

The Mount Kembla Colliery historical story: Part 2

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This is Part 2 of the article "The Mount Kembla Colliery" by Stuart M Saywell. Part 1 appeared in the May/June edition of the Bulletin. The final Part 3 will be featured in the Heritage section of the September/October edition of the Bulletin.

William Stafford, an old retired miner, who lived just above the main tunnels, was working in his garden when he heard a great report and on looking up he saw a great red tongue of flame 40 feet long. He also saw pieces of iron and torn wood which made a terrible noise flying through the air.

Harry Ramsay, a farmer who lived adjacent to William Stafford, was right above the old furnace when he saw a snaky red flame, a cloud of black smoke and dust shoot out of No. 1 old furnace shaft.

Paddy Brownlee, the Check Weigh Man, was sitting in the weigh-cabin. The force of the explosion knocked him and Wilson; the company's Weigh Man, to the floor. Flame passed into the weigh-cabin, which was largely wrecked, and burnt both men.

At Kembla village the shock was terrific, as if thousands of pounds of dynamite had been set off. The very earth trembled violently, houses, windows, doors and furniture vibrated sharply and crockery shook as if to fall. Men and women were almost thrown off their feet. An eye-witness described it as a large train of smoke with the blast, after which there was an eerie silence during which roosters crowed and dogs howled. The silence was quickly followed by a frantic rush to the mine by the relatives of those men inside. The blast was loudly heard in Wollongong and telephone messages quickly informed the town of the disaster.

At the Court House the sitting was immediately adjourned and all present, led by Mr W. Rogers, the Mine Manager, set out for the mine. Wollongong was soon deserted as every means of transport was availed of to reach the scene of the disaster. A terrible scene awaited those who came to the mine. All buildings, including office, engine house, boiler house, had been blown into an unrecognisable mass. The entrance to the main tunnel was completely blocked by a fall of earth and stone.

Stories of survivors and rescuers

David Evans, a man of 52 years mining experience, 16 years a deputy in Kembla, and day deputy in the section where the explosion occurred. Francis Dungey the other day deputy was killed in the explosion. Evans was on the pillars on the left side of No. 6 (James Heading) and did not feel or hear anything. He was informed by Mat Frost that something was wrong in No. 1. Evans made towards No. 1 and quickly reached the return from that district, where he found smoke coming from No. 1. He then went towards the air shaft and opened separation doors to short circuit the smoke to the upcast shaft and so prevent it from circulating around the workings. He gathered about 90 men and led 70 of them out by old workings. The course he took was through old longwall workings where the men had to crawl frequently and it took them three hours to get out by the travelling road near the manager's house. They were saved by a small current of air which was circulated around the old longwall faces to keep them clear. Some 20 men who were originally with the party decided to make their own way out to the surface and all later were overcome by the carbon monoxide gas, and died. On reaching the surface he joined a rescue party led by Dr.

Robertson and did not return outside until between one and two o'clock the next morning. He went in again on the Friday, but this time to recover some of the victims.

Matthew Frost was a wheelers' overman, which job he carried out on behalf of his father, who held a contract for drawing the coal. Frost was closely associated with Evans and his statements covering the early actions show clearly how much the survivors owed to Evans, as according to Frost. Evans' coolness did much to quieten the men they met. Frost went with Evans towards No. 1 district. He assisted Evans to open the doors near the shaft which short-circuited the smoke and gas into the upcast shaft. When the explosion occurred Frost was in the 7th right of the shaft district and he felt a great pressure of wind coming round the rope road. He heard no noise, but he noticed that the wind came against the normal air course and that it travelled the same in both the front and back headings. He did not notice any bad smell until about 15 minutes after the explosion; when he met the smoke which was hot. By arrangement with Evans, Frost stayed on for about 40 minutes after Evans took his party away. Evans instructed him to stop men from passing that point, gather them up and take them out the way Evans was going, as only Frost and Evans knew the way. A number refused to be guided by the instructions and were overcome. Frost and one Ridley endeavoured to drag some of the unconscious to the fresh air, but they were not very successful and they stayed until the first rescue party, led by Adam Frost, reached them. By this time the main heading from daylight was clear of gas. Matthew Frost then went to daylight and immediately joined another rescue party, returning to the entrance about one or two o'clock the next day and later went in again on recovery work.

Mt Kembla Disaster Causality List

Name	Occupation	Buried	Age	Name	Occupation	Buried	Age
AITKEN William	Miner	Windy Gully – Mt Kembla	23	MacCABE Henry O	Mining Engineer	Wollongong – Anglican	45
AITKEN John	Miner	Windy Gully – Mt Kembla	47	McCANN Patrick	Miner	Wollongong – Catholic	36
ANNESLEY Prosper J	Miner	C. of E. – Mt Kembla	33	McDILL James	Miner	Windy Gully – Mt Kembla	47
BELLIS Richard	Miner	Windy Gully – Mt Kembla	62	McCLISTER Hugh	Wheeler	Windy Gully – Mt Kembla	24
BEST Thomas Sylvester	Miner	Bowenfels – Lithgow NSW	48	McCLISTER James	Miner	Windy Gully – Mt Kembla	22
BLACKETT Albert W	Miner	Windy Gully – Mt Kembla	22	McMURRAY William	Deputy	Windy Gully – Mt Kembla	47
BLACKETT Robert G	Miner	Windy Gully – Mt Kembla	24	MEURANT Henry	Miner	C. of E. – Mt Kembla	20
BRASHER William	Miner	C. of E. – Mt Kembla	55	MEURANT William	Miner	C. of E. – Mt Kembla	22
BRAY William V	Miner	Wollongong – Presbyterian	38	MORRIS George	Miner	C. of E. – Mt Kembla	34
BRENNAN Michael	Wheeler	Body never recovered	19	MORRISS Thomas F	Miner	Wollongong – Catholic	26
BRYSON John	Miner	Windy Gully – Mt Kembla	53	MORRISS Walter J	Miner	Wollongong – Catholic	52
CARTER Arthur	Miner	Windy Gully – Mt Kembla	28	MORRISON Alexander	Clipper	Windy Gully – Mt Kembla	15
CHURCH Charles	Miner	Windy Gully – Mt Kembla	68	MORRISON Henry	Clipper	Windy Gully – Mt Kembla	17
DIXON George H	Wheeler	C. of E. – Mt Kembla	22	MUIR John	Miner	Windy Gully – Mt Kembla	18
DOHERTY William	Miner	Albion Park – NSW	28	MUIR Peter	Miner	Windy Gully – Mt Kembla	41
DUNGEY Francis	Deputy	C. of E. – Mt Kembla	44	MURPHY John	Miner	Wollongong – Catholic	49
DUNNING Frederick R	Wheeler	C. of E. – Mt Kembla	19	NEES John G	Miner	C. of E. – Mt Kembla	34
DUNNING Joseph F	Miner	C. of E. – Mt Kembla	24	NELSON Jacob	Clipper	Windy Gully – Mt Kembla	14
DUNNING Thomas R	Miner	C. of E. – Mt Kembla	46	NELSON William	Under-Manager	Windy Gully – Mt Kembla	39
EGAN Dennis	Miner	Wollongong – Catholic	20	NIXON William	Wheeler	Helensburgh – Anglican	21
EGAN Edward	Miner	Wollongong – Catholic	19	PEACE Matthew	Miner	Wollongong – Catholic	38
EGAN Michael	Miner	Wollongong – Catholic	29	PRICE William J	Wheeler	Windy Gully – Mt Kembla	26
EGAN Thomas	Miner	Wollongong – Catholic	32	PURCELL James jnr	Shiftman	Wollongong – Catholic	37
FILBY William	Miner	C. of E. – Mt Kembla	49	PURCELL James snr	Miner	Wollongong – Catholic	64
GALLAGHER Daniel	Miner		50	PURCELL John	Miner	Wollongong – Catholic	33
GALLAGHER Edward	Miner	Wollongong – Catholic	38	PURCELL Patrick F	Engine Driver	Wollongong – Catholic	45
GALLAGHER Michael	Miner	Wollongong – Catholic	45	PURCELL Thomas	Miner	Wollongong – Catholic	39
GILL Edward J	Miner	Wollongong – Catholic	28	RICH Henry	Miner	C. of E. – Mt Kembla	67
GLEESON Stephen	Miner	Wollongong – Catholic	33	RICH James H	Miner	C. of E. – Mt Kembla	39
HARTLEY George O	Miner	C. of E. – Mt Kembla	22	ROBSON Edward	Miner	Windy Gully – Mt Kembla	65
HEAD James	Miner	West Dapto – Catholic	30	RUSSELL George	Miner	Windy Gully – Mt Kembla	20
HEALEY Daniel	Miner	West Dapto – Catholic	32	RYAN John	Miner	Wollongong – Catholic	33
HEWLETT Alfred	Shiftman	Windy Gully – Mt Kembla	28	SCOTT David	Miner	Windy Gully – Mt Kembla	39
HEWLETT William	Miner	Windy Gully – Mt Kembla	21	SILCOCK William	Clipper	Windy Gully – Mt Kembla	14
HITCHENS Jehu	Shiftman	C. of E. – Mt Kembla	60	SKILLING Albert	Clipper	C. of E. – Mt Kembla	15
HOWELL Thomas	Miner	Windy Gully – Mt Kembla	27	SMITH Frederick	Clipper	C. of E. – Mt Kembla	14
HUGHES Thomas	Fitter	C. of E. – Mt Kembla	32	STAFFORD Claude R	Clipper	C. of E. – Mt Kembla	17
HUME Reynold	Miner	Windy Gully – Mt Kembla	27	STAFFORD David K	Wheeler	C. of E. – Mt Kembla	17
HUNT William Allen	Miner	C. of E. – Mt Kembla	38	STAFFORD William K	Miner	C. of E. – Mt Kembla	25
HUNT Percy A	Miner	C. of E. – Mt Kembla	42	STEWART Francis	Miner	Wollongong – Catholic	38
HUNT Percy S	Miner	C. of E. – Mt Kembla	18	THOMAS Richard	Miner	Windy Gully – Mt Kembla	26
JAMES Henry	Miner	Wollongong – Presbyterian	33	TOST Thomas	Miner	Windy Gully – Mt Kembla	30
JAMES John H	Miner	C. of E. – Mt Kembla	42	WALKER John	Miner	C. of E. – Mt Kembla	16
JEFFREY John	Miner	Windy Gully – Mt Kembla	31	WALKER Richard	Miner	C. of E. – Mt Kembla	42
JONES Robert	Miner	Windy Gully – Mt Kembla	69	WALKER William	Clipper	C. of E. – Mt Kembla	18
KINDRED Thomas	Miner	Windy Gully – Mt Kembla	17	WILKINSON Joseph	Miner	Windy Gully – Mt Kembla	26
LANE Richard C	Miner	C. of E. – Mt Kembla	44	WOODROOF William C	Miner	Wollongong – Presbyterian	33
LANE Richard	Miner	C. of E. – Mt Kembla	45	YOUNGMAN George H	Miner	C. of E. – Mt Kembla	38

Please Note: There were 95 recorded fatal casualties on the day that the Disaster occurred. However, Patrick Francis Purcell, Engine Driver, was in the engine house when the 'fire-ball' completely demolished the building. He received extensive burns and many other injuries and was hospitalised until his death on 4 July 1904. He has been included in the official list now numbering 96.

Those listed as injured – Non-fatal injuries, more or less were:

BATES Thomas Lionel	inspector	PEACE Jonathan	miner
BRASHER James	miner	PEACE Isaac	miner
CLARKE John	pit-top foreman	RICHARDS Stanley	clipper
GILLESPIE Arthur	surface hand	SMITH Thomas	miner
McDONALD George William	miner	STONE Percy	clipper
PEACE George	miner	WALKER George	miner
WESTERN George	boiler fireman		

Adam Frost, an overseer of wheelers, was at the 2nd right tommy-dodd in the 1st right when a great blast of wind blew his light out. The wind came up the 2nd right. Frost went in the direction of the Main haulage, but after 200 yards he met smoke, dust and heated air. The air was travelling its proper course and he returned to the tommy-dodds, where he met a number of men whom he took out by Purcell's daylight heading. He then went down towards the main entrance of the mine and to the shaft district. He assisted several men and noted that quite a few who were on the way out were affected by gas. He met his brother Matthew and rescued the unconscious from No. 6 right and before reaching the surface at about 8pm. He later went into No. 1 right.

John Morrison was night deputy in No. 1 right. He had been working at the mine for 15 years and had been deputy some nine weeks only. At the time of the explosion he was at home, as was William McMurray, who resided with him. He and McMurray were amongst the first rescuers to enter the mine and it was Morrison and Charlie Biggers who first made contact with Mat Frost at No. 6 right and they, together with Ridley, rescued men in No. 6. Morrison came out of the mine between eight and 9pm and then went back in with ten others into No. 1 and the party again reaching the surface at 3am.

Edward Meurant, a miner, was

working with Francis Stewart. They continued to work on their place No. 19 bord until 4pm, two hours after the explosion. They did not notice anything unusual until they reached the main heading.

The most important part of the rescue operations was carried out by those within the mine, together with those who reached it within two hours of the explosions. A large number of persons performed wonderful service in the rescue operations and very many brave deeds are recorded, but it is impossible to mention them all in this document.

Coroners inquest

On 1 August, 1902, Charles Russell, Solicitor of Wollongong and Coroner, commenced an enquiry which lasted 22 sitting days and ended on 12 September 1902. The enquiry concerned the deaths of William Meurant and William Nelson. There were 28 witnesses and after hearing evidence and visiting the mine the following verdict was brought forward by the Jury:

“That William Meurant and William Nelson died at Mount Kembla Colliery from carbon monoxide poisoning produced by an explosion of fire damp ignited by naked lights in use in the mine and accelerated by a series of coal dust explosions starting at a point in or about No. 1 level back heading and extending in a westerly direction to

the small Goaf marked 11 perches on the mine plan.”

Commissioners report

It was after a mature consideration of the Commissioner's report that the Department decided that an inquiry into the competency of Mr William Rogers; the Manager of the Mount Kembla Colliery, under Section 10, of the Coal Mines Regulation Act was unavoidable. The necessary steps were accordingly taken. Mr Justice Heydon was appointed to hold the inquiry, which was opened on the 20 July, 1903, and on 14 September, 1903, His Honour announced,

“That after careful consideration he had suspended Mr. Rogers' certificate for a period of twelve months from that date. Mr. J. C. Jones, the Manager of Osborne Wallsend Colliery, was appointed by the management of Mount Kembla to take charge of the mine during Mr. Rogers's supersession.”

Mr. William Rogers was re-employed as manager of Mount Kembla Colliery on 31 October, 1904. ■

To be continued: final Part 3 in the September/October edition of the Bulletin. Includes what happened after the disaster; and the beginning of a New Era of Mount Kembla mining.