

The hotel was a great success until it was destroyed by fire on 3rd April, 1908. The fire, which started about 5.30 am in a back room, was reported to Police by 'phone and Duty Constable O'Brien together with Sergeant Leen and Constables Mercer and Mitchell, attended the fire. The RAA had already observed the fire from the Forts and sent a detachment to the hotel. Despite their response it was too late to save the hotel which was occupied by only two people at the time, the current licensee, A. H. Vickers and an overnight guest, Julius Quitman.

The only items saved were some furniture and a few cases of liquor; the contents, however, were covered by the Manchester Assurance Co and Charles Patterson's building by the London and Lancashire Insurance Co.

In September, 1910 work began on building a new hotel on the site with J. H. Eales of Perth as architect and A. Thomson as the building contractor. The new Esplanade Hotel was formally opened on the morning of 16th April, 1911 with prominent citizens being invited to toast the hotel's success and many afternoon teas being served later in the day. Isaac Matson was the owner and licensee of the new Esplanade from this time until his death in 1940 but on at least one occasion (see AA 17/8/1921) called tenders for a lessee. It is interesting to compare the Albany Advertiser's description of the new hotel with hotel facilities as we know them to-day:

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MIDDLETON BEACH HOTEL, ALBANY: THE NEW ESTABLISHMENT

Phoenix-like from the ashes of the old wooden hotel at Middleton Beach, has arisen the present handsome Esplanade Hotel in brick. The magician of the wondrous change is Mr Isaac Matson, one of the best known mining men in this state, and it speaks volumes for his enterprise and faith in the growing popularity of Albany as a tourist resort that he has sunk in the venture, in bricks and mortar, fittings, etc, close on nine thousand pounds. With further development and prosperity of Western Australia, it is very unlikely that faith will be shattered, and ere long the Middleton Beach Hotel should become one of the best known of tourist hotels.

Middleton Beach is reached after a two-and-a-half miles' drive along a road that becomes prettier as the hotel is reached. Within a stone's throw of the gently lapping waves stands the handsome building, and from its balcony a magnificent view of the bay and the bold headlands and islands is obtainable. Almost at one's feet extends, crescent-shaped, one of the finest sandy beaches in Australia - a veritable children's delight. Here mothers may allow their little ones to scamper in the wavelets to their hearts' content with a minimum of risk. Further along where the rollers sweep in unfettered, those who enjoy surf bathing may have it as perhaps it is to be had nowhere else along the coast - fine steady rollers that curl, and, breaking, spread themselves over the shallows and gently sloping beach without leaving a deadly back-wash.

But, to return to the hotel. Altogether there are 100 rooms, 75 of which are bedrooms. On inspection the visitor is at once impressed with the warmth and colour tones of the various rooms - a welcome change from the dead-white plaster walls of so many hotels. Especially is this noticeable in the bedrooms, which vary in tint, and with furniture to match. The picking out and lining of the walls and ceilings of the drawing, dining, and billiard rooms has been executed with great taste, and with due regard to the fittings that harmonise so well, and the credit of these innovations is entirely due to Mrs. Matson, who not only superintended, but assisted in the transformation, the walls and ceilings as they left the contractors' hands being finished in the usual dead-white.

The Drawing-Room: In the furnishing of the hotel no expense has been spared, and everything is of the best. The drawing room needs to be seen to be appreciated, for, besides its dainty furniture, it contains many art treasures that were collected by Mr. and Mrs. Matson during their recent Continental tour. A two hundred guinea grand piano (landed in Albany) is installed in this room, and awaits the appreciation of visitors during

the present season.

The Dining Room: The dining room, which will seat comfortably 70 diners, is splendidly lighted, occupying as it does the north-eastern corner of the building. With its oriental carpet, tapestries, solid walnut furniture, snow-white linen, and glittering silver, it is in itself an artistic prelude to the creature comforts.

The Tea Room: On the opposite side of the building is an up-to-date tea room, 30 feet by 21 feet, which is fitted up with marble-topped iron tables, semi-circular counter, piano, etc. From the windows an excellent view of the bay is to be seen, and with casual visitors is soon to be well patronised.

The Children's Nursery: Provision has been made for a children's nursery, a boon that, no doubt, will be appreciated by adults. In this section of the hotel children will have their own dining room, play room etc, where they may romp and enjoy themselves without fear of damage to the furniture, or their elders' nerves. It will of course be taken for granted that children are not allowed access to the drawing room.

The Billiard Room: The fittings and furniture of the billiard room are luxuriant. The table is, of course, beyond reproach, and arranged around are a dozen huge tub chairs in Australian mahogany, solid and beautiful in the natural polish of the wood. The oriental linoleum completes the touch of warmth and cosiness of the room. The saloon bar, which is approached from beneath two arches, occupies a recess from the billiard room with which it is in keeping.

The Domestic Arrangements: Of the domestic arrangements one cannot speak too highly as everything has been designed with a view to absolute cleanliness. Lavatories, bathrooms, etc. are separated from the main building and the up-to-date devices include a septic tank. Hot and cold water is laid on throughout. These arrangements, together with electric bells, gas, etc, cost no less than 1000 pounds. At the rear is a granolithic courtyard, 24 yards by 10 yards, the centre of which has been uncovered for the establishment of a rose bed. When such has been created, together with palms, etc, in tubs, the effect will no doubt be appreciated.

Tennis Courts: In front of the Hotel two turf tennis courts have been laid down. Besides adding to the natural beauty of the spot, they will afford recreation and pleasure to visitors.

The Commissary: The best of meals may be relied on, and as many home products as possible will be provided. These will include the freshest of eggs, milk, cream, home-made preserves, pickles, etc.

The Tariff: To many intending visitors this is the all important consideration, and in this respect the management are to be commended for their moderateness. The tariff is in line with other hotels of equal standing, viz., three guineas per week. Private suites are of course extra, but special terms can be arranged for visitors with families.

The Middleton Beach is under the direct management of Mrs Matson, and is, therefore, in capable hands. Visitors' wants will be promptly attended to, and no effort will be spared to make their stay a pleasant one. Launched under the happiest of auspices, and situated in a delightful spot, the Middleton Beach Hotel should become far-famed as an ideal tourist retreat away from the heated and dust-laden towns of the warmer portions of the State

During World War II the Esplanade Hotel, together with The Rocks, was used as Rest and Recreation accommodation for American officers. After the war it was re-built in motel style and re-opened on 16th March, 1964. The lessees from 1964-1970 and 1972-1976 were Peter and Doris Clarke. Memorable events which occurred in their time included an overnight stay by the Duke of Edinburgh and a hold-up in 1976 when Peter Clarke was accosted by a masked man with a rifle; it was later proved the man was an escaped mental patient.

In 1991 Paul Terry International purchased the hotel with plans to re-build it completely. Paul, a Sydney financier, who had sold his multi-million Monitor Money Corporation in 1987, had decided to reinvest in his home state. The organisation's brochure describes the design of the hotel:

"Particular attention has been given to the design and appearance of The Esplanade to ensure that it compliments [sic] the architecture that gives Albany its distinctive character and that full advantage is taken of the superb site on Middleton Beach. The entrance, which features a traditional porte-cochere leading into a formal lobby with grand staircase, together with the facade treatment and verandahs all reflect an Australian colonial theme ... facilities ... include 48 very large and comfortable guest rooms, including 8 suites - a fine dining restaurant with dance floor, a bistro, lobby bar and sportsmen's bar - a public lounge complete with an open fire - Conference centre - Gymnasium -Children's games room - Swimming Pool - Tennis Court."

The five star hotel opened in 1991 with Constant Engels as manager. Dutch-born Engels had trained in Swiss hotel schools and hotels; his wide range of experience included Hong Kong's Peninsula Hotel, Huka Lodge at Taupo in New Zealand and the Hordern family's Milton Park in New South Wales. Albany people became great supporters of the Esplanade's Genevieve's, Juniper's and the Legends Bar and the very popular Sunday lunches where Paul Terry and his family joined the diners.

In conjunction with the Esplanade Hotel, Paul Terry also built the Extravaganza Gallery, now a heap of rubble, which contained a famous collection of vintage and veteran cars, including Genevieve, and numerous art and craft works, the latter mainly for sale. Sadly Paul Terry was killed in a freak helicopter crash in the Philippines in the mid 90s and the hotel passed out of the family's management, to be eventually sold.

The new owner of the site is an investment group, WCP Plaza which has dubbed the resort development Project Plaza, employing planning consultant, David Caddy and architect, Morris Nunn. Plans are for 81 room hotel, function centre and health and recreation facilities, the design being influenced by Asian and Greek styles of architecture.

Sources -The Esplanade Hotel Garden, D. S. Albany: a panorama of the Sound from 1827. Nelson, 1977 Johnson, Les Albany Who & What. W A Museum, 2001
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