

PLOD ESSAY

Kilcunda Coal

The view of the whitecapped breakers rolling to the shore at Kilcunda is one of Bass Coast's most iconic coastal scenes. That view has had a hold on me since I was a child in the back seat of the family car, returning from trips to Melbourne.

The great pile of grey rubble on the left in the foreground was always there too. From early on I knew that unnatural hill was a mullock heap, waste from an old coal mine, but what did that mean? What was it doing there?

I never thought to have a closer look until recently while stopped for roadworks outside of Kilcunda, I noticed the sign marked 'Mitchell Mine Historic Reserve'. I made a quick turn left and parked at the top of the hill near the rail trail.



As I made my way down the grassy slope, I could see two information boards and a path leading up the mullock heap. After all these years I was excited to be able to walk up there, but as I drew closer, I noticed it was surrounded by a high cyclone fence and a locked gate. A faded interpretive sign outside the fence showed a plan of 'Mitchell's Black Coal Mine' including the mine shaft, brace and railway siding where coal was loaded for transport to Melbourne from 1913.



I walked over to where remnants of concrete foundations and rusty relics of the old boilers lay neglected among thorny weeds. Weather-worn, green 1990s-style post-and-rail signs showed the location of the former chimney anchor block, compressor wheel, winch house and chimney stack, and the mine office site where managers had enjoyed a fine view of Bass Strait.

The mine operated from 1908 until 1952. The 'Mitchell Coal Mine' is listed as an archaeological site of State

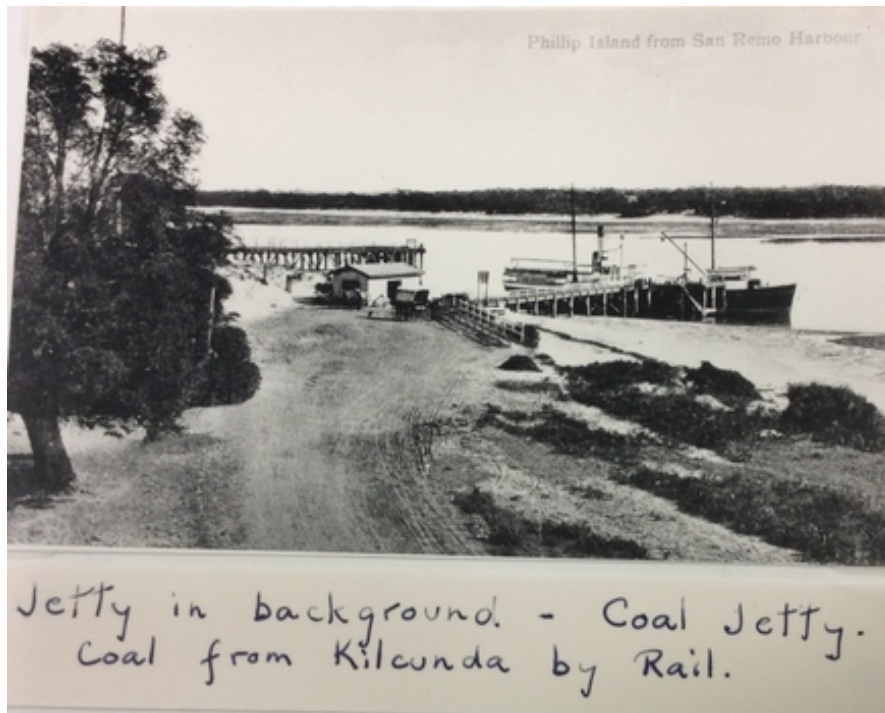
Significance and is also important to the families of the men who worked there. It was sad to see the interpretive displays had been left to fall into disrepair.

The Mitchell Mine wasn't the only Kilcunda coal mine. And, it wasn't the first.

Coal was found on cliffs east of Shelley Beach at Kilcunda in 1865. The Cape Paterson coalfields, the first and only commercial coal mines in the fledgling Colony of Victoria, had recently closed and the government needed another local source of coal to reduce dependence on expensive NSW coal.

A £1000 reward had enticed private companies to invest in the Cape Paterson coalfields so in 1870, the government offered £5,000 for delivery of the first 5,000 tons of coal to Melbourne. The *Western Port Coal Company* commenced mining at Kilcunda soon after.

A shaft was sunk about 400 metres inland and about 30 metres deep into a coal seam which outcropped to about one metre on the cliff face.



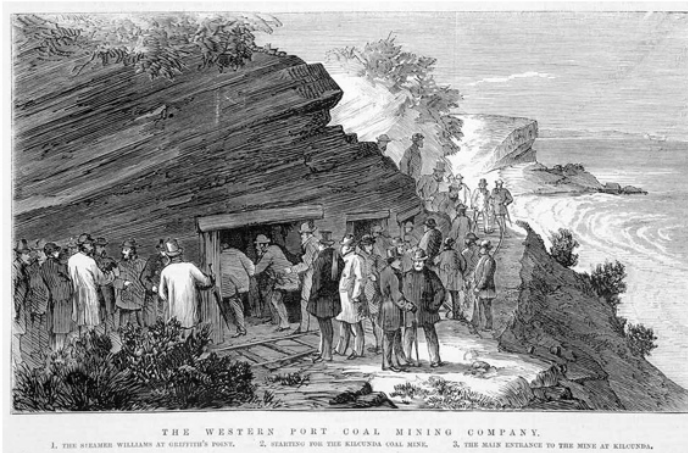
At first coal was transported overland by bullock wagon to Griffiths Point (San Remo) where it was shipped to Melbourne from a jetty which the company had built at a cost of £700. In 1874, the company invested £11,000 in a 13-kilometre wooden rail tramline with horse-drawn 'trucks' to haul the coal along a route similar to the present-day road from Kilcunda to San Remo.

By 1874, the *Western Port Coal Company* had three shafts in operation but with £27,000 already spent, including an overdraft of £12,000 which had to be repaid, it was necessary to raise more capital.

Early the following year, the principal proprietors Messrs. Latham and Watson prepared a prospectus, chartered the steamer *Williams* and invited potential investors to personally inspect the mine. The visit was reported in the *Age* newspaper, 23 April 1875 and prints of three wood engravings that illustrated the journey were published by Ebenezer and David Syme on 17 May 1875.

About 60 gentlemen responded to the invitation and the *Williams* got under steam from Sandridge (Port Melbourne) around 9 pm. After a calm night, the vessel entered Western Port, passing by Cape Woolamai and arriving at the company's jetty at Griffiths Point around 7am. The wood engraving depicts the *Williams* as a low, sleek, steamer with paddle-wheels and two chimneys as it approaches the jetty, where several coal trolleys are waiting to be unloaded.

After breakfast, the party readied for the journey to the mine; a chaotic scene of men galloping away on horseback while most of the others sat cramped together on an improvised horse-drawn wagon and the remaining few were left to stand for the entire three-hour journey. The countryside was described as 'scrubby, wild and uninviting looking' but the writer noted, 'there were several picturesque views of the waters of Western Port'.



The party arrived about noon and proceeded to inspect the mine, entering the main tunnel from the side of the cliff. The wood engraving shows all of the gentlemen were dressed in top hat, morning coat and trousers in keeping with someone of wealth and status. Some stood around in small groups engaged in conversation as others stooped to enter the mine.

Inside the tunnel the coal seam averaged about two feet thick (220mm) and the roof and floor of the tunnel raised up and dipped down several times where faults had been found.

The company's prospectus listed sales, expenses and assets including the mine, jetty, tramway, weighbridges, offices, smithies, carpenter's shops, miner's huts, stables, trucks, horses and drays. The coal taken out was said to be compact, of well-defined texture and of good quality, and firms using the coal attested to its excellence as a fuel. The prospectus also highlighted the £5,000 government bonus for delivery of the first 5,000 tons of coal to Melbourne, of which the company had already delivered 2,879 tons.

After the mine had been inspected and the prospectus discussed, the party returned to Griffiths Point, arriving about 5pm. But with the late hour, the tide dropping and the wind on the rise, the Captain decided it unwise to depart and the *Williams* lay at anchor all night.

The tables were 'well provided and diligently attended' and as there were insufficient bunks for everyone, the gentlemen spent the night 'pleasantly' by sharing renditions of 'popular operas and songs of the day' or playing whist, crib and other games. One of the gentlemen generated much amusement by exploding dynamite under the water.

Upon reaching Sandridge about 3.30 pm the next day, a toast was made to Mr Watson and Mr Latham and prominent Melbournian Mr A. K. Smith praised the prospects of the mine and the resources of the 'Cape Patterson coal basin' in general.

It is unclear if the mine inspection raised any capital as three years later mining operations were suspended due to financial difficulties, including non-payment of the £5,000 government bonus. Mining resumed the following year after additional capital was found and the tramway was upgraded with steel rails loaned by the Victorian Railways.

In 1883 the *Western Port Coal Company* ceased operations having delivered 15,000 tons of coal to Melbourne and despite repeated requests and litigation, the £5,000 government reward was apparently never paid.

The Kilcunda coal seams were mined by several companies over the decades, slowly working south from the *Mitchell Mine* area to the *Coast Coal Mine* operated by the Mabilia brothers from 1952 until 1966. By this time, total output from the Kilcunda mines was about 450,000 tons but faults in the coal seams eventually made mining uneconomical.



Traces of the Kilcunda mines can also be seen from the George Bass Coastal Walk. Obscured by bushes beside the path is an impressive old steam-driven winch and nearby, two reed-fringed dams built to drown the old mine shafts are now habitat for waterbirds. Mabilia Road and Shanty Lane pay tribute to the close-knit community built by the miners and their families up on Mabilia Hill.

Along the narrow path near the steam winch something glistens in the sun. I bend down and lift a sliver of shiny black coal with my fingertips. Coal runs so deep in the story of Bass Coast that you only have to scratch the surface to find it.

By Linda Cuttriss

This essay was first published in *Bass Coast Post*, February 2025