

HENRY LEE ON COAL

(Our September Meeting)

Members who were unable to attend the September meeting, missed hearing Dr Henry Lee speak about the coal trade in Illawarra. Henry is a lecturer at the University of Wollongong and has written and researched extensively on coalmining. His talk commenced with the discovery of the coal seam at Coalcliff by shipwrecked sailors in 1796 and progressed through the difficulties associated with establishing local mines in the 1850's.

It was fascinating to learn that until 1849, the Australian Agricultural Company had a monopoly over the exploitation of minerals in Eastern Australia. They exercised this right to prevent mines being opened by other individuals and companies. This delayed the establishment of mines in Illawarra despite awareness of the coal seams.

Henry painted a vivid picture of life in Illawarra prior to 1850 when the local economy was based largely on agriculture and dairying. Periodic depressions severely affected the district and the population waxed and waned. Although close to Sydney, transport difficulties hampered trade. Local farms could not regularly supply milk to Sydney because it took too long by road and the shipping links were unreliable. Until refrigeration was available and the railway built, most of the milk was converted to butter.

In 1849, the monopoly ended and local farmer, James Shoobert, opened a small coal mine on his property at Mt Kiera. The first load of coal was carted down Crown Street to the harbour and was accompanied by a grand procession. Later in the day, local digni-

taries gathered for a luncheon/dinner at which the future prosperity of the district was prophesied and toasted. The mine was not a financial success and Shoobert sold it to Henry Osborne who already had mining interests near Newcastle.

Henry Osborne was the younger brother of Drs Alick (Rosebank, Dapto) and John Osborne (Garden Hill). He owned Marshall Mount as well as extensive land holdings elsewhere in NSW. It was Henry Osborne who brought Major McCabe to Wollongong to supervise the opening of the Osborne-Wallsend Mine which was opened on the side of Mt Keira near the Shoobert mine entrance.

The success of the coal trade depended on transportation. In the initial years, the only viable means of getting the coal to market was by sea. The harbour at Wollongong had been built by convicts in 1837 and proved too small for the colliers. Efforts to have the harbour extended were blocked by colliery owners in Newcastle who saw the opening of mines in Illawarra as a threat to their own businesses.

Improvements to the harbour were completed in 1868 but they were too little, too late. The larger ships could still not enter the picturesque port. Mine owners at Bellambi and Bulli sought to circumvent the harbour by building long jetties near their mines. Eventually, the sea asserted its supremacy and destroyed them. It was not until the completion of the rail link with Sydney and the development of Port Kembla that transportation became reliable.

Henry's talk was one in a series on early Wollongong which the Society has hosted. It was invaluable in providing members with insight into life in the district one hundred and fifty years ago. Henry recreated the isolation of the days before reliable transportation and gave members a sense of how the local economy was dependent on the whims of external forces such as the colliery owners of Newcastle.

John Shipp