

THE TATTERSALL'S HOTEL STORY

The story of Tattersall's Hotel, one of Bourke's earliest landmarks, is a rich tapestry of resilience, tragedy, and transformation. Situated in a prime position near the picturesque Darling River, it was the lifeblood of a town where paddle steamers, teamsters, and coaches converged, later becoming a part of Bourke's thriving social and commercial hub close to the Bourke punt and later Wharf, which was constructed in 1898.

Tattersall's Hotel was initially built in about 1860 by William Sly, alongside the Fort Bourke Hotel owned by Joseph Becker. It was known humorously as "Sly" grog, since it operated without a license in its early years. Originally named the Bourke Hotel, it changed to Tattersall's within a few years. This log-and-bark structure welcomed its first guests at a time when Bourke was a burgeoning frontier town. In 1859, the paddle steamer *Gemini* from Adelaide arrived, bringing much-needed food and rum, which was celebrated with much enthusiasm.

The early years were marked by natural disasters. In 1864, the Darling River swelled to a great height, threatening to destroy the town. The people of Bourke, armed with pickaxes and shovels, built an earth levee that protected the fledgling settlement, including the two hotels and the town's only store. Around 1869, the hotel saw a transformation under Henry Colless, who constructed a grand, luxurious brick building, said to rival the finest hotels in Sydney. This new structure became a social and business centre for travellers and townspeople alike.

Like many early establishments, Tattersall's was no stranger to misfortune. In 1872, a businessman named Thomas Smith died in the hotel under lonely circumstances, buried without a Christian service or friends to mourn him. Tragedy struck again in 1874 when a fire ravaged the attached weatherboard cottage and threatened the telegraph office nearby, though the hotel itself was saved. Another fire, a year later, saw a similar brush with disaster when a chandelier fell, igniting the dining room. Quick thinking and the use of blankets saved the hotel from ruin.

The hotel continued to face tragedy beyond fires. In 1875, Daniel Warmall, a long-time resident of the hotel, passed away there after a prolonged illness. One of the most sorrowful moments came in 1886 when Sophia Jane Magner, a young hotel worker, committed suicide within the hotel. Her heartbreaking death was tied to a love affair with a town solicitor, adding a layer of scandal to the event.

The 1890s ushered in an era of great hardship for Tattersall's Hotel and Bourke as a whole. In 1890, the Darling River once again flooded disastrously, and the levee system proved inadequate. Tattersall's was severely damaged, with its walls and floors taking the brunt of the destruction. The publican at the time, Daniel Morgan, and his family lived in difficult and uncomfortable conditions, waiting for materials to arrive so they could rebuild the hotel. Though a single-story building, Tattersall's boasted a billiard room, bar, dining room, sitting rooms, and a few bedrooms, offering respite to weary travellers even in its damaged state.

The Federation drought, spanning from 1893 to 1902, wreaked havoc on Bourke's economy, leading to declining populations and businesses. Many publicans struggled to keep the hotel afloat, with the license changing hands multiple times. William Byron, one of the publicans during this time, was declared bankrupt in 1896, a victim of the drought and failing local economy. Byron's story took a dramatic turn when he left Bourke and eventually enlisted in World War I, aged 60 (he lied about his age), only to tragically die in 1919 while serving in Egypt.

Despite the difficulties of the 1890s, Tattersall's survived, though it never regained its former glory. The hotel's license changed hands numerous times, with many publicans facing financial ruin. By 1916, Ezra and Caroline Sharp took over, and after Ezra's death in 1920, Caroline continued running the hotel until

the State Government's License Reduction Board cancelled its license in 1924. Tattersall's continued to operate as a boarding house under various owners until the 1940s.

By 1950, Tattersall's had fallen into disrepair. A fire broke out in one of the rear rooms, claiming the life of a man who had fallen asleep after a bout of drinking. The building was condemned in 1949 and demolished the following year. Yet, even in its final moments, Tattersall's still had surprises—during demolition, a labourer found a gold sovereign dating back to 1909 beneath the floorboards, which he generously donated for a local sporting club raffle.

In 1952, the site saw a rebirth. The Bourke RSL Club constructed a modern clubhouse called the Oxley Club, bringing new life to the once-famous location. In 1956, a memorial hall was built next to the club, commemorating the town's war heroes. The Oxley Club prospered for several decades, but by the late 1990s, economic decline took its toll, and the club eventually closed.

However, the story of Tattersall's site didn't end there. In 2010, local businessman Phillip Parnaby breathed new life into the location, transforming it into the *Diggers on the Darling*, a tavern and restaurant that celebrated Bourke's heritage, complete with war memorabilia. Sadly, in 2021, a devastating fire consumed the building, along with much of Bourke's treasured war history.

The legacy of Tattersall's Hotel is one of endurance and adaptation. From its origins as a rough-and-ready bark structure to its evolution into a luxurious brick hotel and later as the site of the Oxley Club and *Diggers on the Darling*, the location has witnessed the highs and lows of Bourke's history. Despite fires, floods, and economic hardship, it remained a cornerstone of the town for over a century, its story woven into the fabric of Bourke's heritage.



Tattersalls Hotel (photo Holtermann NSW SL)



Sly's Bourke Hotel



The Oxley Club 1952



The Oxley Club and Hall about 1980

(Photos Jenny Cheeseman)



The Diggers on the Darling Fire 2021

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