



Roller Skating

—1867—

Here in May 1867 something remarkable opened at the hotel, drawing a very large, and very curious, crowd.

Early landlord John Webb decided the hotel needed a new kind of entertainment to be the trendiest place in town.

Gossip had been spreading and everyone couldn't wait to see inside! They could hear fast, new sounds rushing past.

The doors flung open, and people piled in, stepping in to behold Tasmania's first roller skating rink.

International champion skater Adolphus Spiller sped past demonstrating the speed and style of the new sport.

Not long after it had taken hold in London and New York, the craze known as 'Rinkomania' had arrived in Hobart.

Roller skating had been around for 100 years prior, invented back in 1760 by a Belgian inventor working in London, John Joseph Merlin – but his skates could only go straight. The story goes that he daringly wore them to a masquerade party in London. But to show off his new invention, his grand entrance included trying to play the violin at the same time and ended badly as he crashed into a mirror!

And so roller skating was forgotten for a while, later revived in 1863 when America James Plimpton made a mechanical breakthrough by designing roller skates with two parallel sets of wooden wheels on rubber springs, giving skaters the ability to steer in a curve.

When roller skating arrived here with the new curving wheels, it was a sensation. Around 200 men, women and children enrolled in skating lessons here with Mr Spiller.

Among gilded mirrors, twinkling chandeliers, gold candelabras and elaborate wallpaper, all kinds of competitions and special skating events were held here.

References:

'Local News', *The Tasmanian Times*, Thu 1 Aug 1867, p. 2
The Tasmanian Charivari, Mon 20 May 1867