

WOLLONGONG LIGHTED WITH GAS

The May-June issue of this Bulletin carried reference to the Wollongong Gas Company which supplied the first gas to Wollongong in 1883. Here is the promised excerpt from the *Illawarra Mercury* of Friday, August 24, 1883, which described this momentous event:

"As briefly stated in our last issue, the town of Wollongong was lighted with gas for the first time on Monday night. Some days before then Mr. Montague Coward, the contractor, arrived in town, and with Mr. John Davies, the engineer of the works, had all things put in readiness for lighting on the evening stated. At about 5 o'clock in the evening several Aldermen and other gentlemen visited the gas works at the invitation of Mr. Coward. All the plant was examined by those assembled, much interest evidently being taken in the concern. The technical names and utility of each item being explained by Mr. Davies, and the visit thus rendered all the more interesting. The works having been thus viewed, the assemblage adjourned to the cottage erected for the manager's residence, where Mr. Coward treated all hands to champagne. Before leaving the works, Captain Owen, as Chairman of the board of Directors, declared the operation so far completed as to enable the Company to light the town that evening and to receive orders for gas to any extent likely to be required. Cheers having been given for the Gas Company and the works, the assembly dispersed. Within a few minutes afterwards Captain Owen, again representing the Company, lighted the first public lamp, this being done at the corner of Keira and Smith-Streets, at the top of Hospital Hill. The other street lamps all the way to the Brighton Hotel near the wharf were soon lighted, as also were all the buildings on which gas was laid. The town, or rather parts of it, within the range of gas mains presented quite a novel and improved night appearance.

The effects of gas light in some instances was particularly striking, the most noticeable in that respect being a brilliant display of light in the adjoining business premises of Messrs. Wilmot and Knight and Mr. Thomas Robertson in Crown Street west, and Messrs. Hewlett Brothers in the east end. The gas burned in the most satisfactory manner, the light being all that could be desired in every respect. Later in the evening Mr. Coward entertained about 30 gentlemen at a champagne spread at Mr. Osborne's Freemason's Hotel. The affair was got up in Mr. Osborne's best style. Mr John Bigger (sic), the Secretary of the Gas Company, presided, the host of the evening (Mr. Coward) occupying the vice-chair. The inner man having been duly attended to, the Chairman proposed Mr. Coward's health, paying a high compliment to that gentleman for the part he had acted in connection with the Company, which to a large extent owed its existence to him. The townspeople themselves not taking up shares to the extent that should have been done, Mr. Coward invested in the concern to the extent of 3,500, which he accepted as part payment for constructing the works. Some delay had taken place in the works being completed, but, as all could see for themselves the lighting of the town that night was most successfully accomplished. The event of that evening would constitute quite an epoch (sic) in the history of Wollongong."

Mr Coward responded, indicating that "unavoidable delay had taken place in getting some of the machinery out from England." More speeches followed before the assembly separated at 11 o'clock.

For the technically minded, the *Mercury* then printed a detailed description of the works.

From the historian's point of view, the reference to Hospital Hill reminds us that in 1883 the Wollongong Hospital was situated in Flinders Street where the Collegians Club's car-park is now. In those days of horse-drawn vehicles, the rise from there to Smith Street was regarded as a hill!