

## Shipping Operations at Coal Cliff, 1877-1910

The original Coal Cliff mine, with its associated jetty, was opened in 1878 on the site where coal was first discovered in New South Wales some eighty years before. There had been several previous attempts to interest investors in the enterprise, but other properties had been more attractive, particularly in the northern field. It was finally Alexander Stuart who succeeded in raising the necessary capital to open the mine on his estate.

The mine entered the six-foot-thick seam of coal only forty feet above the sea. The coal was of excellent quality, and in the early years was easily mined. Initially horses did all the underground haulage, but demand for coal led to investment in a steam-powered rope haulage being installed in 1887 or 1888. By the mid 1880's the mine had run into faults, which restricted working places as the seams terminated in rock.

At the mine entrance, on a platform built above the water, the coal was screened, the large coal being filled into trucks of about 2½ tons capacity. The small coal was at first tipped into the sea, but in 1880 a bin to hold 400 tons of small coal was built. The platform comprised the only storage area, so when the waggons were full the mine could not work until the coal was shipped. Initially there was storage for 400-500 tons of large coal, but the heavy demand in 1888/9 led to extra storage bins being built. The storage platform was originally built on timber piles like the jetty, but in the late 1880's these were replaced by a stone-walled platform, part of which can be seen today.

The jetty ran from this storage platform some 400 feet into the open roadstead. It was built on open timber piles to allow the heavy seas to pass through. However in June 1879 and again in June 1881 substantial portions of the jetty were destroyed by heavy seas lifting the piles from the pins which connected them to the rocks. The jetty was rebuilt four feet higher in 1879 and a further six feet in 1881. After that date there was no further major damage to the jetty, although repairs were a constant cost. On the original jetty, coal trucks were pushed by labourers, but during the 1881 rebuilding steam haulage was added.

At the chute, the jetty provided 15-18 feet of water for colliers, but there was no protection from the sea. Consequently vessels could not load when there was a storm, and even the swell produced by the north-easterly winds in summer made operations hazardous. Loading was often impossible at Coal Cliff when other shipping places were unaffected.

The Coal Cliff company had two colliers built for it in 1878; the *Hilda* and *Herga* began trading to the jetty in May/June of 1879, each carrying 250 tons per trip. After 1879 few vessels other than these loaded at the jetty.

Except for small quantities of coal used in the boilers at the mine, the entire output of the Coal Cliff mine was shipped over the jetty. Most went to Sydney where much was used to bunker steamers operating from Port Jackson: there was also some trade in house coal and some to industries in Sydney. It seems that the intercolonial trade Alexander Stuart had

planned for never eventuated.

The mine was apparently never a financial success, even in its busiest years through the period 1880-1889. Following its virtual closure in 1890, following industrial trouble, the mine never again operated at a significant level. In 1892 the property was sold at a sheriff's sale, and from then on until replaced in 1910 by the present shaft mine, it operated irregularly. It seems that the advantage of good coal, conveniently located, was offset by the costs of meeting difficulties. In the mine there were rock faults and water to contend with. The high cost of providing storage meant the mine was often idle. Around the jetty there was damage by the sea and the general process of decay to add to cost. Landslips damaged the storage platforms and boiler house. Marketing was made difficult by the uncertainty of being able to load at the exposed jetty. The rapid growth in the number of coal mines in New South Wales and the consequent decline in coal prices also reduced the chances of success for the enterprise.

In 1910 the present shaft mine was opened on a site which enabled the mine's output to be taken away by rail. This operation had been envisaged by Stuart long before the railway was built. That it took so long to eventuate appears to have been due to a lack of initial funds and the low profitability of the mine. Following the sale in 1892, economic conditions reduced the attractiveness of such an enterprise.

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