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NATIONAL VICTORIA Pubs

## Last drinks: Sudden closure of 150-year-old pub leaves patrons reeling

By Caleb Cluff

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When Rob Allen found himself in a bad personal situation in recent times, he knew exactly where he could turn.



The 34-year-old shearer from Scarsdale, near Ballarat, admits he's had some rough knocks in his life. There have been times when things got out of hand with him, when he made mistakes.



More than just a pub: the Royal Mail Hotel in Sebastopol has shut its doors.

*Photo: Kate Healy*

But the Royal Mail Hotel in Sebastopol was, for Allen, a place where judgments on people were suspended.

“To a lot of people who drank there, it was never a pub,” he says.

“It was a family place. You could be gone two, three months, and walk back in there – open arms, ‘how are you going?’, catch up – just like the day you left.”

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The sudden closure of the hotel last Monday night has left many of its regulars reeling. While some had inklings of there being something wrong, the disclosure of massive debts incurred by licensees past and present and allegations of assets being moved around Ballarat has infuriated staff, locals and others who were fans of the 150-year-

old pub.

“The community and the people have had this pub stolen from them,” says Rob Allen.



A tram outside the Royal Mail Hotel in the late 1960s.

*Photo: The Andrew Cook Collection*

There's been a Royal Mail Hotel on the corner of Albert and Queen streets in Sebastopol since 1868, when a J. Leonard had the licence. It's one of Ballarat's oldest surviving and continuous public houses, and the current red brick building on the site is a classic 1920s rebuild. The Sebastopol line tram would terminate out the front of the pub – a bonus for any publican, surely.

Once upon a time, the corner pub, for better or worse, was part of the defining character of a place. It could be a sporting pub, or a pub preferred by business people. Some were notorious as 'bloodhouses', where you kept your head down, your mouth shut and your eyes on the door.

And many, like the Royal Mail, were working class refuges. Now the working class pub is a rare thing, as drinking habits change and costs rise. 'Gastropubs' are the rage. People drink at home more readily. It's not necessarily a bad thing; change is inevitable. But the Mail was a traditional family pub, and its loss is keenly felt.

Rob Allen is the president of the Royal Mail Sporting Club. The club organises monthly events for its members, whether it is bus tours, pool competitions, activities for their children or just general get-togethers.





Outside the Royal Mail at the turn of last century. The hotel was rebuilt in 1924.

*Photo: Supplied*

“We took all the kids to the waterpark recently,” Allen says.

“We go on the odd pub crawl; not many clubs still do them. It’s a true country pub. It’s a working class pub. The first time I walked in there was about 10 years ago, and I’ve been a regular customer for five or six years.”

The Royal Mail drew punters from further afield than simply Sebastopol, says Allen. People would travel in from Rokewood, Scarsdale, Cape Clear.

Now with their home venue closed indefinitely, everything is under threat. And the Sporting Club members are not just sad, says Rob Allen. They are angry.

Angry at having to go in at short notice to retrieve and secure gazebos, chairs, tables, eskys and all the other things they’ve purchased over the years for their members to use. Angry at seeing the blinds pulled down as the pub was emptied. Angry at losing a place where, for better or worse, people got together and looked out for each other.

It wasn’t a saintly place. No pub is. But, says Rob Allen, the staff and the punters deserved respect. And they got none.

“The closure of the pub has affected a lot of people,” Allen says.

“We had a local, who’s recently passed away. He used to come in every Friday night.

We called him Pete the Butcher. He used to get the meat for the social club; his wife is a life member of the club. There's a family there, the McPhans. Their father, grandfather, he died in the pub, it was the last place he went, so there's that really strong personal connection for them. There are hundreds of stories like that.

"You could walk in there and make great mates. And you'd stay mates with them. It's not just a pub. So many people are angry."

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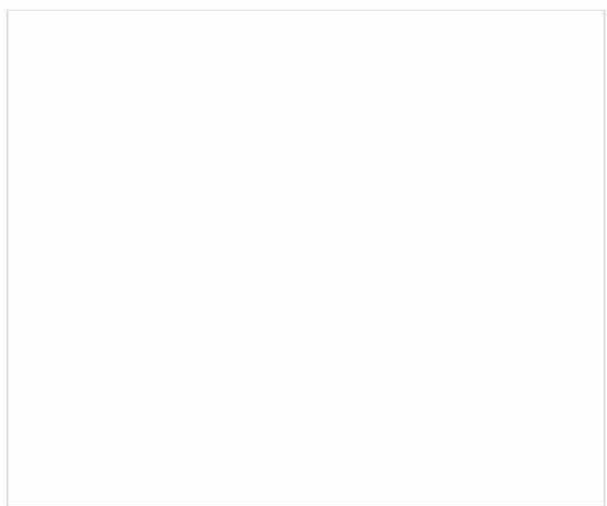
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