



The History of the Ashburton Licensing Trust;

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Alcohol might be just a part of life in the Ashburton District today, but for many years its consumption was banned in Ashburton. In the early years hotels and bars were seen as a useful institution where men could gather for social intercourse. However, there was also ongoing criticism of the effects of alcohol on pioneering families with allegations that men were spending more in one night on grog than their families spent in a month on food.

Hotel bar rooms were on borrowed time with the temperance and no licence movements combining their strength to force the closure of all Ashburton hotel bars on June 30, 1903. At that time there were six hotels in the town, with others in Tinwald, Mt Somers and Hinds. Two hotels in Methven and Rakaia and one at Chertsey were not included in the licence ban. Prohibition saw rapid increase in the number of sly-grog shops - and in traffic between Ashburton and Chertsey.

Over the next 25 years polls were held calling for the restoration of licences and while there was majority support, to overturn the alcohol ban a three fifths majority was needed. Ashburton was to remain dry until 1949 but there was strong agitation for restoration throughout the 1940s. In 1949 a vote for restoration was taken and exceeded the three fifths majority needed. That vote came with the condition licences would be restored to hotels but that they would be run under community management through a licensing trust.

That decision saw the birth of the Ashburton Licensing Trust in early 1950 with a six member board elected. Later that year the Trust opened two bottle stores in Havelock Street and Alford Forest Road and purchased the Grand Central (Devon) and Somerset Hotel. The Devon's bars opened in 1951, the first in the district for 47 years and those at the Somerset a year later.

When bottle stores opened they had customers waiting at the door, and did a steady trade all day. The average purchaser spent less than four shillings on liquor that day and all up 360 customers were served. During 1953 the Trust completed hotels at Hinds and Mt Somers and tabled plans for a hotel at Mayfield. The first decade was difficult as the Trust battled to make money and gain public acceptance. A bottle store opened in Tinwald in 1961 and the Tinwald Tavern in 1966.

The Trust's fortunes began to turn with its first return of funds to the community in 1961, with a 300 pound donation to the Sport Hall. Solid trading ensured that in the 1966/67 financial year it made a tax paid profit of \$38,144. Total liquor sales were \$780,400 and donations amounted to \$600. In its first 17 years of operation the Trust had achieved a total turnover of \$8,396,814.

The six o'clock swill ruled drinking patterns, with men crowding into bars at the end of the working day to drink as much beer as possible before 'supping-up' time of 15 minutes was announced before the bars shut at 6pm. The first rumblings that the six o'clock swill might have overstayed its welcome emerged during the 1960s with the growing restaurant industry saying the law made it difficult to sell alcohol with meals. A referendum held in September 1967 saw 64 per cent of voters' support 10 o'clock closing and the new hours were introduced in October that year.

The Trust settled in to the new, freer trading environment, consolidating its place as the sole player in the Ashburton hospitality industry. It continued to make money and to disburse profits back into the community. In 1969 it started work on the biggest project in its history, one that would become its flagship venue, the Hotel Ashburton.

As dining out became a more common place occurrence, the Trust's liquor monopoly began to irk independent entrepreneurs who wanted to establish their own restaurants, outside of trust control. The first to break the Trust stranglehold were Marion and John Gardiner with their Mona Square restaurant Chandler House. Diners were able to buy alcohol on the premise, an option previously only available at Trust outlets.

In 1983 the Trust had a record turnover, \$7.5 million, with business at the Hotel Ashburton up 75 per cent. Business continued to improve but clouds were gathering on the horizon indicating the good times would not last. The late 1980s were tough. The Trust not only had to deal with a struggling economy, it was also again dealing with public criticism over alleged secretiveness of its activities and an inadequate return of funds to the community. Alcohol started to become available in some supermarkets after the passing of the 1989 Sale of Liquor Act but because Ashburton was a licensing trust area this option was not available. There was growing unrest among Ashburton supermarkets; local owners wanted the option of selling liquor and they gained sufficient support in the community force a poll in 1993. This was narrowly lost – by just over 100 votes – with the status quo remaining.

Five years later in 1998 a second poll was held. Again the status quo won the day.

In 2004 all of Ashburton off-licences were Trust establishments and the supermarkets opted to have a third attempt at over turning the trust's monopoly. They gathered forces, mounted a campaign and the issue was put to the vote. In November 20, 2004, 54 years after it was formed, the Ashburton Licensing Trust lost its monopoly on liquor sales in Ashburton, by less than 300 votes. The first supermarket liquor sales were made in January 2005.

The Trust had two options. It could continue with the same business model and watch its profitability decline, or it could re-think and re-shape to meet the new market in which it was forced to operate. It chose the latter and in the following years became a slick, commercial operation. It thought big, aimed high, struggled at times but emerged as a profitable organisation that continued with its original philosophy of returning money every year to the community. That business model saw it open new businesses, reinvent existing business and, after a year or two of pain, it become a high profile, high profit, high performing business.

The history of the Trust can't be seen in isolation – it's genealogy is closely aligned to that of the Ashburton Community, the Trust continues to identify new opportunities, make changes to the existing outlets owned and managed by the Trust and to look for new ways to support the Ashburton community.

The Trusts' DNA heritage includes involvement in everything from arts and culture; the Ashburton Operatic Society and the Society of Arts, to significant community projects such as the Events Centre Tennis Pavilion, the Multi Cultural Bite event, the A&P Show, the Santa Parade and the new EA Networks Stadium.

Sports within the District have been a major beneficiary of profits from the Trust with donations to everything from cricket to netball, basketball, and of course rugby and the Sport Mid Canterbury Volunteer of the Year and Sportsperson of the Year Awards. Special Interest groups such as the Caged Bird Society and the Ashburton Aero Club have also received support from the Trust. There are a raft of other organisations that the Trust supports in the form of donations, prizes, gift vouchers and more.

Exciting plans are in the pipeline for the Trust with phase one of the Hotel Ashburton renovations completed in March 2012, entailing a re-investment back into the Hotel of \$1.8m, including accommodation rooms, Clearwater Restaurant & Lounge. Phase two of the renovation program is about to commence, including renovation of the conference and event facilities, planned for completion September 2013 – just in time for the all important Wedding and Christmas function seasons.

Also due for completion in time for Summer is the addition of pavement dining – an extension of Braided Rivers Restaurant & Bar, to include seating on Burnett Street, allowing diners to enjoy their meal outside on our glorious mid-Canterbury summer afternoons, or perhaps sup a lazy glass of wine on a balmy autumn evening.

Not to be outdone Speight's Ale House is also earmarked for renovation to occur simultaneously with earthquake strengthening work. This project will take place over the next six months and see Speight's Ale House Ashburton adopt the new look and feel for the Ale House franchise.

These are indeed exciting times for the Trust and the Ashburton community – our future is looking bright, the opportunities for growth abound and we look forward to the next step in our journey.

Since its inception, the trust has returned more than \$14 million to the Ashburton District.