The New Great Britain Hotel

William Cannon had opened the Great Britain Hotel in his house in 1864. In 1870 he built a seven roomed brick hotel next door, renaming it the New Great Britain Hotel.¹

On 21 September 1872, a group of men gathered in the Hotel and together formed the world’s first maritime union, the Melbourne Seamen’s Union.²

Membership of the seamen’s union grew rapidly. In 1873, with an estimated 800 members, it was the largest body of seamen in the Southern Hemisphere.³ By 1880 seamen’s unions had been formed in all of the eastern and south eastern colonies of Australia and in New Zealand. It was not long after this that the smaller unions formed loosely together to create a federal association that was able to act collectively.⁴

Before the formation of a union, seamen worked without political rights, arbitration or any industrial legislation. Port Melbourne was a centre for port activities and many of the individuals and families who lived there earned their living as seamen or port workers. One such man was George Sangster, seaman turned politician. George attended the first meeting of the seamen’s union and became an active member holding the offices of President, Vice President and Secretary. It was while he was President of the Melbourne Seamen’s Union that he established the New Zealand Seamen’s Union, which came under the umbrella of the Seamen’s Union of Australia.⁵ George was active in local politics too, elected a Port Melbourne Councillor in 1893. One year later he became Port Melbourne’s first Labor MLA, being sworn into office in October 1894.⁶ Between 1894-95 George was also President of Trades Hall Council.⁷ He was given a state funeral upon his death in 1915, when all the flags in Port Melbourne were lowered to half mast in his honour.⁸

In the same year, the New Great Britain Hotel closed its doors for the last time. Today the building has been restored and is now a private residence.⁹

¹ Pat Grainger, Chartered Scoundrels: A Brief History of Port Melbourne Hotels, (Port Melbourne: Port Melbourne Historical and Preservation Society, 2007), 60.
³ Argus, 23 December 1873.
⁸ Argus 12 April 1915.
⁹ Grainger, Chartered Scoundrels, 60.