

An Exploration of Newcastle & Hunter Valley

Drinking Establishments

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With pokies, live music, cold beer and friendly yarns, patrons can find a range of activities and distractions in their local establishments. From feeding addictions to offering a place of refuge, the local pubs and clubs of Newcastle and the Hunter Valley are a constant but also a life-altering force, much as they are anywhere. The local establishment is continually turned to, and owners welcome patrons with open doors. Not only do they provide entertainment and alcohol, licensed premises also offer shelter and a sense of community outreach in times of need.

A prime example of how establishments both undermine community values and offer a place for community support was during the June floods in 2007 in Newcastle and the Hunter. Patrons could be seen lining up to get inside Newcastle nightclubs the very night after millions of dollars of damage had been incurred. After gaining entry, escaping the cold and wet, they proceeded to drink and chat up the opposite sex. They were trying to find a sense of normality. The very same weekend, several people found themselves taking refuge in the pub in Hinton after their properties had been flooded. Even as the waters encroached upon the pub grounds, there was a clear emphasis on the importance of the pub. The SES, taking time from sandbagging the river and placing tarps on homes, deemed it necessary to float kegs of beer to the Hunter folk so they could drink while

watching the State of Origin football. Figure 1 to the right was one that appeared in local media of a local drinker savouring his beer. It seems that where there is alcohol, there is release, and perhaps comfort and relief.



Fig 1. "Not a dry town... Hinton local Mick Flett" (Liam Driver)

Pubs and clubs act as hubs for contemporary social interaction and hence as stages for contemporary culture, or at least cultural mores. People congregate in these hubs to interact, repel or seek respite, each hub gaining a varying congregation. And the very buildings in which this takes place possess fascinating histories and personalities of their own. In my research, past and present aspects of pub and club culture are examined, including live music and, in particular, what I term "The Seven Establishment Sins" — these sins being alcohol, gambling, smoking, violence/swearing (grouped together as forms of aggression), sex, drugs and fashion. Every one of these sins can be witnessed at one establishment or another around Newcastle and the Hunter. While the older regulars, and their stories, are a large part of my research and my stories, I will be focusing on the younger crowd at various establishments for the purposes of this paper, as they have been particularly relevant to recent events.

In a culture where the aforementioned sins are prevalent, many put up a front or artificial persona. Short skirts and low cut tops for girls—even



Fig 2. Line of Soldiers (Peter Bower)

in the middle of winter—and too much aftershave and bad dance moves for guys are examples that just touch on how these personas are created. Whether conscious or subconscious, a falseness is created to impress by young pub-goers. Patrons create this artifice to achieve or discover a sense of comfort and relief; it is done in an attempt to appeal to the

opposite sex, perhaps to find a one-night stand, or to find a comfort zone with other people, or simply to escape their normal life.

Cold

A layer of makeup, a lack of material,
her teeth release audible clatter.

The night air crawls slyly over her,
invading over the mounds
of exposed, goose-bumped skin.

Even with a jacket
borrowed from a generous stranger,
stalactites hang precariously
from the black sheath, ending in the tips
of high stilettos.

The soft lapping of water against the wharf
combines with the loud chatter.

Bass from the dance floor keeps time
with her shivers. A heartbeat fades,
her body shrouded in the fog
that seeps from her trembling lips.

Smoke floats from an ashtray
in the outside smoking section;
frail tobacco embers glow
from a slender finger perched proud.
Ash sinks into its grave
while butts crowd together,
edging closer to the burning cigarette
to get warm.

Rain spreads across the harbour,
diffusing the coal-loaders' lights.
On the breakwall the beam of the lighthouse
steadily turns,
ignoring the beat of the music
and the cold.

Staff and entertainers also put up a front, portraying themselves as what they are not. While speaking to Central Coast singer-songwriter Sarah Humphreys, I asked her about the idea of truthful portrayals of personalities in establishments. As a performer, she continually fights a battle herself, trying to find a happy medium between personalities depending on the show she is performing. At original music nights, when people are there to experience new music, she feels more relaxed and better able to show her 'true self'. As an up-and-coming original act, she, like many local artists, has also had to do cover shows to make a living. While covering other people's songs, performers often find they are creating a cover for themselves. Normally scheduled on weekends when crowds are drunker, cover shows are daunting for performers. While not always the case, it is common to have patrons demand to hear particular songs and performers are often subject to heckling or lewd comments. I asked Sarah how she copes with these crowds and she replied:



Fig 3. Sarah Humphreys: performing for patrons
(Peter Bower)

There's definitely a persona I put on, particularly at the rougher shows. It's like when a cat fluffs itself up to look bigger and scarier, I walk with a certain 'toughness' and try to look as if I can hold my own.

Staff and entertainment function as an interesting but, obviously, important part of an establishment's culture. Not only do staff and entertainers need to shape their own personalities to thrive in establishments, but also at the same time they shape the 'personality' of the establishment. In talking to various cover bands over the years, they have all told me that the mood of a room influences the songs they sing; but, similarly, the songs they sing influence the mood of the room. Some establishments have bans on certain songs, such as songs by AC/DC, as they stir up patrons and create a more aggressive mood. Likewise, happy and talkative bar staff will also have a positive influence on a room.

Appropriately enough, this is a feedback loop; the crowd influences the vibe, while the vibe influences the crowd; the entertainment



Fig 4. Mass of Faces (Peter Bower)

and staff influence the crowd and vibe, while the opposite is also true. The resulting noise is indistinguishable and invasive, with every aspect combining while still separate and open to the change of every other aspect. The 'personality' that floats through the pub is the result countless influences, is rarely the same two nights in a row, and is always trying to be shifted into a more positive vein by staff and entertainers.

On the other side of the stage's edge, the patrons are the biggest receptor to change of self. In continuing my discussion with Sarah, she raised the idea that all sides shown are the 'real person', suggesting that everyone changes from situation to situation. She continued to explain that change, however, is more constant in people within establishments:

I think that there is a side of people that only comes out when they're at the pub, a rich and raw energy that can be positive or negative, depending on who that person wants to be at that moment in time and how they handle the things around them, how they handle their feelings and how they handle their alcohol.

One of the biggest factors in producing this change is, as Sarah puts it, how people handle their alcohol. Entertainers are unfortunate enough to see the negative change in people quite often. I have witnessed drunken people who were friends go from a friendly wrestle to throwing punches in moments; I have seen beers accidentally spilled result in brawls. But by far the most disturbing story was one I was told where a drunken individual held a local entertainer at knifepoint before a gig and threatened that, if certain songs weren't played, there would be consequences. Alcohol produces a wide range of change, most of which are often non-violent.

The shy and introverted, and even the extroverted, are more social in pubs and clubs. A large reason for this increase in socialisation is related to one of The Seven Establishment Sins: Alcohol. In sociologist Steven Tomsen's paper, "Boozers and Bouncers: masculine conflict,

disengagement and the contemporary governance of drinking related violence and disorder” (2005), a number of male interviewees report the benefits of alcohol consumption. Tomsen points out that “drinking is valued as a social lubricant that promotes mixing with less tension with friends and occasionally meeting girls” (4). One interviewee states:

It is more social. I wouldn't be able to talk to chicks if I didn't drink. I can't socialise without alcohol - I just freeze and get self-conscious. (4)

This false representation of self also reflects back on to those surrounding the individual. Not only does the alcohol allow a drinker to feel more relaxed and social, but allows other people to be more receptive to that individual. The same drinker continues on to say:

I am a pretty ugly bloke and it is really hard to get a chick. So you shout them a couple of beers until they are seeing double vision and they are going “You are hot, you are gorgeous - you are going home with me.” (4)

Of course, drinking doesn't always lead to a relaxed and social environment. Tomsen continues in his paper to look at conflicts in pubs, and argues that, while alcohol may create a relaxed attitude to insults, alcohol seems to be an active ingredient in the mix with regards to aggression. His interviewees state that although alcohol creates a mood in which violence is not actively looked for, violence often can't be avoided (to defend oneself or friends, especially after accidents and bumps in crowded pubs). Tomsen

notes how his interview groups claim that violence is caused by “people [who] are ‘idiots when they get drunk’ or ‘bad drunks’” (6).

An increase in alcohol and drug-related crimes in establishments in the Newcastle area has been reflected, or amplified, in the media and the publicity of a government crackdown on antisocial behaviour associated with drinking establishments since early 2007. In the past two years, there



Fig 5. Grayson: Performing to a large, friendly crowd (Peter Bower)

have been frequent meetings of police and Newcastle city residents, patrons and hoteliers seeking a solution to the rising level of late-night violence and antisocial behaviour. The NSW

Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research reported that pub-related violence had skyrocketed in the past decade. But, as Chris Fogg said in an interview, “The few bad drunks are ruining it for the rest of us” (Campbell 7).

The Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research claim that late-trading hotels have been involved in the majority of incidents, with Newcastle having the second highest rate of alcohol-related incidents per head of population in NSW (Creagh). Leaked figures in December 2007 also showed Newcastle hotels breached their licence conditions 196 times in the first nine months of 2007, while 79 per cent of all assaults committed on licensed premises in Newcastle occurred in just six inner-city pubs

(McCarthy 4). As such, inner-city establishments have been subject to drastic governmental counter-measures, including the banning of alcoholic shots, restricting certain alcoholic drinks after 10pm, last drinks half hour before close, and a 1am lockout period followed by a 3am closure of all inner-city pubs and clubs.

The effects are already starting to show. Through a combination of the new restrictions and redevelopment plans in Newcastle's CBD, one pub, The Lucky

Country, has recently disconnected the kegs and closed its doors. A place that became a favourite of many for its \$2 alcoholic shots (banished with the alcohol restrictions)



Fig 6. Editorial Cartoon January 10, The Herald (MandyG)

and its huge support for local alternative bands, restrictions made it difficult for the pub to survive. In the end, the owners gave into the pressure from redevelopment companies, and the pub will one day in the coming months reopen as a boutique wine bar with hotel accommodation. Not only will the local alternative and rock bands suffer, but many have also lost their other "home". In its final days of trade, the cracked face of the pub looked far from inviting, but the popular haunt transcended beyond looks. Many cite the pub as a place where you could be yourself and still feel welcome; that

it was a place that had real character and uniqueness. It didn't try to copy others; it promoted individuality and originality, in its patrons, its bands and its staff. Bryan Furchert (2008) complains about the closure:

This is such fucking sad news. The Lucky Country is one of the only pubs I've ever been in where I just feel at home. The music is generally alternative, not Top 40 rubbish, and the bar staff are punks / metallers (sic) / Goths / whatever and it's not unusual to see a staff member sporting a black eye.

Perhaps this individualism, along with the media-fuelled fears of the inner-city violent culture, was the cause of the early closure of The Lucky Country. Due to have a farewell bash on Saturday November 1, 2008—with multiple bands performing, but also with extra security and complete police cooperation with sniffer dogs, undercover police and searches at the door—management was issued a police order to close the doors immediately on the morning of Thursday October 30. By nightfall, the word has spread of its closure, the doors locked shut and the windows boarded. The reason for this early closure: police learned of *one* individual on a Facebook group suggesting a riot over The Lucky Country's closure.

Here lies a local culture
Most nights were good, some were bad
Between school and a shifting future
It was the most we had.

"Star Hotel" (Cold Chisel, 1980)

Newcastle has been dogged with a violent pub history at least since the 1979 Star City riot, in which 2000 people rebelled against a curfew that was enforced by police in the middle of the band's last song. The result was overturned cars, two burnt out police vehicles, assaults against police and the general destruction of property (Homan). The concern of many Newcastle residents is whether history is repeating itself. The 1980 Cold Chisel song, "Star Hotel", reflects the current problems as strongly as it did the time it was written, where pub- and club-goers are relying on the local culture as a crutch in a world where everything is becoming uncertain with the current economy and similar problems.

But, in truth, violence is synonymous with pub life. In places where change is so predominant, violence is recurring and constant. People frequent pubs to drink and vent in some manner, to find relief and release and comfort. On occasion, this is found in the form of aggression; and on occasion, the public are stirred up by something that has always been there by one thing or another.

The question remains whether this violent behaviour is a result of the change of personalities in establishments, the result of the personality-changing aspects of alcohol and other illegal drugs, or the result of the late night trading hours. Considering that the decreased trading hours has seen no dramatic decrease in the reportage of pub violence, it is likely that late night trading hours is not the cause of violent behaviour. The enforced changes to trading hours and how they further shape behaviour and local mores, and how these changes will affect the establishments themselves,

the very sense of ‘being’ that each establishment holds unique to itself, is something I am hoping to touch on in my narratives.

Each establishment has something that makes it an individual.

Whether it is The Cambridge with its reputation of great alternative music

and its more alternate

crowd, Customs House

with its relaxed, upper-

class vibe, Frostbites with

its alcoholic slushies and

dance tracks, the outer

suburb pubs with their

varying music acts and

clienteles, the Beattie Hotel

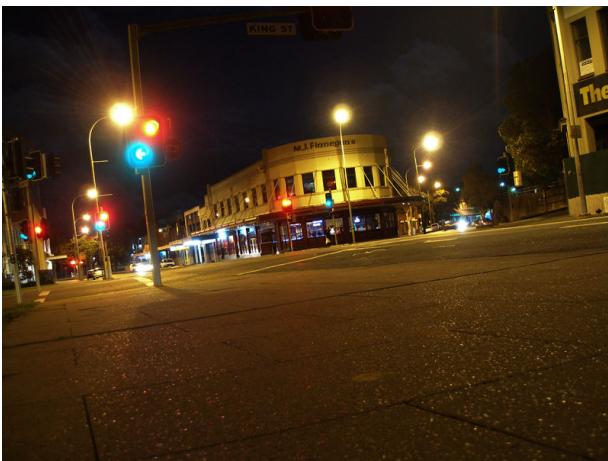


Fig 7. MJ Finnegan's: at night (Peter Bower)

in East Gresford with its poetry readings, or other country pubs with their friendly regulars and wild nights, each pub brings something different. One establishment that stands outside even this band of variability and has a unique history of its own is MJ Finnegan's Irish Pub.

Full of subtle ironies and contradictions, the Irish Pub was not always a pub. Renovated in 2002 by the Irish Pub Company and The McNally Design Group after years of fighting for a liquor-trading licence, MJ Finnegan's calls itself an “authentic Irish pub”, but is in truth the bastard son of a horror threesome. Latching onto popular trends as much as Irish tradition, and set in an old building that has been used to sell electrical goods and hand out dole payments, the building's persona is as confusing

as the bar is crowded. The building in which MJ Finnegan's occupies was built in 1938, and was the Newcastle branch of Martin De Launay, an electrical wholesaler. The business profited mainly from the sale of idler rollers for conveyor belts, the belts being used in the large local coal mining industry. Following this, it served as the Commonwealth Employment Service office, giving assistance to the unemployed in the Newcastle area. The pub that opened in 2002 is authentic in some of its components, bogus in others. Although the interior was designed and built in Ireland before being shipped out and fitted to the old building, Finnegan's cannot claim true Irish heritage. Rather, it is a gimmick to satisfy popular trends. Only a handful of pubs outside of Ireland can refer to themselves as authentic Irish pubs, claiming to have been shipped out, brick for brick from the foundations up, and reconstructed in their new piece of 'Ireland'.

Finnegan's has been losing some of the "Irishness" it never had, with the green and yellow stained windows now only at the front of the restaurant and no longer in the main bar area. The bay windows that existed until 2007 sporting an array of nautically themed objects—steering wheels, brass telescopes and maps that created the illusion that it was possible to find your way home—have been replaced with clear glass windows that allow the world to look in. It is



Fig 8. Serving more than Guinness (Peter Bower)

rumoured that the new windows were set in place for security reasons, in relation to the inner-city problems.

As the Irish Guinness is poured, and people stand on the cold slate, resting a foot on the tarnished brass rail that surrounds the base of the bar, the artifice of the Irish pub is slowly fading, but claim of authenticity still lingers. Move upstairs and you find yourself in a crowded nightclub-esque environment, the horseshow bar passing out drinks in all directions while the DJ mixes tracks with too much bass, attempting to cater to the needs and wants of the young crowd, while bouncers stand solid and vigilant. As one of several inner-city pubs struggling to find its feet and deal with the pub-related violence and its enforced restrictions, it has recently, and suddenly, found itself with an identity crisis: lost is the craic and true sense of an Irish pub. And so the only question that remains is the Chicken or the Egg question of pub and club cultures. What shapes what? Do establishments shape the patrons and their behaviours, or do the patrons shape the establishments? And, as both influence each other in an eternal cycle, creating the piercing feedback loop, this is a question that can never be answered.



Fig 8. Last Drink (Peter Bower)

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