

LONDON TERRACE - A “*Palace of Varieties*”

If there is any shortcoming in the written history of Bunbury, it is reference to the Port town's underbelly. By definition, the illicit portion of old Bunbury life, the seamy side of society, mostly hidden over the years. Early Bunbury newspaper reports of drunkenness and degeneracy are commonplace, keenly editorialised by the moral standards of the day. However routinely, modern historians have preferred to talk about the murkier stories of humanity simply in broad terms. By and large, tales of seedy Bunbury have been glossed over.

It would be nice to think of Edwardian Bunbury (1901-1910) as a shiny port city, with clean modern facilities, hustling and bustling, welcoming in the new post-Victorian era. The truth is partly otherwise. With its high water table and stormwater drainage problem, combined with the often poor state of outhouses, privies and septic tanks, town sanitation was a major problem. It was a rare Bunbury Municipal Council meeting that did not make mention of public health, blocked drains, foul deposits and noxious smells and refuse water. There was a degree of prosperity in town; however some areas were grubby and grimy both in amenity and character.

As a harbour city, from the very beginning Bunbury welcomed ships, cargo and visiting sailors from around the world. Typically a ship in port meant a busy time for the local police force. Adding tough foreign seafarers to the local population of working class men, wharfies and labourers who worked hard and drank hard, Saturday night at the lock-up was customarily busy. Many who spent a night in the cells - visitor or resident - did so because of drunkenness, obscene language and/or brawling. Fights, mugging, public nuisance, petty crime, obscene acts, pests and prostitution were not uncommon. Although only a minority of Bunbury men were shifty idlers or dishonest layabouts, they were the ones who gained most ill-repute.

After the turn of the twentieth century, the number of licensed premises in Bunbury had grown rapidly. By 1908 there were thirty-three liquor licences, a pub for every 100 residents. Offences of being drunk and fighting were enthusiastically reported in the 'SOUTHERN TIMES' and 'BUNBURY HERALD', Local Magistrates E.M Clarke, H.E. Reading, Geo. Teede and C.E. and A.F. Spencer meted out town justice. Coincidentally, these civic minded men also held liquor licences and were prominent in local government, Bunbury aldermen of their day. Although Christian temperance ideals may have been a mitigating factor in moderate Bunbury, drunkenness, uncouth behaviour and their associated harms remained an evident social worry. (1)

In context of crime, scandal and outrage, it would be unfair to say that Bunbury had any three in greater proportion than any other port town. It may have been that the presence of sailors in port made Bunbury appear more of a frontier town than it was. Whatever the case, there was a drift to change. The town was growing and in 1893 the railway had connected it to another level of worldly sophistication. This brought not only new business but also opportunists and drifters. Domestic drunkenness,

fighting and petty law-breaking were well reported, but the involvement of outsiders and foreigners added spice to newspaper stories on crime. The minority puritan bloc in the Town's Catholic and Protestant communities were just as vocal as the loud drunks, except they intoned their personal religious beliefs more piously on Sunday. In July 1903 the Congregational Church Reverend J. Chapman ruded: *"the fact that drunkenness is very rife in this town"*. The Reverend Chapman ended his sermon with these words: *"We appeal to those in authority to put forth every effort that the law may not be openly set at defiance – more honoured in the breach than in the observance"* (2).

A prime location for defiance was **London Terrace**, which had already gained its own kind of reputation. Described as a number of tenements, including a brick house located on the corner of Victoria Street and Clifton Street, the residential row of dwellings facing the main street had a distinct air of disrepute. With unsanitary privies and rank groundwater, the immediate vicinity was a constant concern to Bunbury's Municipal Health authorities. This end of Victoria Street, close to the port, with its pubs and rough dark places, was not where the genteel citizens of Bunbury walked easily at night. Dodging stagnant water, negotiating haphazard drainage lines or horse manure, all the while ignoring the smell, made it as unfriendly as the nefarious characters inhabiting this less salubrious part of town.

London Terrace had gained notoriety over the decades. In 1897, Jeremiah Fitzgerald a sawyer was robbed at the Wellington Hotel. According to Fitzgerald he was drunk and went to sleep at the bar. Sometime after 7-o'clock he found his chamois purse, his money, pipe and knife were missing. The amount of cash came to £4-10s. a sizeable sum of money for those in the regular business of rolling drunks. The culprits, John Brown and Thomas Birch, were quickly tracked by an alert police constable John Green, accompanied by a witness to the robbery, a civilian fisherman named Victor Peter. They found the two men at London Terrace, where PC Green attempted to make an arrest. Green testified that Brown was violent and produced a knife. The menacing Brown was thrown to the ground by civilian Peter and subdued. With the purse and stolen money recovered during the arrest and reliable witnesses the two offenders were charged. They pleaded guilty before Magistrate W.H. Timperely and sentenced to 6 month's imprisonment with hard labour. (3)

As men were drinking they were also lusting and houses of ill-repute served Bunbury's needs with the profession. In early July 1900 Magistrate Timperely was again at the bench when Charles Gustaveson appeared before him on a charge of disorderly conduct. The ever diligent PC Green explained to Timperely that the accused Gustaveson managed a brothel run by a Mrs Solomons in London Terrace. Green first noticed a disturbance at one o'clock in the morning that continued until about 2.30, with bad language that could be heard all over the street. PC Green testified about Gustaveson and London Terrace: *"The man worked on a lighter all day and managed the other place all night. The place was a horrible den. The worst*

of the thing was that there was a little girl, nine years old, the daughter of Mrs Solomons, living there" (4).

The SOUTHERN TIMES followed up with a new report under the titillating by-line:

- A NOTORIOUS HOUSE -

"Gustava Soloman, a middle-aged woman, respectably dressed, and a foreigner, was charged with being the occupier of a house frequented by prostitutes and other bad characters. When asked to plead, the accused said "I did not know that the girl was that sort when I took her in. I found it out afterwards and turned her out". After hearing police evidence as to certain matters which occurred in the house on Sunday July 1, at 1 a.m., the R.M. gave the accused a severe talking to, and told her she had rendered herself liable to six months' imprisonment. However, he hoped that this would be a warning. The accused was discharged". (5)

London Terrace was a place that the civil and mannered class of Bunbury used as an example of dissolute fellowship. Where merchants and traders and their children and wives had their human foibles and transgressions, it was easy to point to the failings of the lower class. After the excitement of Mrs Solomons' activities, incidents involving the lower classes reminded people of their different stations. Later in the year, London Terrace resident Charles Hill was charged with having attempted to set fire to his house. Although the case was dismissed, thanks to the sturdy defence by Mr Neville (of Eastman and Neville), the incident only served to reinforce the reputation of the Terrace. (6)

By 1903 nothing much had changed down town. Those living in the London Terrace houses demonstrated that they were not immune from neighbourly spats. In February the BUNBURY HERALD gleefully reported an incident under the heading *"A Disgusting Act"*. The accused William P. Pratt was charged with having committed a nuisance by discharging offensive liquid and matter onto the verandah of his neighbour, Mrs F. Barron. Witnessed by Mrs Rosina Corbett, who was on the verandah at the time, Mrs Barron came outside to see Pratt go into the adjoining cottage, where he resided. With a description of the contents not for delicate taste, one reporter summed it up *"The smell was almost unbearable"*. Another scribe was blunter, stating that *"the offensive matter was nightsoil"*. Although Pratt pleaded his innocence, claiming that the charge had been brought about by spite, the case was proved and he was fined. Having no income to pay a fine Pratt elected to serve 21 days imprisonment. (7, 8)

Perhaps the highpoint in the history of London Terrace was the sensational capture there of two prison escapees, William Slee and Thomas Cavanagh, in the early hours of Sunday 15 January 1906. Six weeks earlier the two men along with a third, James McCarthy, aka John Maguire had engineered a daring escape from the lock-up at Rottnest Island. The men, burglars and thieves, stole the Harbour Trust's 12 foot dinghy, in which they made an audacious trip from Rottnest to the mainland.

Whereas McCarthy/Maguire was arrested within a fortnight in James Street Perth, it seemed that Slee and Cavanagh had slipped away. However local police received word that the men were in Bunbury and being harboured in a two-roomed house in London Terrace. A local water police constable, George Brown later gave evidence that he knew the residents who lived at the house. Rented to a man by the name of Craig Scott, it also appeared that the house doubled as "*a kind of meeting hall*". A number of men who were lumpers on the wharf slept there, having their meals outside, using the house almost as a doss. (9, 10, 11).

The people across the classes in Bunbury were avid newspaper readers. They were well served by enthusiastic journalists and crusading editors in Perth and the South West. The dramatic headlines about Slee and Cavanagh made for high readership and endless talk about town. The newspapers dined out on the story. The SUNDAY TIMES, WEST AUSTRALIAN and WESTERN MAIL all told of the capture in rapturous terms, as the story had played out over Christmas and New Year. On 17 January 1907 the enthusiastic BUNBURY HERALD raised the multiple by-lines: (12)

THE ESCAPEES

SLEE AND CAVANAGH

THE RAID ON LONDON TERRACE

Charge of Harboring

Scott and Company before the Court.

Extraordinary Correspondence.

As much as the talk was about the felons, of equal interest were the occupants, dwellers and tenants of London Terrace. Those inhabitants who had harboured the escapees were themselves charged. Samuel O'Connor, Craig Scott, Andrew Wingate, Edward Hughes, Thomas Harrison and Albert Perry were arraigned before JP's Brashaw and Spencer to answer the serious charge that they had harboured the two escapees, whereby they may have assisted in maladministration of justice. These were charges that sponsored the stories that supported Bunbury in its well lubricated operatic chatter. At each appearance the courtroom was crowded with curious citizenry, while local solicitor Mr K.M. Eastman appearing for the six

accused. In a sometime comic atmosphere London Terrace was described as a ***“Palace of Varieties”***, to the mirth of the gallery. The court case was adjourned until April when ultimately five of the accused were discharged, having suffered a hard three months. The unfortunate Harrison, who was proved to be more involved with the escapees, was sentenced to serve 5½ months hard labour. (13, 14, 15)

Petty sessions at the Bunbury court contributed to a seemingly unending roll of newsprint in town, so London Terrace was not out of the news for long. In November the local Board of Health brought to attention frequent complaints about the state of the privies serving the tenement. Local sanitary contractors Messrs Laudehr and Gillespie joined in the chorus of complainants. On Bunbury’s flats the abominable drainage system and the general decay and degeneration at London Terrace had converged. With its transient population and social complications brought by alcohol and human misfortune, the Terrace was not a pleasant place. With old privies in full view from Clifton Street and the detritus and debris from decades of living, the group of buildings was considered to be in terminal need. No evocation of Section 92 of the Health Act or use of formalin spray could cure the weariness of the London Terrace tenements.

The unwholesome nature of the buildings and general unsavouriness came to a point of decision. In May 1907 the Bunbury Municipal Council health officer declared he had made an inspection of the premises and found the houses comprising London Terrace absolutely unfit for human habitation. The following month Councillor Thomas moved that *“the Council apply for the necessary demolition orders returnable for the demolition of 7 cottages situated in Victoria and Clifton Streets and known as London Terrace”*. In July the Health Inspector reported that the owners and landlords of London Terrace had agreed to have the places pulled down.

However, there would be one last sting in the tale of London Terrace. In July some children exploring the buildings’ demolition-in-progress tumbled upon a cache of stolen jewellery beneath floorboards. The Bunbury newspapers were blissfully able to wring one last shaggy yarn from London Terrace. The valuable gold jewellery was found to be that stolen from Mrs W.L. Marsh, of the Prince of Wales Hotel, some three years prior. For young Mervyn Hands who had removed the particular flooring boards to uncover the hoard, it was his turn in be renowned in the ‘paper’. The newspaper line was a sure lesson for all children: *“With commendable forethought for one of his years young Mervyn took the lot home to his mother”*. (16)

Stories of London Terrace and the assortment of men, women and children who inhabited the residential row of cottages and buildings concluded. However conditions at the port end of pubs, workers cottages, sheds, doss houses and local factories and workshops, with its bad drainage and dubious residents remained an unending source for print reporting. Bunbury’s refined hillside population and tree street dwellers acknowledged their lower class citizens somewhere between compassion and disdain, sometimes at the same time. It worked both ways in times

of class, no matter where you lived. People at the tough end of town battled on with the fear of poverty and deficit. In Bunbury the human condition, with all its character and oddity across the classes, endured side by side. With little in the way of social services or mental welfare, for the unfortunate it was often a struggle made numb by alcohol and misery.

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SOURCES

- (1) 'Excellent Connections, Bunbury 1836-1990', Barker & Laurie, 1992.
- (2) SOUTHERN TIMES, 7 July 1903 ("Drunkenness church") retrieved TROVE 6/12/15
- (3) SOUTHERN TIMES, 9 September 1897 ("John Brown and Thomas Birch") retrieved TROVE 6/12/15
- (4) SOUTHERN TIMES, 3 July 1900, ("brothel") retrieved TROVE 23/11/15
- (5) SOUTHERN TIMES, 12 July 1900, ("A Notorious House") retrieved TROVE 6/12/15
- (6) SOUTHERN TIMES, 2 October 1900, ("London Terrace Hill") retrieved TROVE 7/12/15
- (7) BUNBURY HERALD, 13 February 1903, ("London Terrace disgusting") retrieved TROVE 7/12/15
- (8) SOUTHERN TIMES, 14 February 1903, ("London Terrace disgusting") retrieved TROVE 7/12/15
- (9) BUNBURY HERALD, 17 January 1906, ("Slee and Cavanagh") retrieved TROVE 13/12/15
- (10) WESTERN MAIL, 20 January 1906 ("Slee and Cavanagh") retrieved TROVE 13/12/15
- (11) WEST AUSTRALIAN, 26 January 1906, ("Slee and Cavanagh") retrieved TROVE 13/12/15
- (12) BUNBURY HERALD, 17 January 1906, ("Slee and Cavanagh") retrieved TROVE 13/12/15
- (13) BUNBURY HERALD, 24 January 1906, ("Slee and Cavanagh") retrieved TROVE 13/12/15
- (14) SOUTHERN TIMES, 23 January 1906, ("London Terrace") retrieved TROVE 14/12/15
- (15) BUNBURY HERALD, 18 April 1906, ("Slee and Cavanagh Sequel") retrieved TROVE 14/12/15
- (16) ABOVE NEWSPAPERS 1907, ("London Terrace") retrieved TROVE 2015