



Victorian Renaissance in Melbourne

When Sam Halfpenny first opened the Old White Hart Inn on Great Bourke Street in Melbourne, Australia, back in 1847, he often gazed out at the vast open spaces around him in the newly settled town, waiting for customers to arrive.

To drum up business, Halfpenny's hostelry later staged goat races, pig races, greased pole climbs, and football games on vacant fields across the road, inviting newly arrived immigrants and "gentlemen from the bush" to lodge at the inn and join in the fun.

But if Sam could have gazed into the future, and seen that his Old White Hart Inn would one day become part of a magnificent hotel that stands on that site today, he would have been delighted.

The vacant playing fields have long since been occupied by Parlia-

ment buildings (politics is the name of the game played there today), surrounded by a constellation of green parks and gardens, and Melbourne's metropolis has burgeoned from 20,000 inhabitants then to three million now.

The Hotel Windsor, which merged with the Old White Hart Inn sixty years ago, is modern Melbourne's most unusual hotel. A Victorian era establishment built one hundred years ago, it has recently experienced a unique renaissance. The Oberoi hotel chain, now operating the Windsor, has spared no detail to restore the original architectural style, authentic decor, and nineteenth century ambience to pristine grandeur.

Formerly known as the Grand Hotel when civic-minded Melburnian shipping magnate George Nipper began its construction in 1883, the "showpiece" hotel was intended to rival in capacity and sumptuous-

ness any hotel anywhere in the world.

But its fortunes were to rise and fall often during the century of its existence.

In 1886, George Nipper sold the premises on the corner of Bourke and Spring streets to a company whose directors were staunch teetotalers determined to ban all drinking at the hotel. At a memorable inaugural banquet, the Hon. James Munro, chairman of the directors, and leader of the Temperance Party in Parliament, plucked the hotel's liquor license from his breast pocket, struck a match to it, and, as it curled up in flames, declared to the cheering shareholders, "Gentlemen, this is what we think of the license!"

Munro's career went on to greater heights—he became Premier of the State of Victoria—but not so the fate of the "dry" Grand Hotel. Business slumped. Financial difficulties persisted. And wilful guests found ways

to tipple on the sly. One Manager, A.F. Beker, confronting surreptitious boozers, angrily rebuked them, "Take away those teacups! If you must bring in liquor, drink it decently like men, out of glasses!"

Nevertheless, during those temperance years the hotel, considered Melbourne's most luxurious, played host to government officials, diplomats, the landed gentry, distinguished actors and musicians, and two future monarchs of the British Empire—King George V and Edward VIII. When a new company bought out the hotel in the 1920's and decided to change, among other things, its name, it became the Windsor in honour of the royal visitors. The other major change by the new owners, headed by Sir John Monash, Australia's citizen-soldier hero, was to incorporate with the Old White Hart Inn next door. Thus the landmark Inn, still blithely purveying "Wines, Spirits, and Bottles Ales & c. . . . inferior to none," enabled the Windsor to regain its liquor license and a new generation of non-abstaining clientele.

After a £100,000 refurbishing job, the "Grand Old Lady," as the hotel was affectionately known, was rejuvenated again. Politicians, from Prime Ministers on down, flocked to the Windsor from Parliament House across the street, taking up residence in the seven suites on the top floors and gathering nightly in the huge, wooden-pillared lounge. A copy of the house magazine of the time describes, in rosy prose, one of the many amenities: "A Writing Room for ladies...upholstered in old gold... soft rugs into which dainty feet luxuriously sink... cushioned and brightly foliaged and beflowered charm"

Despite all the charm and devoted patronage of statesmen and politicians during the many years when Australia's Federal Parliament was housed across the street, the Windsor once again slipped into decline. In 1976, the structure was threatened with demolition and a high-rise office building was proposed for the site. The Government of the State of Victoria, encouraged by many nostalgic parliamentarians, stepped in and bought the building. At the same time, the National Trust of Australia classified the hotel as a "monument," a treasured heirloom of Australia's cultural heritage.

In 1980, the Oberoi hotel group, Asia's largest hotel chain, was granted the lease to operate the Windsor. Plans were made to restore the venerable landmark, in every possible detail, to its original state of Victorian "grandificence." Functional facilities, however, less visible to the public, were thoroughly modernized, including a sophisticated fire protection system, all-new plumbing, and computerized telephones.

At a cost of over eleven million dollars, the classic colonial-style exterior, with its cupola towers, parapets, and arched balconies, the posh Old World public rooms, and two hundred guest rooms and palatial suites were completely redone, meticulously recreated. On an upholstered divan in his room, a prurist guest might wince at the anomaly of the electronic "Jetset" digital clock radio set into a Victorian bedside commode. Or he might reflect on the softly purring air conditioner, or the new refrigerator in the adjoining dressing room. But then he might conclude that the nineteenth century folks would have loved to have had these conveniences themselves.

When that same guest went downstairs to the Grand Dining Room, he could easily imagine himself stepping back into the last century. A string quartet is playing the chamber music of Mozart and Haydn. Seated at a table set with porcelain, crystal, and silver, our guest is served by a white-jacketed, gold-buttoned waiter bringing the dishes from a hundred-year-old mahogany sideboard nearby. Overhead the room is lighted by ornate glass ceiling domes and glittering chandeliers of the gaslight era. (So what if the white "gasolier" globes actually hold electric bulbs?) Stained glass windows depict British historical figures and Shakespearean characters. Two exquisite black marble fireplaces dominate the room.

The feeling is one of low-key graciousness. The total effect is Victorian elegance.

On February 24th this year, the new Hotel Windsor was formally reopened. It was a gala occasion attended by government officials, dignitaries, businessmen, and travel industry representatives.

Teetotaler James Munro would have been chagrined at the convivial crowd that celebrated in the hotel's Cricketer's Bar, Winston Cocktail Bar, and White Hart Grill. This time no licenses or mortgages were burned. But the galaxy of well-wishers cheered as one of the world's oldest and most splendid hotels renewed its lease on life. ☺

Mr. Jack Goldfarb of New York City has been a freelance writer for the past 21 years. His features have appeared in publications such as The New York Times, Saturday Review, Orientations, Lookeast, Pacific, New Zealand Herald, among others.