

# The Plod Essay: Kirrak: The End is Coming

The Annual Dinner this year is, in part, to commemorate the last bit of coal pulled out of the State Coal Mine in December 1968. It is also to launch *The State Coal Mine at Wonthaggi 1909-1968* written by Jon Sleeman.

Sleeman's book traces the rise and fall of the Wonthaggi mines. It is written in clear language and the explanations of sometimes complicated engineering feats that took place in the making and maintaining of the mines is logical and easy to read. Once you have read this book, you will have an explicit, straightforward and coherent overview of what went on in this town's mines for sixty years.

Of course, in a book, which is an overview, some aspects of occurrences in the mines were told superficially. One of those is the surface fire at Kirrak in October 1964. In *The Express* it was reported,

"The destruction of the Engine Room, the Compressor Room, the Office and the Deputies' Change Room [by fire] on Tuesday [6<sup>th</sup> October] morning made the future of the entire State Coal Mine seem hopeless." (*The Express* 8-10-64)

The fire was called destructive and disastrous, but no lives were even remotely at risk. "It put out all the mine's electric lights, stopped all ventilation fans and put the pit phone out of order. When the lights went out the men followed emergency procedure and went to the shaft area." (*The Sun* 7-10-64).

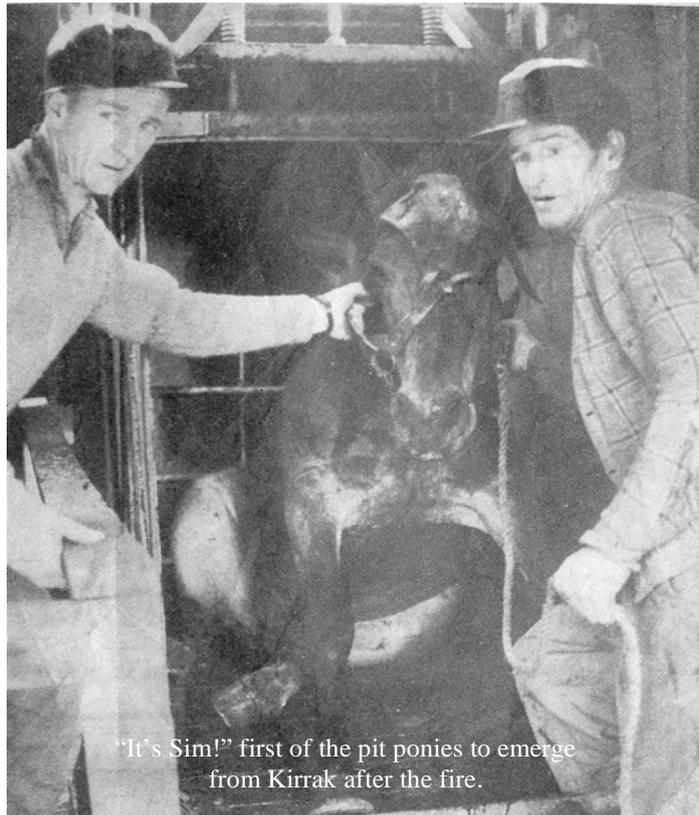
The problem was that the 57 men were trapped 1150 feet underground because the mechanism for the miners' "cage" had been destroyed. So, the only way out for the miners was to climb up "a series of 64 steel-runged ladders to the surface – a total of 1200 steps about a foot apart with a rest platform about every 20 steps." (*The Sun*).

Two men, Allan Thompson and Keith Thorton, were in the first batch of miners to make "the perilous climb" to the top. "Then they heard that some of the older miners were not keen to face the climb alone. So they went down those 1200 steps and then back up them again with the last of the trapped men – a total climb up and down of 3600 steps."

Thompson said of this feat, "There were about eight men who weren't too keen to climb. When we got back into the mine I gave them a bit of abuse, and there was no trouble." (*The Sun*)

Horton said he took the weight of an exhausted workmate on his shoulders during part of his second climb from the pit.

"Frank's face was white with the effort. I think he was ill. He seemed to spend most of his time during the climb resting his weight on me." (*The Sun*)



"It's Sim!" first of the pit ponies to emerge from Kirrak after the fire.

The more serious result of the fire was that seven pit ponies were stranded underground. Because of the destruction of the lift mechanism in the main shaft, the ponies had to be lifted out at the air shaft. However, getting them through tunnels only big enough for a man to squeeze through was a problem. "To get to the air shaft the ponies had to be led 300 yards from the main shaft. Roof supporting props had to be moved to get the horses through

and then two special steel doors were put on the lift in the airshaft to enclose each pony. Before being hoisted up, the ponies were injected with a tranquiliser by stable foreman, Nobby Smith."

For two days Nobby took water and chaff to the ponies and "the first act of each pony on stepping out of the shaft was to nibble knee-high grass nearby. 'They're very bright' said Waxy Rankine. 'Pick up your coat at knock-off time and

they know the shift is finished.” (*The Express* 15-10-64).

Hours after the fire, Transport Minister, Mr Meagher, arrived to survey the destruction, even while miners were still hauling themselves out of the tunnels and two days before the first pony saw the light of day. “General opinion was that the decision of the Minister would either ensure employment in the years to come or it would close overnight.” (*The Express*)

When Meagher announced that the burnt out sections were to be repaired, the Mayor of Wonthaggi, Cr Turner, said, “We can thank God that we did not lose any of our men at Kirrak area, and the decision to keep our men in employment is really good news to us all.”

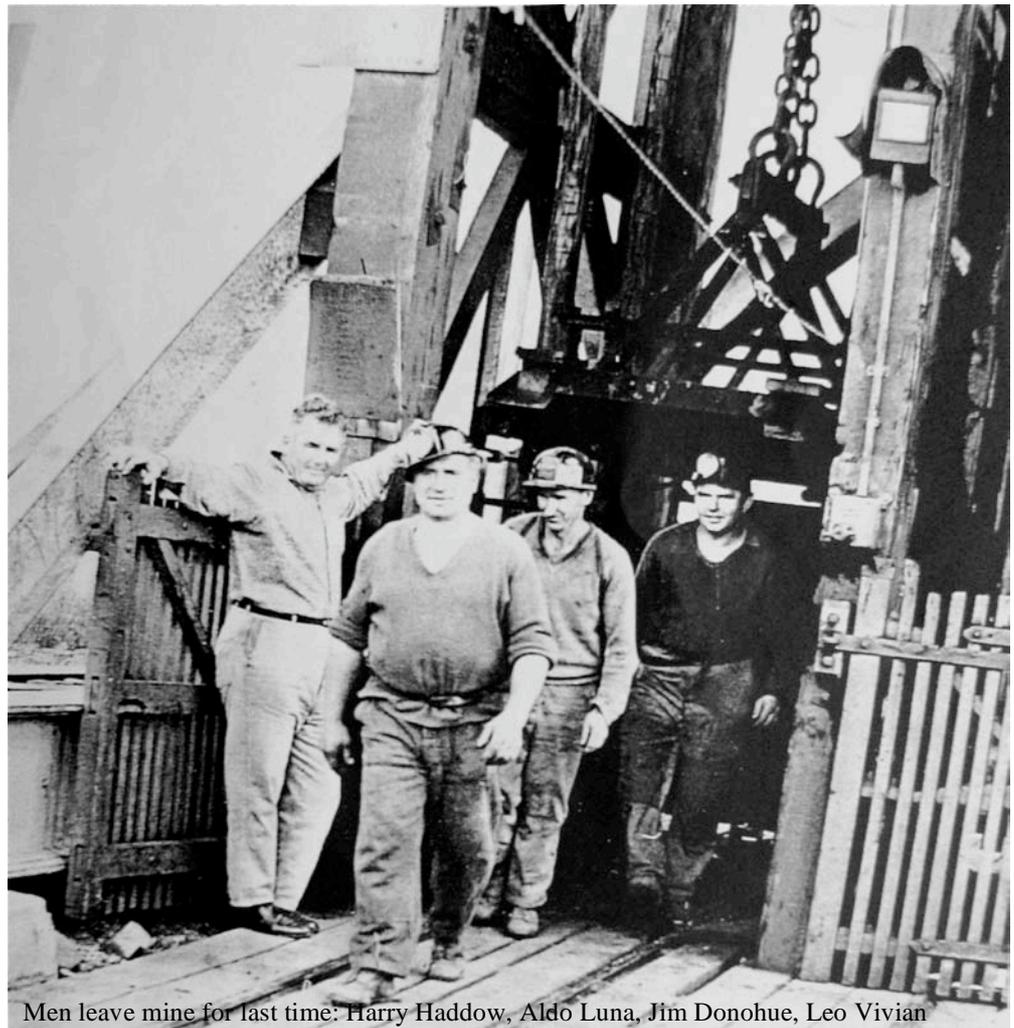
After Meagher’s announcement, it was assumed the mine would continue working but on a reducing scale. However, nails had been going into the coffin of the mines for quite a long time before the fire. In fact, the mines had been running at a loss since the 1930s because the price of Wonthaggi coal was determined by the Minister of Transport who wanted to keep costs of running the State trains low. When diesel and electricity began to take over coal in the 1950s as the means of keeping Victorian trains going, the end of the mines could be seen. The Kirrak Mine was closed for good four years after the fire.

Friday, the 20<sup>th</sup> December 1968 was the last working day of 23 Shaft at Kirrak and the last day that a coal mine operated in the State Coal Mine. Despite its significance, it was a low-key affair. The deputy Commissioner of Railways, Mr E P Rogan, travelled to Wonthaggi to thank the men and wish them well at a small gathering at Kirrak. After the gathering,

94 miners left the mine pay office with cheques and cash worth a total of \$317,000. Four 18-gallon kegs followed the pay collection. It was closing day, the end of an era. (*The Express*)

Jon Sleeman’s book, *State Coal Mine at Wonthaggi, 1909 -1968*, covers all events at the mines. It is lavishly illustrated with photographs, maps and Diagrams. The Text includes the manuscript, ‘Black Coal in Gippsland’, written December 1964 and ‘Additional Notes’ written April 1976. J Sleeman’s original manuscript and notes were merged and re-titled by John M Coghlan March 2006. The Historical Society published the book with a grant from the State of Victoria; Irene Williams managed the business side of things; she and Lyn Landon were proofreaders; Dennis Leversha was responsible for layout and cover design; it was printed by Clancy’s Printing Service.

The book will be on sale at the Annual Dinner for a special one-off price of \$18. Have your money ready.



Men leave mine for last time: Harry Haddow, Aldo Luna, Jim Donohue, Leo Vivian

