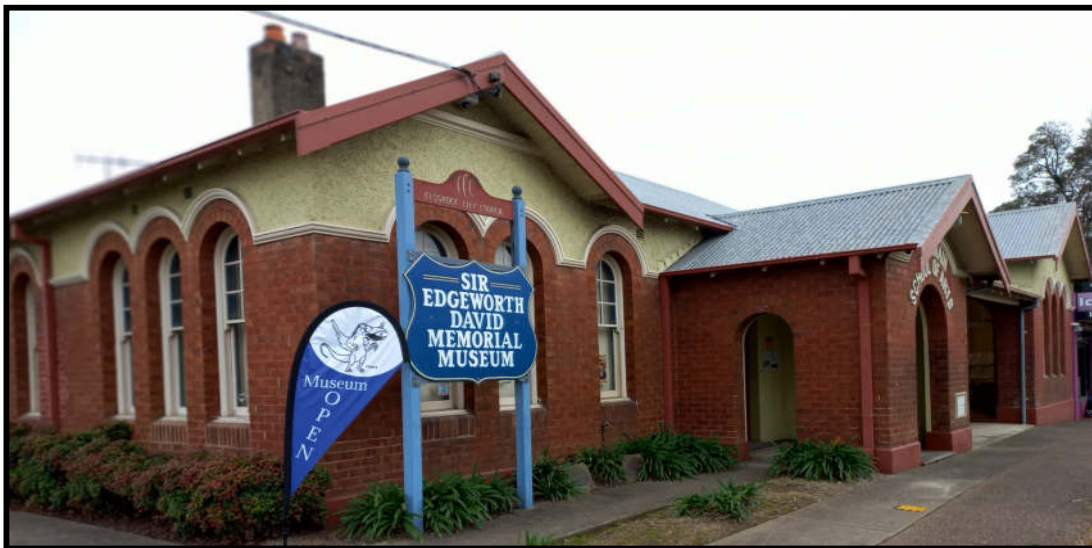




**COALFIELDS LOCAL HISTORY ASSOCIATION
QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER**

NUMBER 68

SEPTEMBER 2023



CONTENTS

Articles

Bellbird Mining Disaster 1 September 1923	3	Underground Mining Mia Smith Worth	11
Centenary of Bellbird Mining Disaster 1 September 2023	5	Museum Report	12
First Mines Rescue Station In NSW	7	Obituary Marjory Joy Wotherspoon	13
Bellbird Mining Disaster Improvements Audrey Anton	10	Meeting Times	14

Welcome to Tumblebee, the official newsletter of the Coalfields Local History Association Inc.

Aims and Objectives

To discover, record, print, preserve and teach the History and Heritage of the specified district. The specified district being all the land situated in the Cessnock Local Government Area. Primarily known as the Hunter Valley in general

The Coalfields Local History Association Manages the Edgeworth David Museum, Manages and maintains the Jim Comerford Collection and offers assistance with Family History Research and inquiries.

Office Bearers

President	Kim WELLER	
Secretary	Lexie MATTHEWS	0409452555
Treasurer	Peter ALLEN	

Committee Members

PATRONS

Catherine PARSONS
Meryl SWANSON MP

Newsletter Editor	Lynette Hamer	49362493
-------------------	---------------	----------

LIFE MEMBERS OF EDGEWORTH DAVID MUSEUM

Brian ANDREWS OAM (Deceased)
Lexie MATTHEWS
Cheryle SHOESMITH

Association Address	Coalfields Local History Association Secretary P O Box 10 Kurri Kurri NSW 2327
---------------------	--

Web Address	coalfieldshistory.org
Email	coalfieldshistory@gmail.com

The affairs of the Association shall be conducted by the management committee, which includes the office bearers of the Association. Members of the association are welcome to attend and observe at any meeting and may take part at the discretion of the chairperson

BELLBIRD MINE DISASTER

1 SEPTEMBER 1923

Saturday 1 September 1923 saw the occurrence of the worst coal mining disaster in the history of the Northern District resulting in the loss of twenty one lives, the temporary closure of part of the Bellbird Colliery and an out pouring of community grief previously not experienced.

Mining communities being close knit felt the impact of the tragedy, but true to mining tradition the miners, families, organizations, the community in general and other mining districts came together to offer support in many forms.

THE BELLBIRD COLLIERY

The Bellbird colliery began operations in 1912 and was working the Main Greta seam. Naked lights were used within the mine as there had never been Methane gas (CH₄) previously detected in the mine. Coal dust minimal. Moisture was present and in the dry areas of the mine powders from the clay floor substituted as excellent stone dusting.



THE DISASTER

That Saturday afternoon the day shift left the mine at around 1.00pm. Deputies had carried out the usual pre shift inspections and had found nothing untoward. However shortly after 1.00 pm when the afternoon shift were going underground Frederick MOODIE encountered dense smoke. He immediately retreated, informing deputies SNEDDEN, WILSON and EKE. Deputy EKE tried four times to alert the surface without success and was eventually driven back by the smoke. Several deputies tried to ascertain the source of the smoke and in doing so discovered the bodies of four dead miners. On further investigation nine more bodies were found along with three dead horses. By this time it was obvious that there was a fire in the mine and several explosions followed.

The fifteen bodies were conveyed to the surface under the supervision of Mr John BROWN, manager of Aberdare colliery. Mr BROWN subsequently lost his own life while trying to rescue the remaining five miners who were entombed when the mine was sealed. Following investigations into the conditions that existed, with the presence of fire, smoke and noxious

gases and the explosions that had occurred the heart wrenching decision was made to seal the mine with the remaining six bodies inside. During the sealing process more explosions occurred destroying the fan shaft. Sealing the mine was seen as the only way to extinguish the fire. Prevailing conditions made it far too dangerous to attempt any further recovery operations.

So strong was the mateship amongst miners that many of the men who had just completed their own shifts rushed back to the mine to assist with the rescue operations. Young and old volunteered to help, however because of the dangerous conditions only experienced miners were allowed to take part.

Imagine the risks involved in trying to carry out a rescue operation in a smoke filled gaseous atmosphere with naked lights on cloth caps, no breathing apparatus (only damp handkerchiefs over their mouths) and no stretchers to carry the dead. They had to improvise stretchers from particle board that had been used to construct stoppings. At the time there were only six proto suits in NSW. One at Hebburn at Weston and one at Aberdare. At this time proto suits were looked upon as not necessary. They had been used successfully in Britain for some time but the colliery proprietors would not justify their use in the NSW mines. (A disregard for lives over profit).

The unaffected sections of the mine continued to produce coal and in June 1924 the damaged section of the mine was reopened with the use of proto suits. These suits finally proved their worth in rescue situations in mines. Five more bodies were recovered at this time, however the body of Malcolm BAILEY was not recovered until 1965, by accident forty one years after the disaster.

The impact on the community of such a disaster was felt far and wide. The outpouring of grief and support was displayed at the funerals of the first fifteen men recovered. It was estimated that approximately 25,000 people attended the funerals. Thirteen of the miners were buried in Cessnock cemetery at Nulkaba. One in Sandgate cemetery and one in a private cemetery at Barnsley. The thirteen coffins were conveyed to the cemetery on lorries. Local business were closed and there was a general outpouring of grief in the community and indeed in other places in the state, especially mining areas.

As sad and tragic as this event was some good came out of it. After two inquests and a Royal commission (which the government opposed) The Mines Rescue Act was passed in December 1925 and came into force in 1926. The mine owners were finally forced to finance the establishment of fully equipped mines rescue stations, manned by trained personnel. These stations were to be established in several coal mining areas. The first to be established was the South Maitland station at Abermain.

MINES RESCUE ACT.

Act No. 3, 1925.

George V, No. 3. An Act to provide for rescue operations in coal and shale mines; for the establishment, equipment, maintenance, and control of rescue stations and rescue corps; for the payment by the owners of mines of certain contributions towards Mines Rescue Funds to be devoted to the foregoing purposes; for the establishment at mines of rescue brigades; for the provision at mines of certain apparatus, and the training of men in the use thereof; and for purposes connected therewith. [Assented to, 28th September, 1925.]

BE

CENTENARY OF THE BELLBIRD MINE DISASTER

1 September 2023

It is very important to preserve our history and heritage. Coal mining is the root of our local communities. The coal mines are the reasons for the establishment of our towns. Our culture is defined by our mining ancestors. Our children need to be reminded of the hardships and struggles that our mining ancestors endured to bring us to who we are now. Since the Coalfields Local History Association endeavours to preserve all our history, coal mining in particular we were more than happy to participate and indeed be the incentive for the recent Centenary of the Bellbird Mine Disaster. A program of events for the day was devised. We began reaching out to other organizations who may have had an interest, as a result of this Coal Service and the MEU came onboard and with their assistance a really amazing event was planned and carried out. The Bellbird Public school participated with their choir singing the National Anthem and their captains reciting the poem "Men of Coal". The MEU pipe band introduced the event. Local dignitaries, representatives of the MEU, Coal Services and Mines Rescue spoke. Uncle Richard EDWARDS gave the welcome to country on behalf of the Wannarua people and delivered the welcome in the Wannarua language. Families and relatives of the deceased miners were invited to lay floral tributes. Tara NAYSMITH sang "Mates Underground" and the event was closed by our Patron Meryl SWANSON MP.



Bellbird Memorial with centenary plaque added and floral tributes laid



Bellbird primary school choir



Floral tributes laid by family members along the memorial rose garden in the background the mines rescue vehicles that were on display on the day

THE FIRST MINES RESCUE STATION IN NSW

Abermain has the distinction of being the first Mines Rescue station to be established in NSW.

After the devastation of the Bellbird Mine disaster the Mines Rescue Act was passed by the government and implemented soon afterwards.

Traditionally coal mining has always been a dangerous occupation. This is testified to by the 1793 names inscribed on the Jim COMERFORD memorial wall at Aberdare. This wall is a memorial to all the men in the Northern District who have lost their lives or died of injuries received in coal mining accidents.

Each time a mining accident occurred and especially when lives were lost the lack of appropriate rescue gear and the need for improvements in safety were highlighted. Of course these incidents lead to inquiries and some experimentation led to a better understanding of the chemistry of mining conditions. Even though falls of stone and coal were dangerous, the presence of deadly carbon monoxide (CO) gas was the worst condition miners faced.

After the deaths of many miners due carbon monoxide poisoning it became obvious that there was a definite need for breathing apparatus to be used when rescue operations were taking place.

In 1896 eleven miners lost their lives due carbon monoxide gas poisoning at the Stockton colliery. Fifteen lost their lives due to the same cause in 1898 at the Dudley mine. After the Stockton disaster the Mines Department purchased two pneumatophors to be used for experimental use. Apart from the death toll, the common factor in most mining accidents was the need for rapid and safe rescue procedures. The recovery of survivors, deceased miners and the assessment of damage was a major priority, for this to be done required rescuers to enter dangerous unbreathable conditions. Breathing apparatus was essential. For the proper use of breathing equipment, training and constant maintenance of the equipment was required. It became obvious after the bellbird disaster that Mines Rescue centers would be needed to house equipment, train men and provide prompt constant updating of methods and procedures.

The Mines Rescue Act provided for the establishment of Rescue stations. Since the South Maitland Coalfields had the worst accident record and was, at the time central to most of the mines in the district it was firstly decided to build the first station at Neath but the decision was finally made to establish it at Abermain



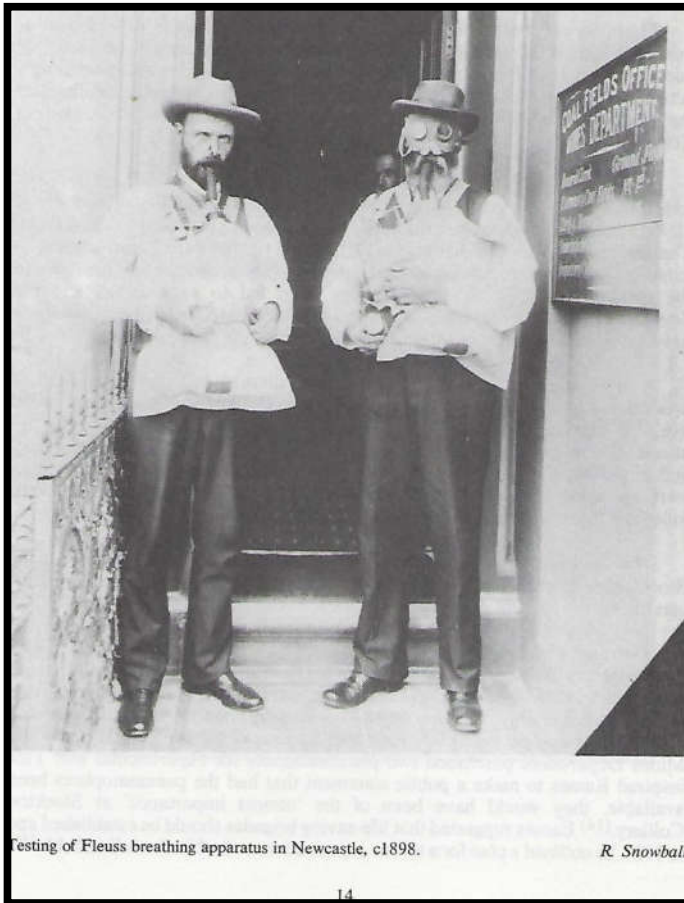
Coal mining is traditionally a fluid industry with mines constantly opening and closing. With advent of mining moving to the Upper Hunter area and mines on the South Maitland Coalfield closing it became obvious that the Abermain Mines Rescue station had out lived it's usefulness. In 1983 the new Mines Rescue station opened at Singleton Heights. It also became obvious that the nature of mining was changing from underground to open cut. This required the Mines Rescue organization to review it's purposes and open cut services were introduced.

With improved safety measures and improvements in technology the nature of the services of the Mines Rescue station has changed, it now focuses on training techniques and equipment maintenance. With the reduction in underground mining, the type of accident that the teams are required to manage have changed.

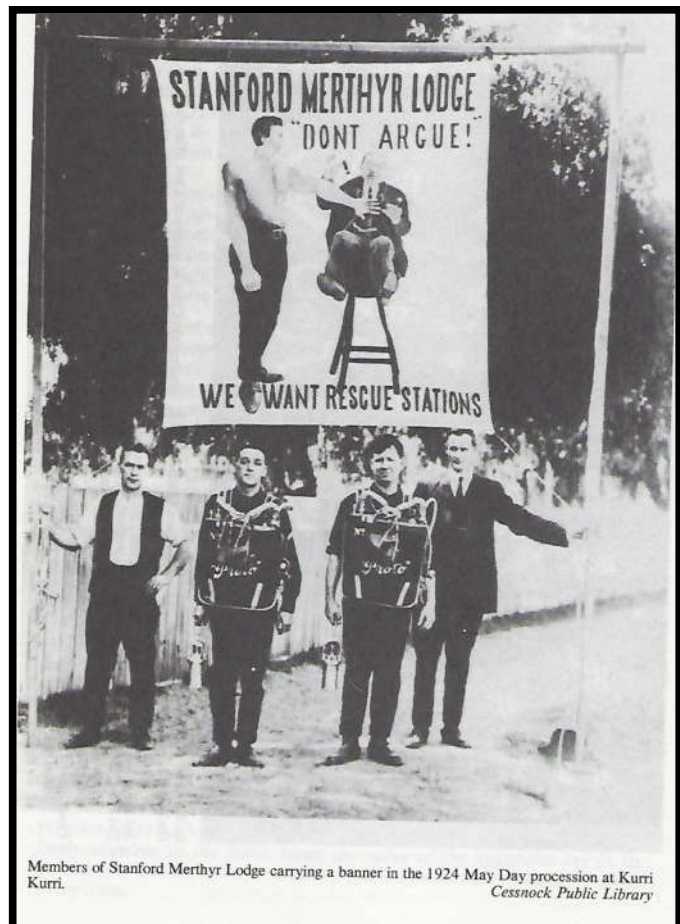
Even though the nature of the rescues required have change the importance of the Mines Rescue service has not.



Proto gear used in the reopening of the Bellbird mine. This equipment proved the usefulness of breathing apparatus in conditions where carbon monoxide and other poisonous gases are present



After the Stanford Merthyr disaster were six men were killed the unions continued their campaign for the establishment of Mines Rescue Stations, however it was the deaths of twenty one miners in the Bellbird mining disaster that finally brought the introduction of rescue stations to fruition.



Bellbird Mining Disaster Improvements

By Audrey Anton

Introduction

Have you ever wondered about the Bellbird Mining Disaster and what improvements have been put in place to prevent that from happening again? Some of the improvements that have been put in place, are improved communication systems, breathing apparatus and remote controls. These have been developed to make sure that the terrible disaster won't ever happen again. Making sure that mines are now modern, safe and efficient is now a high priority.

Communication Systems

Frist of all, communication systems have come every far in the last 100 years. For example, sensors to monitor gas, oxygen, humidity and temperatures have been developed. They monitor subsurface atmosphere which may be contaminated with poisonous gases. This is important because it was carbon monoxide poisoning that killed so many people in the Bellbird Mine Disaster. If communication systems had been in place, then, maybe these miners could have been saved.

Remote Controls

It is quite clear that wireless remote-control equipment has improved mining conditions in recent times. ALPHA (A company who makes mining remote control equipment) has developed underground mining remote control equipment. Both sight remote control and autonomous are available. Some examples are preliminary tele remote control, semi-autonomous tele remote control and autonomous tele remote control. If these technologies had been developed in 1923, perhaps no lives would have been lost in a disaster such as Bellbird Mine Disaster. Developments such as wireless remote controls have greatly improved the safety of mines all around the world and it is advancing rapidly.

Breathing Apparatus

I strongly believe that vast improvements in breathing apparatus have improved and helped with mining conditions. Breathing apparatus was first invented in 1863, however, they were cumbersome and large and so not widely used. The purpose of them was to extend breathing endurance of a limited gas supply.

They have steadily improved since then. A recent advancement has been self-contained rescue devices (SCRD) by Carroll Technologies. It is a piece of equipment used for an emergency, for example when there is a fire or explosion. As there are numerous hazards that workers in mines and tunnels face, having numerous procedures and technologies in place is very important to ensure the environment is safe. Hopefully with these improved efforts no more lives will be lost like the 1923 Bellbird Mining Disaster.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the research shows technologies and procedures have come a long way since the Bellbird Mine Disaster. Improved communication systems, remote controls and breathing apparatus are examples of brilliant inventions that will save lives in the present and future. As we remember those involved in the Bellbird Mine Disaster, we hope that technology continues to improve, and families will never again have to endure such tragedy from someone simply doing their job.

Underground Mining

By Mia Smith Worth

Have you ever wondered about the history of underground mining? Underground mining began 40,000 years ago in other countries but was first brought to Australia in 1841. It has come a long way since it was first developed. This means the machinery and props involved with underground mining have evolved and advanced over time. Improvements in breathing apparatus, personal protection, and underground communication have made underground mining more modern, secure, and safe.

I strongly believe that improvements in breathing apparatus have impacted on the safety of underground mining. For example, breathing apparatus 100 years ago was very heavy so many of the miners refused to wear it. But now it is more suitable to wear. They were first invented in 1863 by a man named James Braidwood. When James Braidwood first invented this breathing device, he put two canvas bags together lined with rubber. Breathing apparatus is used for protection against carbon monoxide, which is an extremely dangerous gas after a mining fire or explosion.

The advancements in personal protection have clearly increased the safety of underground mining. Personal protection is used to ensure the safety of miners while they are on site. Some examples of personal protection equipment include a hard hat, goggles, ear protection, respiratory devices, and gloves. Miners must wear this gear before entering the site to keep them safe from hazards that could occur, like fires, explosions, dangerous gases, and more. If workers are not wearing the proper gear when these accidents occur, then the consequences could be health problems or physical injuries.

Underground communication is an essential part of underground mining. Underground communication has evolved over time and was first invented in 1812 by Thomas Edison. It was a type of radio signaling that was used in mines and caves that used low-frequency waves to penetrate dirt and rocks. Some of the communication devices that have since been developed include traditional LMR systems, hardened telephone systems, paging telephones, radio frequency, and wearable devices.

In conclusion, the improvements and evolution of breathing apparatus, personal protection and underground communication has made underground mining safer and secure. Hopefully with these improvements and many others, miners will be a lot safer and nothing like the Bellbird Mining Disaster will happen again

MUSEUM REPORT

Of course the Centenary of the Bellbird Mine Disaster proved an overwhelming success due to the efforts made by the sub Committee, Museum volunteers, Coal Services and the MEU. Our thanks go out to all those who participated in the planning and implementation of the event.

Due to efforts by museum staff and support from the MEU the museum has been successful in having a valuable chart used in the original inquest into the Bellbird Mine disaster conserved and digitized. This was on display for the first time at the Centenary commemoration.

The Coalfields Local History Association mounted a small display in the Bellbird Workers Club during the Centenary event to showcase the type of information that can be found in our amazing museum. This was very well received, with any positive comments being made.

As a follow on from the Centenary of the Bellbird Disaster event, one of our members retired school teacher Sharon DYSON-SMITH addressed a school Assembly at Bellbird Public school. The theme of the address was the disaster and it's impact in 1923 and indeed up to the present.

The museum had a visit from Abermain Primary School pupils. The feedback was that the children enjoyed themselves as well as gaining information of how the town of Abermain has changed over the years. The children were well behaved and were a credit to their teachers and school.

Over the past weeks we have had many visitors to the museum. Of special interest was Andrew JONES and his wife who hail from Staffordshire in England. He was seeking information on his great uncle who was involved in mining in our area.

During the planning of the Centenary of the Bellbird Mine Disaster all schools in the Cessnock LGA were contacted regarding whether they would be interested in participating in an essay competition. Unfortunately the only school that showed any interest was St Patrick's at West Cessnock. Due to the lack of response from other schools the committee decided to omit the essay competition from the program. Two students from St Patrick's submitted essays, the quality and content of these essays was impressive. To show our appreciation for their efforts the Coalfields Local History Association in conjunction with the school presented Audrey ANTON and Mia SMITH WORTH with certificates along with a small gift at their September 15 Assembly.



OBITUARY

MARJORY JOY WOTHERSPOON OAM

It is with great sadness that we report the passing of our member Marjory (Marj) Wotherspoon OAM. Marj passed away on Wednesday 12 July 2023 after a short illness at the age of 80.

Marj was a stalwart of the Kurri Kurri community and it is plain to see why she was awarded an Order of Australia Medal in 2014. Having been a business woman she was the first female President of the Business Chamber. She was a founding member of Towns with Heart and was part of this organization right up until her passing. She was a member of Probus, Hunter Prelude Early Intervention Centre and Coalfields Local History Association. Marj's interests were not only limited to community organizations, she was passionate about Local Rugby League and was a life member of both the Junior and Senior Clubs. Marj devoted many years to serving in the canteens of the Kurri Kurri High School and the Kurri Kurri Rugby League Club.

She lived a very active and productive life. Born in Kurri Kurri where she lived all her life she will be sorely missed by family, friends and the community. Our condolences go to her family and friends



Order of Australia medal (OAM)

MEETING TIMES

General meetings will be held at Abermain Bowling Club
Corner Armidale & Goulburn Streets Abermain at 3.00 pm on the third Tuesday of every second month

Tuesday 17 October 2023	AGM	2.30 pm Abermain bowling Club
Tuesday 19 Dec 2023	xmas meeting	2.30 pm Abermain bowling Club
Tuesday 29 January 2024		2.30 pm Abermain bowling club
Tuesday 16 April 2024		2.30 pm Abermain bowling club
Tuesday 18 June 2024		2.30 pm Abermain bowling club
Tuesday 20 August 2024		2.30 pm Abermain Bowling cub
Tuesday 15 October 2024	AGM	2.30 pm Abermain Bowling club
Tuesday 17 December 2024	xmas meeting	2,30 pm Abermain Bowling club

MUSEUM OPENING TIMES

The Museum is open Tuesdays, Thursdays and Sundays 10.00am to 2.00pm.
Other times by appointment.

A GOLD COIN DONATION IS APPRECIATED

The Museum is located in the Abermain School of Arts Building 209 Cessnock Road
Abermain.

Parking available at rear of building

Association's Area Interest

The specified district of the Coalfields Local History Association Inc's area of interest is all that land situated in the Cessnock Local Government Area (LGA), primarily, as well as the Hunter Valley in general

Copyright

All articles and items in this newsletter are subject to copyright and may not be reproduced without the written permission of the Management Committee.

© 2019 Coalfields Local History Association Inc

Disclaimer

The Coalfields Local History Association Inc accepts no responsibility for the information provided or its accuracy, or opinions expressed in this newsletter. Any persons acting on such information do so at their own risk