

PLOD ESSAY

Dealing with the Alcohol Problem in Wonthaggi 1909-1915

Among the first buildings to be erected in almost all mining towns are pubs to cater for the thirsty miners. In the past, these pubs were often built and run by the mine owners, some of whom used the pub premises to pay the miners' their wages, with the often predictable results. Wonthaggi was very much the exception to the rule as the reformers behind the State Mine project tried to deal with the problem of the 'demon drink'. The first pub was not established until January 1915, five years after the birth of the State Mine project.

When the Murray/Watt government came into being at the beginning of 1909, they were determined to establish a State Mine. In October the Coal Mines Regulations Bill was in its second reading and meeting strong opposition from the conservatives in both houses opposed to the 'nationalization of industry' as well as from the young and increasingly more powerful Labor Party for not going far enough. The expansion of 'state socialism' into the coal industry by the Victorian government received a great deal of publicity all over Victoria and Australia. The talk of the reform of the coal industry, of better working conditions, of a model state mine and the establishment of a model state town became increasingly louder during 1909 and attracted both speculators and men searching for a better life. When the NSW miners struck in November, 1909, the Victorian government exploited the strike to set up the State Mine .it exaggerated the impact that the strike was having on Victorian industry and campaigned for the full development of the Powlett Fields.

The revolutionary project soon gained momentum. Miners, especially from the goldfields were recruited, and others came on their own accord to start a new life in a new mine and in a new town. Among these were many men who were 'the spiritual sons of Eureka' as Mr Opie defined them. They were committed to working for the betterment of the working class and creating a new society.

As we know the miners, officials, business and professional people were housed in Tent Town for the first six months of their lives in Wonthaggi. Tent Town was an orderly place, well set out by the government authorities, with water and sanitary services provided. Discipline was based on respect for each other and there was very little violence. Though there were restaurants, cafés and tea houses, there were no outlets for alcohol. Dalyston however was not too far away and 'pigs' (two gallon licence places) and sly grog joints did exist in the vicinity of Tent Town. Mr Murray, the Premier was an ex-alcoholic who had become a teetotaler and a supporter of the "Temperance Movement' and he and others in his government were hoping to establish a town that was as near to a dry town as possible. Already in tent Town anti-alcohol meetings were held and well-attended.

From May 1910 people started moving out of Tent Town into the mushrooming State Model Town of Wonthaggi. Shops, guest houses, theatres and houses were going up all over the place but among these buildings there were no hotels. Though there was much pressure from the hotel industry, the government, through the Licensing Board, refused to grant hotel

licenses. Grog, the curse of the working class, was to be controlled if not banned in the new town based on new principles, which was being set up. A limited amount of 2 gallon licences were to be granted. The alcohol would be bought at certain outlets and then drunk at home. Of course this was not successful. A small anecdote in the pages of the Sentinel illustrates this failure very well. According to the Sentinel reporter a young man arrived in Wonthaggi soon after the town had been set up, on a hot and windy day. He was dying for a drink so he stopped a young boy just near the makeshift station and said: Young, fella is there anywhere in this town where a man can get a drink? The young boy replied, pointing to the small church at the top of McBride Avenue, 'You see that church up there?' 'Yeh' "Well it's the only place in this town where you can't get a drink.'

In August 1910 a resolution had been passed at a public meeting which read 'We, the people of Wonthaggi in the best interests of morality and temperance desire the Premier of Victoria to take steps to establish a State Hotel at Wonthaggi. That the government be asked to amend the licensing law to abolish two gallon licences in all parts of Victoria and that no new licences be issued or renewed.' The government listened but instead of establishing a State Hotel, which would have been a truly revolutionary move, it encouraged the formation of clubs that could sell alcohol in a controlled environment. When the Borough Council was formed in 1911, the call for the establishment of a Borough Hotel was also not acted upon.

The Club movement, however took off. Within a short time there were 7 clubs in the town: The Wonthaggi Club, The Caledonian Club, The Rifle Club, The

Workman's Co-operative Club, The Minstrel Club, the Racing Club, the Billiard Club. By 1913, there were 13 licensed clubs. A wit, once again in the pages of the Sentinel, described the town thus. As you leave the station and go up McBride Avenue you have: shop, club; shop, club, club; shop, club, club, club, club and so on

Criticisms of the club system that had mushroomed in Wonthaggi and had caused 'dreadful evils' were becoming more and more insistent. Incensed letters of condemnation demanding reform appeared in the local papers and in papers all over the state. Calls for parliamentary inquiries to curb the 'abuse of drinking and gambling behind closed doors' were made. The demand that hotels be licensed so that Wonthaggi's evils could be at least monitored and controlled by the police-and the wives could enter and drag their men home- became so strong that in January 1915 four hotel licenses were granted to Wonthaggi. Within 15 minutes after the Bench gave their decision, the Sentinel reported, the Commonwealth flag was flying at Mrs Allen's Hostel, and business was in full swing. In December 1915 almost all the applications for renewal of club licenses were refused by the Licensing Board. Only two clubs in Wonthaggi and one in South Dudley were considered to be genuine clubs which abided by the law. Of these only the Wonthaggi Club and the Wonthaggi Workmen's Club remain. Of the four hotels licensed in 1915, only Mr Webb's Caledonian Hotel and Charles Taberner's Wonthaggi Hotel remain. The Powlett Hotel closed its doors in November 1970 and was soon demolished. The State Mine Hotel, no longer a pub, but so much part of Wonthaggi's colourful history still stands.