



DANCING GIRLS

Wingham in the 20th century

a personal memoir

Sue Milliken

Before

Subtropical rainforest, down to the silver river. Bedded in a millennia of floodsilt on banks the height of fortresses. Bamboo, nettles, looping vines, treeferns, magenta orchids, vermilion lichen, cunjevoi, creek myrtle, native rosemary, and the trees! Fig trees the size of mansions, coachwood, brush box, stringybark, turpentine, black bean, angophora, tallowwood and the mighty cedar, *toona ciliata*, undisturbed over centuries to grow to the height of a ten story building, with the girth of a rainwater tank.

On the pungent, decomposing forest floor lived the nervous paddymelon, the bowerbird, the brush turkey, myriad insects and snakes and little frogs. In the ancient canopy the whipbird cracked its stockwhip, valley to valley, the bellbird rang its tiny silver bell, chartreuse parrots fed on nectar, sugar gliders and flying fox travelled through the night sky, or rested, upside down, from feasts on figs and berries.

Behind the rain forest lay the mountains, layers of dusky lavender, misty in the early mornings, silhouetted deep purple in the evenings as the sun set in a burning glow behind the great divide.

The Aborigines lived in harmony with abundant nature, evolved over thousands of years.

Into this wilderness came the cedar getters.

Soon the Aborigines were gone, and the forest rang to the axe and the thunder of felled giants. When the cedar was gone, the brush was cleared along the river and up through the tributary creeks and the valleys into the foothills, and the settlers moved in.

Hard working Scots mostly, they made dairy farms on the emerald river flats which emerged from the rainforest and fattened cattle on the higher ridges. From the forest remnant they built fences in post and broad rail, split with axes, with sliprails of three saplings for gates. They constructed neat, unpretentious homesteads out of slab and hessian. Cow bails and yards were erected close to the house to walk the cows in for milking in the dawn and dusk, and the smells of moist cowshit and warm milk pervaded summer evenings.

The cedar getters fanned out as far as the mountains, bringing yoked teams and the crack of the bullock whip to valleys and hillsides where forever there had only been birdsong and the soft voices of the native people.

The furthest navigation point on the great river where boats could meet the logs became the wharf and the wharf became the town.

The first settler took up land in 1841. Unimaginatively or perhaps nostalgically named Wingham after a village in Kent, England by some homesick government clerk, the settlement was proclaimed a village in 1844. By 1890 it was a thriving centre for timber and farming, but Taree, closer to the coast on a broader reach of the river and more accessible, grew more quickly and government services were transferred there in 1909. The two towns, eight miles apart, coexisted uneasily.

Taree looked down on Wingham as a backwater. Wingham, knowing it was there first, was slightly disdainful of the brasher *arriviste*.

At the turn of the twentieth century, Wingham was well-established around a central park with its date palms, weatherboard grandstand and white circular railing. Graceful Victorian and Edwardian public buildings gradually appeared on the southern and eastern sides of the park. The Post Office in 1884, the School of Arts in 1907, the Police Station in 1909 and the Court House in 1934. These buildings remained in harmony until the erection of the new Catholic Church in the early 1950's, an orange brick architectural eyesore which dominated the hill overlooking the river.

On the northern and western streets facing the park grew the town's shops, the grocer, the hardware, the gentlemen's and ladies' outfitter, the saddlery and farm supplies, the furniture store, the chemist, the butcher the baker and the cafe.

The town's newspaper made its appearance in 1880, and eventually settled as the *Wingham Chronicle and Manning River Observer* with a brick building containing printing presses and editorial office in Bent Street opposite the park. In 1909 Frederick Arthur - F.A. - Fitzpatrick acquired the paper, and until 1953 as "Fitz O'Wingham" recorded and reported on the town's doings before handing over to his son, J.J. Fitzpatrick, who remained in control for a further 22 years, a total of sixty eight years in two generations of the one family.

On diagonally opposing corners of the park were the two hotels, gradually rising from shanties to substantial two storey establishments with broad verandahs, accommodation, large kitchens and dining rooms.

The town's first school was built where Isabella street left the shops on its way to the last of the rain forest, known as the brush, and the bank of the river where the wharf and working sheds had been built.

In 1909 mains water was connected to the town and a modest drinking fountain and memorial to the town's first doctor, Dr. Kelly, was erected in white marble on the corner of the park nearest to the school.

The railway came to Wingham in 1913, the line following the valleys and the rivers and contours of the foothills up from Dungog. The names of the stations reflected the evolving ethnic mix as settlements grew: Gloucester, Tugabakh, Pitlochry, Wirradgurie, Doon Ayre, Kimbriki, Karaak Flat, Killawarra, Dingo Creek.

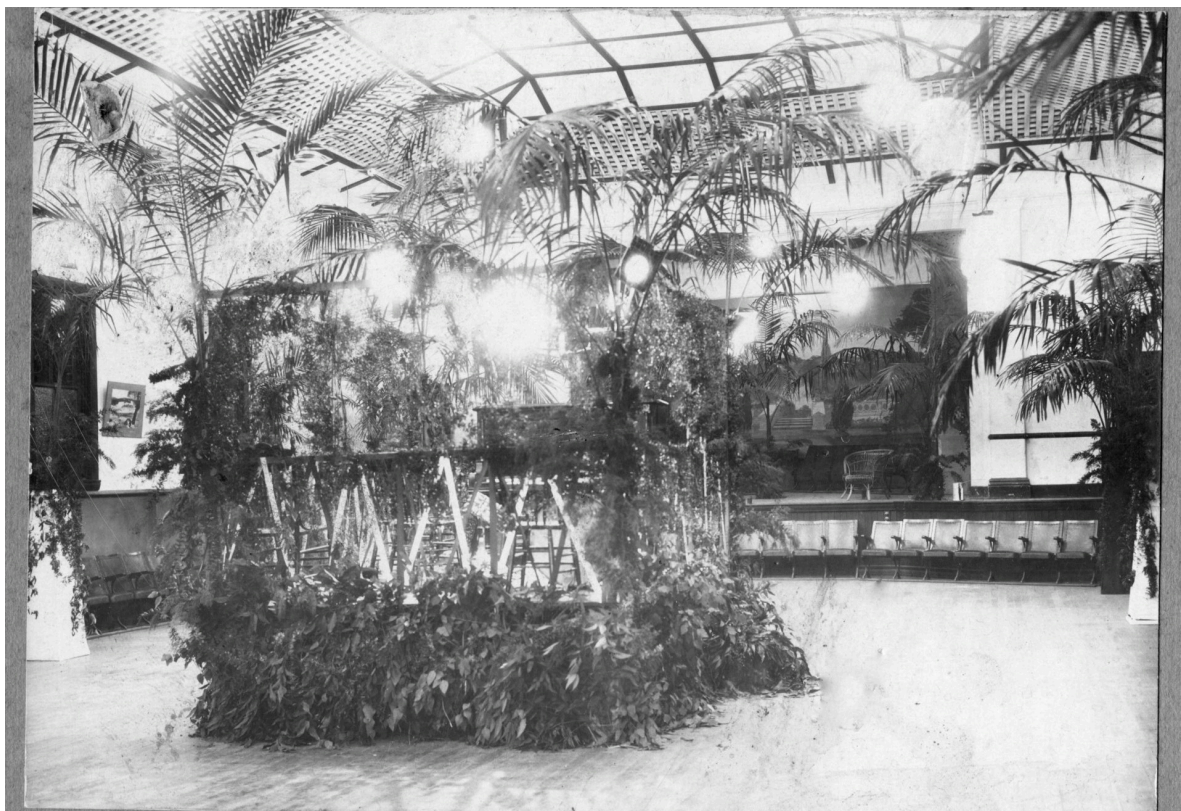
A road connecting Wingham with points south and north took longer. Gradually a "highway" – not much more than a dirt track – grew from the ferry at Hexham past The Buckets at Gloucester, over the Tugabakh Mountain at Krumbach to Tinonee, Wingham and on to Taree, with ferries across the Paterson, Williams and Karuah rivers and across the Manning above the wharf at Wingham. In time the highway deviated from the Gloucester Wingham route, making its way directly to Taree and then on north to Brisbane. This sealed Wingham's fate as a quiet rural settlement.

In 1923 a Memorial Town Hall was built in Farquhar Street, to honour the men from the district who served and died in the Great War, and whose names were inscribed in marble on its wall.

The Town Hall became the centre of social activity for the town.



White tie and tails was the fashion for men.



Set for the Bachelors' Ball

In the 1920's, the Dancing Girls epitomised Wingham in that brief period between the upheaval and loss of the Great War and the dislocation of The Depression.



Thelma Cross and Beth Abbott centre, Gwen Carpenter far right,
Lillian Easton front right

These young women were the daughters of the town's pioneers and their parents would have been the first generation born in the district. Their fathers were farmers, shopkeepers, managers of the big stores, the co-op or the butter factory or, in the case of Thelma Cross, my mother, a hotelier and cattle dealer. At least three of the girls in the photographs were my mother's friends. Beth Abbott, whose family were Scottish farmers from Karaak Flat, Lillian Easton, whose father was the town's stock and station agent, and Gwen whose married name was Carpenter, about whom I know no more, except that these four remained friends for the whole of their lives.



Thelma on the left, Gwen Carpenter on the right. 1940's
Tad Wunderlich centre. That's me far left.

They worked where required, milking cows, mustering cattle or helping with the family business, but there was enough money for trips to Sydney and stylish clothes, many of which they made themselves ...



Thelma



Jenny

There were picnics at the beach, or by the river, and parties.







My father, David, aquaplaning...



A day at the races? They seem to have binoculars



Harry Cross on the right, so probably Aunty Clara in the hat



Simple elegance

The depression affected Wingham as it did everywhere and money and work became less plentiful but country people were resourceful, their needs were uncomplicated and with a decent roof over their heads, a good vegetable garden and access to the products of the dairy, they were able to tide the difficult times through, making clothes last longer and putting off the purchase of a new car or new farm machinery until they could afford it. Produce was shared and a visit to someone's home or farm would be accompanied by a gift of whatever was to hand – a watermelon, a bag of freshly picked corn on the cob, a big Queensland Blue

pumpkin, or a billy full of mushrooms collected from the paddock by the creek or from the golf course opposite Tom and Chris Gollan's farmhouse on the Taree road in the dew of a summer morning. People were generous and no one thought twice about helping someone down on their luck or in trouble. To the extent that you could help, you did.

By the end of the 1930's, the dancing girls were married, and entering the new phase of their lives with families and young children.



When the Second World War made its unwelcome appearance the town had recovered from the Depression and it settled down to endure straitened times once again, this time with the unfamiliar restraints of rationing. Many of the young men went to war but many were in reserved occupations and stayed on the farms.

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I was born in 1940, when my mother and father were living in Gunnedah, which was to be my father's last posting in his shortlived banking career.

When I was eight months old, my maternal grandfather, Harry Cross, died of a heart attack aged 63. His unexpected death brought my parents – and me and the family dog, back to Wingham to take over the Wingham Hotel. My mother's sister Jenny, seven years younger, was living at the hotel and had been helping my grandfather to run the business. However a woman could not then hold a liquor licence on her own so my father, reluctantly, was pressed into becoming the licensee. My father joined the army in 1940 but was shortly declared medically unfit and to his regret

but not that of the rest of the family, he was demobbed and returned to the life of a publican.

My father David came from Failford, which was not much more than a school and a hall on the bank of the Wallamba River ten miles upstream from the coastal villages of Tuncurry and Forster and about thirty miles east of Wingham. My father's father, James Milliken, emigrated from Islandmagee in Northern Ireland in 1880 and took up land on the Wallamba. When he was established he returned to Northern Ireland, married a young woman called Helena Hill, and brought her back to his farm, named Magheramorne after his home in Islandmagee. They had nine children of whom my father was the youngest. As the youngest of nine there was no land for him to inherit, so he began a career in the Bank of New South Wales, before marrying my mother.



David Milliken seated, sister Jean on left

My mother's family arrived in Wingham as the town was becoming established. James Cross was born in Wincanton, Somerset England in 1812. He married Ann, surname unknown, and they had four children before they migrated to Australia around 1850. They had two more children in Dungog, before arriving in the Manning Valley around 1855, following which they had three more – ten in all.

The second son, Henry, was my great grandfather. He was born in 1838 in Somerset and died in 1923 in Wingham. Henry married Janet Lyall Ramsay in 1862 and *they* had ten children, of whom number seven was my grandfather, Henry George, known as Harry. He was born in Wingham in 1877 and died there in 1940. All the children from both generations seem to have lived reasonably long lives – long for the times, anyway. The only one we seemed to have anything to do with as I was growing up, and then only peripherally, was Harry's brother Cecil, who died in 1948 when I was 8. He lived next door to the Wingham Hotel behind a shop run by his wife, Sophia Gleeson, known as Aunty Soph. The Gleeson name seems to

weave through this narrative although it is unknown whether any or all of Gleesons mentioned are related.

Harry Cross married my grandmother, Catherine Reilly, in 1908. Catherine's parents were John Patrick Reilly of Tipperary, Ireland, and Sarah Jane Goodwin of Manchester, England, aged 32 and 30 respectively, who were married in Manchester in 1876. Catherine was born in Glebe on 21 June 1884. Catherine was Roman Catholic but Harry was Anglican and their children were raised Anglican.



Catherine?



Undeniably Harry, therefore probably Catherine

My mother, Thelma Lillian Cross, was born in the same year. Her sister Janet Lyall (after her grandmother, Janet Lyall Ramsay) – always known as Jenny, was born in 1915.



Thelma

Dressing up was a popular pastime of the age, and during Thelma's childhood it inevitably had a patriotic theme.



1917





Victory? 1919?



Irish themes were popular



Interesting use of hand tinting in this photograph

Catherine died of diphtheria aged 34 in 1920, when Thelma was eleven and Jenny was six.

In 1925 Harry married again, to Clara Browning, who brought three young nieces into the marriage. These girls, Annie, Ina and Clare Gleeson, were the children of Clara's sister's marriage to James Gleeson of Port Macquarie. Their mother had died in 1913, and my recollection is that their father was dead too and that Clara was their sole guardian. As their mother died in the year that Clare was born, it is possible that she died in childbirth. Clara and the Gleeson girls were Roman Catholics, but Harry and his daughters were and remained Anglicans. Nevertheless all five girls were sent to boarding school first at the convent in Cundletown, and then to Santa Sabina College in Strathfield, a school started by the Dominican nuns in 1894. The nuns never proselytised, and Thelma and Jenny learned tolerance and respect for the faith of others through their experience with the nuns of Santa Sabina.



Thelma at Santa



Jenny at Santa



Jenny's friends Barbara and Lucette C1930
They could be schoolgirls today



Growing up. The girls with Harry

By the time I can remember life at the Wingham Hotel, some years after Harry's death, Clara - referred to as "Aunt" by my mother and Jenny - had moved to Wauchope, and she and the Gleeson girls were only rarely mentioned, without either animosity or affection, and we rarely saw them. Why Aunt moved to Wauchope, and what financial arrangements were made for them, is unrecorded and was never spoken of in my hearing.

My brother Robert was born after the war, on the 13th of September 1946, so that by what could only have been coincidence, there was a similar age difference between him and me as there was between Thelma and Jenny.





Outside Stan Costa's café in Isabella Street

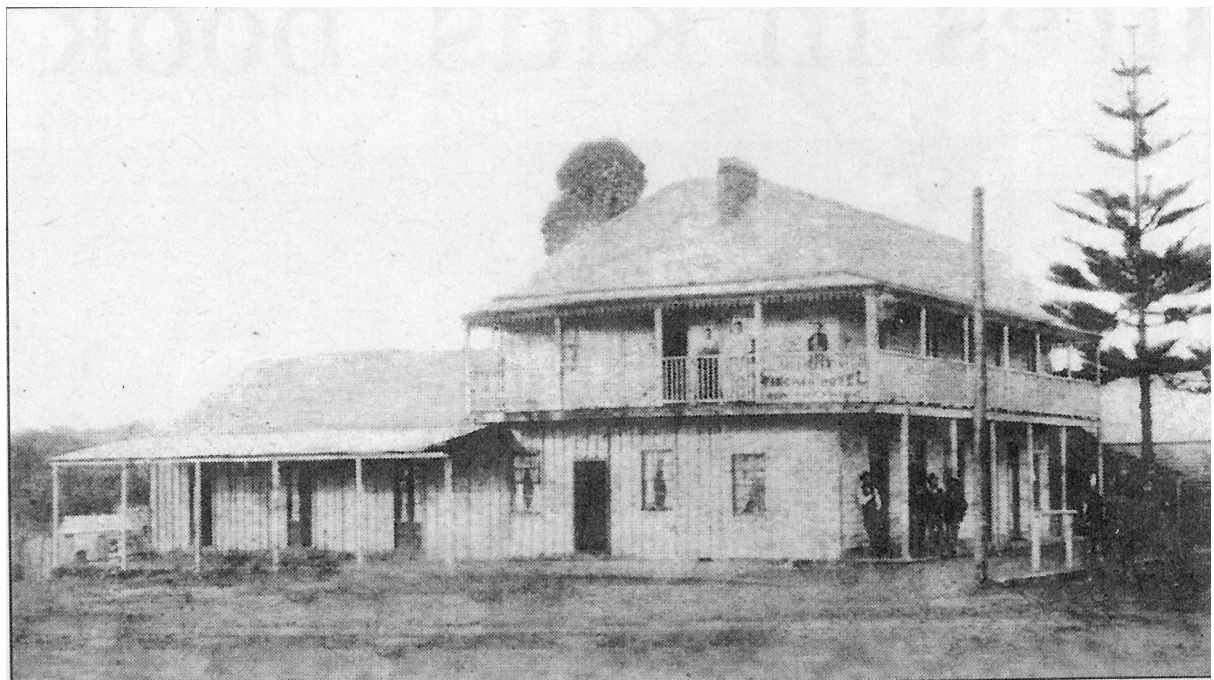


Robert, school on left, park behind

The Wingham Hotel

There had been a hotel on the site on the corner of Isabella and Wynter Streets since 1858, when it was known as the Lamb Inn. It was a change station for coach horses on the route north from Raymond Terrace.

The hotel was acquired by George Cross in 1882. This must have been George born in 1844 in Somerset, who died in Wingham in 1909, and therefore the uncle of Harry. George added the front, two storey section to the Lamb Inn and called it the Wingham Hotel.



1880's

When George acquired the business he took an advertisement in the Wingham Chronicle saying "Good stabling and paddocks for horses. An experienced groomsman has been engaged. A 'table d'hote' at 1 o'clock pm every day." At some point between 1882 and the early 1900's the business left the Cross ownership, but was bought back after the turn of the century by Harry, who also owned the cattle sale yards in Combined Street, among other business interests.



1940's

The hotel burned to the ground on the night of July 15, 2010. Just how or why the fire started is a matter of conjecture, but the devastation would not have been so complete had Harry Cross not made the decision in 1920 to rebuild it in weatherboard.



Harry Cross seated, centre

“He should have rebuilt it in brick”, Thelma was frequently heard to remark, and I am pleased that she never learned how prophetic her words came to be. But timber was the material of the coast, and the hotel in its prime was a remarkable edifice.

The building rambled and meandered, gracious and welcoming, its atmosphere as much a factor of the family’s open hearted management as its ad hoc design.

In our time it consisted of the main building, overlooking Isabella Street and the park, with ten-metre verandahs angled to catch whatever breeze stirred on a stifling Wingham midsummer afternoon. There was an extension facing onto Wynter Street with rooms above and an overflow dining room below, and on the other side was “Turks”, a deserted two story wooden building adjacent to Auntie Soph’s little shop opposite the school.



The earliest photograph we have, possibly soon after completion.
Harry Cross’ name can be seen between the name. Turks at far right

At the rear was a complex of outbuildings containing the laundry and the source of the hotel’s hot water, the donkey, a contraption the height of a man wrapped in asbestos and coke fed. The vegetable garden was separated from the laundry by a shaded path, and behind them stood the mighty shed. Half an acre of corrugated iron atop ironbark posts, it was erected by Harry Cross as shade and shelter for the horses and sulkies of the earlier era of visiting farmers who attended sales at his cattle yards across the street. Attached to the shed was a complex of stables and a harness room, a sample room and a long paddock which contained a large and comfortable chook yard to supply the hotel with eggs and Sunday dinner.

Although the hotel was still a vibrant centre of town activity, by the time of my childhood its heyday in fact was already past. Before the motor car became ubiquitous, travellers had a much greater need for accommodation. The two dining rooms, double kitchen and overflow bedrooms on the Wynter Street side and in

Turks were a reminder of past gatherings in town for events such as the annual show, balls and other festivities, along with the weekly cattle sale. By the 1940's travelling salesmen no longer displayed their wares in the sample room, a mysterious place whose windows were painted cream to prevent prying eyes from getting a free preview of the wares on display. The yellow light playing on dusty benches and the rather sombre atmosphere spoke of the times when the room had doubled as an emergency morgue. One such occasion was when six young men drowned in a boating accident on the Manning; our cousin Harry Baines, a boy at the time, was the only survivor.

The entrance to the hotel, in Isabella Street, was in the art deco style, and had a stone floor with the hotel's name inlaid in brass. A wooden jardiniere on long curved legs stood on either side of a wooden arch. The hotel's front door was never locked for this would have been pointless, as the central hall opened on to the back verandah with no door at all.

Through the arch were the stairs leading to the accommodation above. The curved stairs were bordered by a solid and shiny rail, which was both dangerous and exciting to slide down, a pastime naturally forbidden but undertaken anyway.

To the right of the entrance hall and stairs was a corridor leading to two heavily curtained and little-used parlours, one of which contained a piano and was occasionally the venue for a sing song after dinner. Both Jenny and Thelma were musical. Thelma had studied piano at Santa Sabina to A.Mus.A level and could play more or less anything by ear, with a lilting rhythm and a light touch on the pedal. Jenny had a trained contralto voice, vibrant and full bodied, so good that she could have sung professionally.

To the left of the entrance hall and stairs was the office and the bar. The dining room was behind the stairs and through the rear door of the entrance hall was a covered verandah which led to the kitchen and a small lawn enclosed by a high fence over which grew a prolific grape vine. This lawn was used by the family for childrens' parties, drinks in the cool of the summer evenings, and photographs.



Sue, Michael Moffatt, Michael Wunderlich, Gramme and little Carpenter



Jenny, David, Sue, Harry Baines



Thelma, Jenny with Sue, Harry Baines

Everything was painted cream. Wood was varnished dark brown. The outside verandah posts were painted green.

The exception was the dining room which was painted white, a place of starched linen table cloths and linen serviettes folded into fancy shapes, taught to each new waitress as she started work by Thelma or Jenny. You entered the dining room through a kind of pantry area where cutlery and crockery were kept, to a high ceilinged room which looked out through tall windows on to the lawn. The menu was typed each day by Thelma on the office typewriter. Dinner was always a soup, a roast and a dessert, lunch a "cold collation". Butter was shaped into small rolls with the use of two butter pats, which was something of an art. The butter pats were wooden spatulas with handles and long narrow, and very sharp, grooves on one side. The squares of butter were rolled backwards and forwards between the grooves. These small instruments are burned into my memory because I occasionally copped one on the bare backside if I was caught swearing. Although extremely unpleasant it proved futile as a deterrent, which Thelma must have realised by the time Robert started swearing, as he was spared this nasty experience. Later the butter pats were retired and a more modern metal device scraped the butter from the one pound block.

There were six tables in the dining room, which each seated six people, although the room was almost never at capacity, which was just as well as the kitchen would never have coped. We had our own family table, nearest the door. Opposite was

the “permanents” table, and casuals sat one behind. It was always cool and quiet in the dining room, as it was insulated from the summer heat and the noisy ambience of a busy pub by its high ceiling, the servery at its entrance and the rooms at the front of the building.

The kitchen was built separately off the rear verandah as a fire precaution. Beside the kitchen was a small room with a sink where Jenny did the flowers for the jardinières in the lobby and the dining room. Cut flowers were in short supply and usually she arranged long-stemmed arum lilies, which she brightened up by dusting the blooms various pastel shades with powdered chalk.

The kitchen was a long room equipped with two enormous black double fuel stoves and two large lino-covered pine tables. At this time only one of the stoves was used. Its capacity was more than enough to cater for the number of residents.

I usually ate my breakfast in the kitchen, quite often steak and a couple of fried eggs. Not an ideal diet but it didn't seem to have an adverse effect on my development.

The kitchen, badly ventilated, was very hot in the summer, which may have explained the erratic behaviour of the series of cooks who came and went. During the war and just after, labour was in short supply. The one constant was Aunty, no relation to us. Everyone called her that and she called Thelma Mrs. Milliken and Jenny, Miss Cross. Her surname was Magee, or may not have been, it may have been a name invented by my father, in response to a question to which he did not have an answer. She was probably in her sixties, lean and wizened, with a simian face and grey hair escaping in wisps from a hurriedly tied and uncared for bun. She lived, grace and favour, in a room beside the laundry.

Aunty's official title was laundress, but she helped around the house and cooked when we couldn't get anyone else. Sadly, her cooking stints never lasted long, as she had a fatal attraction to the sherry which went into the daily trifle. If Thelma or Jenny did not stand and watch her pour it into the bowl, and they rarely had the time to do so, the sherry went into Aunty and vanilla went into the trifle. She had a weakness for other forms of drink as well, and her periods of employment were regularly terminated. “I'll have to sack Aunty,” Thelma would say, steeling herself for a scene and tears and wailing and promises never to do it again. This usually happened after either she or Jenny had had to get into the kitchen and finish off cooking a meal for the guests when Aunty was drunk as a skunk and couldn't continue. After a period of abject sobriety Aunty would be given another chance and the cycle would repeat itself.

Upstairs were the bedrooms, most of which had doors opening on to the verandah. At one end of the long dark corridor was our flat. In here was my parents' bedroom, Robert's bedroom and my sleepout verandah, which was glassed in with Cooper louvres. There was a sitting room with a fireplace, a radio and comfortable sofas, and a kitchenette. Jenny's living quarters were off the sitting room on the street side, a sunny, glassed-in section of the wide main verandah where the floor seemed to slope outwards and downwards. You always got up a bit of speed when you entered.

Our flat was a place of peace, of retreat from the constant demands of the bar, the kitchen, the house guests and the staff. When we were in the flat, we were a family,

and the family came first. When my parents were anywhere else, the business came first. Sundays were special, the bar was closed and we would spend time together, either visiting friends, going for a swim in Dingo Creek or in the winter sitting around the fire in the living room, reading books and talking. On Sunday nights Thelma made jaffles in the electric fry pan in the kitchenette for our dinner.

Our sitting room was the scene of many a party, particularly during the war when soldiers came home on leave. I would lie awake in bed as they laughed, sang and sometimes cried when someone had had too much gin.

The bar was the hotel's money-maker. It was divided by a horseshoe-shaped counter and an elaborate panelled overhead bottle shelf, all of which were made out of solid red cedar. The bar counter was polished daily and glowed a deep, burnished garnet. The bar was strictly off limits to children. However on Sundays, when the bar was closed, sometimes my friends and I were allowed in. Then it was silent and dark, and smelled of disinfectant and cedar polish, and we would mix cocktails of cherry cheer or sarsaparilla with lemonade and feel like millionaires because we didn't have to pay. This was a second generation pastime, I was to learn in 2007, when Thelma and Jenny's 100-year old cousin Gladys reported how as children she and Thelma "... on a Sunday when the Hotel was closed we would tie teatowels around our waists and pretend to serve drinks in the bar."



The cedar bar
Clara and Harry behind the counter, Leo Gleeson between them.
Tommy Gollan propping up the bar

In the floor of the bar behind the counter was a trapdoor, below which were a set of almost vertical wooden steps into a cellar. One day David stepped backward into the open hole where the trapdoor should have been and went straight through.

Although he avoided paraplegia, he suffered terrible back pain forever after. The cellar was a concrete space which held the beer kegs, which were lowered through a hole in the footpath above on straps. The kegs from Tooth & Co were wooden with iron bands, and later Grafton Brewery provided its product in modern aluminium kegs. The kegs made their own particular sound as they were delivered and removed - deep and resonant when they were full, and hollow and echoing when they were departing empty. The hiss of compressed air when they were disconnected from the Temprite which forced the beer up into the taps was a high pitched scream, escalating to a small explosion as the last of the gas departed. The cellar smelled slightly sour, of fermenting hops.

Next to the bar on the ground floor was the heart of the hotel, The Office. It was a crowded room with an expansive brown leather sofa and comfortable armchairs, Thelma's Cutler rolltop desk and a fireplace in which a coke fire burned in winter. The Office was where all the decisions were made, where people gathered, where visitors called, where Jenny would sprawl in an armchair at the end of a busy day and say "I wouldn't go out tonight if Clark Gable asked me." It was where I always had to report in by nightfall, where town gossip was aired, and where staff were interviewed and dismissed. (Except for Auntie, who had to be trapped wherever she could be found, shakily anticipating Thelma's wrath). All of which took place to the background noise of the bar, a low hollow intermittent sound of glasses and chatter through the afternoon, building to the roar of a 747 warming up by six o'clock, followed by my father's repeated "Time, gentlemen please," followed eventually by descending silence and the sound of glasses being washed up and the till emptied, and the end of the day.

Opposite the hotel, on the corner of Wynter Street where the shops began, stood a two storey nineteenth century brick building with an upstairs verandah over the street. This building was demolished some years ago, to make way for a car yard. The building was owned by stock and station agent George Easton whose offices were on the ground floor. Above was a flat, which was reached by outside stairs from the rear of the building, where "Auntie Flo" lived. Again, no relation, Auntie being a common term at that time to describe, as well as blood relations, anyone familiar but not related. It could be confusing. Auntie Flo was a friendly, theatrical woman who loved children. She would invite us after school to come up to her flat and ply us with lemonade and cakes. She would play the piano and sing and occasionally dance for us, in a kind of Isadora Duncan way, with swaying and waving of scarves. Thelma never objected when I told her I was going to Auntie Flo's, but the look on her face and a shared glance with Jenny indicated that she would have preferred the situation not to arise. Auntie Flo was never present at any of our family and friends' gatherings, and I could never get my mother to talk about her. This puzzled me at the time, as we liked her so much. It was not until fifty years later that I was told by a contemporary - who no doubt got the gossip from his parents - that Auntie Flo was George Easton's mistress.



Auntie Flo's flat and the external stairs captured in the background of a birthday party photograph. The long shadows add to the mystery of the shaded windows. Was she watching, and wishing to be at the party?

As small children we spent a lot of time playing "down the back" in an unsupervised way which might be frowned upon today, in the stables and the yard. The stables, rarely used by then, were where the horses had rested while the sulkies and carts were parked under the shed. My pony used a loose box which opened into the bottom paddock. It had a hard dirt floor and a feedbox which I filled with chaff mixed with oats from the feed room.

In a corner at the bottom of the paddock on the Combined Street corner was the air raid shelter, a long trench covered over by railway sleepers and earth. The air raid shelter proved to be redundant, as the war never came to Wingham. Nearby was a very old mandarin tree, with twisted, lichen covered limbs rather like the arms of a strong old woman. It produced pungent mandarins. Along the stable wall was a rampant choko vine whose enormous, coarse, pale green chokoes grew in abundant and unstoppable supply. Although forbidden, we ate the mandarins ("you'll get a stomach ache") and trashed the chokoes which we hated, in a vain attempt to keep them out of the kitchen.

A concrete septic tank was sunk into the ground and it made a convenient place to light a small fire and cook that gastronomic sensation, flour and water on a stick embellished with butter and golden syrup, when we learned how to make it at Guides. Beside the septic tank was a pile of railway sleepers (perhaps left over from

the air raid shelter) and the skeleton of a model T Ford, slowly returning to its maker among the paspalum and stinging nettles. We climbed over the railway sleepers, drove the model T, and played cubbies in the air raid shelter.



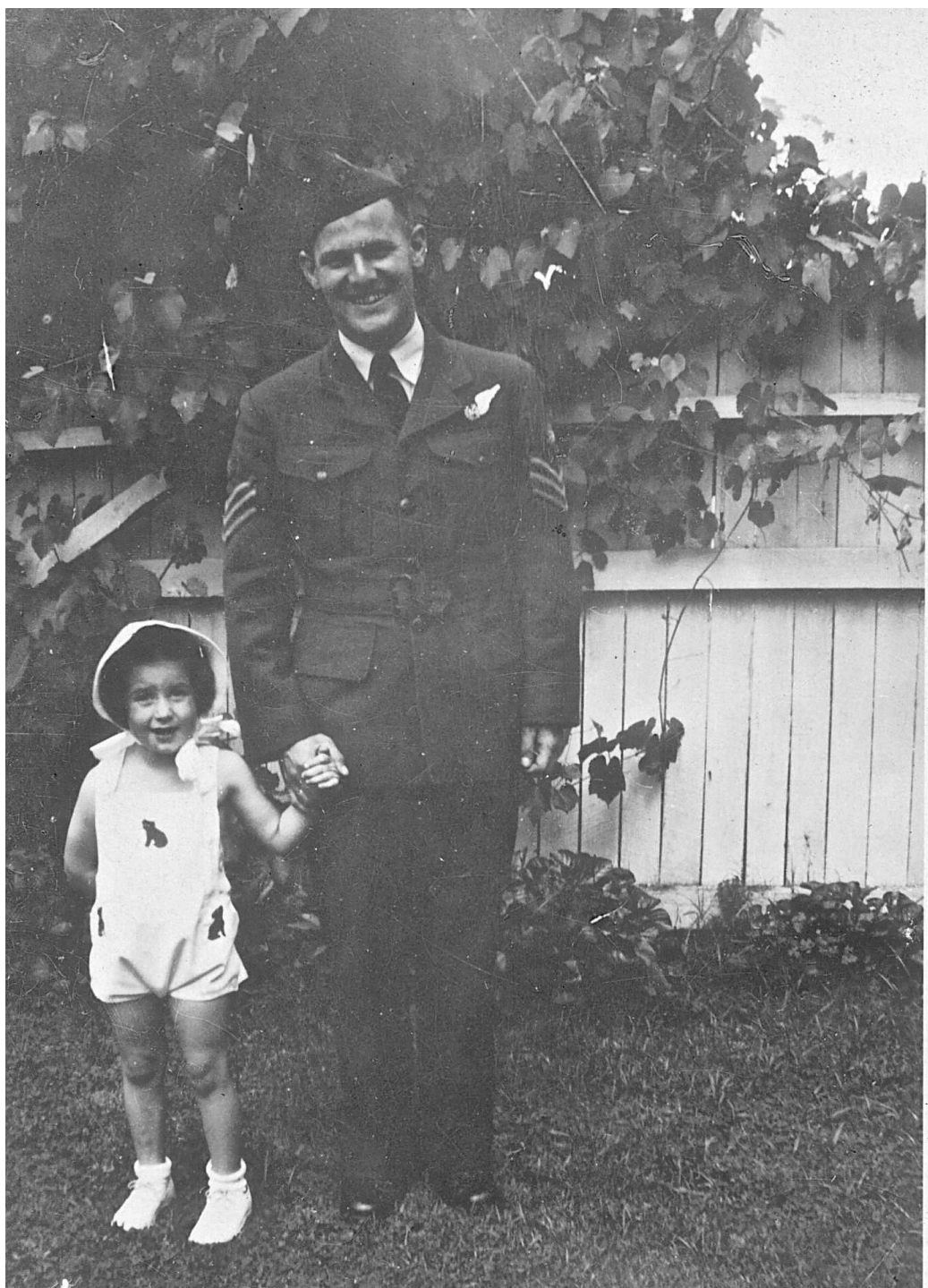
No photographs exist of the shed in its heyday. This was taken after the fire, from where the chookyard once was. Subsequent owners had already demolished the stables, feed room and sample room. The shed itself has now been demolished.

My first pony, Jumbo, was a patient veteran whom my parents had acquired from Betty Hill, daughter of the auctioneer who lived further down Isabella Street, when she outgrew him. I broke my arm climbing onto Jumbo bareback when I was four. I never had any fear of horses and the old white gelding could not be blamed, he did not move a hair, standing rock still and uninterested while Michael Wunderlich, under my instructions, gave me a leg up which launched me over and down the other side in one movement, and I landed on my elbow.



Trying out Jumbo before purchase, at the Hills

Hotels like ours were family affairs and during the war Maudie, a relative of grandfather Harry Cross, lived in the spare wing of the building, upstairs. Maudie used to allow me to drink my tea out of a saucer, which annoyed my mother. Maudie's son Harry Baines, grandfather's namesake who had survived drowning as a boy, was in the Air Force. He was a navigator in bombers and Maudie was constantly anxious. She had reason to be, as Harry was shot down twice, the second time into the sea, and he survived a further crash on his way to hospital after being rescued. He was badly traumatised by his war experience but overcame it to marry Nita, daughter of cattle dealer Charlie Chapman and, starting with very little, to become a successful owner of many hotels. He always remembered my grandfather with gratitude and affection for teaching him the business. I adored Harry, he was handsome and gentle and we had a special bond.



With Harry, home on leave

Also during the war, Tad Wunderlich and her son Michael lived with us for a few years. Tad was the wife of Reg, who was my father's best friend. David and Reg met in Coffs Harbour when David was just out of school and starting in the bank.



David second from left with arm around Reg. Cool sunglasses.

Now Reg was an officer in the army, and after following him around army camps in the early part of the war, Tad and Michael came to live with us when Reg was sent overseas. Michael was close to me in age, a year or so younger, and Lee was born at the end of the war, close in age to Robert.



The four of us at Forster baths

When David was in camp in Singleton, before his discharge, he ran into Reg unexpectedly, shortly after Reg had been commissioned. Very pleased with his new pips, Reg stood up straight and waited for my father to salute him. "G'day you old bastard." my father said.

Tad was lissom and beautiful, a blonde who had been Miss New South Wales and a fashion model who was photographed by Laurence le Guay and Max Dupain. She and Thelma barely knew each other until she came to live with us, but they became close friends. Tad was dry and funny, and she and Thelma made a vow never to fall out over the kids, which must have tested them at times, because Michael and I found plenty of things for them to be cross about. When Reg eventually came home from the war, they returned to Coffs Harbour but we spent every Christmas holidays together at Forster for a long time.



Thelma, David, Sue and Tad on holiday at Forster

After the war we had a series of long term guests at the Wingham Hotel, the "permanents", some of whom lived at the hotel for years. The Laurences, Molly and Clive, arrived from Adelaide to set up an accounting practice. They stayed with us until they found a place to live. Captain Kensitt, a quiet survivor of Changi, lived with us for several years and opened a small shop in the town. Keith Blackley, son of the commander of the mounted police in Sydney, a pharmacist, was followed by George Vaile, also a pharmacist. George's son Mark became leader of the National Party and Deputy Prime Minister.

Then there was my brother's great favourite, Miss Paterson, (Always called Miss Paterson, never Betty, although she was young and friendly). She arrived to become Wingham's Health Inspector, and she stayed with us for several years when Robert was small. We thought Miss Paterson and The Captain might make a double act, but that was not to be. She worked hard, was popular, and had a lot of time for a little boy and she and Robert became very close. Home from work at a sensible five o'clock, she would keep Robert company and read to him in the frantic early evening hours, when Thelma was busy finishing the business day.

In addition to the permanents who were considered friends as well as clients, there was a procession of regulars, the commercial travellers of the day who no longer needed the sample room, but nevertheless still did all their business face to face. There was always a buzz of excitement when one of the favourites passed through, with a few drinks in the office before dinner.

The management team of Thelma, David and Jenny was an uneasy one at times. Jenny was lively and charismatic, but she and Thelma sometimes disagreed. Their relationship was complex and not always smooth sailing. David did his best to navigate these occasionally rocky waters and did it in the way of the Presbyterian Irish, by keeping his own counsel and staying out of the way. Jenny and Thelma did however share a sense of humour which enabled them to see the funny side of the world around them, and my memory of them sharing a joke and laughing together is stronger than of their sometimes quite spectacular disagreements.



With me and Michael, the laundry and Auntie's domain behind.

Life in Town

Wingham in the 1950's, like Harrods, had everything necessary to sustain life. Everyone knew everyone, and no one locked their houses, or their cars. A stroll down the main street would involve several stops for conversation, as would a visit to any of the shops. Life moved at an orderly pace, livened once a week by sale day, when the farmers and their families came to town, to buy and sell, and to shop. The saleyards had moved by now, from Combined Street to the edge of town, out near the butter factory. The golf course had moved too, from the Gollans' farm on the Taree Road, to behind the showground, with a purpose built club house which would in time be joined by a motel.

On sale day a few still came to town by horse and sulky, which would be left in the shade of the shed at one of the hotels. Others came by truck with a load of cattle for sale or a plan to take a load of jersey cows home. If the farmer didn't own a truck, arrangements would be made for Charlie Chapman to drive the cattle to or from with his teenage helpers – including a pintsize drover called John Dawson who Charlie nicknamed 'Johnny Swallowpuddin' - and a couple of kelpies.

The annual show brought the country to town. The showground on the Gloucester Road filled with horses, cattle for the campdraft, and town and country folk out for a day's entertainment, lunch in the CWA hall and a beer at one of the booths run by the hotels.

Notable friends of my parents after the war included Eddie and Beth Summerville, the Klinebergs, the Laurences and the Machins.

Beth Abbott, after her time as a dancing girl, had married Bob Abbott – were they cousins? While his brother Jack was away at the war, returning home a decorated colonel, Bob managed the family farm. Bob died suddenly, very young, from one of the illnesses which today would be easily treated, leaving Beth with two young daughters, Margot and Gillian. Margot was the elder, two or three years older than me, and Gillian was my contemporary. Later Beth married Eddie Summerville, a handsome dairy farmer with a spectacular broken nose, the result of an altercation with a bull in which the bull came off best.



David and Thelma with Eddie and Beth

Eddie's life had been touched by tragedy too. His first wife had died leaving him with a baby son, Phillip. On top of the three small children they brought to the marriage, Eddie and Beth then had two sons of their own, Harry and Frank. They lived on a lush property on the Comboyne road which sloped down to the deep reaches of Dingo Creek, a tributary of the Manning. Dingo Creek was the source of Wingham's water supply, and the pumping station was a few hundred metres upstream from the Summervilles' stony creek crossing. While the adults sat around on the verandah on hot summer Sunday afternoons drinking beer, we rode our horses down the bluff to the creek, slipped the saddles off and slid bareback into the deep swimming hole under the high bank. The ponies loved to swim, and we guided them across the pool to the rope hanging down over the deepest spot, climbed up onto the horse's back and, teetering, swung out and away, letting go of the reins and catapulting out into the water with a great splash. The horse would swim to where its feet met the water-worn pebbles near the crossing, and wait patiently till we swam to collect it and do it again.

On Tuesday nights Eddie came into town to Rotary, and afterwards he always called on Thelma and David and shared a couple of drinks before heading off back to the farm.

Jack Abbott, Beth's brother in law, still lived on the family farm at Karaak Flat, on the road to Nowendoc. His homestead was built of unpainted cedar, shaded by enormous walnut trees and cooled by the pure water of the Manning as it flowed down to Wingham. Jack lived a no frills bachelor existence on his farm, but dressed up, he was blonde and handsome in white tie and tails, for a ball at the Town Hall.

David Klineberg arrived in 1947 to take over the medical practice of our family doctor, Dr. Smith, and the family quickly integrated into the social life of the town, David's wife Beryl becoming one of my mother's closest friends.



Beryl Klineberg preferred photographing to being photographed. But she was caught here on a shopping expedition in Sydney, left. Gwen Attwater, Tad's sister, right, Thelma in the middle.

The Klinebergs were, so far as I am aware, the only Jewish family in the town. I only gradually discovered this as I grew up, as their religious distinction was never mentioned by anyone, at least in my hearing. As far as I was concerned they could have been Presbyterians or Methodists, I just never had cause to think about it.

Beryl and David had four children. Two girls, Robin and Lesley, born early in the war, were my contemporaries and two boys, Peter and Bruce, who were born after David returned from service in the Pacific and supervising medical treatment for the repatriated prisoners of the Japanese. They were Robert's age.



L-R Bruce Klineberg, Lesley Klineberg, Robert, Sue, Peter Klineberg, Robin Klineberg, Michael & Lee Wunderlich
Forster lakeside baths, C1950

David worked more or less around the clock, seven days a week, in the way of country doctors then. House calls were made an hour or two's drive away up perilous bush roads, at any time of the day or night, in any weather. Beryl, a triple-certificated nurse, managed the practice and carried on an active social life among the wives of Wingham. Generous to a fault, she oversaw quiet but valuable charity initiatives, adoption of babies born to Wingham's single mothers (there seemed to be a lot of them), and gifts and endless meals to her friends. One hesitated to admire anything in the Klineberg household, lest the admirer be ushered out the door with the item under their arm. She and David were fabulously late to every social outing, mostly, but not always, caused by the constant demands on David's professional skills. Beryl was an avid photographer, and acquired an 8mm movie camera which recorded hours of footage of out of focus children running away laughing.

The Laurences arrived for Clive to take up the town's accountancy practice around the same time. For some months they boarded at the hotel while looking for a house to buy, and in this way Molly became fast friends with Thelma. Their daughter Catherine was another of Robert's contemporaries. Clive had been an officer in the army reserve and so although a small man, he carried himself with military bearing and spoke with precision. He smoked a pipe and liked a good whisky. Molly was a big woman, warm hearted and open. They were, for Wingham, intellectuals and brought with them some city sophistication and interest in literature and politics.

The other family who were important to our lives were the Machins. There were two brothers, in partnership in the local sawmill, Wilfred and Mervyn. Merv seemed to

move in different circles, I think the brothers were not all that close. But although older than my parents, Wilfred and Nina - who was always referred to as Mrs Machin, or Mrs Wilf, even by her close friends - were good friends and moved in the circle of Summervilles, Klinebergs, Laurences and so on. Mrs Wilf was in fact an Abbott, she was Jack's sister and therefore Beth's sister in law, so the Machins and the Summervilles were close also.

The Machins had four children, Fay, Shirley, John and Lesley. Lesley was the baby of the family, at least ten years younger than the other three. She and I met at kindergarten and have been friends ever since, which now adds up to 70 years.



Lesley and me on the way to Lesley's after school

Other families I remember include the Blenkins and the Maitlands. Bertie Blenkin was the dentist, he started on my teeth when I was about five, with the old motorised drill which turned several generations off oral hygiene. His wife, known as Mrs Blenk, was an elegant woman with quite a loud voice and blue hair. The Blenkins were the Machins' age and the wives were friends, although I'm not sure about the husbands. Their children were older than us. The eldest, John, married Fay Machin. Next came Alice who was Shirley Machin's friend, and finally Harold, who was Thelma's Godson, so there must have been a solid friendship there, too.

The Maitlands were the family who owned the eponymous clothing store in Bent Street. I have a dim memory of the older generation, and there was a daughter, Molly, who I think moved away quite early. My parents' good friends were the son John and his wife Nan. John had been a pilot in the War, and had been shot down and nursed back to health by Nan, an English nurse, who married him and came to live in Wingham. They had one son, Robert's age, young John. John walked with a pronounced limp as a result of his war injuries, and wore a brace. Nan and Thelma bonded over their shares in The Northern Champion, a Taree newspaper which floated and then inexplicably went into receivership, and they both lost quite a lot of money which they had invested on the assurances of a friend that it would be a good opportunity. John had a brother, Bill, who was intellectually disabled but helped out in the store.

The Allans, Gwyn and Ray, ran Moxey's general store on the corner of Farquhar and Bent Streets, which is now the Wingham museum. Gwyn was a Moxey and had inherited the store. She was a natural blonde with handsome, Scandinavian good looks. Ray was a small man who must in his youth have been handsome, but by the time I remember him he was florid and somewhat the worse for wear. He was a particular pal of my father's, possibly because they were both married to the proprietor, not an easy thing in that time.

Frank and Netta Summerville were also part of the circle. Frank was Eddie's younger brother, suave and handsome and the town's protestant solicitor. Netta had a dry sense of humour.



Beth, Netta Summerville, Molly Laurence and Thelma

The town had the sectarian divide which was the norm at that time. Catholic kids were educated by the nuns of St. Joseph behind the red brick church next to Moxey's store. Protestants and Catholics didn't socialise much although it was not until I had been gone from Wingham for many years that I realised that there was a divide. My family was extremely tolerant, possibly helped by Thelma and Jenny's positive experience at a Catholic school, but I also think that it was not in their natures to judge people on who they were, but on what they were. The other hotel, McIlwaine's, on the diagonally opposite corner of the park from the Wingham Hotel, was the Catholic pub and I suppose the McIlwaine's had their own circle of Catholic friends, but as there was a less than friendly business rivalry between the two establishments, discussion of what went on at McIlwaine's was rare in my hearing.

My parents' circle socialised occasionally with the Stacks, who lived on the high riverbank near the Maitlands and the Machins. Ray Stack, a diminutive man who always wore a hat, was the Catholic solicitor. His wife, a nervous woman, occasionally gave birthday parties for their two daughters to which Lesley and I were invited. They also had several sons, who in later years were to transform themselves into Stacks The Lawfirm, a well-known Sydney litigation firm.

Leo Gleeson, Harry Cross' friend, was also Catholic. Leo when I first remember him had a garage at the bottom of Isabella Street, where the supermarket now stands. A later venture, subdividing land at One Mile Beach at Forster, was ahead of its time and lost him a lot of money. He was married to Alice, a quiet and delicate woman – who nevertheless lived into her nineties – and they had four children. Alison was about my age and we used to spend time together occasionally. One of the younger boys, Paul, was Robert's age and they did the same. The eldest son, Murray, became Chief Justice of the High Court of Australia, one might say Wingham's most distinguished son.

One year Michael Wunderlich and I caught whooping cough, and when we recovered we were sent to convalesce on a farm on the Comboyne, a verdant high plateau between the Manning and the Hastings Valleys, where the air is crisp during the day and the nights are sharp and cool. Michael's grandmother, a dry and practical woman with a melodic laugh whom her grandchildren and everyone else called Gramme, came with us, and the three of us spent idyllic days mucking about with the farm children, paddling in the shallow burn which bubbled in crystalline purity down through the farm, fishing for yabbies and riding behind the great quiet Clydesdale on the wooden slide which transported milk cans and farm necessities around the property.



Michael on Gramme's right, me tucked in on her left

Thelma and David usually owned a small dairy farm along with the hotel, and sometimes we would visit these beautiful, emerald green paddocks with their purebred jersey herd to talk to the share farmer, who did all the work in return for a home and independence. Sharefarmers, who usually had a tribe of kids to use as free labour, worked seven days a week because the cows had to be milked twice a day, every day. They were milked in the early dawn so that the milk could be transported to the gate to meet the milk truck in the cool of the morning. In the evening the milk was separated, the skim milk fed to the pigs and the incredible, rich, thick jersey cream kept overnight in a cool, dark, whitewashed room with a high ceiling, a concrete floor and wire gauze on windows to allow the breeze to circulate without insects. The cream then went out in the morning to the factory with the fresh milk.

Wingham, in a valley surrounded by hills, was hot in the summer, and by January it was usually baking. Flies droned in the still of the day and mosquitoes attacked in battalions at night, unless you used a mosquito net, which made the heat airless and stifling to breathe.

Those who could, escaped to the coast for as long as possible during January and February. The exodus began on Boxing Day, and lasted for the duration of the school holidays. Fathers sometimes left their families at the beach and returned to Wingham for a few days each week to keep the business going.

The exodus was split between Black Head and Forster. Families owned cottages on the hill overlooking Black Head, or rented beach houses in Forster. The facilities at both beaches were then very basic. Black Head had only one small shop, run by a tyrant of a woman who made her own rules and had everyone using it in a way that suited her, not necessarily the customer.

Forster was a village, with a proper main street which ran from the punt across Wallis Lake which gave unreliable access from Wingham, Taree and Tuncurry on the north side.

In our case, we decamped to Forster for the entire month of January, renting a cottage with the Wunderliches, who travelled down from Coffs Harbour. Jenny ran the hotel during our absence, and when we returned, she took off in her Flying Standard, a small sporty Vauxhall with a soft hood, and spent February at Forster.



Forster beach, the Casino and baths behind



After the holidays ponies were retrieved from the farms which had given them some freedom through the summer and were returned to stables or town paddocks. School recommenced, everyone went back to work and the life of the town went on for another year.

In 1954 the government extended hotel licensing hours from 6 pm to 10 pm, thus ending the six o'clock swill, but changing forever the comfortably relaxed life of the country publican. My family decided they did not want to live the changed lifestyle that 10 o'clock closing would bring, so they sold the hotel. We moved to a farm in Gloucester, and Jenny married and moved to Sydney. Eighty years or so of connection to the Wingham Hotel came to an end.

Queens Park, NSW
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