EVENTS IN THE HISTORY OF COAL CLIFF AND ITS COLLIERY.

1. Survivors from the wreck of the “Sydney Cove” in Bass Straits, who had in turn been shipwrecked on the Ninety Mile Beach, report finding coal just south of Sydney. Surgeon George Bass reports confirmation in August of that year, having examined the cliff seam from the ocean.

2. In 1840/42, Lewis Gordon becomes owner of Portion 18 (site of future colliery) and Portion 21 (site of future Clifton Village), Parish of Southend, County of Cumberland. Gordon was employed in the Survey Department, and later appears as an executor of the will of Sir Thomas Mitchell, the Surveyor-General and famous explorer. These lands are later referred to in several records as having been the property of the late Sir Thomas Mitchell.

3. About 1853/54, just prior to his death, Mitchell endeavours to create interest in a trans-Pacific-Panama-Atlantic mail service as the speediest route to England. He offers wharf facilities at Sydney, and a source of fuel at Coal Cliff.

4. Campbell Mitchell, his son, in 1864, arranges for J. McKenzie, Inspector of Collieries, to make a report on Coal Cliff coal, in which he reports that he considers it would be a good steaming, smelting and coking coal.
5. About 1875, Campbell Mitchell sells the area to Alexander Stuart, a partner in the firm of Robert Towns & Co. This was the same Stuart who was member for Illawarra, and later became Premier of New South Wales, and was knighted.

6. By September, 1877, Stuart was remitting funds to Thomas Hale, who was constructing a jetty at Coal Cliff, this work having started about April of that year.

7. Original approach to mine was a “slide” down cliff face, then later a pathway was made down from the road which was developed at that time.

8. The first under-manager of the mine was Thomas Oswald, one of whose children, Sarah Jane, was to marry P. J. Carrick, a subsequent manager of Coal Cliff Colliery.

9. The first coal was shipped to Sydney on the afternoon of Friday, 11th January, 1878, by the chartered steamer “Eagle”, which had been loaded with 100 tons in 1½ hours.

10. In May, 1879, the sister colliers, “Hilda” and “Herga”, each of 222 tons gross, arrived from Glasgow, where they had been built to Alexander Stuart’s order by Messrs. Cunliffe and Dunlop. They immediately started conveying coal from Coal Cliff to Sydney, and charters were accepted at times for other collieries and other types of cargo. They sailed as far afield as the Clarence River and Kiama. Some of the early masters were Captains Henderson, Howell, Walbrook and Phillipson.

11. The jetty throughout its life presented a constant maintenance problem, and there appears to be a number of occasions when repairs of so extensive a nature were carried out, as to be considered equivalent to complete renewal of the jetty. Divers, as well as mine staff, and local contractors, were employed on it from time to time, as any period at which steamers were unable to berth there, meant serious loss of trade.

12. Some of the wheels and axles for the skips in the early days of the colliery came from the Baldwin Locomotive works in the United States of America, for which the firm of Robert Towns & Co. had the local agency.

13. Oswald, the first under-manager, passed away in 1878, as the result of an accident, and his widow lived on for many years afterwards, running a store in the village of Clifton, which had been developed to provide housing for the staff of the mine, close to their place of employment.

14. In April, 1880, Thomas Hale had left the Colliery, and his place was taken by Charles Harpur as manager. However, by 1883, the management of the Colliery was taken over by Charles Stuart, nephew of Alexander; Harpur was subsequently to become manager of Metropolitan Colliery when it was opened.
15. The preliminary construction and subsequent opening of the Illawarra Railway had a profound influence on both the colliery and Clifton village, some of which was resumed for the tracks. It was realised that eventually this form of transport would be the better for marketing the mine's product. The Clifton tunnel, for a period, delayed the opening of through railway working from Sydney to Wollongong, which was effected on 3rd October, 1888.

16. Robert Louis Stevenson (author of “Treasure Island” and “Kidnapped”), in conjunction with Lloyd Osbourne, described in his book “The Wreckers”, railway maintenance work at Clifton about this period, and it makes very dramatic reading. R. Towns & Co. were for a time the agents of R.L.S. when he was in the South Seas.

17. Trouble arose in the Clifton village when the butcher sold his meat at high prices to the railway contractors’ men, and had none left at a reasonable price for the local residents.

18. One named De Flon, who had been with the Colliery since its inception, under Thomas Hale, was later described by Charles Stuart as the jetty “shipping master”, but by 1884 he had resigned, and later on P. J. Carrick appears to have been placed in charge of the jetty.

19. The Lilyvale estate is first mentioned for development, when Charles Stuart arranged in February, 1885, with Frank Hamilton that the latter should give oversight to the property and arrange for the sale of timber.

20. A sample of Coal Cliff coal was sent to the Colonial and Indian Exhibition in London in 1886.

21. By August, 1887, John Williams was the manager of Coal Cliff Colliery; it would seem that Charles Stuart’s departure would have occurred with his uncle’s death in the previous year.

22. After Sir Alexander Stuart’s death, Sir John Robertson and Messrs. Cowper and Humphreys appear as the principal partners controlling Coal Cliff Colliery. However, in 1889 “The Coal Cliff Land and Coal Mining Company Limited” was incorporated and the list of subscribers showed that the Stuart interests were still represented through the executors of the estate of Sir Alexander’s widow, who was also deceased.

23. However, the heavily mortgaged company did not prosper, and in 1892 the Hon. Ebenezer Vickery, in conjunction with others, whose interests it seems he subsequently bought out, acquired the colliery, Lilyvale estate, and steamers “Herga” and “Hilda”.

24. The services of Dr. Robertson, the mining authority, were sought for advice on the safe and improved working of the mine, and he was also requested to report on the most suitable site for sinking a vertical shaft. The steamers, which had been neglected, were repaired and put back into service.
25. At this time Carrick was described as the Jetty Manager, George Prosser was in charge at Lilyvale, and Mr. Duncan McGeachie was appointed manager of the colliery.

26. In July, 1892, first mention is made of the Stoney Creek “shaft-site”. A month later it was decided to erect a small sawmill on the Lilyvale estate.

27. Coal Cliff Colliery suffered, as did others, from the closure of the banks in the '90's, and the restrictions in trade that occurred at that time. For a period the mine pay had to be taken from Sydney by train, as there was no branch bank open in the near vicinity.

28. Strangely, during a maritime strike, free labour loaded coal at Coal Cliff without incident, the miners taking no interest as they had won the coal and had been paid for it.

29. By 1900, P. J. Carrick was signing himself as “Manager, Coal Cliff Colliery”. Correspondence prior to this date shows that he had taken over the administration of Clifton village and the Lilyvale Estate. His reports were directed to Messrs. E. Vickery and Sons.

30. At Christmas time, 1900, Carrick reported that Clifton was deserted as the men and their families had gone away for the holiday period, and he feared that they would not return until after the Commonwealth celebrations were over.

31. In 1902, a large bushfire threatened the Lilyvale buildings and plant, but energetic fire-fighting averted danger. Neighbouring collieries offered free land and donations for church and public buildings about this period to try and attract labour away from Clifton.

32. In 1903 it was reported that a bore hole at Stanwell Park had shown the upper seam to be good, clean coal, just over six feet in thickness.

33. A contract for renewal of the jetty was let to R. Cram for a sum of £12,000 in 1904.

34. Work commenced on the Stoney Creek shaft subsequently, and the first coal from it was dispatched to market early in October, 1910.

35. With the opening of the shaft, a railway siding had been prepared for it, being in readiness a few days earlier, and thereafter the entire output of the mine was sent by rail, and the jetty fell into disuse. The last vestiges of it were dismantled during the 1939-45 war, and for many years the original entrance to the mine remained as an outcast airshaft.

36. Screen buildings and a modern bath-house were subsequently erected. For a period during the 1939-45 War and shortly afterwards, the Commonwealth Coal Commissioner/Joint Coal Board took over operations of the Colliery. Steps in recent years have been taken to render the mine completely mechanised, a new outcast airshaft has been sunk and is now in operation at Darke's Forest, and a coal washing plant is about to commence operations at Coal Cliff.

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