

Birdsey

A tribute to one of Heathcote's early characters

By Barrie Woods

You are probably familiar with Birdsey Reserve on Bridle Path Road. The reserve covers about 3 hectares and is home to our local food forest. Like me, you might have first heard the somewhat unusual name 'Birdsey' and wondered if there was more behind it than just a possible ornithological reference. I decided to do some digging and here is what I found.



Birdsey Reserve is named after Mr John Birdsey, one of the early settlers in Christchurch and an interesting and somewhat colourful character. His connection to Heathcote is that he established the Valley Hotel.

John Birdsey was born in England in 1824, but we take up his story in 1844, when he married Sarah Olton, in Geelong, Australia. There he operated a hotel in Geelong called 'Three Tuns' and possibly another named 'The British' though it is possible the name was changed and they were both the same establishment. It seems Birdsey's ventures in Geelong were not a great success as court records show claims for insolvency and the unpaid salary of a Thomas Etherington who was the manager of the bowling alley at Three Tuns in 1859. Sarah died in 1857, aged 37 years, and later the same year Birdsey remarried to Harriet Clark. Their first daughter, Lilian, was born soon after in 1859.

Seeking a new life, John and Harriet emigrated to New Zealand on the sailing ship Omeo, arriving on January 2nd 1861. On the 12th of May that same year, their second daughter, Emma, was born. Just the day before John, in Saturday 11th May, John Birdsey had opened his new hotel, 'The British' on High Street in the city, near the junction with Cashel Street.

Birdsey was described as a first class cook who would appear in his chef's cap and apron. It was reported that

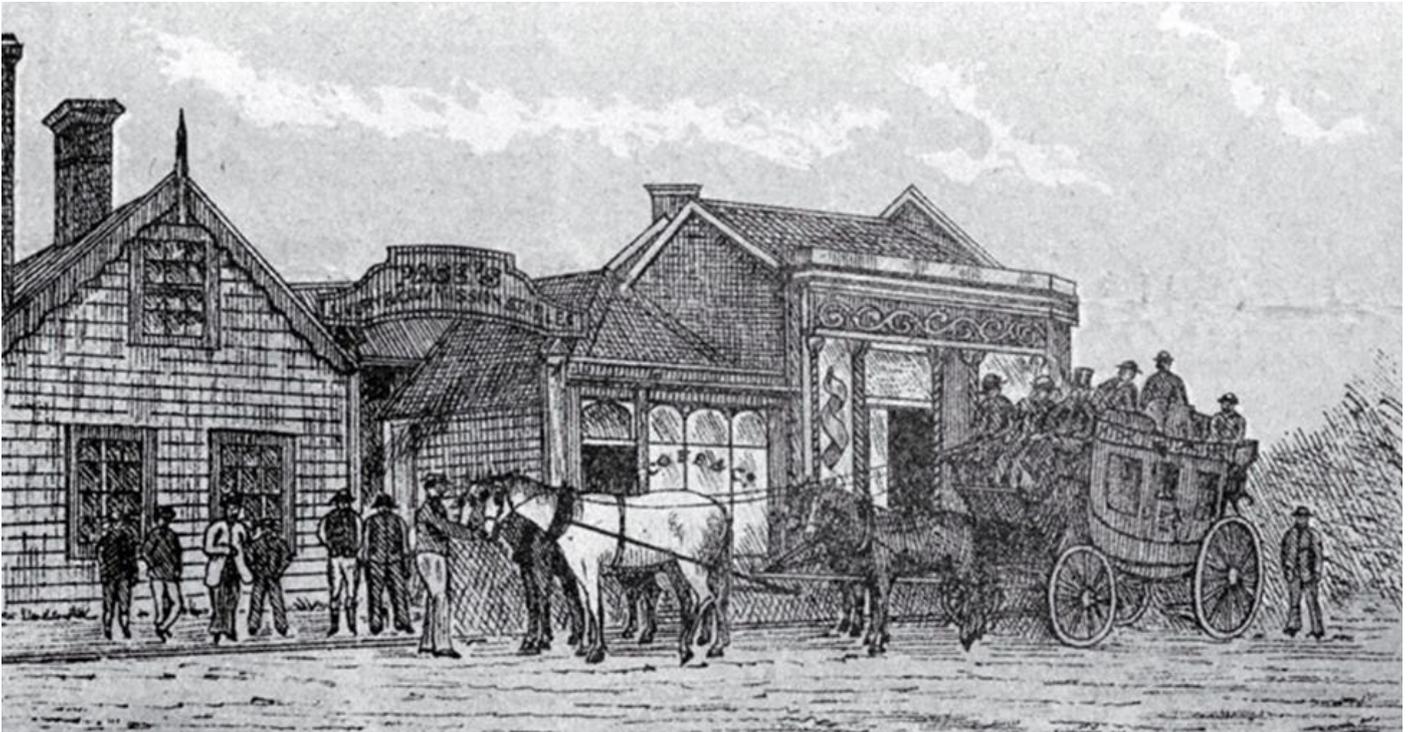
"The opening of such a house as this promises to be, where a dinner well cooked, and served with cleanliness and despatch, can be obtained, will prove a real acquisition to the town."

On Saturday last, a new hotel, "The British," was opened in Christchurch, under the auspices of Mr. Birdsey, who has brought with him from Victoria a well-earned reputation as a good caterer. The display in the window on that occasion was a perfect masterpiece of art, nor do we learn that those who went in to test the efforts of 'mine host' came away disappointed. The opening of such a house as this promises to be, where a dinner, well cooked, and served with cleanliness and despatch, can be obtained, will prove a real acquisition to the town.

The British started off initially as a dining restaurant, but within a short time expanded to become a public house offering lodging and bar service. The dining room was redecorated and a very large and ornate lamp was installed outside. One night some practical jokers put a tom cat in the lamp, much to the amusement of the early patrons, but not so much by those awakened by the poor cat's yowling. By 1864 Birdsey was hosting the local Jockey Club in an area set aside, which soon included a Public Subscription Room (betting room). The Cobb & Co coach arrived and departed from outside The British, with many travellers partaking of food and liquid refreshments.

John Birdsey's reputation grew and soon he was catering for a number of events and occasions. The most notable of these was perhaps the celebration of the turning of the first sod of the railway tunnel. This

RAILWAY!
BIRDSEY'S BRITISH HOTEL,
CHRISTCHURCH.
WANTED,—For the RAILWAY FETE on
the 17th instant,
TWENTY WAITERS,
And a Lot of POULTRY and BOUQUETS.
Apply early to JOHN BIRDSEY,
British Hotel,
Christchurch.



Cobb and Co's 20 passenger "Jack" coach in 1864 standing outside Birdsey's Hotel, opposite the White Hart, High St, Christchurch, about to leave for Kaiapoi. Captain Anderson was driving. This drawing was taken from a photograph by Dr A. C Barker. Artist unknown.

was a lunch held at the Heathcote portal of the tunnel on July 17th, 1861. A crowd of some 1500 assembled; the weather was wet and the speeches tedious. There was a marquee set up for official guests and food and refreshments for others were to be served outside. Protesting at the poor quality of the food and beer provided for them, the outdoor crowd attacked the marquee and destroyed it, along with a quantity of glass and crockery. The cost of the damage amounted to around £200, of which Birdsey had to stand half. There were letters of complaint to the newspapers and considerable unhappiness at what had transpired. One witness said, "We never recollect having witnessed a more disgraceful scene or one which reflected greater discredit upon the persons concerned in it." Other events were more successful and were reported favourably in the newspapers.

Birdsey was a supporter of the Agricultural and Pastoral Association and provided his services as a judge. He offered to provide refreshments at the Show, but was respectfully declined. He did however put up funds amounting to £1100 to support the visit of the English cricket eleven in February 1864, in return for "all privileges", which meant he could profit from gate sales, catering and liquor sales. This was an immense

outlay of money at the time, and whether any profit was returned is not known. In fact, events that played out soon after suggest it was no money-maker.

Birdsey's connection to Heathcote was more than the ill-fated tunnel luncheon. Recognising an opportunity with the tunnel workers, he obtained a licence to sell liquor in 1862 and began to serve refreshments from a hut in Bridle Path Road. Soon he opened a new two-storey wooden hotel, also in Bridle Path Road, about 50 metres down from the junction with Port Hills Road. (Not on the site of the current Valley Inn, but approximately where Birdsey's Reserve now is.) This was known as Birdsey's Valley Hotel and also served as his family residence.

John Birdsey appears to have been something of a colourful character. Though well acquainted with the local notables of influence, he was also somewhat acquainted with the courtroom, both calling for justice to be done, and on the receiving end of justice himself. A Mr John Ward was charged with stealing a mustard pot and two bottles of pickles from the hotel. He was found guilty and served two months in Lyttelton gaol. Then there was a great fuss and court case when a Mr A R Sturge was found to have presented a forged cheque at the British Hotel.

BIRDSEY'S

BRITISH



HOTEL,

OPPOSITE THE TOWN HALL,
CHRISTCHURCH.

(LATE OF THE BRITISH HOTEL GEELONG.)

BILL OF FARE, FOR THIS DAY,
MARCH 29, 1862.

SOUPS.

Ox Tail, Julienne.

FISH.

Flounders, Mullet.

JOINTS.

Roast Suckling Pig—apple sauce.
Roast Sirloin of Beef—Yorkshire pudding.
Haunch Mutton—red currant jelly.
Roast Lamb and mint sauce.
Roast Fillet of Veal—tomata sauce.
Calf's Head—brain sauce.
Rump Steak and Kidney Pudding.
Boiled Leg Mutton—caper sauce.
Roast Ox Heart—seasoning.
Corned Beef.

POUFLRY AND GAME.

Roast Chickens.
Roast Ducks.
Salmi Wild Ducks.

ENTREES.

Lamb Cutlets aux Concombres.
Veal Cutlets aux Fines Herbes.
Filet de Bœuf aux Tomates.
Kidneys stewed in Champagne.
Currie Tripe au riz.
Beef Collops.
Omelette aux Fines Herbes.

SWEETS.

Vegetables in season.

Table D'Hôte at 2 p.m., sharp.

JOHN BIRDSEY,
Proprietor.

1327

On the receiving end, Birdsey was fined 10 shillings in 1863 for failing to clean his chimneys. Then in December of 1863 he was charged with 'furious driving' and drunkenness on the occasion of the Flower Show on 20th November, resulting in a fine of 20 shillings.

The next year Birdsey again found himself before the court, this time charged with assaulting a Mr Pennington. Apparently, Mr Pennington had taken a

room at The British, and then became involved in some sort of discussion with another lodger resulting in the breakage of a water jug. Birdsey went to the room to investigate the disturbance, whereupon he beat Mr Pennington severely and evicted him by throwing him down the stairs, rendering him unconscious. Mr Pennington required medical attention and subsequently sought redress through the courts, seeking restitution of £100. The magistrate agreed an assault had occurred, but only awarded Mr Pennington the sum of £2.

It is fitting that Birdsey Reserve is, today, home to the Food Forest. In 1863 Birdsey took on the lease of a 'Fruit Garden' which had been established by Mr William Wilson (the first mayor of Christchurch who went by the nickname of 'Cabbage' Wilson). Mr Wilson

GRAND OPENING DAY

FOR

BIRDSEY'S FRUIT GARDEN,

7½ acres in extent.

THIS GARDEN is acknowledged to be the finest in the Southern Hemisphere, and is known as Mr. W. Wilson's Nursery and Fruit Gardens.

Strawberries
Cherries
Gooseberries
Raspberries
Red Currants
White Currants
Black Currants
Apples
Pears
Plums
Peaches
Nectarines
Figs
Filberts
Medlars
Quinces
Damsons.

&c. &c. &c.

The Opening Day for the above Gardens is
THIS DAY, WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 16,
BEING THE
ANNIVERSARY DAY OF THE PROVINCE.

Admission, 2s. 6d.

Tickets to be obtained at Birdsey's, British Hotel, and at the gates.

FRUITERS SUPPLIED AT WHOLESALE PRICES.

owned several gardens or nurseries where he raised trees and plants for the new settlement, among them gorse, broom, willow and fruit trees. Birdsey's Fruit Garden, as it then became known, covered 7½ acres in what is now the central city, and featured a wide variety of fruit trees. A grand opening day for the public was held on 16 December 1863.

In 1863 Birdsey had to renew his licence to serve alcohol at the Valley Hotel. It was argued that he didn't show a sufficiently sober example to his patrons and the application was declined. The official reason given was that the court did not think two licences should be granted to one person.

John Birdsey, Heathcote Valley, general license. Mr. Duncan appeared for Mr. Birdsey, and presented a memorial from a number of persons, certifying that the house was a convenience to the public and travellers generally; that they had never heard of any complaints against the house; that the want of the house would be much felt, and that additions to the house were now going on rapidly, and would soon be completed. Mr. Duncan stated that bedrooms and sitting rooms were now being added to the house; that increased accommodation was not required, nor had it ever been demanded, and he trusted the Bench would grant the renewal of this licence.

The Bench informed Mr. Birdsey that they had resolved to refuse this license at their former meeting, and they now saw no reason to change that resolution; they had resolved now to refuse it; that in future they did not think two licenses ought to be granted to one person.

Unable to trade, Birdsey was forced to put the hotel up for sale after only one year of trading.

Unfortunately, within a fairly short time The British also acquired a reputation of attracting some of Christchurch's rougher element, and profitability suffered. Together with losses on the Valley Hotel, and possible losses on his underwriting of the cricket team visit, Birdsey found himself in financial trouble. In March 1864 he announced he was retiring from the province and had both The Valley and The British hotels up for sale.

Fate was cruel for John Birdsey and on 10 June 1865 he died, aged 41. Just three months later his wife, Harriet,

HOTEL BY PUBLIC AUCTION.

ON FRIDAY, THE 17TH DAY JULY NEXT.

MESSRS. AIKMAN & WILSON are directed by Mr. John Birdsey, to offer for sale by public auction, at their offices, in Christchurch, on Friday, the 17th day of July next, at one o'clock, if not previously disposed of privately,

THE VALLEY HOTEL,

situated at the foot of the bridle-path close to the mouth of the tunnel and railway station.

The house (when the alterations now going on are completed) will consist of three sitting-rooms, private bed-room, four double bed-rooms, kitchen, bar, store-room, and cellar, with stabling and other offices.

The Valley Hotel is at present doing a capital business, which can be considerably extended, with the increased accommodation afforded by the improvements now in course of completion.

To ensure a sale, the property will be put up at a low upset price, on easy terms of payment.

Further particulars may be obtained at the offices of the Auctioneers, or from Mr. John Birdsey, British Hotel, Christchurch.

Sale at 1 o'clock. Terms at sale. 2782

FIRST-CLASS HOTEL.

BIRDSEY'S.

IN THE MOST COMMANDING SITUATION
IN CHRISTCHURCH.

MESSRS. J. OLLIVIER & SON have been instructed to offer for sale

The remaining portion of the Lease of that valuable property in Christchurch, known as

BIRDSEY'S BRITISH HOTEL.

The hotel contains a commodious bar, with all the requisite fittings for a large business; it is quite new and decorated in the first style. Adjoining is a large public café and bar, leading to the dining rooms; and beyond these a private bar and private room attached, hitherto used by the Canterbury Jockey Club.

The kitchen is fitted up with every convenience, and contains the largest range hitherto imported into the colony.

The bedrooms, 13 in number, are well furnished and fitted.

The lease of the house has 18 years to run, at a moderate ground-rent.

The property will be submitted for sale by
PUBLIC AUCTION,

also died, on 10 September. Their two daughters, aged 4 and 6 years old, were orphaned. The local community held benefit events to raise funds for their welfare but little is known of their subsequent childhood. However both grew up and were married and have descendants living in New Zealand today.

After Birdsey's death the lease on The British was taken up by a Mr Morton and was renamed Morton's Commercial Hotel. The building was demolished in 1935. The Valley Hotel was sold to George Fitzmaurice who was granted a license. During the next few years, the Valley Hotel became one of the most notorious after-hours drinking establishments in or near the city. Seamen would walk through the tunnel or over the Bridle Path from Lyttelton at any hour of the night to get a drink and others would come out from the city. Apparently police raids were common but were ineffective at stopping the trade.

After the hotel moved to the site of the present Valley Inn in 1877, the original building continued to be used as a residence but eventually fell into disrepair. It was demolished in 1938.

John Birdsey was bankrupt when he died, but his estate inherited a tidy sum after the death of his father in England. Court records show that when his affairs were finally tidied up in 1892, his estate was worth a mere £888 9s 10d (equivalent to approximately 10 years wages at the time). After payment of his debts, the remaining funds were passed over to Birdsey's two daughters.

Sources for this article include:

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