

REPORT ON JULY 2004 MEETING

Speaker: Don Reynolds.

Subject: Early coal mining in the Southern Highlands.

A very interesting talk by Don brought to light many mining activities in the Southern Highlands. While excavating a cutting for the great south road at Nattai (Mittagong) in 1833 a deposit of iron ore was discovered. It was not until 1848 when John Neale, Thomas Holmes and brothers Thomas and William Tipple Smith took up land at Nattai and commenced primitive smelting operations using a Catalan forge to produce iron from the iron ore deposit. This was the first successful attempt to smelt iron from local ores in Australia and thus the Fitzroy Iron Works was born. Though there was sufficient timber around the area the search for coking coal began in earnest. Some was found in 1854 a fair distance away making the coal too expensive. Fitzroy Iron Works then leased a large area where they were situated. The quality of coal found was variable and very little was not suitable for cokemaking. Due mainly to the lack of good coal and transport from the area the iron works closed down a number of times until it closed for good in 1877. Large scale coal mining never was considered an economic venture due to the many different seams with different qualities of coal due to the volcanic heat and upheaval of the area. One of the more interesting and well known characters to start his career in the Southern Highlands in the late 1870s was Ebenezer Vickery. He was involved with Fitzroy Iron Works as well as some coal mining ventures. He started Bulli and Mt Kembla collieries. After the Mt Kembla disaster of 1902 Vickery went to England where he died shortly after his arrival. German internees during WWI at Berrima suggested that the area was suitable for cement making. Some years later cement works were established and are still going today. JH