

COALMINING RELATED DEATHS, HUNTER VALLEY, NSW pre-1900 (2004)

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Although this study purports to cover the nineteenth century – 100 years – the absence of records for the early period could well conceal a greater number of fatalities than the 406 named here.

Mining began in the first period of settlement in Newcastle in 1801, then resumed permanently in 1804. Coal was the impetus for the foundation of the settlement at Coal River. The first fatal coal mining accident found beyond any doubt was in 1816, then none until the 1840s. Despite our best endeavours, nothing has been found to close these gaps.

Early in the period the victims included convicts, ticket-of-leave men, emancipists and immigrants, whose were mostly from the mining areas of Scotland, England and Wales, but also from a number of other countries. Later in the century the Australian-born become more numerous, many of them being sons following their fathers into the mines. Their ages ranged from 11 to 76 years of age. In that century they were, of course, all males.

Their stories tell more than the manner of their deaths. Not only is there much to learn about the individuals – whether they died in a single accident or the great disasters like Stockton, Hamilton, Ferndale, Greta, South Burwood, Dudley. The reader will learn much of their families, their homes, their many interests in the community. The wider picture constantly reveals many examples of mateship and heroism, at their very finest among the men who engaged in the arduous and dangerous work of the collieries of our Valley.

It is still possible a century or more later to grieve for these lost men and boys and those they left behind, often in very reduced conditions or destitution. Clearly, circumstances dictated that many of these men lie in unmarked graves, without headstone or any marker.

