

The Regatta Hotel – An Iconic Brisbane Riverside Pub Since 1874

written by Peter Wilmoth

The Regatta Hotel, on the corner of Coronation Drive and Sylvan Road in Toowong, is an icon of the Brisbane riverside suburb of Toowong, a much-loved part of the community for 150 years with a deep connection to the Brisbane River which it overlooks.

The hotel has long been a Brisbane favourite, and a much-loved gathering place for Toowong locals. For nearly 150 years it has attracted those coming in for a meal or a drink and to enjoy the river view.

For years it's been popular with rowing enthusiasts on regatta days and a welcoming place for students and staff from the nearby St Lucia campus of the University of Queensland to gather.

For 150 years it has been the heart of Toowong, part of and witness to the growth of Brisbane. From its earliest days – when pubs were usually the first structure built in the settlement towns of the 1870s – to the present The Regatta has been a crucial community meeting place.

But as well as its local fame, The Regatta is part of Queensland and Australian history through its role as a venue for an act of protest in 1965 by two women that changed a law that disallowed women from drinking in public bars.

For generations The Regatta has been so much a part of the life in Toowong that it has been a setting in several novels.

But more importantly The Regatta is a central character in its own remarkable story which began when settlement towns were emerging across Australia in the 1870s.

The Regatta took its name from the rowing regattas held on the Toowong Reach of the Brisbane River by the Brisbane Rowing Club which opened in 1875. The Regatta is classified by the National Trust of Queensland and was put on the Queensland Heritage Register in 1992. The hotel is also on the Register of the National Estate of Australian Heritage Commission.

The hotel had modest origins. First established as a single-story structure in 1874, The Regatta was built by Lawrence Howard Healy when Coronation Drive was named River Road and sheep were still herded along it.

Healy had advertised his intention to apply for a license and provided a description of the proposed hotel situated in 'New Cemetery-road'.

Healley, who married Catherine Prendergast in 1870, wrote in his application: "The house is my own property and contains three sitting rooms and six bed- rooms exclusive

of those required by the family, which I intend to keep as an inn or public house, under the sign of Regatta Hotel. I am married and have no children.”

While the hotel seemed to be a typical ‘bush pub’, the advertisement in the newspaper shows it was on a higher level, with ample accommodation and access to a private sitting room.

There were four hotels that operated in the Toowong area between 1864 and the end of the 1890s. The first, the Toowong Retreat Hotel (1864-66), was located on the corner of Curlew Street and Moggill Road. Of the other three hotels, the Regatta and the Royal Exchange are the only two to survive.

As local historian Leigh Chamberlain has noted in her study ‘The Regatta: A story of triumph over adversity’, the hotel was popular with the town’s “social elite”.

“While the hotel aimed to cater for all across the social spectrum, Healley’s emphasis upon the provision of private sitting rooms positioned his hotel to cater for the social elite for whom such facilities were so necessary for the ‘gentlewomen’ within their ranks.”

In 1885 The Regatta was no longer the small “bush pub” but had begun its life as the grand building it is today. The original single-storeyed timber building was removed to make way for the imposing new premises.

In 1882, the licence of the hotel had been transferred to William Winterford who had arrived in Australia in 1860, a member of a pub-owning English family.

Having bought the hotel from Mr Heally in an excellent location offering easy access from Brisbane by train to Toowong station, Winterford commissioned well-known architect Richard Gailey to design The Regatta we know today.

Gailey, who also designed Brisbane Girls Grammar School and the Empire Hotel in Fortitude Valley, drafted the plans for the multi-level hotel which included the still magnificent cast-iron lacing for which his designs were known.

In 1886 the pub was rebuilt – by George Gazzard – at a cost of 4,800 pounds.

A feature of the building is the wide verandahs, designed to catch the river breezes and take in the extensive views of the Brisbane River.

Mr Winterford had vivid memories of the famous Oxford-Cambridge regattas held in England, and it was his vision to build a grand hotel to overlook such races.

The Regatta was one of a number of large, masonry, first-class hotels designed by Richard Gailey in the 1880s, notes a Queensland Government history site.

Amongst these were the Wickham (1885), The Prince Consort (1887), The Jubilee, (1888) and The Empire (QHR 600199) (1889).

“They were designed not just for local patronage, but to attract travellers and visitors. Each replaced an earlier and much humbler hotel on the site, and in their ornate exteriors, they reflected the optimism and bravado of the booming Queensland economy of the 1880s,’ the site noted.

As its name suggests The Regatta has had a long association with the rowing events held on the Brisbane River.

On 4 November 1876 The Queenslander newspaper reported on Brisbane Rowing Club’s Half-Yearly Regatta. The article is a useful insight into life on the river in the 1870s, with people viewing it from all aspects including boats placed strategically for the best view. Dignitaries as senior as the Governor attended on the day.

“The regatta of the Brisbane Rowing Club was held in the Milton reach for the first time on Saturday last. The weather was just what might have been wished for, as there were clouds enough to afford shelter from the sun,

while a light north-east breeze prevented the heat from being unpleasant.

“The flood tide came in just before the starting of the first race, so that the wind did not raise any swell to speak of, although this unanimity (so to speak) of wind and tide was anything but conducive to the pleasure of those who were anxious to view the various races from their sailing boats, of which some twelve or fourteen were present.

“It had been arranged that the races should start from a point a little below the Milton Bridge, and from thence proceed straight to the winning point, which was marked by a flag fixed on a punt off the Regatta Hotel, a distance of 1 $\frac{3}{4}$ or two miles. After each race, the boats were towed down again by the Sir Charles Cowper to the starting-place. This arrangement was found very convenient for the steamers follow it with spectators; but visitors on the bank who had expected that the finish would take place at or near the point of starting, found themselves very far astray in their calculations, and quite unable to see the race.

“His Excellency the Governor, accompanied by his aide-de-camp, and a small party of ladies and gentlemen, viewed the regatta from the steamer Fairy.

“The Sir Charles Cowper, which was chartered for the convenience of the starter and crews, and the Settler, on which were about two hundred of the general public, both followed each of the races very closely, but had all their work to keep near the gigs; other steamers were present with private parties.

“There was a goodly number of spectators on the river bank, and many were seen accompanying the races by riding along the road, from which an excellent view could be obtained.

“It was about six o’clock when the last race was finished, and the crews returned home to prepare themselves for the final tug of war, which comes off to-day.”

In its early years the hotel had a general store attached to the building. As Leigh Chamberlain has noted combining the functions of a hotel and a grocery store had practical merit as the hotel’s cooling equipment could double to cool grocery items such as milk and butter.

“Proximity to the proposed Brisbane-Ipswich railway line would provide access to cheaper and more convenient transportation of goods,” she writes. “Also, the hotel could access milk and butter from local dairies, such as that of George and Mary Carr’s, established in the mid-1860s at Long Pocket.”

The river was naturally a key reason for its location, but there were other reasons too. As Leigh Chamberlain has written:

“The address of the Regatta Hotel was listed in 1876 as ‘Milton Road (by the river)’. The positioning of the hotel to face Sylvan Road suggests the site was deliberately chosen to cater for thirsty mourners returning from funerals at the Brisbane General Cemetery (Toowong Cemetery). Perhaps the hotel planned to cater for funeral wakes, and to offer conveniently located accommodation to mourners travelling from further away.

“The cemetery opened formally in 1875 although several burials had taken place from 1871, including that of Governor Blackall. Drovers living temporarily at Mt Coot-tha were also a potential clientele for the Regatta Hotel.

“Arriving in Brisbane following their cattle drives, they camped with their families in the foothills of Mt Coot-tha on crown land close to Toowong Cemetery. Some of the allotments in that area were not freeholded until 1885. As the Regatta Hotel was the closest hotel to the drovers’ camp, after months on the road with their herds, the local ‘watering hole’ at the eastern end of Sylvan Road would have seemed very inviting, and the opportunity to enjoy convivial company equally desirable.”

Also appealing was that supplies could be replenished from the grocery store for the long trip back home.

The Regatta – like many other pubs built around the 1870s as towns were settled across Australia – played many roles in the community. Not just somewhere to eat, drink and sleep, the hotel was a meeting place – maybe the modern word ‘hub’ may be used to describe its role.

It was also regarded as a central venue for communications between locals and visitors.

In her study of the hotel Leigh Chamberlain writes:

“From time to time advertisements appeared in the local newspapers for lost stock such as cattle or horses, with inquiries directed to ‘Mr Healley, Regatta Hotel’. By his willingness to assist, Healley showed himself to be a very public-spirited gentleman.”

Indeed Mr Heally was known as a “gentleman” – part of the town’s social and political elite – who ran a hotel of distinction.

“Presumably this social class also formed his clientele. Healley’s acceptance socially was further reinforced on 5 June 1880 when he was nominated as an auditor for the Toowong Shire Council.”

A Queensland Government history site noted The Regatta was a fairly luxurious place.

“Winterford opened his new hotel in 1887, anticipating a clientele who would be enticed by the river views, the proximity to town and to the Toowong railway station, the weekend regattas on the doorstep, entertainments such as billiards and boating, a well-stocked wine cellar, large well-ventilated bedrooms, family suites, the luxury of hot and cold baths, and good stabling accommodation.”

By the late 1880s The Regatta was a well-known hotel in the area. On 19 March 1887 Queensland Figaro and Punch magazine (Brisbane) published an admiring piece.

Top of Form

“This splendid hotel has been recently opened by its enterprising proprietor, Mr. Wenterford [misspelled]. Probably, not even in Brisbane, is there another hotel to which in appearance the Regatta Hotel would stand second. Certainly, there is no hotel in Queensland that has a finer situation. It overlooks the river, South Brisbane, and West End. The whole of Toowong (I suppose the prettiest suburb of Brisbane) lies about it, and the pureness of the air, the beauty of the scenery, and the unexceptionable accommodation in the hotel itself makes it a most desirable place for boarders.”

It noted the hotel was “a large and imposing building” which consisted of three floors and two entrances in front, one to the bar and the other to the private portion of the hotel.

“On the first floor are the dining room (which is capable of seating nearly 100 persons), the billiard-room, private sitting-rooms, and bar. On the second floor are two splendid sitting-rooms, furnished in good taste and with every possible comfort. There also are a large number of bedrooms.

“The third floor chiefly consists of bedrooms. A broad verandah goes round each side of the hotel, and each floor has a large balcony from which the view is magnificent. There are baths on each floor (hot and cold), gas throughout the whole house, and the cellarge could not be surpassed.”

The writer continued the favourable review:

“I have much pleasure in recommending this hotel to all who want a comfortable and quiet residence with home comforts. There are every means for getting into Brisbane by ‘bus, by train and by ferry. It is likely that Mr. Wenterford will, in time, run a coach for the conveyance of his boarders to and from Brisbane.

“A boat club is in course of formation which will have its headquarters at the hotel, and which may be a means of causing the regatta to be held where it used to be, in the most suitable reach of the river. If Mr. Wenterford could secure the ground in front of his hotel for a promenade, and get the services of a band occasionally, his promenade concerts would add greatly to the success of the hotel. He has my best wishes for success.”

Unfortunately, despite the rave, the great Brisbane flood and the depression of the 1890s that followed hit hard and in 1897 William Winterford succumbed, giving up his licence.

A Queensland Government site noted:

“Neither the hotel’s comforts nor the Toowong scenery succeeded in attracting the desired patronage. Lack of wider custom, the financial depression of the early 1890s, and the floods of 1893, nearly ruined Winterford. In 1897, he forfeited the Regatta to his mortgagees.”

The Winterford name still has strong associations with the hotel. In 2015 The Westside News ran an article about more than 60 descendants of “the publican behind the Regatta Hotel’s transformation from bush pub to stately edifice” gathering at the hotel.

“It was a family reunion more than 100 years in the making after financial ruin forced William and his wife Margaret to walk away from the Regatta in 1897, ten years after they made it their own,” the article said.

“Sharon Racine, the great, great, great, granddaughter of William and Margaret, said the Regatta Hotel’s position by the river ultimately cost the Englishman dearly,” the piece noted.

Winterford was not the last publican at The Regatta to be affected by floods. The nearby river always played a key and sometimes devastating role in the hotel’s long life.

Its location on the river was always central to its charm and popularity. Life on the Brisbane River meant superb views which Brisbanites would flock to enjoy on weekends, and a century-and-a-half relationship with rowing events held on the river.

But it also meant the increased risk of flood. The Regatta was first flooded in 1887, then again in 1893. The Brisbane River flooded in 1974 and more recently in 2010.

The 1974 Australia Day weekend floods saw muddy waters cause extensive damage to the hotel.

The Daily Telegraph newspaper on 13 January 2011 told a story of the 1974 floods.

“It was here during the 1974 floods that drinkers moved into the bar for a beer and, when the water started slapping their ankles, moved up to the second-floor balcony,” it said.

“By the time the flood peaked, a canoeist paddled right up to the drinkers on the second-floor balcony and somehow a photo was taken as the enduring image of those floods.”

Reporting on the floods in that January of 2012 The Courier Mail newspaper spoke with long-time visitor Tony Kutt who said there was a lot of similarities between the way the hotel coped in the aftermath of the 1974 floods compared with last year’s inundation.

“It took two weeks for the pub to get back up and running in ’74 and we could get a beer here two weeks after the flood last year as well,” he told the paper.

Mr Kutt said there were three reasons he would keep coming back to the Regatta until he died. “You come for the view, stay for the beer and leave with your mates.”

Floods weren’t the only natural disasters that struck The Regatta. On 19 March 1915 The Week newspaper of Brisbane, under a headline “Great Fire at Toowong”, reported on a fire which, at 3am on a Sunday morning, saw the back portion of the hotel “sheeted in flames”.

The hotel was owned at that time by Mr. O. Daniels.

“It is thought the alarm was given by a boy who was camped in the ferry shed nearby,” the report said.

“There were seven persons sleeping in the hotel, the licensee and his wife (Mrs and Mrs Gleeson), and their four children and a maid servant”.

“When they were all aroused an attempt was made to escape down a staircase and gain exit at the front. The smoke was too dense and there was nothing left but to jump for it. A rush was made for the front balcony. Jim Gleeson, the eldest son, jumped first, a distance of 20 feet. He caught the two children and then assisted with his mother.

“The whole of the back portion of the hotel was gutted and damage was estimated at 5,000 pounds.”

The Regatta survived fire and flood but was almost shut down due to local wowsers and a quirky local law.

In 1917 the Liquor Act gave wowser groups the power to close any pub through a vote by people living within a three-mile radius of a hotel. In May that year the people of Toowong voted to close down their local pub.

A report in The Telegraph of Brisbane on 23 March 1920 noted there were “fifteen other Queensland hotels affected by the issue raised”. No reasons for the desire to shut down important community meeting spots are known.

Immediate action was taken. The pub’s owner Sarah Ann Daniell and licensee James Patrick Gleeson engaged lawyers to find a way to overturn the poll.

This bizarre case went to the Supreme Court of Queensland which ordered the decision of the Brisbane Licensing Court be referred to the High Court of Australia.

The arguments to keep the pub open turned on the notion that the local poll among Toowong voters was unlawful in that it was conducted on the same day – 5 May 1917 – as the 1917 Senate election.

The High Court decided – by a majority of six to one – that section 109 of the Australian Constitution had been breached and that the State law allowing local polls on the same day as a Commonwealth election was void.

That night, as the news reached The Regatta, there were hearty celebrations. The pub had been saved, and the wowsers had been defeated.

Over its 150-year history The Regatta has withstood flood and fire; it has been the venue for countless celebrations including wild scenes in September 1983 when Australia II won the America’s Cup and police had to close the surrounding streets to try and control the large crowds of students and patrons alike celebrating this momentous national event at The Regatta.

The hotel has seen – and indeed itself been part of – profound and important social change.

On Wednesday 31 March 1965 The Regatta Hotel became the scene of an historic event, one which has become recognised as a leading activist moment in second-wave feminism.

In conservative 1960s Brisbane women were barred from drinking in public bars.

Merle Thornton – the mother of actor Sigrid Thornton – her friend Rosalie Bogner and four others decided to do something about this. They went to Parliament House to meet with the Minister for Justice and Attorney General Peter Delamothé who was reviewing Queensland liquor legislation.

The women decided it was an ideal moment to suggest to him that the law excluding women from bars be dropped.

“We’d been to see the minister the day before to try and get him to change the legislation and we were laughed at, so we decided on a demonstration,” Merle told the ABC in 2015.

Choosing to hold the demonstration at The Regatta, with its “pretty good public bar, with terrazzo flooring and a brass foot rail, which suited our purposes admirably”, as she writes in her 2020 memoir ‘Bringing The Fight’.

Merle and her friends typed up a pamphlet to distribute at the hotel. It said: “Women are members of the public. They want to be able to drink in public bars if they like.”

The pamphlet went on to explain why women should be able to drink in public bars, including “because public facilities of all kinds should be available by right to all adult citizens”, that “using our laws or conventions to protect women who don’t want to be protected perpetuates Victorian protective patronage”.

The pamphlets were handed to drinkers in the Regatta once the women had chained themselves to the foot rail.

With chains and a padlock around their ankles Merle and Ros were asked to leave by the barman but refused. The police were called and attended. They also asked the women to leave but again the women refused.

Jack Herbert, the bagman of the Fitzgerald inquiry, was called in. The ABC reported: “Eventually he said, ‘So long girls, have a good night, don’t drink too much’, so we seemed to have established that police were not prepared to enforce the laws against women in public bars,” Ms Thornton said.

The presence of an ABC film crew helped spread word of the protest which a week later formed the basis of a report on ‘Four Corners’.

Newspapers around Australia, and then around the world, covered the protest.

The impact was huge: it brought about an end of segregated drinking in Queensland.

“It may not seem that extraordinary now, but it was a catalyst for change that would go on to improve the lives of many women across the country,” Merle writes in her memoir.

The protest is still considered a pivotal moment in the Australian women’s liberation movement, garnering national attention and bringing forward a change in Queensland laws.

In 2012 the noted author Susan Johnson wrote about Ms Thornton in The Courier Mail.

“In her long and eventful life she’s broken a lot of rules, and made some new ones: besides chaining her ankle to the railing at the bar at the Regatta Hotel in 1965 to encourage a change in the state Liquor Act (an early example of the women’s movement’s use of “direct action” where a symbolic act draws public attention to an issue), she also agitated for and was pivotal in the elimination in 1966 of the Commonwealth Public Service rule that women leave their jobs on marriage.

“In between, during her years as a humanities academic at the University of Queensland during the heady days of student activism in the ’70s, she designed and introduced the first women’s studies course in Australia.”

Today there is a room named after her at the Regatta, in Brisbane’s inner-west Toowong and a framed cartoon depicting the ankle-chained women.

Johnson wrote: “Thornton says she has heard that some Brisbane girls make the pilgrimage to the Regatta on their 18th birthdays to have their first legal drink in the Thornton Room, which makes her happy.”

In 2015 the ABC reported that a lunch was held at the hotel to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the protest.

“Now when Ms Thornton visits the hotel she can have a drink at Merle’s bar, which is named after her,” it said.

“I’m prepared to pay but they rarely ask me,” she said.

The Regatta has always recognised its storied history. The Winterford Room is named in honour of its founding owner and The Gailey Room and The Gazzard Room honour its architect and builder. In more recent times The Thornton Room acknowledges Merle Thornton’s historic, law-changing act in 1965.

As The Regatta celebrates its 150 years, there is no doubt it will play host to many more characters, survive any challenge it faces and inspire many more stories.