“BALGOWNIE — AN OLD PLACE WITH A NEW NAME”

Notes on an address by Bro. J. P. O’Malley (Councillor) to the Society on 4/7/46:

Beginning with the first mention of the grant of land to John Buckland in 1833, Br. O’Malley referred to the fact that this large grant of nearly two thousand acres quickly became broken up into blocks of from forty to eighty acres.

Interesting descriptions of the neighbourhood of this “Celebrated Balgownie Estate” were cited from sale notices in “The Australian” of 1841. The proximity to “residences of moral, respectable and wealthy settlers,” and the daily boat service between Sydney and Illawarra, are the baits held out to prospective buyers. One farm of forty acres was sold for one thousand pounds.

Following the years of timber clearing, the good soil combined with favourable climatic conditions made the district important to the farming community. As early as 1854 we have proof of the existence of an excellent orange orchard near upper Cabbage Tree Creek—the property of John Ryan. Mr. William Harrigan, of Tarrawanna, reaped 115 bushels of maize to the acre.

Just about this time James Cram came from Newcastle-on-Tyne to find employment in Mt. Keira mine. Acquiring thirty six acres in the heart of the present township of Balgownie, James Cram later disposed of small building sites—the first to be sold in the district. Fenwick Fenlay and John Roberts were two of the first buyers. This was the birth of “Cramsville”—the township’s first name. Farrell, Looney, Hunter, Lang, Caldwell, Brennan, Gillis and Madden are some of the constantly recurring names.
“Balgownie House” next engaged the speaker’s attention. A Mr. Wright, who was in charge of a local detachment of convicts, was its first occupant, together with officers and officials. The sandstone flagstones for the house were shaped in Parramatta and conveyed to the site via Rixon’s Pass. Later Mr. John Madden acquired this property.

With the advent of Patrick Lahiff to Wollongong in the forties, a new and important era was about to dawn for Balgownie, or Cransville, as it was called. The “Illawarra Mercury” of June 14th, 1861, recorded that Patrick Lahiff and Benjamin Fawcett were on the point of opening a new coal mine on land belonging to a Colonel Plunkett. James Byrnes, of Parramatta, was destined to direct the new company with Spears, Howarth, Eady and Lahiff.

From about 1866, James Cram as underground manager, actually gave vocal directions to the Mt. Pleasant Colliery employees from a vantage position on the slack heap.

The “Mosquito Fleet” from Botany Bay was loaded after the coal had been drawn from the mine by a haulage system unique on the coast for thirty years. Martin Quilty, Robert Thorne, John Kennedy, John Byron and John Madden are colourful figures of the period.

Dick Week’s coach, John Richardson’s School (Fairy Meadow), James Cram’s store were institutions now legendary. Dr. F. A. Maguire, Major General in the recent war, was the most distinguished product of Balgownie School.

James Masters, Dr. Allan Ross and Cliff Sproule were Internationals in the realms of sport.

The history of the local churches and civic institutions was being compiled, and with the closing of the mine during the depression years Balgownie had acquired anew the natural charm of its early days.