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Nestling: the Manor House at Woodside is built of local bricks.

Gold was never found at Woodside, although a goldrush put it on the map and the end of the golden age wiped it off again. Between times, Woodside was the scene of a famous gold robbery.

The village snuggled beside a glen at the foot of the Maungatua Hill, looking over the Taieri Plain, south-west of Dunedin.

Up this gully the diggers tramped towards the goldfields of Waipori, Tuapeka and Dunstan, in Central Otago, nearly 150 years ago. Later, up this glen, and onto the Dunstan Trail, probing far across the high plateau beyond, bumped the coaches of Cobb and Co.



MIKE CREAM/THE PRESS

Former glory: the old store, at Woodside, near Outram on the Taieri Plains.

Back down this glen came the gold coach with its armed escort of grizzled troops. Some had seen action in the Crimea and during the miners' revolt at Eureka Stockade in Victoria, Australia.

At Woodside they paused before pushing on to the hotel and police camp at nearby Taieri Ferry, where they stayed the night before the last stage of their journey to Dunedin.

A few farmers, woodsmen and sawmillers were here before the diggers. These God-fearing Presbyterians did not welcome the intrusion of a motley bunch of hungry gold-seekers who stole their sheep and left only skin and bones. When residents heard that this passing parade had attracted the infamous Henry Garrett to the area, they bolted their doors and barred their windows.

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He was associated with Richard Burgess who, with accomplices Kelly and Levy, was later hanged for the Maungatapu murders near Nelson, after a fourth gang member, Sullivan, testified against them.

Garrett led a bunch of pistol-packing ruffians who preyed on diggers returning from the goldfields. At Woodside Glen, which is now a pretty picnic area, his gang held up 15 diggers heading for Dunedin with gold in their pockets, in late 1861. The gangsters tied their victims to trees and made their getaway with a small fortune.

Garrett reached Sydney before he was captured and brought back to Dunedin for trial. After serving a term of hard labour, he was released but re-offended and was locked up in Dunedin jail again. He was then transferred to Lyttelton where he completed his time. Free at last, he spent the rest of his life impressing people as a writer and speaker.

As I stroll around Woodside in gentle rain, it is not Garrett's ghost I sense, but the spirit of worthy pioneers and community leaders.

People like James and Catherine Fulton, who built the the former Sunday School, that became a community hall in the 1860s. It looks tumbledown now but the name Fulton remains prominent.

Two generations later, Jules Fulton and friend Robert Hogan formed roading company Fulton Hogan near here.

Another early settler, Francis McDiarmid, arrived from Scotland on the immigrant ship Philip Laing, in 1848. Sturdy Scots, like him, built sturdy homes, like Woodside Manor. This impressive baronial homestead was built of local bricks in the 1860s.

If there is a ghost, it is a happy one -- that of large and genial Woodside hotel keeper J. Iveson. He operated the daily coach service to and from Dunedin. Frequently he would come out from behind his bar to drive the horses.

When Woodside began its decline, around 1880, Iveson had his hotel jacked up and moved four kilometres to Outram, where he re-established his business.

Outram's star was on the rise. The Taieri River was bridged there. A branch railway line from near Mosgiel reached there in 1877.

Outram today is a picturesque blend of building styles, from late Victorian to modern, at the foot of the highway that soars over the Otago highlands to Middlemarch, and on to the Maniototo area. It is home to 700.

While Outram prospered, Woodside wound down. It once contained a sawmill and flourmill, a general store and post office, bootmaker's and baker's shops, various tradesmen's workshops, a school and hall.

Much of the store and Post Office remains, converted to living quarters. Several old cottages have been charmingly restored. The school and hall are derelict.

Woodside village is a shadow of the past. Only a handful of people live here. Few from outside the Taieri Plain have even heard of it.

Dunedin families who have discovered Woodside Glen choose to drive out there on sunny days, down narrow, hedge-lined lanes.

They plant their deckchairs and picnic tables on the lush grass, beneath the bush-clad hillside. They don't mind that diggers with bulging pockets once picked their way down this gully, boasting of their success.

Or that bushrangers lay in wait here for the easiest of pickings.

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