



WONTHAGGI & DISTRICT HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Powlett River Pioneer Mines by Terri G Allen

The Victorian Government had its geologists bore for coal in the Powlett River valley between 1886 and 1889 and spasmodically from 1903. Systematic drilling commenced in 1908. In 1909 Stanley Hunter sank a well to source water for the drilling bit. At the foot of a low sandhill in allotment 26A Parish of Wonthaggi, the well was close to the site of the future Power House (today's Donmix). At a depth of 16 feet he cut a solid black coal seam 6 feet thick. A timbered shaft was sunk 1 chain north cutting 8 feet of coal at 32 feet. This became No. 1 Shaft. This led to the reservation of the surrounding area for the Powlett Coalfields.

Cabinet approved the mines' development on 11/11/1909. No. 1 shaft was pumped dry and within 8 days the first coal was dispatched to Melbourne from the State Coal Mine of the Powlett Field. Initially the managers were Stanley Hunter, D C McKenzie and Dodwell H Brown from the Mines Department. Hunter, the discoverer of the coalfield, was later to fall in No. 1 Shaft and break his leg.

Nos. 2-4 shafts were sunk close by by 12 miners from the St Arnaud – Rutherglen goldfields. This field became known as



Miners shovelling coal into cane baskets



At pit mouth No.1 Shaft January 1910

CENTRAL AREA. The drill rigs of the boring machines were used as poppet heads, their engines winding the coal from the shafts in baskets. Within 3 weeks the 4 shafts were in operation, so the Mines Department purchased 320 acres of freehold land from the Hollins family, at a cost of 4,796 pounds for the township. It reserved a further 1,763 acres for 1,535 pounds. In the interim the miners lived under canvas in adjacent Tent Town; by March 1910 730 men were employed.

Nos. 1 & 2 shafts were linked to a large fan on the surface to ventilate the underground workings, 10 miles in length. No. 3 Shaft, the greatest producer, soon had boilers, winder, poppet head, a substantial coal-sorting brace and, in 1910, a railway siding. By 1914 Shafts 1, 2, 3 & 4 were exhausted. The State Brickworks was built half a mile to the west.

Before the building of the railway, all coal had to be transhipped through Inverloch, 11 miles away. Between November 1909 and February 22 1910, 360 bullocks and 40 horses hauled 3526 tons of coal over the sandy track to the enlarged Inverloch jetty. The steamers "Manawatu", "Queenscliff", "Ripple", "Wyralla" and "Ceres" transported the coal to Port Melbourne. The first load of 4 tons was

transported by bullock dray by Harold Hicks for 15 shillings.

In the emergency period (November 1909 – June 1910) labour was paid for by the day: coal miner 10 shillings, hand wheeler 6-8 shillings, winch driver 8 shillings and 4 pence, deputies 11 shillings, unskilled labourers 7 shillings and 6 pence. 400,000 tons of black coal was raised by basket from less than 50 feet depths, with a maximum output of 400 tons a day. No. 3 Shaft had one fatality. C.Neilson lost his life under a fall of coal at the work face. By the time the railway reached Wonthaggi, 10,000 tons of black coal was stockpiled.

A newspaper eye-witness account read: “In the drives there has been no scamping of work. Every inch of them has to be timbered as the men have gone on and the coal-black walls and back of the drive sets off the red-brown of the substantial timbering. Throughout many of these drives the average man can work erect, while the main drives are almost stately in their proportions. The first

feeling on descending the shaft was that of an agreeable change, like descending a cellar on a hot day. The men agreed that mining of the Powlett compared favourably with mining wherever they had seen it before, whether in coal or gold mines. There are three shifts worked, and the men receive 10 shillings per day clear – that is, light, tools and other accessories are “found”. Every man engaged on the mine seems to share the enthusiasm of those in charge. Before the railway line ran into the mine there was a race between the railway construction branch and the men at the mines.



Coal trucks & No3 Brace

The management had undertaken to have 10,000 tons of coal on the surface before the railway was completed. This was done but as the last few tons were coming up the dust from the railway navvies’ picks could be seen rising over the undulating country near the town....”

From these Pioneer Mines the State Coal Mine, Powlett Coalfield and township of Wonthaggi grew.



Officials arriving for an inspection of the mine’s progress at Shafts 1 & 2

References:

- Quilford, [The State Mine](#), Gumnut Press 1977
Coghlan, [The State Coal Mine and Wonthaggi 1909 – 1968](#), 1979
Harper, [The Wonthaggi Coalfields](#), eia 1987
Fahey et al, [Wonthaggi State Coal Mine](#), 1987
Sleeman, [The State Coal Mine at Wonthaggi 1909 – 1968](#), WDHS 2008

Note: Sleeman’s book is available at Wonthaggi & District Historical Society for \$22.