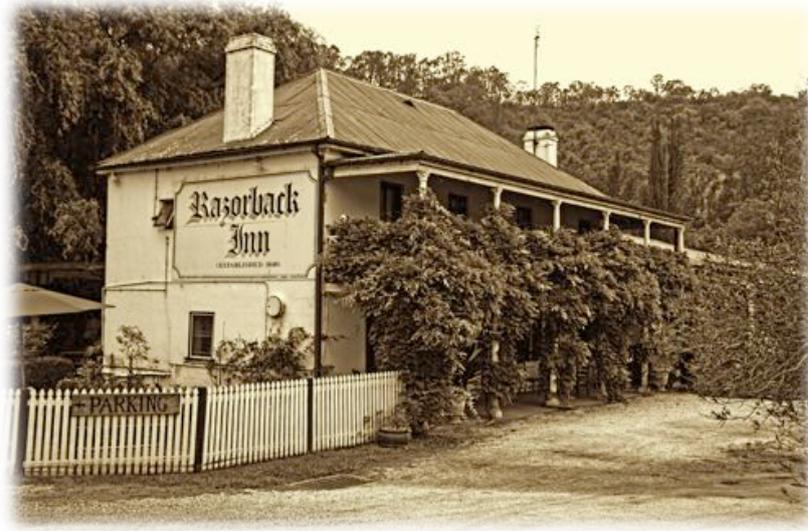


Oliver Whiting and the Razorback Inn

from *Once Upon A Hume* by Stephen Gard

www.stephengard.com.au



The first Razorback Inn erected on this site opened its doors for business on 11 December, 1845. Built by Oliver Whiting as his residence, and standing on the busy Great South Road, the original licensee was Oliver's wife Florence. Oliver himself was not eligible to hold a publican's licence, for Oliver Whiting was a convict. He was not one of the usual run of convicts, transported for theft, murder, manslaughter, assault, forgery, highway robbery, or handling stolen goods: Oliver Whiting had been a machine-breaker. In 1830, he had joined in the Swing Riots of Kent, fomented by the Robin Hood figure of 'Captain Swing', helping to smash up the threshing machines that Whiting and his fellows believed were threatening the livelihood of rural labourers. Whiting was sentenced at the Kent Quarter Sessions to transportation for life, and he arrived in the Colony of NSW *per* the ship *Royal Admiral* on 8 November 1830. He was just 21 years of age.

In 1836, we find Oliver Whiting married to Florence Hawthorn, and assigned to the service of Major Henry Colden Antill, squire of 'Jarvisfield', a 2000 acre holding near the village of Stonequarry (now Picton) which Antill had been granted by Governor Macquarie. Major Antill was a benevolent master, who encouraged his servants to support themselves and prosper. Oliver Whiting was a tanner and shoemaker. By 1842, he was carrying out his trade at Jarvisfield. Oliver Whiting seems to have been a favourite of Major Antill, or so we learn from anecdotes of the Major's grandson, John Macquarie Antill.

'During his term of assignment Oliver used to drive Major Antill's son in a dog-cart all the way to The King's School in Parramatta. All dressed up, Oliver sat on the driving seat of the dog-cart with the dignity that position demands. He wore a grey bell topper hat, in which he carried letters and all manner of odds and ends. Major Antill thought so well of Oliver Whiting that one day he made him overseer. The particular work on that day was stumping a paddock. Oliver took his men there, set them to work, and then lay down under a tree and went to sleep. The Major came along and, finding him asleep, promptly degraded him to the labouring gang. One morning, forty years after, Oliver appeared at the door of John Antill's study, his bell-topper in his hand.

'Yes, Oliver, what is it?'

'Mr. John, sir, could you give me a bit of legal assistance?'

Yes, Oliver, certainly.'

'Well, sir, you remember when your father made me overseer?'

'Oh, yes, I remember.'

'Well, sir, I was overseer for two hours, and I never got my sixpence an hour. I want to claim that money from the Government at compound interest for forty years.'

Another story concerns Oliver Whiting's tannery. He drove to Sydney with hides at intervals, and one night on his return journey, when he reached Peach-Tree Corner on the Razorback Road, he was told that bushrangers were ahead of him. Having money and valuables with him, he thought it safer to leave his property there, so he left his cart in the bush, let his horse go, and set off for home on foot. Unfortunately, the constables mistook Oliver for a bushranger. They captured him, handcuffed him, and brought him before Major Antill. The Major was surprised and indignant. 'Take those handcuffs off as quick as you can!' he stormed. Oliver's wrath took a more practical turn. As soon as he was free he seized the handcuffs, dealt one constable a mighty clout with them, and then went for the other with a handy stick. The unfortunate constables had no remedy for this vigorous assault. They had been guilty of wrongful arrest.' (*The Sydney Mail*, 16 June 1937)

In 1846, the magistrates of the Picton Bench recommended that Oliver Whiting receive a Conditional Pardon, meaning that he was free to carry on any occupation he chose, and live anywhere in the Colony, on two conditions. First, that he behaved himself, and never broke the law, and second, that he never returned to England. In 1847, Oliver Whiting became the official licensee of the Razorback Inn. By this time, it was a hostelry well-known to travellers on the Great Southern Road. Picton people referred to it as 'the Red House'. It was built of locally made bricks, probably baked by Jarvisfield brick-makers. Reddish soil gave the village of Upper Picton its earliest name, 'Redbank', and the walls of Oliver Whiting's 'Red House' likely had these striking ruddy shades.

From 1848 to 1854, the Razorback Inn had various licensees, Mr Whiting being busy with his tannery and other matters. One of these was the desertion of his wife Florence, who left him in 1850 for reasons unknown. Perhaps Florence had been beguiled by some swaggering fellow on his way south to the Victorian gold-fields. Did Florence take off with him, in pursuit of fortune and romance, abandoning the demanding and dreary life of a hotel-keeper? In 1854, Oliver Whiting was once again the licensee of the Razorback Inn, and there he remained until 1860. By that time, he had met and married Jane Sylvester of Camden. When the railway came to Picton in 1863, Oliver and Jane Whiting built the Great Southern Inn at the entrance to the Picton Railway goods yard, and conducted that business for the next twenty years. Oliver Whiting died in January 1882. He lies in the cemetery at St Mark's Anglican Church, his gravestone proudly inscribed 'Native of Kent England'. In December 1889, Jane joined him there.

The current stone-built Razorback Inn is of a later date. It compares in many details with the 'Jarvisfield' homestead constructed during 1862-4, the work of Sydney architects Weaver and Kemp. The Razorback Inn has had several facelifts over the years, and other structures have been added to it; for example, the Wool Away Woolshed, a popular function centre during the 1980s when 'bush-dancing' was in vogue. The Razorback Inn retains its 'Old Colonial Georgian' appearance, and is currently listed on the NSW State Heritage Register as a Place of Significance.