

PLOD ESSAY

FROM TENT TOWN TO MODEL TOWN



Graham Street, looking west with Ludbrooks, Plaza Theatre and Caledonian Hotel, Circa 1915-20

MOST of the towns around Bass Coast started small and slowly grew to service the early settlers taking up land in the surrounding area. Wonthaggi arrived much later than most, and it would grow with a speed second to none.

Wonthaggi began with a clear and singular purpose. It was to be the site of Australia's first state-owned coal mine with a 'Model Township' built alongside that would have government housing, water reticulation, sewerage, a hospital and other civic amenities.

The bold plan didn't happen straight away. The idea was first hatched in 1908 when thick coal seams were found on the Powlett Plains. Members from both sides of parliament argued that the Powlett deposits should be retained for state use to break Victoria's dependence on New South Wales coal.

It was November 1909, when a protracted strike on the NSW coalfields had left Victoria's coal supply dangerously low, that an emergency meeting of Cabinet approved establishment of a State Coal Mine at Powlett River.

Such was the urgency of bringing up the coal to fuel the state's railways, factories, homes and ships at port that scores of miners flocked to the scrubby plains of the Powlett River where they were housed in a canvas camp that they called Tent Town.

At first, women were banned from living at the camp until one of the miner's wives who'd been staying at the Dalyston Hotel packed a few things, collected the children and got a lift to the diggings in a bullock wagon, determined to join her husband. Soon after, a married men's section was set aside for families.



about, photo.

Powlett—Bourke Street—as we first saw it.

The *Argus* newspaper reported a “carnival” atmosphere in Tent Town in the early weeks of 1910 with men sharing meals outside tents, a man playing piano accordion, women arriving with babes in arms, social gatherings, church services and there were shops, restaurants and boarding-houses.

Some days, though, the wind whipped up and dust blew into tents smothering everything. It didn't bear imagining this scene when the winter rain and cold set in. There was no time to waste and in February the ‘Model Township’ was laid out by the government surveyor. McBride Avenue, named for the Minister for Mines, and Graham Street would form the business area.

McBride Avenue would continue up to ‘Church Hill’, the highest point of town, where a grand residence for the mine manager would be built and allotments were set aside for the various religious denominations. Many of the town's prominent citizens would choose to build their fashionable homes in this fine location.

An area bordered roughly by Broome Crescent, Billson, Dickson and King Streets would house government cottages for miners to rent and a large section of quarter-acre blocks for lease to miners would extend to the west, south-west and south.

There were three standard designs for the government cottages. All would be simple, single-storey weatherboard dwellings. Plan A was a single fronted, 3-room cottage with two bedrooms, a living room and a passage down one side and a ‘lean-to’ which functioned as a scullery, washhouse and kitchen off to the side at the back with a tiny front porch for entry. Plan B was a 4-room cottage of similar design and Plan C was double fronted with five rooms and a verandah.



The Toorak of Wonthaggi from the Reservoir.

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J.P.C.



1910 Government Cottages, Broome Crescent, 1991. Photo: Wonthaggi Historical Society

By the end of February, construction of the first 50 government cottages was under way under the supervision of builder George Matthews. At this time there were 600 miners on the payroll and by March the number had risen to 750 with an estimated 2,000 people living in Tent Town.

In April, the Minister for Mines announced that Tent Town must be vacated within two months. A further 50 government cottages would be built, but a collective anxiety spread through the camp. One hundred cottages would not be enough for everyone. Hundreds of miners applied, many writing letters with desperate pleas of hardship, but miners with the largest families were allocated a cottage.

Many of the 1910 government cottages have since been replaced and others have been altered in some way, but Dunn Street west of Billson Street has the most intact remaining examples of each cottage design.



1910 Government Cottage, Dunn Street - Plan A design



1910 Government Cottage, Dunn Street - Plan B design



1910 Government Cottage, Dunn Street - Plan C design

The first auction for commercial sites was in Melbourne in March 1910. All businesses were to cease operating in Tent Town by the end of May but as most shops had been erected on skids they could be readily moved when the time came.

It must have been quite a scene on the Powlett Coalfields through autumn and winter of 1910. Construction of the new 'Model Township' was in overdrive and pressure was mounting to vacate Tent Town without delay.

Miners with families packed their few belongings to move to their government cottages as children laughed and cried amid all the excitement. Shops were being hauled into place on the main streets. New stores were being built. Axes were cracking and saws scraping as messmate and paperbark trees came smashing to the ground. Sounds of hammers knocking onto nails rang through the air as walls went up and roofs went on.

Meanwhile, the mine-whistle kept announcing the next shift. Steam hissed and smoke billowed from the coal-train as it chugged away with its next load. And the miners kept going underground and coming up again with their faces covered in coal dust.

By early June the camp was rapidly emptying out. All shops had closed in Tent Town, and a butcher, draper, saddler, chemist, dentist, café and general store were soon open in the main



Graham Street, looking west with Ludbrooks, Plaza Theatre and Caledonian Hotel, circa 1915-20.

streets of town.

Many of the shops were shabby, temporary structures but some are still standing today. The shop that is now the Whistlestop Bakery was built in June-July 1910. Ludbrooks drapery store with its impressive parapet and tower was built the same year and is still a prominent feature on the corner of McBride Avenue and Graham Street. The Plaza Theatre, completed in 1912, is now the Plaza Arcade and the Caledonian Hotel across the street opened for business in 1915.

While fast-paced development of the town steamed ahead, there were signs from early on that some of the government's arrangements for the 'Model Township' were less than ideal. Miners who missed out on a government cottage had to lease a quarter-acre block and erect a house at their own expense. Regulations required that the building was to be of brick, stone or concrete yet ownership would revert to the Crown at the expiry of the 21-year lease. Miners protested that the lease conditions were unrealistic and unfair.

More unwelcome news came in late June 1910 that the government would soon finish making roads and after that ratepayers would have to maintain them and make their own footpaths. Miners were aghast as the government had always asserted that the town was government land and presumed it would be maintained by the government on revenue raised from leases.

Living conditions remained rudimentary for some time. Water reticulation and sewerage were slow to arrive, and residents complained that water provided in standing pipes was unfit for domestic use. Sanitation was poor, garbage collection non-existent and in 1912 a typhoid epidemic gripped the town. The State School was shifted around numerous times, and a permanent hospital didn't open until 1914.

While the government was quick to praise its efforts in providing cottages for the miners, a Borough of Wonthaggi councillor was unimpressed. In the *Sentinel* April 12, 1912, he claimed that less than five percent of workers had decent homes and that "three rooms and a 'lean-to' constituted a four-roomed cottage, and on a windy day the housewife had to be very careful or else she would be blown out of the door".

The government's 'Model Township' wasn't meeting expectations, but, mining folk are a self-reliant lot and were used to sticking together and fighting for their rights. They eventually gained the right for cottages and leaseholds to be transferred into freehold and through the leadership of their union established their own amenities and services.

The miner's union founded the Co-operative Store and the Wonthaggi Miners Friendly Society Dispensary which also operated as a co-operative. The union established a Workmen's Club and organised a home delivery coal-carting service. The majority of the hospital's funds came from miner's weekly wages and fund-raising events organised by the Ladies Committee. And after years of fundraising, the miners built their own Union Theatre for balls, concerts, public speaking and going to the 'pictures'.

The co-operatives, owned and run for the benefit of members, gave mining families a level of financial independence. Wonthaggi became known as a town where friends and neighbours looked out for each other, a solidarity that came from the ever-present dangers of working down in the mines and the ongoing struggles for fair pay and safer working conditions.

The plan for a 'Model Township' was devised by state government politicians but the mining folk of Wonthaggi shaped it into their own kind of model town. The co-operative organisations and people's readiness to lend a helping hand gave them a strength and resilience they would draw upon in the years to come and in time would earn Wonthaggi a national reputation.



Ludbrooks building (built 1910), Whistlestop Café (1910) and Plaza Arcade (1912) in the distance on Graham Street today. Photo: Linda Cuttriss

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September 2025

(first published in *Bass Coast Post*)