

Robert Doncon

Robert Doncon (1814-1881) was a York publican and businessman who built and owned the Kings Head hotel and the Halfway House at The Lakes. He also built what is now the CWA building.

Robert Doncon born on 23 March 1814 in Southrepps, Norfolk, England, the son of Robert Duncan (Doncon),¹ carpenter. On 4 February 1839, at North Walsham, Norfolk, England, he married Sophia Reynolds (born 6 June 1816, England).²

The Doncons arrived from England on the barque *Unicorn* on 3 August 1844.^{3 4} For some time, up to about 1855, he used the spelling Duncan for his surname but after about 1855, Doncon was mainly used⁵

After arrival, Doncon worked as a labourer.⁶

Doncon bought a 2 acre property in Blandstown from Revett Henry Bland on 16 July 1846 for 2 pounds⁷ which presumably was to later become the Kings Head Hotel.

By at least June 1847,⁸ he had bought⁹ and was operating the "Half Way House" on the (old) York Road and became a publican.¹⁰ He held a licence for the "Half Way House" in 1848 and 1849. In April 1848, he advertised three times for a pair of sawyers to work at the Half Way House.¹¹

In 1849, the Government decided to realign the road to York¹² and the "Half Way House" was bypassed. Doncon tried to find someone else to take the licence to the "Half Way House" but was not successful.¹³

In November 1849 Doncon was offering goods for sale at the Kings Head hotel.^{14 15} On 31 December 1849, Robert Doncon was given a publican spirits licence in relation to York, presumably for the Kings Head hotel.¹⁶

In March 1850, Doncon was charged with serving brandy to the aboriginal police.¹⁷ Doncon claimed that the native police were buying the alcohol for the Protector, Walkinshaw Cowan, who was known to be opposed to the "fiery spirits".

¹ Doncons in Australia: The first 150 Years, compiled by Lesley Margaret Doncon, p.5.

² Doncons in Australia: The first 150 Years, compiled by Lesley Margaret Doncon, p.5.

³ Rika Erikson: The Bicentennial Dictionary of Western Australians.

⁴ Their arrival was noted in the Perth Gazette and Independent Journal of Politics and News, 10 August 1844, p.2, showing steerage passengers included "R Duncan, Mrs Duncan and 2 children".

⁵ Doncons in Australia: The first 150 Years, compiled by Lesley Margaret Doncon, p.5.

⁶ Doncons in Australia: The first 150 Years, compiled by Lesley Margaret Doncon, p.5.

⁷ Landgate Memorial Book IV, No 125.

⁸ Inquirer, 7 July 1847, p.1.

⁹ Rika Erikson: The Bicentennial Dictionary of Western Australians.

¹⁰ Rika Erikson: The Bicentennial Dictionary of Western Australians.

¹¹ Inquirer 5 April 1848, p.1; 12 April, p.1; 19 April, p.4.

¹² To "King Dick's Line".

¹³ Doncons in Australia: The first 150 Years, compiled by Lesley Margaret Doncon, p.5.

¹⁴ Inquirer, 7 November 1849, p.4.

¹⁵ Ad repeated Inquirer, 14 November 1849, p.4.

¹⁶ Perth Gazette and Independent Journal of Politics and News, 11 January 1850, p.1.

The Kings Head Hotel was again granted a “Publicans’ Retail Spirit Licence” in January 1851.¹⁸ Relicensed next year the same time as the Dusty Miller.¹⁹

The hotel was used for meetings of the York Agricultural Society until they began to meet at the Castle Hotel.²⁰ The Inquirer noted that “the members sat down to a substantial lunch provided by Mr Doncon”.²¹ It was also used for other meetings such as the Race Club.²²

At the meeting of the York Agricultural Society in July 1851, “about 30 of the members sat down to a dinner provided by Mr Doncon; the cloth having been removed, the usual loyal toasts were drank”.²³

Robert Doncon and Solomon Cook took charge of the rural sports at the York Races on 7 January 1852.²⁴

At the meeting of the York Agricultural Society members in 1852, the members took advantage of Mr Doncon’s “large room”.²⁵

[There is a partnership of Scales & Duncan operating a farm at Cold Harbour in 1852, is this Robert?]

Doncon took a conveyance of another lot nearby in 1853.²⁶

In March 1854, a claim for a gold mine was made by D W Chapman, J Duffield, Sen, J Burthenshaw Cox and James Duffield for a 20 mile radius of Doncon’s Half Way House, indicating nuggets of gold had been discovered in its vicinity.²⁷

In April 1854, Doncon bought York Town lot 2 (now 152 Avon Tce)²⁸.

In August 1854, Robert Doncon was involved in an accident. To quote the Inquirer:

“On Monday 31st ult., an accident fortunately attended with no fatal results, occurred on the road over Green Mount, to the cart of Mr Doncan, of York, and which arose from the culpable neglect of the parties employed on that line of road. Mr Doncan was proceeding over the Mount on his way homewards, and finding the passage of the road obstructed by a tree thrown across it, he proceeded to the encampment of the gang of men at work, for assistance in removing the impediments to his progress. During his absence for that

¹⁷ Rodger Jennings: Over the Hills, A history of York 1834-1880, p.118, note 295.

¹⁸ Inquirer, 15 January, 1851, p.1.

¹⁹ Perth Gazette and Independent Journal of Politics and News 23 January 1852, p.4; Inquirer 21 January, 1852, p.3. Also licensed on the same day was S Hayes Travellers’ Home on the York Road (later the 19 Mile Inn).

²⁰ Perth Gazette and Independent Journal of Politics and News 9 February 1851, p.2; 14 February 1851, p.3.; 10 October 1851, p.3; 23 April 1852, p.3; 16 September 1853, p.2.;14 April 1854, p.2.

²¹ Inquirer 20 November 1850, p.3.

²² Perth Gazette and Independent Journal of Politics and News 19 September 1851, p.2.

²³ Inquirer, 23 July 1851, p.1.

²⁴ Perth Gazette and Independent Journal of Politics and News 7 November 1851, p.2.

²⁵ Inquirer 21 January 1852, p.3.

²⁶ Landgate Deeds and Ordinances index Volume 5, 189 on page 250 (2 acres purchased for 7 pounds 10 shillings); and 241 on page 308 (purchased for 18 pounds).

²⁷ Inquirer 29 March 1854, p.2; 5 April 1854, p.2; Perth Gazette and Independent Journal of Politics and News 31 March 1854, p.2..

²⁸ Landgate V/373/392: Conveyance 22 April 1854 from Benjamin Lyon of Perth Storekeeper to Robert Doncon of York 31 pounds.

purpose, a tree which had been nearly cut through, and permitted to be left in that state whilst the men partook of their dinner, fell directly across the dray, smashing everything in its descent. The dray was heavily and valuably laden, and a cask and several cases of wine on it were destroyed, and a valuable mare so much bruised, that her recovery is very questionable, and the shaft-horse was also much injured. Should the mare die, the loss to Mr Doncon will fall little short of £100.”²⁹

Doncon ran the hotel with his wife Sophia, who worked at the bar. In September 1854, she was a witness in the trial of Edward Bishop for the murder of a Chinese man named Ah Chong, and gave evidence of conversations at the bar of the Kings Head.³⁰

In 1854, Doncon built a replacement “Half Way House” at The Lakes. He advertised this on 15 December 1854:

“New Half-way House between Guildford and York. ON" the 1st of January, 1855, will be opened by Robert Doncon, the " TRAVELLERS BEST," where every accommodation will be afforded that man or horse can require. Frequent complaints being made of the exorbitant charges at roadside houses, It is determined to meet the wishes of the public, by supplying everything at the above house at the lowest remunerating prices. The following scale of charges will be invariably adhered to: - In the Parlour, each Meal. 2s. 6d. Beds . 1s. 6d. In the Tap room for cash only, each Meal . 1s. 6d. Beds. Os. 6d. For Cash on delivery each feed of corn with chaff or chopped hay, 1s ; each horse hay for the night 2s 6d. Parties with Teams tending their own horses can be supplied with hay by the cwt. at Guildford prices. Where running accounts are agreed upon, bills will be delivered, every 6 months, in which cases the charge will be for each feed of corn 4s 3d, each horse hay for the night 3s. Hay by the cwt., one shilling above Guildford price. A constant supply of first rate wines, spirits, bottled and draft beers, &c. . ' Wheat, barley, or other colonial produce will be received in payment”

It also appears that Doncon had also taken over running of the former “Dusty Miller” hotel (in Pool Street, now Christie Retreat) as there a few references to “Duncan’s Hotel” being in the location of Solomon Cook’s mill³¹, as well as other references simply to a hotel under that name.^{32 33}

By 1856, Doncon was also farming. It was reported that on his farm of 107 acres, “one man with one pair of horses did the whole of his ploughing (108 acres) in 78 days”.³⁴

In or prior to August 1855, Doncon opened a new store.³⁵ This store was probably his new building which is now the CWA building. The first reference to the store is an attempted robbery. In August

²⁹ Inquirer 9 August 1854, p.2.

³⁰ Perth Gazette and Independent Journal of Politics and News 8 September 1854, p.2; 6 October 1854, p.2..

³¹ *The Inquirer*, 11 April 1855, p.1; further ads 25 April 1855, page 2.

³² Inquirer 25 April 1855, p.2.

^{33 33} Perth Gazette and Independent Journal of Politics and News 7 September 1855, p.1; 14 September 1855, p.1.

³⁴ Inquirer and Commercial News, 9 July 1856, p.2.

³⁵ Inquirer and Commercial News, 29 August 1855, p.3.

1855, his “store” was attempted to be broken into, a thief cutting a pane of glass out of the window, but his son gave the alarm.³⁶

Doncon advertised Town Lot 2 (the store) on 10 October 1856³⁷ as follows:

“TO BE SOLD AT AUCTION AT THE YORK FAIR

A newly erected Brick House built for a Butcher’s Shop, but can be easily converted to any other purpose, situated in the most central and business part of York, adjoining Wade’s steam mill and known as York Building Lot No 2, the grant is fenced in with a two rail fence”.

Later in October 1856, Doncon put up the Kings Head for lease:

“The proprietor is about to relinquish the conduct of the above establishment, in consequence of other business requiring his attention. To an active person desirous of entering into the public line, the above offers advantages rarely to be met with in the colony. The House contains 11 bedrooms, 2 sitting rooms, tap room, bar and kitchen with bake and brew-house and a five bushel oven, together with stabling for 20 horses, cart lodges, carpenter’s shop and 4 stockyards, well of good water, &c, and 7 acres land adjoining.”³⁸

In 1857, Doncon sold Town Lot 2 to Resident Magistrate Richard Goldsmith Meares “the Younger” for 250 pounds.³⁹

He owned a race horse named “*Robin Hood*”.⁴⁰

In November 1858, Doncon advertised for a House Carpenter, promising six months constant employ at good wages.⁴¹

The Kings Head was improved in appearance in 1859.⁴²

Doncon was proud that the “Working Class” came to his hotel. In October 1859, Doncon advertised:

“ROBERT DONCON, proprietor of the “Kings Head”, York, begs to return his thanks for the liberal support he has received from all classes, more especially *the Working Class*, and to assure them that he has been enabled from that support to erect a first-class House, where he can accommodate either *rich or poor* with refreshments of the best quality and upon reasonable terms. RD can at any moment provide Bedrooms well-aired, for upwards of thirty persons, and comfort that requires one visit to prove the fact. RD begs to assure the public that his bottle Ale and Porter department will be found well supplied, and as usual every pains taken in purchasing the same to select what his customers give him credit for having – a good article and cheap. Wines of the first quality either in draught or bottle, and

³⁶ Inquirer and Commercial News, 29 August 1855, p.3.

³⁷ *The Perth Gazette and Independent Journal of Politics and News*, 10 October 1856, p. 2.

³⁸ Perth Gazette and Independent Journal of Politics and News 24 October 1856, p.5; 28 November 1856, p.6.; smaller ad 3 October 1856, p.2.

³⁹ Landgate: VI/38/215: Mortgage on 6 May 1857.

⁴⁰ Perth Gazette and Independent Journal of Politics and News 4 September 1857, p.6.

⁴¹ Perth Gazette and Independent Journal of Politics and News 19 November 1858, p.6.

⁴² Inquirer and Commercial News 19 October 1859, p.2.

some excellent Champagne. Draught Porter and Ale drawn with an engine A BALL will be held on Wednesday, the 26th of October, and a first-rate band will attend. Supper at 8 o'clock. Good and extensive stables, gig and coach houses locked, stockyard, sheep pens, and a large paddock, and a supply of excellent corn and hay. An experienced Ostler will be kept."

In the same newspaper, Doncon advertised for a bread and biscuit baker.

A reporter in 1859 said:

"Of the King's Head I can speak in praise of its appearance, and the vast improvements in that establishment certainly make it most inviting. From this impartial account it will be seen that I have adhered to truth, without any approach to disparagement of either party."⁴³

Doncon continued to improve, advertising in 1860 for tenders for 550 yards of plastering.⁴⁴

"There is a story that a local policeman used to drink at the King's Head – sometimes while on duty and the local children used to hide his bicycle up in the trees where he could not find it as he was too full."⁴⁵

In 1861, Doncon opened a new store in York offering merchandise cheaper than elsewhere.⁴⁶

Doncon then advertised the hotel "to be let" for a term of 5 years. Advertisements in 1862 described the Kings Head Inn as follows:

"a drawing room, parlour and dining room, ballroom, 10 bedrooms, bar and tap room, commodious kitchen and pantry with large baker's oven, also extensive cellarage. The outhouses are complete consisting of 14 stall stables, looseboxes, hay and cart sheds, stock yards etc, the whole in excellent repair, together with 32 acres of land; the whole in a high state of cultivation."⁴⁷

On 1 January 1863, Robert Doncon published that "having again resumed the management of the [King's Head] Hotel, "begs to acquaint his friends and the public that the same assiduous attention which he formerly gave and which was so long appreciated, will be renewed, every attention to guests of all grades will be cheerfully given".⁴⁸

In July 1868, Doncon advertised to let the house near to the Kings Head on Avon Tce.⁴⁹ He was also described as a shoemaker.⁵⁰

In January 1871, he advertised to let his baking house as having the largest oven in the district.⁵¹

⁴³ Inquirer and Commercial News 19 October 1859, p.2.

⁴⁴ Perth Gazette and Independent Journal of Politics and News 6 July 1860 p.2.

⁴⁵ Doncons in Australia: The first 150 Years, compiled by Lesley Margaret Doncon, p.5.

⁴⁶ Perth Gazette and Independent Journal of Politics and News 9 August 1861, p.6.

⁴⁷ Perth Gazette and Independent Journal of Politics and News 11 July 1862 p.2; 3 October 1862, p.1..

⁴⁸ Perth Gazette and Independent Journal of Politics and News 2 January 1863, p.2.

⁴⁹ Perth Gazette and Independent Journal of Politics and News 3 July 1868, p.1

⁵⁰ Doncons in Australia: The first 150 Years, compiled by Lesley Margaret Doncon, p.7.

⁵¹ Perth Gazette and Independent Journal of Politics and News 27 January 1871, p.1

On 8 November 1872, Richard William Chipper applied for a publican's general licence for the King's Head Hotel "containing three sitting rooms and eight bedrooms...now in the occupation of Mr Robert Doncon".⁵³ In about September 1873, Doncon leased the hotel to Chipper.⁵⁴

In 1874, Chipper, as licensee was charged with allowing gambling on the premises. Henry Stevens (the blacksmith), Henry Turner (or Ware) and John Dott were the customers. They were watched by Lance Corporal Parker and Police Constable Lavery, who observed at least 20 games of dice each for the stake of a "dollar", Chipper being present during the whole affair. After one party had been "spun up", Chipper lent him a pound so he could keep playing. "As it was in the small hours of the morning, it was considered necessary to smoke and liquor down, before proceeding any further". While Chipper left the room to get refreshments, the constables entered the room. One of the customers suggested "sending over a gallon of pale brandy to square the Beak".

Chipper declined to cross examine and pleaded guilty and was fined 20 pounds, given that Chipper had been convicted of the same offence a few months earlier.

In 1876, Doncon advertised his home adjoining the Kings Head for sale or lease. The ad says that Doncon was "leaving on account of ill-health".⁵⁵ The property was described as follows:

"ALL that dwelling house and grant attached, the property of Mr. Robert Doncon (who is leaving on account of ill-health), adjoining the " King's Head" Hotel, York, containing 12 rooms, and an entrance hall, together with Stabling, Gig house, Hay and Chaff-house, Loft, &c, and 1 good well of water. ALSO, 3 grants of land adjoining of 3 acres (more or less.)

In October 1877, Doncon advertised his house for auction⁵⁶:

YORK FAIR DAY.

Mr. J. T. Monger

HAS been instructed by Mr. Robert Doncon

(who is about to leave the colony) to offer for sale on WEDNESDAY, the 24th OCTOBER, at 12 o'clock sharp

THE two-storey house, in which he lives, consisting of 12 good commodious rooms, verandah, and balcony ; one room fitted up with shelves for store purposes ; good kitchen garden, and out-houses comprising, coach house, workshop, stable for 3 horses, hay house, hay loft and cart shed ; 12 acres (more or less) of land attached, well fenced and under crop, two good wells on the premises.

The house occupies a central position in the main street of York, and is admirably adapted for a Temperance Hotel, or other place of business.

ALSO,

Immediately after the sale of the above, will be offered three grants adjoining ; well fenced and under crop ; containing
4 acres more or less.

Intending buyers can obtain further information and inspect the property on application to the proprietor, or the Auctioneer.

⁵² Inquirer, 15 March 1871, p.1.

⁵³ Inquirer and Commercial News, 13 November 1872, p.2.

⁵⁴ Inquirer and Commercial News, 24 September 1873, p.3.

⁵⁵ Western Australian Times, 15 February 1876, p.3.

⁵⁶ Western Australian Times, 2 October 1877, p.3.

Good Titles can be given to the whole of the above property.
York, 26th Sept. 1877. [17.10.77.

Shirley Lutz said that the Doncons had “an impressive double storeyed house next to the Kings Head Hotel (at what is now 33 Avon Terrace). It was Georgian in appearance and eventually collapsed due to water seepage undermining the foundation.”⁵⁷

In January 1878, R W Chipper the “landlord” of the Kings Head was fined for having a drunken man on the premises.⁵⁸⁵⁹

In February 1878, Doncon was reported as adding “the necessary adjuncts towards making 9his home) complete as a Temperance Hotel”.⁶⁰

Between 1865 and 1878, he employed 17 ticket of leave men.⁶¹

In February 1878, Robert Doncon “now residing at Bland’s Town in the district of York” gave notice of his intention to apply for an Eating, Boarding and Lodging House licence.⁶² He also advertised his boarding house and undertook to “supply hay and corn at a cheaper rate than is to be obtained elsewhere”.⁶³ A letter to the paper from “Corrian” in relation to this advertisement described Doncon as “well known to most bushmen as an obstinate, straightforward man, and if can only assimilate his ideas to the requirements of customers from the back track, and carry out what he promises by advertisement, he will be sure of the support which should be extended to such a useful and much wanted establishment”.⁶⁴

The Western Australian Times published a column of praise for the initiative.⁶⁵ The required licence was granted on 4 March 1878.⁶⁶

In July 1879, Doncon advertised his “Temperance Hotel” as being for sale or to let.⁶⁷

On 19 September 1881, Sophia Doncon, aged 65 years, died “after a long and severe illness”.⁶⁸ Doncon’s “2 storey house situated in Avon Terrace, York” was sent to auction on 3 December 1881. The house and objects for sale were all described. Robert Doncon was said to be “leaving the colony”.⁶⁹

⁵⁷ Doncons in Australia: The first 150 Years, compiled by Lesley Margaret Doncon, p. 7.

⁵⁸ Inquirer and Commercial News, 30 January 1878, p.3.

⁵⁹ Eastern Districts Chronicle, 19 January, 1878, p.2.

⁶⁰ Eastern Districts Chronicle, 2 February 1878, p.2.

⁶¹ Rica Erickson, Dictionary of Western Australians.

⁶² Eastern Districts Chronicle, 2 February 1878, p.2; 9 February 1878, p.4..

⁶³ Eastern Districts Chronicle, 2 February 1878, p.2.

⁶⁴ Eastern Districts Chronicle, 9 February 1878, p.2.

⁶⁵ Western Australian Times, 22 February 1878, p.2; see also 26 March 1878, p.2; 10 May 1878, p.2. which says “...cleanliness, comfort and good fare, are the order of the day; and man and horse are well cared for”.

⁶⁶ Eastern Districts Chronicle, 9 March 1878, p.2.

⁶⁷ Western Australian Times, 8 July 1879, p.3.

⁶⁸ Eastern Districts Chronicle, 23 September 1881, p.2; 30 September 1881, p.2.

⁶⁹ Eastern Districts Chronicle, 7 October 1881, p.3.

Doncon was reported to have left for London on 4 January 1882, on the Helena Mena.⁷⁰ He is reported to have returned on 7 January 1883 on the Arafura.⁷¹ He must have gone to England again as he left London for Fremantle on 22 October 1885.⁷² And he was reported as about to leave the colony again in February 1886 in relation to the sale of land at Bland's Town.⁷³ He is shown as a passenger for Albany in May 1886.⁷⁴

In 1889, Doncon "an old settler" was charged with "wandering about town without proper care or control, when supposed to be in a state of unsound mind".⁷⁵

He was admitted to the "Fremantle Lunatic Asylum" in January 1890 and died there on 2 October 1893.⁷⁶ There appears to have been no obituary for him.

Rob Garton Smith
President
The York Society (Inc)
February 2022

⁷⁰ Inquirer and Commercial News, 11 January 1882, p.3.

⁷¹ Daily News, 9 February 1883, p.3; Herald 10 February 1883, p.2.

⁷² Daily News, 4 December 1885, p.3.

⁷³ West Australian, 12 February 1886, p.2.

⁷⁴ West Australian 24 May 1886, p.3.

⁷⁵ Eastern Districts Chronicle, 7 December 1889, p.4.

⁷⁶ Inquirer and Commercial News, 13 October 1893, p.6.