

CROKER PRIZE FOR BIOGRAPHY 2022

2214 Collits Inn

by Bob Wright

COLLITS INN

Nestled in a stunning location in the Vale of Clwydd, where the old Cox's Road completes its descent from Mount York, lies Collits Inn. The first inn west of the Blue Mountains, it was built by ex-convict Pierce Collits in 1823. For the next decade the inn enjoyed a crowded hour of glorious life, bustling with brisk activity as travelers came and went, ate and drank, and exchanged news of the growing colony of New South Wales and its expansion to the west. The Collits family filled the inn with hospitality and good cheer. If I can be said to have come from anywhere in Australia, it is here, for Pierce Collits was my great-great-great-great-great grandfather.

Pierce Collett, as the name was originally spelt, was born in Thomas Town in County Kilkenny, Ireland circa 1763.¹ He is next heard of in London, where he married Mary Hardwick in 1795.² Pierce and Mary had four children in London, two daughters and two sons.³ Both sons died in infancy.⁴ In July 1800 Pierce was convicted at the Old Bailey of receiving stolen goods and sentenced to 14 years transportation to Australia.⁵ Mary elected to join him in exile as a free settler and secured a passage for herself and their two young daughters on the ship Pierce was to be sent out in. The Collits family arrived in New South Wales on the 'Minorca' in 1801.⁶

On arrival Mary, as a free settler, was granted 70 acres of land at Castlereagh on the River Nepean by Governor King.⁷ Pierce had the good fortune to be assigned to his wife as a convict servant, and thus right from the start he was working for his own advantage.⁸ The Collits' farm prospered despite recurrent flooding of the River Nepean, and Pierce and Mary raised a large family, having a further eight children in Australia.⁹

Over the years they earned a reputation as industrious and respectable settlers, and Pierce found favour with Governor Macquarie, who granted him a Conditional Pardon in 1811,¹⁰ and in 1815 appointed him Chief Constable of the District of Evan.¹¹ During these years Pierce subscribed money to local funds to build a bridge and a schoolhouse in Castlereagh, to relieve flood victims on the Hawkesbury and to relieve veterans of the Battle of Waterloo.¹² He also donated large amounts of fresh meat to the Government Stores,¹³ and in 1820 Governor Macquarie appointed him Pound-keeper and Inspector of Cattle for Slaughter on the River Nepean.¹⁴

The crossing of the Blue Mountains by Blaxland, Lawson and Wentworth in 1813 and the completion of Cox's Road in 1815 opened up new opportunities to the west, and Pierce with his energy and entrepreneurial spirit was just the man to take advantage of them. In 1821 he received permission from Governor Macquarie to settle beyond the Blue Mountains and to construct an inn in the Vale of Clwydd at the foot of Mount York.¹⁵ Work proceeded slowly as Pierce had to transport all his materials, including timber, hand-made nails and shingles, across the mountains,¹⁶ and the convict labourers assigned him had no carpentry experience.¹⁷

By August 1823 the building was complete, and Pierce moved his family to their new home, bringing to an end 20 years on the farm at Castlereagh.¹⁸ He was already 60 years of age, and was embarking on a new business venture which was not without risk. He named the inn the 'Golden Fleece',¹⁹ but it became popularly known as Collits Inn. It proved a great success, affording travelers shelter at the end of their

second day's journey from Sydney on the road to Bathurst.²⁰ There, according to one account, one partook of 'the good cheer of mine host of the Golden Fleece, whose humour and hospitality will tend to smooth the rugged asperities of the way.'²¹

Pierce had built his inn on land he did not yet own however, and so in 1825 he requested and received a grant of 200 acres in that location from Governor Brisbane.²² There followed some intricate manoeuvring over a number of years in which Pierce apparently tried (successfully, in the finish) to claim the 200 acre grant twice, alleging that he had been promised a 200 acre grant by Governor Macquarie, thus becoming embroiled in a long-running dispute with the Surveyor-General, Major Mitchell.²³ To further confuse the issue, Governor Darling granted Pierce a further 150 acres at the rear of the inn in 1830, and he subsequently also tried to claim that grant twice!²⁴

The 1820s were the heyday of Collits Inn. Pierce hosted many hundreds of travelers to and from the interior, culminating in a visit by Governor Darling in 1829.²⁵ He had come a long way since he stood in the dock of the Old Bailey nearly 30 years before. However the golden days of prosperity were already passing, never to return. In 1830 Major Mitchell began construction of his new line of road through the Victoria Pass, which bypassed the steep and perilous descent of Mount York. When it was completed in 1832, Collits Inn was stranded, and Pierce closed it for business.²⁶

Pierce died at the age of 85 in 1848,²⁷ predeceased by Mary, who died in 1841.²⁸ They were both buried in the bush cemetery behind their inn at Mount York, where their tombstones may still be seen today.

Collits Inn eventually passed out of the hands of the family.²⁹ It underwent extensive restoration work in the late 1990s, and in recent years has enjoyed a renaissance as a guest house, French restaurant, and wedding reception venue.³⁰ I have visited there many times, and stayed in the home of my ancestors. That quiet spot, with the wide sweep of picturesque valley in front, the dramatic bulk of the mountain behind, and the gentle breeze sighing through the bushland on each side, is where I come from, and where my heart belongs.



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- ¹ Ancestry.com, *England & Wales, Criminal Registers, 1791-1892, Pierce Collitts, 1800*, (database on-line).
- ² Ancestry.com, *London, England, Church of England Marriages and Banns, 1754-1936, Pierce Collett, 1795*, (database on-line).
- ³ Ancestry.com, *England, Select Births and Christenings, 1538-1975, Maria Collett, 1795, Sarah Collett, 1797, Henry Pierce Collett, 1799, Pierce Collett, 1800*, (database on-line).
- ⁴ The deaths of the two sons are not recorded in the Parish Registers, but they did not accompany the family to Australia.
- ⁵ Proceeding of the Old Bailey, *London's Central Criminal Court, 1674-1913, Pearce Collett, 1800*, (database on-line).
- ⁶ *Convict Records*, <https://convictrecords.com.au/convicts/collets/pierce/65664>, accessed on 24 May 2022.
- ⁷ NSW State Archives & Records, Index to the Colonial Secretary's Papers 1788-1825, Fiche 3268, [9/2731], p.132.
- ⁸ Lorna Hawkins, *Our Innkeeper*, (Orange, 1995), p.27.
- ⁹ The 1788-1820 Pioneer Association, *A Register of Pioneer Families, Vol.2*, (Croydon, 1996), pp.101-111.
- ¹⁰ Ancestry.com, *New South Wales, Australia, Convict Registers of Conditional and Absolute Pardons, 1788-1870, Pierce Collitts, 1811*, (database on-line).
- ¹¹ NSW State Archives & Records, Index to the Colonial Secretary's Papers 1788-1825, Reel 6011, [4/3509], p.398.
- ¹² W.L. Havard, 'Pierce Collitts and His Inns', *Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society*, No. 26 1940, pp.393-394.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁴ NSW State Archives & Records, Index to the Colonial Secretary's Papers 1788-1825, Reel 6011, [4/3509], p.398.
- ¹⁵ NSW State Archives & Records, Index to the Colonial Secretary's Papers 1788-1825, Reel 6052, [4/1751], pp.48-49.
- ¹⁶ William Dumaresq, 'A Ride to Bathurst', *The Australian*, 24 March 1827, pp.2-3.
- ¹⁷ NSW State Archives & Records, Index to the Colonial Secretary's Papers 1788-1825, Reel 6055, [4/1760], p.98.
- ¹⁸ Havard, *op. cit.*, p.396.
- ¹⁹ *The Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser*, 25 March 1824, p.2.
- ²⁰ Havard, *op. cit.*, p.396.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*
- ²² NSW State Archives & Records, Index to the Colonial Secretary's Papers 1788-1825, Fiche 3269, [9/2740], p.7.
- ²³ Havard, *op. cit.*, pp.398-403.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, p.399.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, p.404.
- ²⁷ Date as inscribed on tombstone of Pierce Collitts in Mount York Cemetery.
- ²⁸ Date as inscribed on tombstone of Mary Collitts in Mount York Cemetery.
- ²⁹ Hawkins, *op. cit.*, p.121.
- ³⁰ Christine Stewart, *Collitts Inn: Uncovering the Past*, (Tellwell, 2021), p.v.