

REPORT ON JULY 2013 MEETING

Speaker: Mrs Jennifer Donohoe

Topic: Dr Cox's association with Helensburgh

Dr Frederick Henry Cox
(1870-1942)



The guest speaker at our July meeting was Jenny Donohoe, the research officer of the Helensburgh and District Historical Society. Jenny is also the curator of the Old Mine Surgery museum.

The subject of Jenny's talk was the life and work of Dr Frederick Cox who was the sole medical practitioner in Helensburgh for some thirty two years. He was hired in 1910 by the miners of the Metropolitan Coal Mine to look after workers at the mine. He also attended the needs of their families and people living in the surrounding district.

At that time, Helensburgh was an isolated settlement and Dr Cox's nearest medical colleague was at Wollongong. The mine began operation in 1888 and by 1910 there were over 300 employees. Dr Cox was also on call for workers engaged on the railway deviation at Helensburgh and the bypass of the notorious tunnel between Stanwell Park and Otford.

Dr Cox was born in Tasmania in 1870. His grandfather, Henry Thorne Cox, was convicted in England for embezzlement and transported to Van Dieman's Land in 1843. His wife and 3 children followed him in 1849 and another 5 children were born in Tasmania. Henry Cox worked as a journalist and at one time owned *The Advertiser* newspaper. His children were encouraged to improve their social and economic standing through education.

His second son, George Edward, studied for the ministry of the Congregational Church and ran a boys' school at New Town in Hobart. He married Marion Miller in December 1868 and they had two sons –

Frederick Henry and Edward George. Unfortunately, George Edward died in December 1871 aged 32 years. His wife took over the school and fostered the education of her sons.

Young Frederick Henry matriculated to the University of Sydney and studied medicine from 1890 to 1895. While in Sydney he stayed with an aunt at Chatswood and often walked from there to the University in order to save money. After graduation he worked at various places in country Queensland and NSW as well as London where he undertook postgraduate study.

His wanderings came to an end when he arrived in Helensburgh. The Cox family moved into a house provided by the mine owners at 2 Robertson St. Some years later Dr Cox purchased 8 Robertson St and built a surgery on the side of the house. The surgery building was relocated in 2001 to 78 Parkes St and became home to the Helensburgh and District Historical Society.

Dr Cox was typical of country and suburban general medical practitioners up until recent times. He was on call 24 hours a day and attended patients at his surgery as well as in their homes or workplaces. As the mine doctor, he was required to go underground to attend accidents and on occasion accompanied patients by train to hospitals in Sydney.

Accidents and illness at the railway camps or on surrounding farms also required his attendance. He purchased his first motor vehicle, a Model T Ford, in 1911 but until then he either rode or drove a sulky. Even after he acquired a car, Dr Cox continued to ride when the roads were unsuited to car travel.

Dr Cox had to deal with various epidemics while at Helensburgh. The most serious were the outbreaks of typhoid at the railway camps where the living conditions were poor. The camps consisted of tents and huts housing up to 700 men with no running water and rudimentary sanitation.

Spanish Influenza broke out in late 1918 and lasted into 1920. In addition to treating sufferers around Helensburgh, Dr Cox also treated the patients further afield as some of his colleagues fell victim to the epidemic.

Although faithful to his Hippocratic Oath, Dr Cox had limits. When the miners' association refused to increase his contract payments, he resigned as the mine doctor while continuing to provide services from his surgery. No other doctor would take on the contract and work at the mine ceased. The stand-off was resolved soon after to the satisfaction of all concerned.

Dr Cox died on 5 December 1942. He left behind him a legacy of commitment to the Helensburgh community. He was remembered as being short and somewhat overweight but very energetic and caring person. He was renowned for his pet British bulldogs, for his interest in photography and for his willingness to lend books from his private library to bright school children.

Dr Cox was a very civic minded person; his work with the Boy Scouts movement was rewarded in 1940 with a Meritorious Award for the last 20 years of dedication to the movement. He was also a foundation member of the Helensburgh Masonic Lodge formed in 1915, and he frequently visited Lodge Illawarra, at Wollongong and other lodges throughout the district. When Dr Cox died at the age of 72 the family received a flood of letters of condolence acknowledging the high esteem he was held in the 32 years he lived and worked in the district.

JS



His old Mine Surgery 78 Parkes Street