The Ship Inn Hotel:
a Story of South Brisbane and Southbank

Our understanding of the history of an area, town or even a city can be greatly enhanced through focusing on the history of a particular street or building. The best-known Australian example of this would be Professor Geoffrey Bolton’s *Daphne Street* in which he encapsulates the history of northern Perth through the example of the street where he was born and raised. Numerous semi-fictional, semi-biographical works set in Brisbane achieve something of the same, with the best-known example being David Malouf’s *Twelve Edmondstone Street* which paints a picture of West End in the 1940s and 50s mainly based on the story of one house and street. Other Brisbane examples include Nick Earl’s *Zigzag Street*, Hugh Lunn’s *Over the Top with Jim*, and the recently released, *Seventeen Browning Street*.¹

The story of the Ship Inn Hotel, at the corner of Sidon and Stanley streets, South Brisbane, illustrates and exemplifies the chequered history of South Brisbane and, in particular, the area now known as Southbank.

When Brisbane was first settled by Europeans in 1825, the area now known as South Brisbane was mostly low and swampy ground, except at its southern and eastern edges where the rocky outcrops of Kangaroo Point and Highgate Hill offered higher, albeit less fertile, land. This area was the traditional land of the Toorbul and Jagarah peoples who regularly raided the convict gardens of South Brisbane.

In 1839, the Moreton Bay convict station began to close down and planning for a free settlement commenced. The southern boundary of the town, now known as Vulture Street, was laid out by Robert Dixon in 1840, and the main road on the south side, Stanley Quay (later Stanley Street) was established by Henry Wade’s survey of 1842. While the land beyond Vulture
Street was surveyed and sold as two to five hectare suburban blocks, the land along Stanley Quay had too much commercial value and was surveyed and sold as small urban blocks.\textsuperscript{2}

The 36 perch (910m\textsuperscript{2}) block of land on the southwest corner of Stanley and Sidon Streets, on which the Ship Inn Hotel is located, was surveyed by John Galloway in 1855 and purchased from the Crown by Thomas Blackett Stephens on 17 July 1857, for £28/15/\textsuperscript{3}.\textsuperscript{3} Stephens was a major landholder and political figure on Brisbane’s south side. He built a home just to the west of where Somerville House is now located, and his family operated a number of businesses such as a fellmongery, a tannery and the Moreton Bay Courier.

Already at this early stage Brisbane’s development pattern was becoming obvious, with administrative functions on the north bank and commercial and industrial activity on the south bank. South Brisbane’s early commercial development was almost exclusively along the river’s edge, following Stanley Quay. Working-class residential development took place in the flood-prone streets behind, while members of Brisbane’s political and commercial elite, such as the Appel, Blakeney, Deighton, Fraser, Grenier, Sexton and Stephens families established grand homes on the larger and higher blocks along the northern slopes of Highgate Hill. Because bullock and horse wagons from the west and south all arrived along Stanley Quay, many hotels and shops opened, a ferry to the north shore ran from the end of Russel Street, and wharves, shops and facilities developed nearby.

During the early 1860s, the American Civil War spurred the Queensland cotton industry and, with much of the produce being exported through South Brisbane, contributed to a boom in property values along the river. As well, wool exports from the Darling Downs normally came through South Brisbane, making this a busy port area.
In August 1864, Thomas Stephens sold the 36 perch (910m²) block on which the Ship Inn Hotel would be built to Daniel Donivan for £112/10/, almost 400% more than he had paid seven years previously.\(^4\) Irish-born Daniel Donivan was publican of the Bowen Hotel (formerly Steam Packet Hotel) on the south side of Stanley Street, between Glenelg and Russell Streets. Donivan had married Elizabeth Hallett in Brisbane in 1859 and they had three children. Donivan was a bold entrepreneur who anticipated that South Brisbane’s development would proceed south-easterly along the waterfront towards Kangaroo Point. He would have noted that during the floods of February 1863 and March 1864, while much of South Brisbane, including the Bowen Hotel, was under water, the higher land near Sidon Street was relatively dry. Donivan paid a high price for this prime position on a rise which reduced the chances of flooding.\(^5\)

In February 1865, Daniel Donivan, still publican at South Brisbane’s Bowen Hotel, nominated as an alderman for the recently formed South Ward of the Brisbane Town Council.\(^6\) His unusual appeal to the electors of South Brisbane demonstrated his sharp wit and robust ego:

> Now’s the time, and now’s the hour. In your hands, and in yours alone, is the power to redeem your noble City from the dust. She has been too long misruled. Profligate extravagance, corrupt jobbery, every sin of omission and commission, has hitherto marked the career of your Municipal Members. Let them now pass away into utter oblivion, and may their works follow them. ... [If I am elected] our noble Brisbane will soon become the surprise, the envy, the admiration of (what shall I say?) the World. Yes, that is it — the world; not only this World, but every other World. Oh! My dear Brother Electors, what shall we do, what shall become of us, if we let slip the present magnificent chance.\(^7\)

Donivan was elected to the Brisbane Town Council, defeating such well-known neighbours as Thomas Blackett Stephens and Thomas Grenier. Donivan was easily re-elected in February 1866 and, during his aldermanic career, held
significant positions on finance and improvement committees where he demonstrated competence and efficiency.\textsuperscript{8}

In September 1865, Daniel Donivan started building the hotel which we now call the Ship Inn, financing its construction through a £600 mortgage with the Trust and Agency Company of Australasia. In December, with his hotel nearly built, he sold the liquor licence to the Bowen Hotel to John Cockerill, and applied for a liquor licence for his new hotel containing “three sitting-rooms and seven bed-rooms exclusive of those required by the family. The house is my own property; is not at present licensed, and which I intend to keep as an hotel, under the sign of the Railway Hotel.”\textsuperscript{9}

Donivan presumably selected the name Railway Hotel because the Government was constructing a railway between Ipswich and the Darling Downs, with the first section between Ipswich and Grandchester having opened on 31 July 1865. Rumours abounded that the tracks from the west would soon come to South Brisbane to meet the river near the present site of the Maritime Museum, adjoining Donivan’s hotel. Property sales in this area were routinely promoted as being near “the probable terminus of the Brisbane and Ipswich Railway”.\textsuperscript{10} The railway did eventually arrive but far too late to help Donivan. As well, rumours abounded that since the Brisbane River was being dredged to admit ocean-going ships, a graving (or dry) dock would have to be built, most likely at South Brisbane, and the rocky area near Donivan’s land was the obvious site. Unfortunately for Donivan, work did not start on the South Brisbane Dry Dock until 1876.\textsuperscript{11}

When Daniel Donivan opened his hotel in January 1866 he called it the New Bowen Hotel, commanding “a view of Government House, the Botanical Gardens, the River, and the City”. Donivan boasted:

\begin{quote}
The Undersigned has just completed the erection of a FIRST-CLASS FAMILY HOTEL, with all the necessary appliances and conveniences, amongst which may be enumerated spacious and well-ventilated
\end{quote}
Apartments, suitably furnished, Warm and Shower Baths, a healthy site, a splendid view, and within a few minutes walk of the Ferries and Bridge. The attention of the Proprietor will be especially directed to the excellence of the Culinary Department. The Liquors, etc., purchased from the importers of the best brands, can be relied upon as first class. The above advantages render this Hotel specially adapted to visitors from the country or the neighboring colonies, as all the quiet retirement of a Suburban Residence is combined with the advantage of being within an easy distance from the centre of city business.

Donivan was seriously under-capitalised as he tried to purchase sufficient bedding, furniture, food and liquor for this business. He obtained a second mortgage from the Trust and Agency Company of Australasia for £133, and ran up accounts with numerous Brisbane suppliers, mainly fellow Roman Catholics. It is unclear why Donivan called this the New Bowen Hotel - perhaps he hoped to attract his previous clients from the Bowen Hotel, only two blocks away. However, by April 1866, Donivan was calling his place the Railway Hotel, with the name prominently painted on a hoarding visible from Government House, across the river.

In 1866, South Brisbane was still poorly developed except for Stanley Street. A ‘lady’ landing at South Brisbane that year recalled, “the place was covered with thick timber, and the only road then existing on the south side was a rough bullock track [Stanley Quay] leading from the ferry landing near the present site of Victoria Bridge to the Five Ways [Woolloongabba] and Ipswich Road [now Annerley Road].” There were complaints about wild bulls grazing in South Brisbane, endangering life and limb, “and very ugly-looking customers they appear to be”.

Because of these factors, the Railway Hotel’s business was much slower than Donivan had expected. Also, 1866 was a time of severe economic depression with banks calling in loans and suspending payments. Violent demonstrations by unemployed workers threatened political stability.
Donovan’s creditors pressed him for repayment and, in spite of his glib
tongue, he could not hold them off forever while business flagged.

Daniel Donivan was still living at the Railway Hotel on 18 April 1867, but
he and his family soon quietly disappeared. Senior Constable Richard Barry
summonsed Donivan to Police Court on 22 May 1867 for having “abandoned”
his licensed house. Donivan did not appear in court, and could not be found,
so the Railway Hotel’s liquor licence was cancelled and the mortgagee seized
the abandoned building. Samuel Davis and George Fife (merchants), Joseph
Darragh (butcher) and Pat Ahern (Baker) also took legal action to collect
debts, leaving Daniel and Elizabeth Donivan penniless. Rather than staying
and being declared insolvent - which would preclude him from again holding a
publican’s licence - Donivan moved with his family to Sydney and started life
anew as publican of the Dove Inn, at 53 Sussex Street.

‘Captain’ Thomas Francis bought this unlicensed hotel from the
mortgagor in August 1867 for £828, cash. Francis was the engineer who had
been employed by the Queensland Government in March 1861 - at £450 per
annum - to operate the steam dredge, Lytton, and deepen the Brisbane River
to allow ocean-going navigation. Francis undertook the latter part of this
work as a contractor for which he received £25,222 - so he was a man of
means.

Thomas Francis and his wife, Mary Ann, lived in the unlicensed hotel
before renting it to Anne Paulovitch, a widow, who ran it as Acton Boarding
House during the mid-1870s. Francis then rented it to George and Caroline
Levitt who, in June 1877, applied for a liquor licence to operate as the Royal
Dock Hotel. The licence was refused because of local objections. On 4 April
1878, Thomas Francis sold the building to Peter Gaffney for £1,750, double
what he had paid for it. Gaffney was the publican of the Dunmore Arms
Hotel (now the Treasury Hotel) at the corner of Elizabeth and George Streets.  

Peter Gaffney rented the unlicensed hotel to Daniel Kelly who applied in March 1878 for a liquor licence to operate as the Dock Hotel, but this was also refused because of objections from local residents.  

After Peter Gaffney drowned at Sandgate on 26 January 1879, his wife, Margaret, inherited this hotel which she then leased to William Munro, formerly publican of the Sydney Hotel and the Shipwright Arms Hotel, both in Albert Street. Munro had to apply three times for a publican’s licence because of opposition from the wealthy, conservative residents of upper South Brisbane and Highgate Hill. These opponents argued, without providing any evidence, that:

1. The house was in close proximity to the dry dock and a sawmill, and if licensed, would probably lead to drunkenness and accidents.
2. Because houses situated so near to dry docks, are generally the resort of immoral characters.
3. Because the house is not required for the convenience of the public. 

On 10 June 1879, William Munro was finally licensed to operate this hotel under the name Ship Inn, by which it has been known ever since. On the strength of his lease and liquor licence, Munro borrowed £50, at 8% interest, from Patrick Perkins, William Power and Edward Naumberg on 26 June and used the money to prepare for opening. On July 5, Munro advertised: “The Ship Inn, Stanley Street, South Brisbane, the only first class brick built hotel in South Brisbane. Good accommodation for boarders on reasonable terms. The best brands of wines, spirits, ale and port. Good stabling.”  

While Daniel Donivan had anticipated both the dry dock and the railway coming to his hotel, he had been a decade ahead of his time. By the time Munro opened the Ship Inn, however, this was changing. The railway arrived
near the Ship Inn in 1884, horse-drawn trams in 1885, reticulated gas for lighting in 1886, and reticulated water in 1888. The establishment of the South Brisbane Municipality in 1888 meant that the Ship Inn was at the commercial and administrative centre of a booming town of 25,000 people. While Donivan’s timing led to his financial ruin, Gaffney’s and Munro’s timing was spot on.

Business was so brisk at the Ship Inn that its owner, Margaret Gaffney, added a large extension to the south side, in 1892, containing a new dining room and kitchen on the ground floor plus more bedrooms upstairs. The shingle roof was replaced with a steeper, galvanised iron roof with a large gable facing the river, and emblazoned with ‘Ship Inn’, similar to today’s appearance.

The floods of February 1893 barely covered the Ship Inn’s floor although they caused serious damage along lower areas of Stanley Street.

In 1897, a rail line was laid in front of the Ship Inn to serve the numerous wharves and industries between Stanley Street and the river, and the horse-drawn tram line along Stanley Street was electrified, both developments greatly increasing the Ship Inn’s value. An observer that year commented:

South Brisbane gives promise of becoming a large commercial centre. The dry dock is there; so are the extensive railway wharves and stores. The large chilling works ... have recently opened, and having been tapped with a branch line to the South Coast railway system it may reasonably be anticipated that ere long other important industries will spring up along the route. Already a large flour mill is at work there, while ... jam, glass, meat preserving, clothing and other factories are springing into prominence.

On 3 October 1903, South Brisbane, with a population of about 28,000 people, was granted city status, and the Ship Inn’s central location became even more significant. Although the Ship Inn’s publicans changed every few years, Margaret Gaffney retained ownership until she died in Toowoomba in 1919. Her nephew, John Gaffney, had been lessee and publican of the Ship
Inn since 1910, and he now purchased the freehold. In 1913 John Gaffney had become an Alderman of South Brisbane City and in 1919 he became Mayor, about the same time that the Ship Inn’s gas lights were being replaced with electric lights.

Marie Roslyn Gaffney, the daughter of John and Marie Kathleen Gaffney, was born in 1910 at the Ship Inn and recalls living there during the 1920s:

It was a family business and we were all expected to help. When I was about 12 or 13 I used to get home from school, change out of my uniform and be in the bar serving beer. The nuns at All Hallows in those days would have been horrified if they’d known. ... People keep saying it was a tough area, but I don’t recall it as such. Sailors from the ships and other workers used to come there but they were always interested in the children and would play cricket with us in the back yard. ... The worst fight I saw was between two women. One had the other by the hair and wouldn’t let go, so I got my surgical scissors and cut the hair. Those were days you never forget.3

In the early 1920s, South Brisbane City Council acquired the land which now comprises Memorial Park and cleared it of houses and fences, realigned its topography and installed prominent stairs. A plinth, at the corner nearest the Ship Inn, was intended to support a monument to returned soldiers, but has never been finished. Stanley Street was paved with a fifteen-centimetre reinforced concrete base under a five-centimetre bitumen surface.

In 1925, South Brisbane, with a population of 40,000 people, was merged into greater Brisbane and the Ship Inn was no longer at the centre of municipal activity although the booming dry dock and wharves ensured plenty of thirsty drinkers.

When John Gaffney died in 1929, his wife, Marie Kathleen, inherited the Ship Inn. She sold the liquor licence to Amelia Galton in May 1931, and leased the building to her for £620 per annum. Galton started the Ship Inn’s bad reputation, being convicted of several breaches of the Liquor Act.36 In 1935, Marie Gaffney sold the Ship Inn for £4,800 to William O’Hagan of the Imperial
Hotel, Warwick. Amelia Galton continued as publican and lessee, adroitly ignoring demands from the licensing authority that she upgrade facilities and stop selling liquor after hours.

In 1938, the Queensland Government began to transfer overseas shipping facilities from South Brisbane to Newstead and Hamilton because the proposed Story Bridge would be too low for ocean-going ships. This marked the beginning of the end for the prosperous South Brisbane wharves, whose workers were good Ship Inn customers.

When William O’Hagan died in 1941, the Ship Inn transferred to his de facto spouse, Elizabeth Ryan, who also took over the liquor licence. During the war, the Ship Inn was busy because the adjoining dry dock worked non-stop repairing allied ships and submarines, and there were many thirsty American servicemen at nearby South Brisbane Town Hall, Somerville House and St Laurence’s College. The Ship Inn was also popular with black American troops who were only allowed to socialise in South Brisbane. This industrial and military area was a likely place for enemy bombing, so bomb shelters were provided on Stanley and Dock Streets.\(^{37}\)

Towards the end of the war, Elizabeth Ryan sold the Ship Inn to Elizabeth Donnelly while Alice Malone took over as publican. In 1945, Herbert and Ellen Porter took over both freehold title and liquor licence, and ran the Ship Inn until 1950. The Degiovanni family then purchased the Ship Inn for £44,000, and undertook renovations to provide a second bar and to try to recapture some of the Ship Inn’s war-time prosperity.\(^{38}\)

Arthur and Ivy Morgan purchased the renovated Ship Inn for £60,000 in 1951 and, over the next few years, the licensee changed every few months.\(^{39}\) In 1957, the Licensing Commission demanded that the Morgans upgrade the Ship Inn by removing defective rainwater tanks, repairing guttering, downpipes and broken concrete paths, installing emergency stairs
and new toilets, and repainting. The Morgans undertook some repairs and took over as licensees in 1958. In 1963, they sold the Ship Inn to Queensland Brewery Limited, who appointed William Hawkshank as publican.

South Brisbane’s wharves were slowly closing down during the 1950s, the rail-line was removed in 1960, and the nearby locomotive depot closed in 1967. These developments reduced employment and changed the Ship Inn’s clientele as the area began to shift from being a working-class residential area to slowly becoming almost an industrial slum.

Kevin Nunan became licensee on 17 February 1967. Kevin and June Nunan, with six children, came from the Commercial Hotel, Boonah, and regarded the Ship Inn as a “step-up” because it brought them into the metropolis and to a pub with higher liquor sales than they had experienced in Boonah. The Nunans’ own bedroom was at the northwest corner and they recall being disturbed by tram bells and brakes. They provided live music in the lounge on most Friday nights, and had a dozen employees on rostered shifts. During the Nunan's first year, the Ship Inn sold $60,565 worth of liquor and paid $3633 in fees. Kevin Nunan recalled:

The painters and dockers … used to be good drinkers. … There used to be a big signing-on shed at the docks where they’d check to see if they had a ship to work on. If they did they’d go and work on the ship, if they didn’t they’d come to the Ship Inn. It was no rougher than any other pub. There were fights, they knew how to handle themselves but it was just a normal pub.

In 1968, the Ship Inn had seven casual staff with accommodation in one twin room, one family room, and two single rooms. Lodgers paid $2.50 per day for a room, $3 per day for bed and breakfast, or $4.40 for full board. A Licensing Inspector reported, “this hotel is … still in a fairly sound condition [but] in need of some maintenance. … It mainly exists to meet the liquor requirements of workers engaged in the area.” The inspector insisted that the
publican “cease to use the Male Staff Sanitary Block as a vegetable store and general storage area”.\textsuperscript{44}

Elton Rasmussen, a well-known rugby league player and coach,\textsuperscript{45} took over as publican in 1969, just as the Ship Inn faced two crucial years during which the South Brisbane Dry Dock closed, the last tram passed along Stanley Street and demolition began on South Brisbane’s remaining riverfront wharves and industries to create Clem Jones Park. Local employment dropped and the Ship Inn’s clientele rapidly changed for the worse. A Licensing Commission inspector found problems ranging from inoperable toilets to poor sanitation and no toilet paper. Accommodation, costing $16 per week, was available in four single and one double room but, contrary to the law, no register was being maintained. The Licensing Commission insisted that a long list of cleaning, repairing and painting work be completed within four months.\textsuperscript{46} Although little of this work was ever done, the Ship Inn’s liquor licence was not revoked.

During the early 1970s, the Ship Inn deteriorated further, her clientele became ever more rough and ready - but liquor sales stayed at about $70,000 per year and licensing fees at about $4,000.\textsuperscript{47}

In 1975, complaints were made that the hotel staff refused to serve an Aboriginal couple. The publican, Douglas Jacob, responded that the Ship Inn “was in an area where there was a fair amount of troublemakers and ... it was necessary for him to exercise his rights under the Liquor Act and refuse to serve persons whom he considered would likely be violent, quarrelsome, abusive or disorderly.”\textsuperscript{48} Further allegations of racial discrimination arose when a priest accompanied Mrs Shirley Smith, an Aborigine, to the Ship Inn where she requested a glass of orange juice but was refused service and told that it was the policy not to serve troublemakers.\textsuperscript{49}
Late in 1975, June Ahern, formerly a bar maid, took over as publican, paying $250 per week rental. On 23 June 1976, the Licensing Commission, responding to numerous complaints, inspected the Ship Inn and produced a six-page list of defects. The inspector reported: “This hotel is frequented by Aborigines and thus the reason for the state of the hotel.” Few of these problems had been corrected by January 1977 when the Metropolitan Fire Brigade inspected the Ship Inn and found it to be a fire hazard.

Soon after, Detective Constable Charles Grimpel (Consorting Squad) reported to the Licensing Commission:

On entering a lounge room at the rear of the premises I found that although the bar was closed and no staff were in attendance, there were approximately 30 coloured adults both male and female in various stages of intoxication. There were also about eight children in the lounge and they did not appear to be under adult supervision. The floor of the lounge was filthy. There was evidence of spilt liquor and in the corners of the room there was the stench of urine. Also on the floor there were numerous food scraps, dirty paper plates and plastic eating utensils. Amongst this garbage there were approximately eight adults asleep on the floor. On [our] arrival the lounge occupants stirred themselves and began chanting abusive language, giving black power salutes and breaking glass on the floor.

Publican June Ahern protested that her patrons had been quiet and that she couldn’t see anything wrong with their behaviour or the conditions in the lounge. Detective Grimpel responded: “if the licence was to remain major repairs and renovations are required” but, because of the Ship Inn’s clientele “with respect it is submitted these conditions will always prevail at this particular hotel.”

The Ship Inn continued to trade during 1978 even though “human excreta on the floor”, and “observed a male aborigine urinating in corner of lounge” were reported. Under public pressure, the Licensing Commission undertook another inspection on 9 April 1979, found five pages of problems
and ordered its closure. The Ship Inn served its last beer at 10pm on 11 April 1979.56

Contrary to usual practice, the Liquor Licence was allowed to remain dormant for several years because the owner, Carlton and United Breweries, proposed transferring it to a tavern they hoped be built on Waterworks Road, The Gap. That project ran into political strife, however, and the Ship Inn’s licence was never transferred.

The Ship Inn was boarded up, vandalism and squatting were rife, the roof leaked and the building deteriorated. In 1983, Carlton and United Breweries management were excited by speculation that Brisbane would host the World Expo in 1988, and hoped that it might be held on land adjoining the Ship Inn. When that decision was announced in early 1984, the owners wrote to the Licensing Commission:

The present dormant licence of the Ship Inn Hotel ... has become a great deal more viable with the announcement of Expo '88. It is our belief that the Expo Authority wish to resume the whole site and still operate a renovated Ship Inn Hotel. This company is also interested in developing the Ship Inn Hotel and we are to have discussions with the Expo Authority within the next month.57

In 1984, amidst fears that the Ship Inn would be demolished in favour of a modern building, the National Trust added it to its Heritage List, and the Australian Heritage Commission recognised and formally listed it as a key element in the South Brisbane precinct.58

The Ship Inn was resumed, then assigned to the Brisbane Exposition and South Bank Development Authority on 18 September 1984. A press release optimistically announced: “The old Ship Inn will be ... restored to its former glory as part of the ... Leisure in the age of Technology theme of the Expo”.59

In August 1986, the Expo Authority announced that it was negotiating with the Licensing Commission for the Ship Inn to trade 24 hours each day
throughout Expo. The Ship Inn would be offered for sale under a lease/sub-lease arrangement during Expo and would then revert to simple freehold. The Expo Authority acknowledged the Ship Inn to be part of a historical precinct which included the South Brisbane Town Hall, Library and Dry Dock, and stated that it would operate under a ‘historical inn’ licence. A Brisbane company, Tangleberry Pty Ltd, tendered to buy the Ship Inn for about $1.5 million, then invest a further $2 million - “lots of money for a wreck” - and to “restore it to its past glory in time for Expo 88”.

Under the headline, “The Ship Inn Set to Sail Once More” the Courier Mail colourfully summarised its reputed history and predicted its future:

The Ship Inn squats like a tired old man - sick, broken and dispirited. The building’s 112-year-old bones creak, a broken staircase disappears into a black hole, the air lies thick and musty making one cough. Dust, debris and the empty wine and beer bottles of past derelicts litter the once-crowded ... bars where the laughter was loud and the brawls ... were common. At least one man was punched to death.

In the upstairs bedrooms where ... ladies of the night took their sailor and wharfie clientele, unprintable advice relevant to their occupation lies black on the peeling walls.

But the Ship Inn, deserted now except for the ghosts of past mine hosts, and of the drinkers, the singers, the battlers, and the brawlers long since silenced, is about to come to life again.

This popular media image of the Ship Inn is interesting in light of no evidence being found of anyone ever being “punched to death” in the Ship Inn, although someone was severely bashed outside the hotel during Expo 88, well after this article was written. Neither is there any evidence of the Ship Inn ever operating as a brothel although folk legends report prostitutes operating in the area – but then that would be true of most hotels. The Ship Inn’s reputation was far worse than it deserved.
Robin Gibson was chosen as the architect to design and oversee the renovations. The *Courier Mail*, once again exercising considerable poetic licence, reported:

> It will look very much like its old self - at least on the outside, although four more gables will be added. ... Downstairs ... fast food such as pies, hamburgers and pasta will be sold. ... In the more sophisticated upstairs area will be the cocktail bar and the bistro ... where the pigeons now sleep and deposit their waste. ... A string quartet will play, with jazz probably the main musical dish. The staff ... will be more courteous than the person who wrote this notice ... on an upstairs wall; “Keep this bathroom bloody clean. Rinse the bath after use”. ... The renovating company has applied ... to trade 24 hours a day - which certainly would be an attraction to the ghosts of the customers who once had only to knock on the door at any time of the day or night for a drink, meal or a bed - and more if they wanted. For the old Ship Inn was a derelict, soiled, beer bath dabbling in ... prostitution and vice.\(^6\)

In March 1987, the Ship Inn’s owner claimed;

> The historic Ship Inn ... will be restored and extended at a cost of $2.5 million. ... a typical Queensland pub ... a tourist attraction for Expo as well as giving Brisbane people back this splendid old pub [with] ... a public bar which even the roughest bullocky or painter and docker from the hotel’s past would feel at home in.\(^6\)

The developers admitted they would demolish “low standard additions”, triple the floor-space and add four new gables, and claimed that these dramatic structural changes would “enhance this original precinct”.\(^6\)

When renovations started in May 1987, a major heritage row ensued. The National Trust reported, “the roof is gone, the verandahs have gone - we are really at a point of saying is this really an historic inn”, while the *Courier Mail* concluded that the Ship Inn had been virtually demolished. The developers claimed they had only removed areas which were “rotting and riddled with white ants”. Architect Robin Gibson angrily responded, “I don’t
know why people don’t shut up and wait until the thing is finished”. The Expo Authority joined in and asserted that “the state of the Ship Inn ... had rendered it a public danger. The successful tenderer has been put to considerable expense in supporting and refurbishing that portion of the building in any way capable of repair. The ... result will form a remarkable memorial to an historic component of early Brisbane and act as a keystone for the important precinct of which it is a part.”

The renovated and greatly enlarged Ship Inn opened on Friday 18 December 1987, with Jim Noonan as licensee. Noonan was the great-great grandson of Peter and Margaret Gaffney who had owned the hotel between 1879 and 1919. During Expo ’88, its 24-hour licence allowed people to “dance into the early hours of the morning at the Ship Inn nightclub - then stay on for breakfast.”

At the end of Expo ’88, the future of the deserted Southbank site was unclear. The Ship Inn continued trading but reported “an 800% slump in sales”. The owners tried, but failed, to sell it for $4,700,000 by finding 94 investors, each willing to invest $50,000. Tangleberry Pty Ltd still ran the Ship Inn and took legal action against the South Bank Development Corporation which was limiting public access, thereby harming business.

On 20 June 1992, Southbank Parkland finally opened and the Ship Inn’s business improved markedly. In 1993, the Ship Inn was taken off Queensland’s Heritage Register because it had been “altered to such a degree that its heritage value had been lost”. In the following year, the Australian Heritage Commission removed the Ship Inn from the Register of the National Estate for the same reason.

The Ship Inn’s owners sought to sell it to an Asian consortium from Sydney who planned to use it as a licensed private gambling club to be called The Mekong Club. This was opposed by South Bank Corporation
“because of its inherent restriction of public access”. After expensive court action the proposal collapsed.\textsuperscript{73}

In early 1996, the Ship Inn was purchased by FAI Insurance which then sold it to Kevin Seymour in 1997 for $1,200,000. Seymour turned the Ship Inn into The National Culinary Academy, “a training college for anyone seeking a career as a professional chef, bar attendant or elsewhere in the hospitality industry.”\textsuperscript{74} The National Culinary Academy was unsuccessful so the Ship Inn once again closed.

In April 2000, Griffith University bought the Ship Inn for $1,600,000.\textsuperscript{75} It was unclear how they would use this site but, in May 2003, Griffith University announced: “a $7,200,000 redevelopment of Ship Inn, removing the Expo and subsequent additions and building a new Postgraduate Studies Centre. The Ship Inn will have a new lease of life in the 21\textsuperscript{st} century and it will be a new and exciting cultural hub for the city.” Griffith University’s Vice Chancellor, Professor Glyn Davis, promised “The redevelopment of the Ship Inn would guarantee the future of the building which had been part of Brisbane’s history but which had fallen into disrepair”.\textsuperscript{76}

Deputy Premier Anna Bligh reopened the Ship Inn on 9 June 2004, claiming it would be “as significant to Griffith University as the Customs House is as the downtown centre for the University of Queensland”.\textsuperscript{77}

The Ship Inn’s story reflects the development of Brisbane’s Southbank area: the booming period between the 1870s and 1930s when this was Brisbane’s main dock area, the frenetic activity during the Second World War, the area’s decline into a slum during the 1960s and 70s, the boom of Expo ’88, the subsequent uncertainty of future development, and finally the trendy, cosmopolitan development of Southbank as an entertainment, educational and residential precinct. As well, the clumsy renovations to which the Ship Inn was subjected prior to Expo 88, and the recent work to
restore its integrity, can be seen as important elements in the development of Brisbane’s heritage consciousness.

Today, the Ship Inn, with its attached Postgraduate Studies Centre, is an integral part of Griffith University’s Southbank Campus which includes the Queensland Conservatorium and the College of Art, and is a key component of the much-touted International Educational Precinct.

With no heritage protection, however, the 141-year-old Ship Inn’s future is solely in the hands of Griffith University.


2 Information gained from various early maps and survey plans held by the John Oxley Library.

3 Information from a title search and other cartographic examinations undertaken with the assistance of Bill Kitson, Sunmap Museum, Department of Natural Resources, Mines and Water.

4 Stephens actually bought two blocks, surveyed east/west from Sidon Street, for a total of £57/10. Half of this land later became the Ship Inn site.

5 Department of Natural Resources, Mines and Water, Application to bring Old System Land under Torrens System, number 2191.

6 Donivan actually bought this block and an adjoining block for a combined price of £225. He then had the land resurveyed so that each block had frontage to Stanley rather than Sidon Street. He retained the corner block and transferred the adjoining block to his wife, Elizabeth Donivan.

7 QSA, CPS1/AJ1, Court of Petty Sessions, Brisbane, 1861 (Z4140); *Brisbane Courier*, 4 September 1861, p. 2; plus various genealogical sources.

8 *Brisbane Courier*, 8 February 1865, p. 1.

9 The South Ward of Brisbane had been gazetted on 6 December 1864 to include the land south of the river and roughly to the north and east of Boundary and Vulture Streets.

10 *Brisbane Courier*, 11 February 1865, p. 1.

11 *Brisbane Courier*, 15 February 1865, p. 2; *Brisbane Courier*, 14 February 1866, p. 2; correspondence to author from John Laverty on 11 September 2006.

12 QSA, Court of Petty Sessions, Brisbane, 1865 (Z4140); *Brisbane Courier*, 22 & 24 November 1865, p. 1.
When the railway connecting the Darling Downs to Brisbane was eventually opened in June 1875, it came to the north side, much to everyone's surprise.


A temporary wooden bridge between North and South Brisbane had opened in June 1865. This collapsed in November 1866 and was not re-opened until June 1874.

Department of Natural Resources, Mines and Water, Application to bring Old System Land under Torrens System, number 2191.

QSA, CPS1/AJ1, Court of Petty Sessions (Z4140); *Brisbane Courier*, 25 April 1866, p. 3.


Ibid.; Department of Natural Resources, Mines and Water, Application to bring Old System Land under Torrens System, number 2191.

Information from *Sands Directory of New South Wales*.


*Telegraph*, 17 May 1877, p. 1.

QSA, SRS51993, Titles Office Dealings, Thomas Francis and Peter Gaffney, 12 April 1878.

*Courier Mail*, 18 December 1987, p. 35; interviews with Philip Gaffney, 28 October 2006 and Monica Noonan, 31 October 2006. There are rumours that Peter Gaffney was rich because of having found gold at Gympie. His descendants deny this and believe that the money came from Peter Gaffney’s wife, Margaret.


*Telegraph*, 14 May 1879, p. 3.

*Brisbane Courier*, 11 June 1879, p. 6.
There has been a great deal of confusion about this name because there had earlier been a Ship Inn Hotel, on William Street, Brisbane, but it ceased trading in 1866 and Munro reused the well-established name.

Information from title documents.

Edward Naumberg was managing director of Perkins & Co, Brewery; Patrick Perkins was Minister for Lands, MLA for Aubigny, and owner of Perkins & Co Brewery; while William Grene Power was managing partner of Perkins & Co Brewery, and MLC 1883-1903.

Brisbane Courier, 5 July 1879, p. 1.

Most of these dates and figures are taken from R. Fisher Brisbane Timeline: From Captain Cook to City Cat, Brisbane: Brisbane History Group, 1999. South Brisbane’s population roughly trebled during the 1880s with numerous new housing estates being established.

Information gathered from various photographs and newspaper accounts.

J. Knight, Historical Sketch of the Capital of Queensland, Brisbane: Briggs & Morcom, 1897, p. 57.

Between William Munro (1879-81) and John Gaffney (1910), the publicans were Dan Casey, Michael Foley, Thomas Pyrah, William Connolly, John Landy, Charles Manning, Paul Rumpf and Elizabeth Ann Beatty. Such a high turnover was not uncommon in Brisbane hotels at this time.


QSA, PRV14742/1/189 Box 2, Licensed Victuallers Licenses.

Information from various sources and aerial photographs.

Courier Mail, 28 April 1950, p. 7.

Undated and unsourced press clipping held by the John Oxley Library in ‘Brisbane Hotels’ file.


QSA, PRV14833/1/576, Box 116.

Interview with Kevin & June Nunan, Carseldine, 29 August 2006.

QSA, PRV14833/1/576, Box 116.


QSA, PRV14833/1/576, Box 116.

Rasmussen was a very popular sportsman and ‘local hero’, who tried to lift the profile of the Ship Inn by promoting it as a Sportsman’s Hotel. This was a monumental failure.

QSA, PRV14833/1/576, Box 116, various reports.

Ibid.
Ibid., memo from Inspector to Office of Licensing Commission, 19 March 1975.

Ibid., letter from St Ita’s Presbytery to Licensing Commission, 9 December 1975.


Ibid., Verbal complaints to Licensing Commission recorded on Memo, 21 February 1978.

Ibid, inspection report and letter to June Ahern.


Various documents held by National Trust of Queensland (Bris 1/548).

Courier Mail, 23 November 1984, p. 32.

Courier Mail, 22 August 1986, pp. 8 & 27.

Ibid.; Courier Mail, 18 December 1986, p. 4.

Tangleberry was owned by four local men, Michael Drum (Caxton Hotel licensee), Jim Noonan, (Queens Arms licensee), Tony Roberts (solicitor), and Peter Dittmer (accountant).

The Ship Inn was actually 121 years old, not 112 as stated.

Courier Mail, 18 December 1986, p. 4.


Lucas James Mitchell, aged 26, from Annerley, was beaten up outside the Ship Inn on Saturday 8 October 1988. Four men were charged with his assault but only one, Meli Max John Matafeo, who was employed at the Ship inn as a bouncer, was sent to trial.

Ibid.

The notice about cleaning the bath had been signed and posted by June Ahern, the last publican.

Courier Mail, 13 March 1987, p. 41.

Anon., Briefing Notes, held by National Trust of Queensland, dated 14 July 1987. Those additions included the west wing built by Margaret Gaffney in 1892.

69 *Courier Mail*, 18 December 1987, p. 35; interview with Jim Noonan 21 October 2006.

70 *Courier Mail*, 29 April 1988, p. 61.


72 *Courier Mail*, 19 April 1993, p. 7; *Courier Mail*, 8 March 1994, p. 32.


74 *Courier Mail* 16 February 1996 p. 31; *Courier Mail*, 4 April 1997, p. 27.

75 *Courier Mail*, 20 April 2000, p. 38.

76 Griffith University Press Release, 20 May 2003 (Ref no, May 203G); *Courier Mail*, 28 May 2003, p. 12.

77 *Courier Mail*, 10 June 2004, p. 4.