

PLOD ESSAY:

The State Brickworks 1910 – 1914 by Terri Allen

As the State Coal Mine proceeded to erect buildings and reinforce adits, George Broome decided to emulate the common practice in England and Wales and build in brick. As General Manager, he reported in November 1910:

“A deposit of surface clay suitable for brick making overlays the greater portion of the area. About half a mile to the west of No.3 Shaft this deposit is 16 inches thick and underlain by about 30 feet of mudstone suitable for the manufacture of bricks by the semi-dry process. The State Brick Works are being erected in this locality and the manufacture of bricks has already commenced. It is estimated that a selling price of 35/- per 1000 will leave a fair margin of profit. The present selling price of Melbourne bricks landed in Wonthaggi is 66/7 per 1000.”

The plant was well-built and had a single Hoffman kiln, reported to have cost £10,000 to set up. The first kiln of bricks was burnt 6 June 1910, the bricks being stamped “SCM”. Mr Keighley had the contract to cart the bricks from the Brickworks the two miles to the stack near the Post Office site via what is now West Area Road. He shifted them on a horse-drawn tramline along what is now Baillieu Street. These bricks were used to build the Post Office (now the library) Wonthaggi State School 3650, Town Hall, hotels and some shops. Above all, the Power Station with its two squat brick stacks was made of SCM bricks, as were all mine workings from 1910 to 1913.

This seems like successful use of local product; however, brick making in Wonthaggi did not proceed smoothly. Rumour abounded about the poor quality of the bricks produced. Were these rumours coming from Melbourne-based competitors who sold their bricks in Wonthaggi at inflated prices compared to the SCM bricks? The State Government had first call on Glen Iris bricks from 1910 because it had allowed a railway siding to those brickworks. Did this situation mean there was pressure on the Government to close the State Brick Works in Wonthaggi?

Mr. Robert Selkirk of Ballarat was called in. He thought the State Brick Works were incorrectly sited on almost permanently wet clay, this clay being too heavy and sticky for the machinery to

handle. He subsequently supervised the making of 25,000 bricks from clay obtained from the pony paddock, but was of the opinion that the black coal was not suitable for burning the bricks. Nevertheless, he conceded, good quality bricks could be made for as little as 32-33/- per 1000.

Despite Mr Selkirk’s expert opinion, on 20 October 1913, the State Government Cabinet decided to discontinue brick making at Wonthaggi and to dispose of the plant and its material by public tender. Initially, a by-law decreed that Wonthaggi houses should be made of brick, but on 24 October 1913, the by-law was relaxed.

The Age reported on 2 July 1914:

The Minister for Railways, Mr MacKinnon, yesterday made available comprehensive details of the failure of the state to profitably conduct the Wonthaggi Brick Works. Works have for a considerable time been closed down... The minister knows that £10,000 was spent on capital expenditure... In announcing yesterday that the sale of machinery and equipment of the works was to take place, he stated that all the State was going to get in return was £600 – a loss of £9,000”

Some skulduggery must have been involved. Was it the usual private enterprise squeeze? Were Government ministers in collusion with Big Business? The State Brick Works closed, its site now a brick pit and footings rubble in Baxter’s Wetlands, but our solid brick buildings - Library, Town Hall, State School, various shops, Mine Manager’s Residence – proudly bear testimony to the craftsmanship and permanency of the SCM bricks.



State Brick Works with its SCM Brick Chimney