

Antill Ponds and the Half Way House

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Introduction

The following notes have been compiled to accompany plans of the Half Way House in an effort to briefly bring together some of its published history, together with a few anecdotal accounts from memories of the author and others. The plans were compiled in 1994, as a result of careful measurements made amongst the then remaining walls and rubble, and discussions with David Carnes who, with his parents and family, lived there between 1935 and 1948 and to whom I am most grateful for his knowledge and assistance. No attempt has been made to relate railway or highway history beyond a few brief references to illustrate the important influence which these had upon the Half Way House.

Early history of the railway and the Midlands Highway is given by several authors including Cooley (c. 1970), Cooper and Goss (1996, photograph), Sharland (1952, photograph p. 26), Stancombe (1968 illustration p. 960), Weeding (1980) and Fenton (1891, p. 114 relates a raid on the Half Way House by bush rangers). From these sources I have extracted relevant historical notes. I likewise acknowledge the help received from Mrs Jean Gibbs, a direct descendant of John Presnell, the first owner and proprietor of the Half Way House, whose research into her family history has proved most interesting and helpful. The State Library of Tasmania has also been most cooperative, providing references to information published in the *Hobart Town Gazette*, the *Hobart Town Courier* and the *Mercury* newspaper.

Antill Ponds and its Railway Station

The gradual demise of the Tasmanian railways from about the middle of the twentieth century brought about the closure and demolition of many small country stations, prominent amongst which was that at Antill Ponds. The railway had, for many years, served the surrounding pastoral and farming district and was the principal means of transport in the days before the advent of the automobile. Before the Midlands Highway was upgraded and sealed about 1930, it was, by today's standards, little more than a gravelled byway, having been designed for horse-drawn vehicles for which a gentle gradient was more important than the avoidance of sharp corners.

Antill Ponds was named by Governor Macquarie in honour of Major Henry Antill of the 73rd Regiment, the Governor's Aid-de-Camp, after they travelled by

horseback on one of the early exploratory journeys from south to north in 1811 and is almost exactly halfway between Launceston and Hobart. The *Sunday Examiner Express* of 31 January 1981 p. 10, in *A story about a Tasmanian Place* gives an interesting background to the life of Henry Colden Antill. As an ensign in the 73rd Regiment, Antill had carried the colours during the British war against the Sultan of Tippoo in India. He was wounded, received a medal for courage and was promoted to Captain in 1809. At the end of that year he went to Sydney with his regiment, arriving just after Christmas in 1809. He was immediately appointed Macquarie's aid and accompanied the Governor on his first visit to Tasmania. The Governor honoured him by naming Antill Ponds after the colour bearer from India.

With the advent of the railway, Antill Ponds station became a convenient centre for train crews, consisting of a driver, stoker and guard, who changed over, so to return to their place of departure. The station was equipped with public toilets and a ladies' rest room, shunting yards and holding tracks for rolling-stock, a coal bunker and underground water tank from which the tenders of the steam-powered locomotives were restocked, and a large underground turntable, by which means an engine and its tender could be manually turned around. Stockyards for the loading and unloading of animals were regularly used; for sheep, double decker wagons with a capacity of about seventy grown sheep and for cattle about seven grown beasts. Horses, too, were often transported in these. Ample goods-sheds and loading bays, for the receipt and dispatch of rail-transported produce and sundry goods, were also regularly used by local farmers and others.

A track maintenance crew, consisting of a ganger and three fettlers, were responsible for the care and general condition of the track and for weed control and fire safety over the summer months. These families lived locally in Tasmanian Government Railway cottages, which, like the Station Master's house, were invariably sited on railway property within a few metres of the track. Their section of responsibility extended from Woodbury Siding, about five kilometres to the north, and southwards, to the York Plains station, a total length of about twenty kilometres. In addition to weekly work day patrols, the section was routinely patrolled and inspected every Sunday morning.

Most railway personnel had large families and the nearest school was at Woodbury, about six kilometres to the north, most of the children having to walk there and back whatever the weather.

In cold weather the station office was always heated with a large, well-stocked open coal fire and attended during the day by a station master and at night by his relieving porter. They were responsible for the receiving and clearing of up to five passenger trains and as many goods trains which passed through the station during the day and night and which often crossed there, as well as for the associated organisation of signals, staves, rail points and the necessary ticketing and invoicing of passengers and goods.

Signals, on tall steel poles several hundred metres to the north and south, were lit manually with oil lamps which had to be serviced daily. The signal arms, displaying red or green lights, were regulated by means of heavy iron levers installed on the platform and connected to the signals by wires strung about thirty centimetres above ground on wooden pegs beside the line. Additionally, the station staff manually operated the Antill Ponds telephone exchange with about a dozen lines, an agency for the Savings Bank of Tasmania, and the local post office. Being so cited, staffed and equipped Antill Ponds was, for many years, probably the most important and busiest station on the main north-south line.

Information extracted from Orchard (1991) records the post office at Antill Ponds was first opened on 25 June 1832. This was about two years after the north-south road was built through St Peters pass and the White Hart Inn (the first Half Way House) was built. It was subsequently closed on 31 January 1897, re-opened again on 26 April 1897, closed on 8 August 1897, reopened as Woodbury on 9 August 1897 and eventually closed on 31 August 1968.

David Carnes recalls collecting mail from a post office at Woodbury in the 1930s from a private house, operated by Mrs Isles, situated on the eastern side of the highway, on the northern edge of the Blackman River.

Campbell et al. (1962), in *Postal History and Postal Markings* records a post office at Antill Ponds in 1897 (No. 153) and it appears this office, together with that at Woodbury, operated continuously, at least from that date, until the railway station was closed in 1968. Since then all Antill Ponds mail has been delivered to roadside boxes from the Oatlands Post Office.

The Half Way House

A prominent feature and the social centre of Antill Ponds was its Half Way House, a three storey hotel which serviced both travellers and locals with accommodation, meals and liquor. Adjacent stables were also a changing station where hard-driven coach horses were changed for fresh animals.

Only the highway separated the railway station and platform from the front door of the hotel, a distance of about twenty metres. The attraction and proximity of warmth and hospitality for train crews, railway staff, the travelling public and the local community resulted in numerous accounts of humorous behaviour, especially so in the earlier years when the hotel was licensed to sell alcoholic refreshments. The licence lapsed at the end of 1932 and was never subsequently granted.

Early accounts of the Half Way House are scanty, receiving only brief mentions in various publications. Two of the best coverages are to be found in *Early Buildings of Southern Tasmania* by E. Graeme Robertson, 1970, which gives some useful references and quotes; and *A History of the Lower Midlands* by J. S. Weeding 1988 who mentions that the earliest Midlands Highway was routed by way of York Plains, through Sorell Springs, several kilometres to the east of St Peters Pass, thus avoiding the steep and more difficult terrain through the St Peters Pass. A half kilometre section of this original road can still be clearly seen, cut into the hillside to the east of the present highway, a few hundred metres south of Antill Ponds and which originally extended outwards across the plain to Sorell Springs. Northwards it followed the valleys to the east of the present highway to exit onto the Salt Pan Plains a few hundred metres west of the present 'Lowes Park' homestead. A striking panoramic view northwards from this point is illustrated by Joseph Lycett in his *Views in Australia* (1824 plate 19).

At this period the 'half way' house was at Sorell Springs, having been built by John Presnell, a blacksmith by trade, who arrived from England on the *Midas* on 13 January 1821. He was granted 300 acres of land at Sorell Springs on which he built the White Hart Inn. A licence to sell spirits, wine and beer was granted in 1822 but following the subsequent realignment of the highway through St Peters Pass and the bypassing of Sorell Springs, Presnell acquired land at Antill Ponds in 1830, pulled down the first White Hart Inn and had it re-erected at Antill Ponds so to again catch the

travelling public and supply them with refreshments and accommodation. This building comprised seven rooms, suitable for an inn and valued at 500 pounds, together with a six stall stable and other outbuildings. This was also called the White Hart Inn; it bore this name until 1842 when it was changed to the Half Way House.

John Presnell died on 20 May 1831 (*Hobart Town Courier*) aged 45 and was buried in Oatlands, leaving a wife and five children. His wife, Eleanor, continued to manage the premises and, after several applications, was granted a licence on 29 April 1833 to sell wine and spirits (letter Jean Gibbs). Subsequently it was let to David Solomon for 140 pounds per annum until sold by auction in 1838 (see below). The *Hobart Town Courier* of 18 May 1838, p. 3 col. 6, carries an advertisement:

‘TAYLOR & DUNCAN, WILL SELL BY
PUBLIC AUCTION. On the property,
on Wednesday 6 June,
all those well-known Premises, now in full trade,
THE WHITE HART INN, Antill Ponds,
with upwards of 15 acres, in lots,
and positively without reserve’.

Apparently Solomon bought the Inn as the Hotel Index in the Archives Office of Tasmania, citing the *Hobart Town Gazette* of 13 October 1837 and 5 October 1838, records him as the occupier, followed by Anne Solomon 17 October 1839. (For a list of further successive occupiers see Appendix 1.)

In 1842 ownership was in the name of James Hamilton with Edward Greenbark as proprietor. At this time the premises were raided by bush-rangers, Martin Cash, Kavanagh and Jones, seeking refreshments as they were travelling north and surviving by raiding and stealing from settlers following their escape from Port Arthur (Fenton 1891 p. 114).

In March 1852, when occupied by Denis Bacon, the Half Way House was gutted by fire. In the *Hobart Town Courier* of 31 March 1852 tenders were invited for its rebuilding and completion. Unfortunately there is apparently no detailed description of the original building. The new Inn comprised three storeys, having two small bedrooms beneath the gables. The single-storey section on the northern side, which was added at a later date, contained a large dining room and further bedrooms. The *Mercury* of 24 January 1861 p. 3 col. 7 carries an advertisement for the sale of the Half Way House:

‘Mr Lewis Cohen to sell
From the insolvent Estate of
Henry Valentine
by Auction
at Engleberts Assembly Rooms,
Campbell Town on Tuesday 5th. February
at 12 O’clock prompt
Without reserve
The Half Way House
Let to Mr. C. Drable,
one of the best hotels on the road
and commanding a large business.’

The *Hobart Town Gazette* shows Drable as the licensee from 1858 to 1866. (For an annotated list of successive proprietors of the Half Way House see Appendix 1.)

With the completion of the main north-south railway line in 1871 and the establishment of the station opposite the hotel, together with an expanding farming industry, the Half Way House entered what was probably its most prosperous and noteworthy period.

My memories of Antill Ponds and the Half Way House date from about 1929, when I was little more than three years old and living at Middle Park, a small farm about a kilometre to the south. I often accompanied my father, Geoff, to the station where he collected mail, and occasionally, into the hotel to buy cigarettes and a drink.

The then proprietor was George Saunders who kept free-ranging, but very tame domestic pigeons, some of which occasionally entered the house by way of a broken pane in the lantern above the front door. (see Sharland 1952, opp. p. 26.) Saunders often wandered across the road to meet the passenger and mail trains to the entertainment of people, especially myself, with one or two pigeons perched on a shoulder and his hat. The birds had become so accustomed and trusting that, although he stood on the platform little more than three metres from the noisy, steaming locomotive, they were rarely disturbed from their resting place.

In those years several nearby properties produced considerable quantities of wheat, a commodity with which Saunders used to feed his pigeons. One of the property owners, recently reminiscing about his memories of the Half Way House, told of how he and his brothers sometimes exchanged wheat for beer on occasions when they ‘patronised the bar’, saying ‘and my word, old man, a bag of wheat could buy a lot of beer’.

Another lifetime local, recalled an occasion when two nearby residents, having greatly enjoyed an evening of hospitality and feeling unwilling to return home at a late hour, decided to take a room for the night. There was then, of course, no inside toilet, just a chamber pot under the bed, which had to be emptied each morning. The two had consumed much liquid during the evening and the chamber soon reached its capacity. The obvious solution was to toss the contents out of the window; an unfortunate act as the publican's wife happened to be passing beneath the window at that time and was the 'receiver'.

It is my understanding that, upon his death about 1932, Saunders left the half Way House and land on the eastern side of the highway, about 14 acres, to his daughter, Mrs George Lodge, in trust for his granddaughter, the infant child of Mrs Lodge, with the provision that it not be sold until the child attained the age of 21 years. The family later moved to live on the mainland and management and administration of the property was then left in the hands of an Oatlands solicitor. The *Mercury* newspaper of 12 July 1956, reporting on the Oatlands Council Meeting of the previous day, quotes the owner, Mrs G. A. Lodge of Williamstown, Victoria as intending to visit the property for discussions with Council staff regarding its sale or demolition.

Subsequent to Saunder's occupancy, the property was leased without a liquor licence but the tenants continued to serve occasional meals and to sell soft drinks and confectionery, etc. I well remember, about 1933, enjoying a fine New Year's Day dinner with my family and others, served to us in the big dining room, to the north of which was an extensive garden with fruit and ornamental trees, flower and vegetable beds, between which ran a pathway leading to a double toilet on the northern side.

Water for the hotel and gardens was provided from iron tanks filled from a roof catchment, and from a windmill at the rear of the building which drew water from the nearby creek.

The last family to make a home at the Half Way House was that of William Carnes who, during his tenancy from 1935 to 1938 and 1941 to 1948, became recognised as the virtual patriarch of Antill Ponds. They were the last to sell soft drinks there and were well known for their friendly hospitality and a welcome cup of tea, served in the kitchen, warmed by a large, black wood-burning stove.

During World War II the Half Way House was the venue for many fund-raising functions, thanks to the

generosity and cooperation of the Carnes family. The principal activities were on Saturday evenings when about twenty local residents would gather in the 'big room' for cards, playing 'euchre' and 'five hundred'. Occasionally large functions were held, such as dancing, Queen Carnival formalities and other fund-raising events. By these means, from 1940 to the end of October 1945, a period of great austerity, the local Woodbury-Antill Ponds branch of the Australian Comforts Fund raised a total of 1860 pounds, 6 shillings and 11 pence (\$3720.70). My mother was Secretary/Treasurer and as funds were raised, distributions were progressively made to various wartime appeals. The following amounts were extracted from the minutes she kept:

Australian Comforts Fund 1039 pounds 1 shilling and 9 pence;
 Red Cross 781-11-5;
 New Sydney Fund (1941) 24-0-0;
 London Relief Fund (1941) 20-0-0;
 Lord Mayor's Fund (1942) 2-10-6;
 Lord Mayor's Allied Appeal (1943) 10-13-6;
 Chinese Relief (1945) 26-14-9;
 Oatlands Memorial Hall Fund (1945) 2-15-0.

Early in the twentieth century a rather primitive cricket ground and pitch (probably concrete) was established in a paddock on the northern side of the garden, between the main road and creek. My father told me that this pitch was eventually dug up and a crop grown in the paddock. About 1934 the local community decided to build a new pitch on the same site and I well recall that they (illegally and inconspicuously) helped themselves to some of the heaps of crushed dolerite stone left over from the sealing of the highway and conveniently dumped by the roadside fence. The pitch was not used during the war years but afterwards, about 1946, an active club was formed and for several years played competitive cricket in an association with clubs at Tunbridge and Mount Pleasant. The Antill Ponds Cricket Club disbanded about 1949 after which the pitch fell into disrepair and was subsequently removed.

As a licensed hotel, the Half Way House had been fully furnished, mostly with cedar; the doors, skirting, balustrades and bar being made of cedar. The solid walls were principally of rough stones, broken bricks and rubble, plastered over their mortar; good sandstone blocks were used only on corners and over doors and windows. However, the walls of the nearby stables, facing the southern courtyard, were built of good sandstone blocks.

The *Mercury* of 13 August 1966, reporting Oatlands Council business stated that the Tourist Promotion Council suggested the Half Way House be converted into a coaching museum. Council considered this impractical as, by then, the building was in a very bad state and much of the valuable interior had been removed.

The quality stones were eventually removed and used to build large pillars either side of the front entrance to 'Shene', Pontville, while others were donated by the then owner, David Carnes, for a church-yard fence at St Johns Church of England, Ross. (See the *Mercury* of 11 September 1966, p. 10). The *Mercury* of 9 July 1975 p. 25 has a photograph of the Half Way House when partly demolished, saying that it was then owned by Mrs J. V. Burbury of Sandy Bay who had bought it some years previously in the hope of restoration. Some timbers from the structure were eventually salvaged by the Tasmanian Parks and Wildlife Service and used in the restoration of the old Callington Mill in Oatlands and some stones were used to build the public toilet block erected in the roadside rest area in St Peters Pass.

Without the necessary and considerable expenditure required to maintain such an old building it had progressively fallen into a state of increasing disrepair and the furnishings had been progressively sold until it became no longer tenable. Occasionally squatters and often vandals and graffiti artists took an interest, gradually stripping out the old lead-conduite-covered wiring from beneath the floors and plastered walls, removing cedar fixtures, mantles, the bar and balustrades and eventually setting the remains alight. The structure was, by then, in a dangerous state and, for public safety, the remains had to be knocked down.

William Hawkins Memorial

A remaining relic of the 'boon days' is a white memorial stone which stands about a metre high, backed against the railway platform and facing the old highway, about fifty metres north of the site of the Half Way House. It was illustrated in the *Sunday Examiner* of 13 December 1971 accompanying an article by Dennis Hodgkinson and is engraved, in black lettering:

'In memory of
William Hawkins
Who was accidentally killed
near this spot
19th December 1861
in the forty third year of his age'

There are various 'legends' as to the cause of his death including, dying suddenly after the consumption of too much alcohol and being buried on this spot, and falling from his horse. However David Carnes recalls his father telling him that the man died as a result of falling from his spring cart but was not buried there.

Extracts from the convict records list William Hawkins, No. 2147, aged 20, single, a farm labourer and ploughman from Horsham (probably Wilts), five feet six and a half inches tall, dark brown hair, etc., tried on 5 March 1836 for highway robbery, convicted and sentence to be transported for life. He was transported on the *Henry Porcher*, arriving in Tasmania on 15 November 1836, in good health and of good behaviour. On 5 January 1839 he was under suspicion of conspiring with this fellow servant and making a false charge of felony against his mistress, following which he was returned to the Public Works and recommended to work, on probation, at Green Ponds (Kempton) for nine months, and then to Oatlands. On 3 May 1839 he was ordered three months hard labour in chains with the Public Works and on 19 January 1844 was granted his Ticket of Leave.

On 11 January 1847, aged 29, he married Ann Craig, aged 23, a servant and spinster, at the United Church of England, Oatlands, by banns, and at the time of his death was overseer for James Pillinger on one of his properties, probably situated on the 'Western Tier and eastern Marshes, Blackman's River (18480 acres)'. The *Mercury* newspaper of 25 December 1861 p. 2 col. 6, gives a detailed account of the inquest, held at the Half Way House on Monday 23rd before Thomas Mason Esq., Coroner, of Campbell Town, and a jury of seven.

During the proceedings Thomas Trainer, under oath, said: 'I reside at Antill Ponds. I was present when the body of a man lying dead on these premises was shown to some of the jury at this inquest. It is the body of William Hawkins, late overseer to Mr Pillinger. On Thursday last (19th December) deceased went into Oatlands with a load of wheat for me. I accompanied him. He had a cart and one horse. He had a fountain and a small can of yeast to bring out for Mr Drable. He walked and occasionally rode in the cart as we returned from Oatlands. He had no reins. When we got close to Mr Drable's he told the mare to "gee". She turned in towards the taproom door. He sat down again in the car, then the mare turned away towards the corner of the house. She passed the corner and got to the front of the house going fast. He called to her to stop. The more he called the faster she began to go.

The deceased got over the front of the cart and went along the shaft to get hold of the bridle. The horse was going at a fast trot. I cannot say whether he fell off the shaft of the cart, or whether he jumped off. It appeared to me as if he jumped. He ran some six or seven yards alongside the mare. He fell forward on his hands and rolled over to get out of the way of the cart. He was lying partly on his side when the cart caught him, and turned him over on his back, and passed over his body from his side along his breast and neck. I ran up to him but Mrs Drable was there before me. She lifted the head up and I got my arms around his body. She said "He's dead". I said "he's worth fifty dead people". He gave three or four sighs, and then life departed from him. He was apparently dead when I went up to him. His eyes were glazed and he seemed to be quite insensible. Deceased was perfectly sober. He had two or three glasses of ale, but no more. I have never seen him drunk during the time I have known him, 18 or 20 years'.

Then follows similar evidence by Mrs Drable and a statement by James Macnamara, the Oatlands doctor. The article concludes: 'The deceased was a very industrious and honourable man, and was greatly esteemed through the district in which he dwelt. The Jury returned a verdict of accidental death in accordance with the evidence.'

His body was buried in St Peters Cemetery, Oatlands. The stone at Antill Ponds is simply a memorial.

From information given me by a direct descendant (Margery Murfett, nee Harvey) the spelling of his name was later changed to 'Horkins'.

References

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Acknowledgements

Grateful acknowledgement is made to David Carnes who provided much assistance with detailed information about the Half Way House and to Rosemary Moorhouse who alerted me to information about the life and death of William Hawkins and provided me with photocopies from archives. The Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery arranged for the plans to be drawn up by Graeme Hall and Anthea Bilson critically reviewed the manuscript.

Appendix 1

The following information and incomplete list of owners of the Half Way House was kindly provided by the State Library of Tasmania, Hobart and Launceston whose helpful staff are gratefully acknowledged.

HTG =Hobart Town Gazette,
HTC = Hobart Town Courier.

- Edward Greenbark, HTG 8/10/1841, 7/10/1842, 8/10/1843.
- Charles Barlow, HTG 8/10/1844, 6/10/1846, 2/10/1847.
- Denis Bacon, HTC 6/6/1848, 7/10/1848, 29/9/1849, 29/9/1850, 7/10/1851, 5/10/1852, 4/10/1853.
- Edward Barwick, HTG 15/8/1854.
- Joseph Barwick, HTG 21/1/1855, 8/1/1856, 6/1/1857, 5/1/1858.
- Charles Drable, (or Drabble) HTG 11/5/1858, 11/1/1859, 3/1/1860, 8/1/1861, 7/1/1862, 19/1/1864, 17/1/1865.

The following information was taken from the Wise's Post Office Directory of Tasmania (Hotels, Inns etc., Trades and Professions Section).

The directory was published 1890-91 to 1948.

1890-91, not in directory.

1892-93, William Coleville.

1894-95, George Brake.

1896-1908, Charles Fleming.

1909, Jas W. Fleming.

1910, 1912, Lindsay L. Kerslake.

1913 & 1914, Scritchley.

1915, Fleming.

1916-1918, Fleming.

1919-1922, Egbert A. Eley.

1923 & 1924, A. Kirby.

1924-1930, A. Glover.

1931, A. G. Saunders.

Does not subsequently appear.

Appendix 2

Illustrations of the Half Way House, Antill Ponds.

Robertson, E. Graeme 1970. *Early Buildings of Southern Tasmania*. Vol. 1 opp. p. 24 plates 6 & 7. Two photographs.

Sharland, Michael 1952. *Stones of a Century*. Opp. p. 26.

Stancombe, G. Hawley 1968. *Highway in Van Diemen's Land*. Opp. p. 96. Pencil sketch, 1967, by Eric Ratcliff.

Unpublished. Pen sketch by Nairda Lyne. Mrs D. P. Munnings.

Unpublished. Painting by Arn Brewster. Mr and Mrs E. N. Richardson.