The development of coal trade in the Wollongong district of New South Wales, with particular reference to government and business, 1849-1889

Henry Patrick Lee
University of Wollongong
NOTE

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CHAPTER 9

'WHERE IS THE METROPOLITAN AND ILLAWARRA RAILWAY LEAGUE?': THE RAILWAY IN LIMBO 1878-1880

Given the extreme closeness of the Legislative Assembly’s April 1878 vote on the Illawarra Railway, it might have been expected that Wollongong’s businessmen, at least until the Parliament sat again in September, would allow nothing to draw force from their case for the Railway. However, before then a push was made to have the government fund a major redevelopment of Wollongong Harbour, at the insistence of John Biggar.

Biggar, of course, had announced in early June that he was importing Victorian potatoes for sale in Wollongong. This was no momentary whim. In addition to his real estate and auctioneering business Biggar seems to have had it mind to establish himself as an importer of various commodities from Melbourne, including flour and biscuits.1 The condition of Wollongong Harbour, therefore, had a sharper significance for his ambitions than it did for many of his colleagues.

Thus, nearer the end of June he began a fresh campaign to have the government provide safer access for vessels using the port. In a letter to the Illawarra Mercury he recognised that to seek public funding for the improvement of the Harbour might jeopardise the case for rail communication with Sydney. However, in the pursuit of his own interests at a time of economic expansion, Biggar was prepared to take the odd risk. A true entrepreneur, he dismissed as ‘timid folks’ those who would keep silent about the state of the Harbour. On the contrary, he asserted, both the Illawarra Railway and Wollongong Harbour were ‘necessary for the progress of our community’.2 Biggar, though, was more concerned about the progress of his relationship with Melbourne shipping interests.

Hence, while he noted that the Railway was of paramount importance for getting Wollongong coal into world markets and for attracting additional mining capital to the district, his immediate attention was on Melbourne and the opportunities for financial gain that it

1 Illawarra Mercury, 25 October 1878 & 7 January 1879.
2 Letter quoted in ibid., 21 June 1878.
offered. He emphasised that Wollongong’s trade with the Victorian capital was expanding—he was ensuring that. Wollongong Harbour was the only barrier to further growth. It was, he said, unapproachable in heavy weather and offered little shelter from the same, and near the entrance was Black Buoy Rock upon which there was the constant danger of vessels becoming stuck. Biggar cited a letter from a Melbourne ship broker who stated that ‘Masters seem all to dread the port.’ The solution advocated by Biggar was the provision by the government of a steam tug to take vessels in and out of the Harbour and to haul them off the Rock if necessary.\(^3\)

In the same issue of the *Illawarra Mercury* was an advertisement, signed by Biggar, Archibald Campbell, Thomas Collins and other businessmen, asking the Mayor to convene a public meeting to consider pressing the government for a tug boat. Of course, Biggar’s pursuit of his own interests did not mean that the state of Wollongong Harbour did not create problems for other businesses in the district. At the meeting, held on 25 June, Alderman Andrew Armstrong, manager of the American Creek kerosene works, noted that sailing vessels from southern ports like Melbourne could not enter the Harbour if the wind was wrong. Once they had entered and loaded their cargoes, he added, the very wind that would take them south again prevented them from leaving. He said that some vessels had been detained in Belmore Basin for up to 10 days in this way and instanced one case where a steamer had to be brought down from Sydney to tow out a vessel loaded with coal for the Botany waterworks, which otherwise would have ceased operations. Consequently, the meeting adopted a memorial calling upon the Minister for Public Works to supply Wollongong with a tug boat.\(^4\)

The deputation which took the memorial to Sydney on 16 July was virtually told by the Minister, John Sutherland, to go away. Wollongong, he said, was ‘well provided for’. The port, he stated, had three coal staiths and two cranes, and Belmore Basin had been deepened to 18 feet. He agreed that a tug might possibly triple shipping activity but that, he believed, was good reason for him to say that the people of Wollongong could afford to pay for it themselves. In any event, Sutherland concluded, the matter was properly one for the Colonial Treasurer, to whom he would refer it.\(^5\) The only concessions wrung from the interview were a promise to

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3 ibid.
4 ibid., 28 June 1878.
5 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 17 July 1878.
consider the provision of an extra coal staith and an understanding that the removal of Black Buoy Rock might be undertaken at some future date.\textsuperscript{6}

However, even before the meeting with Farnell’s obdurate Minister for Public Works, an event occurred which moved the Wollongong Harbour campaign into a higher gear. In early July the sailing vessel \textit{Yarra} arrived off Wollongong, carrying John Biggar’s first consignment of Victorian potatoes. Owing to adverse winds and the absence of a steam tug, the captain decided not to waste time and money. He continued north and thus it was that Biggar’s potatoes found their way into the rival port of Newcastle.\textsuperscript{7} This plus Sutherland’s icy response to the tug boat deputation was too much for Biggar. In August he placed an advertisement in the \textit{Mercury}, calling a public meeting to consider further agitation on the Harbour.

Biggar had drafted yet another memorial for presentation to Sutherland. He wanted the Harbour enlarged to make it capable of accommodating the very largest of modern vessels. His minimum demands were for masonry work on the western end of the breakwater, where jutting boulders were causing minor damage to vessels; the deepening of the western side of the outer Harbour to at least 18 feet by the complete removal of Black Buoy Rock, which would also improve the entrance to the port; the deepening of the eastern side to 22 feet for a length of 300 to 400 feet, to allow vessels to berth there in safety; the provision of a steam crane on the eastern side wharf, and the widening, deepening and lengthening of Belmore Basin itself.\textsuperscript{8}

These were expensive proposals, but Biggar had not finished. Better than all of this, he asserted, would be the construction of a new dock altogether, on the southern side of the Harbour. At 1000 feet long by 600 feet wide, this bold proposal would have meant the demolition of the town’s gaol and its court house as well as the invasion of the paddocks beyond them. In front of the new dock Biggar wanted a water depth of 25 to 30 feet, and a channel of a similar depth heading out to sea.\textsuperscript{9}

Some thought that Biggar had taken leave of his senses. One correspondent to the \textit{Mercury} believed that his proposal would prove ‘suicidal to the Illawarra Railway

\textsuperscript{6} \textit{Illawarra Mercury}, 19 July & 13 August 1878.
\textsuperscript{7} \textit{ibid.}, 5 July 1878.
\textsuperscript{8} \textit{ibid.}, 23 August 1878.
\textsuperscript{9} \textit{ibid.}. 
movement.'

Even Percy Owen, Biggar's colleague on the Metropolitan and Illawarra Railway League Executive, urged caution. It would be best, thought Owen, to wait and see what would become of the Railway in the next session of Parliament. George Osborne, builder, timber merchant, undertaker and Mayor of Wollongong, agreed. Biggar, however, carried the meeting of 27 August. Aided by George Hewlett, local bank manager, and Patrick Lahiff of the Mount Pleasant mine, who had little faith in or liking for the Illawarra Railway, he convinced his colleagues that, with the Harbour he envisioned, Wollongong would control the Melbourne coal trade and much of its general merchandise trade. They must, he urged, keep agitating for the enlargement of their Harbour. Biggar must have been a persuasive advocate, for the draft memorial was adopted unanimously.

Campbell and Hart's Mercury gave cautious approval to the idea. Nothing, it stated, must prevent the securing of the Illawarra Railway. The improvement of the Harbour and the winning of the Melbourne market was fine, but there was far more at stake; with the Railway Wollongong would 'command the coal market of half the globe.' In addition, with the Farnell Ministry still in office and less than solicitous of Wollongong interests, and with the Illawarra Railway about to come before the Assembly for the third time, the Wollongong Harbour push was poor politics.

When John Sutherland met the deputation bearing the Harbour memorial, on 17 September, he told it that its requests were less than modest. All he offered was a promise to refer the memorial to the Engineer-in-Chief for Harbours and River Navigation, Edward Moriarty, for report. He reminded them that the Parliament had earlier in the year sanctioned the expenditure at Wollongong of £5500 for the erection of three steam cranes and the provision of extra rail sidings, as well as £700 for the extension of the existing jetty. He might also have mentioned the £5000 allocated at the same time for the construction of a breakwater at Shellharbour. These were on top of the £3000 allocated by the Robertson Ministry in 1877.

10 Quoted in ibid., 17 August 1878.
11 ibid., 30 August 1878.
12 ibid., Osborne's occupation taken from advertisement in ibid., 28 June 1878.
13 ibid., 27 August 1878.
14 ibid., 3 September 1878.
15 Sydney Morning Herald, 18 September 1878. See also Appropriation Act of 1878. 41 Vic.No.24 (items 427 & 440).
16 Appropriation Act of 1878. 41 Vic.No.24 (item 430).
for the widening and improving of Wollongong Harbour. Thus, while the Farnell Ministry was not going to pour public money into the Wollongong district, it was not blind to the legitimate claims of the farmers and businessmen there.

Given that the deputation to Sutherland took place just one week after the commencement of the new Parliamentary session, he offered it some advice about the Illawarra Railway. He cautioned them not to press the issue; he had no doubt that it 'will come in its day, but it will be some time yet.' In terms of both the Harbour and the Railway, he said, they were looking a very long way ahead. What the people of Wollongong were being offered by the government was, the Minister stated, sufficient for their present and foreseeable needs.

Wollongong’s businessmen disagreed. The Illawarra Mercury called for more pressure to be placed on the Ministry to provide at least a tug boat. John Biggar, ‘our indefatigable townsman’, drafted yet another memorial for the purpose. This time no public meeting was considered necessary; the memorial was made available for public signature before being sent on to the Colonial Treasurer. The only dissentient was the Wollongong Argus, recently established by Donald Campbell (no relation to Campbell of the Mercury) in competition to the Illawarra Mercury. The Argus was just as much a vehicle for notions of local progress as its rival, though its relationship with Biggar was much cooler. Unlike the Mercury, it gave much less space and priority to his extreme brand of boosterism. It advocated the formation of a local ‘Steam Tug Company’ as suggested by Sutherland. Such a Company, maintained the Argus, ‘would realize handsome dividends, besides adding considerably to the material wealth of the district.

As far as the town’s businessmen were concerned, the potential for greatly augmenting their material wealth certainly existed, but the situation was full of contradictions. On the one hand, shipping activity at Wollongong Harbour had increased markedly in 1878. In 1877 179

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17 ibid., 41 Vic.No.8 (item 472).
18 Quoted in Sydney Morning Herald, 18 September 1878.
19 ibid.
20 Illawarra Mercury, 8 October 1878.
21 ibid., 18 October 1878.
22 ibid.
23 The earliest surviving issue of the Argus is that of 10 October 1878 (No.82). A weekly, this would have had the Argus established around the beginning of March 1877.
24 Wollongong Argus, 10 October 1878.
sailing vessels had entered the port, whereas in the first six months of 1878 alone this figure had jumped to 281. On the other hand, Andrew Armstrong announced in July 1878 that the American Creek kerosene works would cease production altogether because the better quality shale had been exhausted. Without the Illawarra Railway or a safe and commodious Harbour, there seemed to be nothing that would encourage the great flow of mining capital that local businessmen believed their district could absorb. Andrew Armstrong and two partners were testing for coal on some 340 square miles of land encompassing an area from Bulli to Port Hacking on the coast and west to Appin. These, however, were men of little capital.

Nonetheless, there were a few promising signs. In July 1878 Thomas Garlick was reported to be testing the coal seams on the property of the North Bulli Coal and Iron Company, of which George Allen, speaker of the Legislative Assembly and chairman of the Bulli Coal Company, was the main proprietor. Of yet greater significance was the visit to Wollongong in December of Ebenezer Vickery, proprietor of the Mount Kembla property on which the now defunct American Creek kerosene works were located. He did so amidst reports in the local press that a company had been formed in England to work the Mount Kembla coal seams. These seemed to be accurate, for Vickery was accompanied by a Mr. McArthur, described as 'an eminent member of the British House of Commons.'

This was suggestive of a prosperous future but unless the district's export facilities were greatly improved, it was hard to see a string of mines opening along the escarpment. So, what of the Illawarra Railway in the new session of Parliament? The Governor's Speech at the opening of the 1878-9 session on 10 September revealed that the Farnell Ministry proposed 'a very large extension of our Railway system.' The speech exuded optimism. Existing lines, said Sir Hercules Robinson, were operating at a good profit, returning a rate in excess of the interest on the loans. In addition, the Colony's public debt was, per head of population, the lowest of all the Australian Colonies. Therefore, he continued, there would be 'no difficulty' in

25 Illawarra Mercury, 18 October 1878.
26 ibid., 2 July 1878. In 1877 15 men had hewn 2341 tons of shale; in 1878 30 men cut only 620 tons. See Annual Report of the Department of Mines, New South Wales, 1877, p.165 and 1878, p.137.
27 Illawarra Mercury, 21 June 1878.
28 ibid., 12 July 1878. Preparatory work had been going on at the property since 1876. See Annual Report of the Department of Mines, New South Wales, 1876, p.135; 1877, pp.165 and 195 ('A few miners still employed exploring for a good workable coal seam.').
29 Wollongong Argus, 5 December 1878. See also Illawarra Mercury, 31 December 1878.
obtaining further English loans for the Ministry's proposal to add 1000 miles to the existing system. That was the point. Government policy continued to favour pushing the three trunk lines, the Great Northern, Great Western and Great Southern, 'still further into the interior,' rather than constructing branch lines to places like Wollongong. There was no provision for the Illawarra Railway.

Given the Farnell Ministry's standing attitude to the Railway, that was hardly surprising. Neither was the Wollongong Argus' observation that the omission of the Sydney-Wollongong line from the Government's plans was 'a matter for regret.' However, the line's future seemed yet more endangered when Henry Badgery, stock and station agent of Maitland and Member for East Maitland, moved in the Assembly on 8 October that the House consider an Address to the Governor, urging him to see that the necessary steps were taken to connect the Great Northern Railway with Sydney; that is, that the Newcastle coalfield and its pastoral hinterland be linked to the deep waters of Port Jackson. Northern interests had reached the conclusion that the port of Newcastle, though greatly improved at public expense, could not handle all the trade of the region. With the growing Lithgow coalfield already connected with Sydney by the Great Western Railway, the Legislative Assembly's adoption of Badgery's motion, on 1 November, had ominous potential for the Sydney-Wollongong proposal.

The situation was clouded even more when, on 6 December, the Farnell Ministry fell 41-22 in a division on a major land Bill. Farnell resigned as Premier when the Governor refused him a dissolution. John Robertson was offered a commission but his Ministry failed to gain the approval of the Assembly. He returned his commission and then, to the surprise of all, resigned his seat. He declared that three major leaders in the House made the conduct of public business impossible, and hoped that his absence would allow a stable Government to be formed. Henry Parkes was the winner; 35 Members, including many of Robertson's

31 ibid.
32 Wollongong Argus, 5 December 1878.
35 ibid., No.28, 1 November 1878.
supporters, asked him to be their leader. The Governor got Farnell to withdraw his resignation and test, as Premier, his support in the Assembly against that of Parkes. On 21 December Parkes moved a motion of no confidence in the Farnell Ministry, won it by 30 votes to 21 and was commissioned as Premier for the third time. On the same day he went to Robertson and offered him a seat in the Legislative Council and a place in the Cabinet, as Vice President of the Executive Council and Representative of the Government in the Legislative Council. Robertson accepted. At last, the two had realised that, as Parkes himself put it, they had 'on many grounds—broad grounds . . . been in accord with each other.' The grand rivalry of New South Wales politics was over. So much so that portfolios in the new Ministry were apportioned equally between the major followers of the two men.

What this meant for the Illawarra Railway was not clear. Of the new nine member Ministry, four had voted against it in the divisions of June 1876 and/or April 1878 (Parkes, Francis Suttor, William Windeyer and James Hoskins); two had voted for it (John Robertson and John Lackey who resumed his post as Minister for Public Works), and three had not voted in either division (James Watson, Saul Samuel and Ezekiel Baker).

The Member for Illawarra had, as yet, made no attempt to resubmit his Illawarra Railway resolutions to the House. Gray may have been awaiting the fall of the hostile Farnell Ministry, hoping that its successor would be headed by John Robertson, who would appoint a Cabinet comprising allies of the Railway like Alexander Stuart and John Lackey. No one, though, could have predicted that Parkes, the arch enemy of the scheme, and Robertson, joint proprietor of the Coalcliff mine, would form a coalition Government. In any case, Gray waited until 11 February 1879 to place his resolutions on the Assembly's Notice Paper, to be moved by him that evening. He did not do so, claiming that it would be better to await the new Ministry's announcement of its railway policy. This seemed a sensible course to take.

38 Parkes in the Legislative Assembly, 13 December 1878. Quoted by Martin, op.cit., p.302.
39 ibid.
41 Illawarra Mercury, 11 & 14 February 1879.
However, Gray did not wait for the Ministry. He gave notice in late February that he intended to have the resolutions dealt with on 4 March. Again, the moment was lost. This time the resolutions were crowded out by Government business. The Illawarra Mercury was given to understand by Gray that his resolutions would now ‘be introduced ... on the first available opportunity.’ He was as good as his word. March 28 was appointed by the Member for Illawarra as the day of destiny for the Railway. Unfortunately, there was such a poor attendance of Members on that day that the House was counted out. Upon reflection, Gray decided that it would be best simply to leave his resolutions on the Notice Paper, to allow him greater flexibility in choosing a propitious moment for their submission to the Assembly. The Mercury understood that this would occur on ‘some future date, at no great distance.’

Gray’s indecisiveness and dithering matched neither his fighting statements following the narrow defeat of April 1878, nor the Mercury’s opinion, expressed at the same time, that the passing of the resolutions in the new session would be a formality. The explanation for Gray’s performance was probably that most Members remained opposed to spending public money on the Illawarra Railway. That is, that the close vote of 1878 was more an outcome of the indiscipline of faction politics than an indication of support for the Railway in the Assembly. This was the view of the Wollongong Argus. Just before Gray was to move his resolutions on 28 March, the Argus stated that, ‘it is well known that a large proportion of the members of Parliament are not very much in favour of a line being constructed along the coast.’

Indeed, the Argus was not much in favour of Gray and launched a vigorous attack on his record as the Member for Illawarra. It instanced the government’s ‘persistent neglect’ of public buildings in the town and laid the blame on Gray. He ‘appears but very seldom in the House,’ it stated, and concluded that, ‘so far as our wants are concerned, our member is practically a ‘dead head’.’ This opinion was echoed in the Mercury, though less virulently; after all, its proprietors had played a leading role in dumping William Forster as local Member.

42 ibid., 25 February 1879.
43 ibid., 7 March 1879.
44 ibid., 4 April 1879.
45 Wollongong Argus, 27 March 1879.
46 ibid., 13 March 1879.
before the 1874 general election, to replace him with Gray. Nonetheless, Campbell and Hart made note of his long and frequent absences from the House on private business, absences they believed were ‘more frequent than should be the case with a faithful representative.’

Gray, it seemed, had lost his passion for the Illawarra Railway, in favour of private pursuits. He was approaching 60 years of age, and had been the Member for Illawarra for nearly five years, during which time the Railway had twice failed to gain Parliamentary approval, in bitter and controversial circumstances. Certainly, his pursuit of this single most important item, for which Wollongong’s businessmen had put him into Parliament, had begun to lack any sense of urgency. In fact, his final attempt to move his resolutions, before the session ended on 13 July, degenerated into farce. As the Argus described it:

In his usual calm, unaffected style, Mr. Gray rose from his seat and walked forward to the table, for the purpose of moving his motion, when he received the discouraging intelligence from the Speaker that the motion could not then be moved. The courteous member bowed, and as if to show additional respect to the person in authority, walked backwards to his seat; but to the great amusement of those who are opposed to our railway, he unfortunately miscalculated the distance, and sat down on the floor!

It was a fitting conclusion to the Parliamentary session for the Illawarra Railway movement. Other than Gray’s forlorn attempts to bring his resolutions before the House, nothing was done to push the issue.

Gray, therefore, was not alone in failing to take the movement forward. His constituents themselves had become divided on whether to pursue the Harbour or the Railway or both at once. As early as March 1879 the Argus had called upon the district’s ‘energetic and leading men’ to form a Progress Committee, for the purpose of keeping the Railway ‘before the public mind.’ Biggar’s much vaunted new Metropolitan and Illawarra Railway League had fallen apart, just like the Committee that had preceded it. The League had been structured to allow wider public participation than the Committee, and its annual membership fee of five shillings was designed to encourage just that. It was not working. Indeed, as the Illawarra Mercury recalled later, the League’s work was greatly hampered by a lack of funds sufficient

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47 Illawarra Mercury, 6 July 1879.
48 Connolly, op. cit. Gray was born in 1823.
49 Wollongong Argus, 5 July 1879.
50 ibid., 27 March 1879.
to drive it deep into debt. Unless Wollongong's business leaders were constantly drilling their colleagues in their interests and whipping up public support for them, things soon lapsed.

In fact, the League, only founded in October 1876 as a reaction to the Illawarra Railway's defeat in the Assembly four months earlier, had been defunct for some time. This was indicated by an unsuccessful attempt to form a progress committee in June 1878. At a meeting on the state of Wollongong Harbour, Peter Mackel, the town's postmaster, moved that such an organisation be formed. His idea was that the committee would set priorities for local improvements and co-ordinate efforts to have the government fund them. The motion was carried unanimously, and a group of businessmen was appointed to draft a constitution: George Osborne, Mayor of Wollongong and builder, timber merchant and undertaker; Alderman Andrew Armstrong, manager of the American Creek kerosene works and Wollongong agent for the Mutual Life Association of Australasia; Percy Owen, chairman of the Railway League and solicitor, and Dr. Lyons, medical doctor and surgeon.

This was the only significant public movement in Wollongong during this period in which John Biggar appears to have taken neither part nor interest. It showed. A constitution was duly drafted for the Wollongong Progress Committee, to comprise 15 members elected annually at a public meeting of the residents of the Borough of Wollongong. Its specific objects were the securing of improvements to Wollongong Harbour and the winning of the Illawarra Railway, in furtherance of which the Committee was to be in constant touch with the Member for Illawarra, to ensure that the Ministry was made directly aware of the district's needs. A meeting was advertised for 4 July 1878, to discuss the adoption of the draft constitution. However, on the night the promoters judged the attendance to be insufficient and adjourned the meeting to the ninth. There was no further mention of the organisation, and the Wollongong Progress Committee disappeared from history.

51 Illawarra Mercury, 29 March 1881.
53 Illawarra Mercury, 28 June 1878. Occupations from advertisements in same issue, and Organ and Doyle, op.cit., p.79.
54 Illawarra Mercury, 2 July 1878.
55 ibid., 5 July 1878.
Consequently, Samuel Gray was left to carry in the Assembly what remained of the Illawarra Railway movement. His attempt to move his resolutions were not preceded by public campaigns in either the southern districts or in Sydney. Not even a petition was sent to the Assembly in favour of the scheme.56 Neither Gray nor Samuel Charles asked a single question of the Premier or the Minister for Public Works during the entire session—which had run from 10 September 1878 to 24 July 1879—not even after John Lackey became Minister for Public Works and John Robertson joined the Ministry.57 At the close of the session, Gray’s notice of motion lay among the few pieces of political flotsam and jetsam undisposed of by the Assembly.58

Exactly why the Illawarra Railway movement should have become so enervated is unclear, but the prosperity created by the continuing boom in the local coal trade seems to have had much to do with it. In 1878 total New South Wales coal production grew by 9.1 per cent. over the 1877 figure, topping 1.5 million tons for the first time. In Wollongong production expanded ahead of the average, growing by 10 per cent. whereas Newcastle could manage growth of only 7.8 per cent. In 1879 the local mines were doing even better, despite an increase in total New South Wales production of only 0.5 per cent. Newcastle’s output fell by 3.6 per cent., while that of Wollongong rose by 11.9 per cent. and its share of the Colony’s production moved from 15.1 per cent. in 1878 to 16.9 per cent. in 1879. As a consequence, employment in the Wollongong mines increased also. In 1877 there were 529 mine workers in the Wollongong district, rising to 662 in the following year and to 875 in 1879, an increase of 65.4 per cent. in two years.59

Certainly, there had been failures, with both the American Creek kerosene works and the Belmore Basin coke works having folded and their plant sold off.60 These, however, were only ever small concerns. The mines were flourishing as never before. Throughout 1878 and

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56 Statement drawn from a perusal of Weekly Abstract of Petitions Received by the Legislative Assembly. In Votes and Proceedings of the Legislative Assembly, Session 1878-9, Vol.1.
59 Calculated from figures in Annual Report of the Department of Mines, New South Wales, 1877-1879.
60 Wollongong Argus, 13 March 1879 (advertisement re sale of American Creek plant) and Illawarra Mercury, 13 & 17 June 1879 (coke works).
1879, Wollongong Harbour was busy with vessels taking coal away to Sydney and to intercolonial and even international ports.

Despite occasional attacks in the Sydney press on its quality, Wollongong coal was enjoying an increasingly good reputation. Thus, the Osborne Wallsend mine, which terminated its joint marketing arrangement with the neighbouring Mount Pleasant mine at the beginning of 1879, won the Royal Navy’s contract to supply coal to its men-of-war on the Australian Station. Wollongong coal also sustained in small part the interests of French imperialism in the Pacific. In December 1878 the French government chartered a vessel to supply Osborne Wallsend coal to its men-of-war in Noumea, following which a small but regular trade to New Caledonia opened up; in May 1879 the barque Stratheden called at Wollongong Harbour to take on a cargo of coal, on its way from Melbourne to New Caledonia and thence to its home port of Dundee in Scotland. The Bulli Coal Company had also been doing well. In January 1879 its directors announced a net profit of £6316 for the previous six months.

The place had never had it so good, a fact which had apparently anaesthetised even the avarice of Wollongong’s businessmen. As one speaker at the Bulli Benefit Society’s anniversary diner put it in August 1878, while speaking on ‘the beneficial effects of the mining industry’:

Work was plentiful, money was in circulation, houses and even villages were springing up on every hand . . . as if by magic . . . [and] business houses of all kinds were increasing at Bulli, the most important among such perhaps being the Bank, which had recently been opened there.

At Wollongong itself the government had managed to commence in earnest the Harbour improvements promised in the Appropriation Act of 1878. This, together with the air of prosperity seemed sufficient compensation for the Illawarra Railway. In June 1879 the Mercury noted with satisfaction the scenes of ‘Considerable activity’ at Wollongong Harbour,

61 Sydney Morning Herald, 14 January 1879. This report was challenged vigorously in a letter to the Herald from Thomas Hale, manager of the Coalcliff mine.
63 Wollongong Argus, 28 June 1879.
64 ibid., 19 December 1878, and Illawarra Mercury, 6 May & 13 June 1879.
65 Illawarra Mercury, 31 January 1879.
66 F. Robbins, quoted in ibid., 13 August 1878.
as the workmen laid the new rails, erected the new crane and installed a fourth coal staith. Business was so good that Francis Osborne, proprietor of the Osborne Wallsend mine, had decided to replace his horsedrawn coal wagons with steam locomotives. The locomotives and the new rails were manufactured in England and by June 1879 both were awaiting the completion of the Harbour improvements before going into service.

The attention of the district’s businessmen had also been seized by the great International Exhibition to open in Sydney in the second half of 1879. This occasion presented an opportunity for local businessmen to display the products of their district to an international audience, which might be a means of attracting additional investment. Consequently, they had the Mayor convene a public meeting to ponder what steps ought to be taken to that end. The meeting, held on 1 July, was attended by John Mackenzie, the government Examiner of Coal Fields, who was in the district on official business. He advised them to send several large blocks of coal, as well as cheese and butter, to the Exhibition.

Initially, municipal councils in other parts of the district refused to involve themselves in the scheme, believing it was purely something got up for the benefit of the businessmen of the town only. However, the Illawarra Mercury reminded everyone that if they did not co-operate to demonstrate to outsiders the capabilities of their district then a great opportunity to attract new investment and to break into new markets might be missed. This was sufficient, and in mid July, shortly before Parliament was prorogued, the Illawarra Exhibition Committee was established, with Percy Owen as chairman, along with several district sub committees.

On the whole, then, Wollongong’s businessmen were doing fine without the Illawarra Railway. The Harbour was being improved a little and the International Exhibition gave them a focus for their aspirations. As for those Sydney investor-politicians who had pressed as hard for the Illawarra Railway as had the shopkeepers, tradesmen and farmers of the southern districts, they too were no longer in a rush. The two most immediately interested in the

67 ibid., 3 June 1879.
69 Illawarra Mercury, 27 June 1879, and Wollongong Argus, 26 June 1879.
70 Illawarra Mercury, 4 July 1879.
71 ibid., 1 July 1879.
72 ibid., 11 & 14 July 1879.
proposal and in a position to exercise some influence, John Robertson and Alexander Stuart, had been silent. By mid 1879 their steam collier *Hilda* had arrived from the Glasgow shipyards and was fully engaged in the Wollongong coal trade; its twin, the *Herga*, was on its way to Wollongong from Scotland.\(^3\) The Coalcliff mine itself was developing with the boom. In 1878 output stood at 15,226 tons, or 6.4 *per cent.* of district production, with 73 men employed. By the end of 1879 output more than doubled to 35,935 tons, or 13.5 *per cent.* of district production, with employment having jumped to 165.\(^4\) Thus, Robertson and Stuart had a mine that was enjoying an increasing share of the Wollongong district coal trade, which was itself expanding its share of the Colony’s coal production.

John Biggar, however, represented a view of Wollongong’s future that would not be satisfied with only the partial exploitation of the district’s coal resources. Wollongong’s business houses were feasting on the boom, but should that boom evaporate the structural inefficiencies of the district’s export outlets might well drive demand to the Newcastle or Lithgow coalfields. A salutary reminder of this was given in June 1879 when a barque attempting to leave Wollongong Harbour became stuck on the rocky bottom. Fortunately, the weather was calm and the vessel was able to float off on the rising tide.\(^5\) This was not an isolated incident and such occurrences gave the port a poor reputation among ship owners. The work being undertaken on the Harbour was not redressing such fundamental problems. As the *Wollongong Argus* pointed out, the Harbour’s outer basin was not of a uniform depth. Thus, while most vessels could berth comfortably on the southern side, the northern side was too shallow for ‘vessels of any size’ to load with safety under the new cranes.\(^6\)

Biggar needed something with which to shake his colleagues out of their lethargy. That was provided by the Parkes-Robertson Ministry which, near the close of the Parliamentary session, left the Wollongong district out of its railway and public works loan Estimates. Biggar and his friends had, of course, presented Farnell’s Minister for Public Works, John Sutherland, with a Harbour improvement wish list in September 1878. They got none of it.

\(^3\) *ibid.*, 7 March & 17 June 1879, and *Wollongong Argus*, 15 May 1879.
\(^4\) Calculated from figures in *Annual Report of the Department of Mines, New South Wales*, 1878 & 1879.
\(^5\) *Illawarra Mercury*, 24 June 1879.
\(^6\) *Wollongong Argus*, 30 January 1879.
The Loan Act of 1879 authorised the raising in London of £7,352,768. This was by far the largest loan sanctioned by the Parliament since the commencement of the Loans Account in 1853. Borrowing to finance the economic development of the Colony had risen steadily over those three decades. Between 1853 and 1859 a total of £3,593,301 was authorised to be raised, rising to £5,215,179 in the period 1860-1869 and £8,259,888 between 1870 and 1878, a grand total of £17,068,368. The amount sought in the 1879 Act alone represented 43.1 per cent. of that grand total, and marked the beginning of the borrowing orgy that would end in the financial and industrial collapse of the 1890s.

The public coffers had been filled to overflowing by the economic prosperity that followed the end of the recession in the early 1870s. The budget had been in surplus between 1872 and 1877, funded by significant increases in revenue from land. These took a dip in 1878 and 1879, creating deficits in those years. Nonetheless, there seemed to be no end to the boom and Ministries began to indulge the wishes of those who could exert sufficient influence over the Parliament. Neither Wollongong Harbour nor the Illawarra Railway figured in the calculations that were being made. The Harbour was an issue only for the businessmen of the town of Wollongong and for the proprietors of the Osborne Wallsend and Mount Pleasant mines; it mattered little in Sydney. The Railway had been an issue in New South Wales politics, but for the moment not even John Robertson or Alexander Stuart felt impelled to make it one again. Nor, it seemed, did many of Biggar’s fellow businessmen in Wollongong.

Consequently, the Loan Act of 1879, which allocated £5,001,000 to railway extensions, £20,000 to railway trial surveys, £845,000 to rolling stock and stores, and £1,486,768 to Sydney’s water supply and sewerage, contained, to the Mercury’s disgust, ‘not one copper ... for a harbour or a railway’ for Wollongong. John Biggar seized the moment and held a hastily convened meeting of the Railway League Executive in his office, on 16 July, to consider the best means of focusing the attention of the town’s businessmen and the

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77 Loan Act of 1879. 43 Vic.No.11.
78 Calculated from figures in ‘Statement of Appropriations for Services Authorized to be provided for by Loans, from the year 1853 to 31 July, 1895, showing the expenditure under each head up to that date, and the balance written off and retained for future expenditure.’ In Estimates of the Ways and Means of the Government of New South Wales for the Year 1895-6. Government Printer: Sydney 1895, pp.31-48.
80 Loan Act of 1879. 43 Vic.No.11.
81 Illawarra Mercury, 18 July 1879.
public on the need for the Illawarra Railway.\textsuperscript{82} The \textit{Mercury} had declared that if a sufficient amount had been included in the Estimates for the redevelopment of the Harbour, which Campbell and Hart fixed at ‘no less’ than £40,000 to £50,000 ‘at the present time’, then it might have been permissible to forget about the Illawarra Railway for the moment. However, to get nothing for either was cause for ‘public indignation’,\textsuperscript{83} and that was precisely what Biggar set out to manufacture.

In a \textit{Mercury} advertisement signed by Biggar for the Railway League Executive, an ‘INDIGNATION MEETING’ was called for 22 July, ‘to express the general public surprise and dissatisfaction’ that there was no provision in the loan Estimates for the Illawarra Railway.\textsuperscript{84} Biggar’s artifice knew no limits. No one could have been surprised, certainly not about the Railway. Nothing of substance had been done to push it since April 1878. As to the improvement of the Harbour, the Wollongong Progress Committee had had that as one of its objectives but the organisation had not proceeded beyond the draft constitution stage. Even the spontaneous outpouring of public anger that Biggar was arranging was postponed owing to the prorogation of Parliament on 24 July; the Railway League Executive felt that the resurrection of the movement could be staged with better effect closer to the reopening of the Parliament.\textsuperscript{85}

The Government’s railway policy, though, had given the League something on which to base local indignation. Six lines of railway had been approved by the Legislative Assembly on 15 July 1879. Of these, half were consistent with the settled policy of pushing the three trunk lines into the Colony’s interior: Tamworth to Tenterfield, adding 203 miles to the Great Northern Railway at an estimated cost of £1,450,000; Dubbo to Bourke, adding 227 miles to the Great Western Railway, also for £1,450,000 and the completion of the Goulburn to Wagga section of the Great Southern Railway, for £100,000. However, the extensions from Gunnedah to Narrabri (60 miles for £370,000) in the north, from Wallerawang to Mudgee (85 miles for £735,000) in the west, and from Narrandera to Hay (105 miles for £735,000) in the south, branched off from the main trunk lines.\textsuperscript{86} As the \textit{Illawarra Mercury} pointed out, this

\textsuperscript{82} \textit{ibid.}
\textsuperscript{83} \textit{ibid.}
\textsuperscript{84} \textit{ibid.}
\textsuperscript{85} \textit{ibid.}, 22 July 1879.
\textsuperscript{86} \textit{Votes and Proceedings of the Legislative Assembly, No.153, 15 July 1879.} In \textit{Votes and Proceedings of the Legislative Assembly, Session 1878-9, Vol.1.}
had been one of the major objections to the Illawarra Railway, both in the Assembly and in the editorial columns of the *Sydney Morning Herald*. It was an argument, said Campbell and Hart, that had now lost its force.87

 Nonetheless, even in Wollongong the Illawarra Railway continued to fade as a public issue. During the Parliamentary recess, between July and October it hardly rated a mention in the local press. In September the *Mercury* stated that the National Park being established by the government at Port Hacking, north of the Wollongong district, as a recreational outlet for Sydney’s population, would be rendered accessible only by the Illawarra Railway.88 Later that month the *Mercury* picked up a reference in the Sydney press to the metropolis’ bright future as a manufacturing centre, based upon the Colony’s plentiful coal resources, and adduced this as a powerful argument for the Railway.89 In October Campbell and Hart bemoaned the fact that the Ministry and the Parliament seemed to have forgotten all about Wollongong. There was, they complained, no Illawarra Railway and no prospect of the enlargement of Wollongong Harbour; not even a tug boat had been provided.90 On 28 October the new session of Parliament began, and it was not preceded by the postponed Illawarra Railway ‘indignation’ meeting promised in July by the Railway League Executive. No public explanation was given for its failure to materialise, and the local press did not bother to comment. The Illawarra Railway movement, it appeared, had fallen into a deep, dark hole.

 So deep that no public action to obtain it would be initiated until October 1880. Then, the Metropolitan and Illawarra Railway League Executive would burst back into the light with a vigour and a confidence that was as sudden as it was unexpected. However, the reality was that the movement had neither lost its drive nor suffered a fatal accident. Rather, its leaders, who after all were the movement, had decided to drop the tactics of public agitation and discussion. Before explaining why this course was adopted it is instructive to examine how the followers in the Illawarra Railway movement reacted to it.

 Without the drive provided by the sharply focused self interest of a John Biggar, the movement in Wollongong largely ceased to exist. Until the Railway was again pressed upon

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87 *Illawarra Mercury*, 18 July 1879.
them at the end of 1880, Wollongong’s businessmen reverted to pursuing with almost single
minded devotion the improvement of the Harbour. The extent to which this occurred bore
testimony to Biggar’s personal influence in filling the minds of his fellow businessmen with
grandiose notions of the wealth and progress that would come with the Illawarra Railway. It
was not that they too did not cherish these things. Rather, it was that the Harbour existed and
the Railway was as yet a vision which had twice failed to win Parliamentary approval. Earlier
in 1879, when Samuel Gray was manoeuvring to no effect in the Assembly or the Railway, the
Wollongong Argus had noted with an air of resignation that ‘it is well known that a large
proportion of the members of Parliament are not very much in favour of a line being
constructed along the coast.’ This being the case, an ‘Old Resident of Wollongong’ put
clearly the options open to local business interests:

It now remains for the people to decide which they will have, a railway or a
harbour, and once having decided, to agitate, agitate, agitate, until what they
strive for becomes un fait accompli.  

Well, they had done that with both the Harbour and the Railway. The net result was
that they had the Harbour, deficient as it might be. Biggar having largely vacated the public
domain, the Argus advocated with some effect the view that it was better to work with what
you had rather than devote time and energy to what might be. Thus, at the end of July 1879 it
declared firmly for the Harbour and against the Railway:

We are strong advocates for railways as a rule, but have no hesitation in this
instance in asserting that a good harbour would be of infinitely more benefit
to the town and district than a railway. Doubtless the town would receive a
certain impetus while the railway was being constructed, but it is equally
certain it would collapse as soon as the terminus was shifted southwards.
By the construction of a harbour the town and district would receive a
stimulus which would steadily increase.

The paper actually told the town’s businessmen that the Illawarra Railway could prove
detrimental to their interests. Those coal proprietors with mines closer to Sydney, it said,
nominating Robertson and Stuart at Coalcliff, would enjoy a cost advantage over those nearer
Wollongong and might well undersell and ‘injure’ them. Better, advised the Argus, not to toy
with such potentially dangerous schemes. Water provided a natural highway that would carry

91 Wollongong Argus, 27 March 1879.
92 Quoted in ibid., 1 May 1879.
93 ibid., 31 July 1879.
coal and other goods more cheaply than a railway,\textsuperscript{94} and if Wollongong got the harbour it
deserved it would replace Newcastle as the second port of the Colony.\textsuperscript{95}

The only public action of any note undertaken by Wollongong’s businessmen in the
second half of 1879 was a deputation to the Minister for Public Works, John Lackey, to press
upon him the need for several local improvements. The deputation comprised the Mayor,
Andrew Armstrong, four Wollongong Council Aldermen, and the proprietor of the
\textit{Mercury}, Archibald Campbell, accompanied by Samuel Gray and Samuel Charles. There was
no John Biggar and no mention of the Illawarra Railway. Instead, discussion centred on the
improvement of the town’s water supply, the need to re-position the Court House, the
inadequacy of the Post and Telegraph Office, the necessity of a rocket signalling device at the
Harbour, and in particular the urgent need for the removal of Black Buoy Rock at the Harbour
entrance.\textsuperscript{96} There was nothing visionary here; this was the stuff of small town development.
Lackey made no promises. He would get reports from his officers and then make his decision
known.

In the meantime the Harbour continued to annoy the town’s businessmen. During
March 1880 six vessels, five steamers and a barque, got themselves stuck on Black Buoy
Rock,\textsuperscript{97} and in early April bad weather prevented vessels from either entering or leaving the
port.\textsuperscript{98} By the middle of 1880, with the new T-Jetty (so named for its shape) and its steam
crane operating in the outer basin, the \textit{Mercury} was adamant that Black Buoy Rock had to
go.\textsuperscript{99} Matters came to a head in late May when the steamer \textit{Barrabool} loaded coal at Bulli for
Melbourne. This vessel might well have berthed at Wollongong, but its size was beyond the
Harbour’s capacity. The \textit{Mercury} was miffed. Wollongong Harbour, it asserted, ought to
“command” the coal trades of Victoria, South Australia and Sydney, and would, if Black Buoy
Rock was removed and other improvements carried out. Public action was urged,\textsuperscript{100} but there
was not a word about the Illawarra Railway.

\textsuperscript{94} \textit{ibid.}, 7 August 1879.
\textsuperscript{95} \textit{ibid.}, 31 July 1879.
\textsuperscript{96} \textit{Illawarra Mercury}, 16 December 1879.
\textsuperscript{97} \textit{ibid.}, 23 March 1880.
\textsuperscript{98} \textit{ibid.}, 2 April 1880.
\textsuperscript{99} \textit{ibid.}.
\textsuperscript{100} \textit{ibid.}, 1 June 1880.
The district had received nothing for harbour works in the Appropriation Act of 1879, and by June 1880 those funds previously voted for the improvement of Wollongong Harbour were running out, with 15 men being laid off at the works. The much maligned Samuel Gray had been successful in wringing £720 from the Ministry in the 1880 Appropriation Act as a subsidy for a steamer to act as a tug boat for Wollongong Harbour. He seems also to have negotiated a further £6000 for the continuation of the Harbour works, plus an additional £2000. These amounts would not allow Wollongong Harbour to rival the port of Newcastle, but given the political unimportance of Wollongong and the absence of genuine public action on the part of its inhabitants, this was not a bad achievement. Biggar and the Illawarra Mercury, less critical of Gray than was the Argus, recognised him as a quiet achiever, with Biggar stating outright in January 1880 that there was no point in blaming Gray for the district's lack of a first class port: "The people were to blame and not the member.

Even the Argus recognised this. In July 1880 it pointed to the absence of drive and unity that had characterised the public affairs of the district for some time. Wollongong's 'public wants', it said, had been left to individuals who, in approaching Ministers, did not command the authority of a representative organisation. The paper repeated its call for the formation of a Progress Committee.

Lacking such leadership in the period from mid 1879 to late 1880, Wollongong's businessmen seemed content enough with the prosperity and activity that continued to surround them. Yes, they whinged about the Harbour's deficiencies, and with good cause. However, they had never had it better. In November 1879 Campbell and Hart decided to run an editorial tracing the progress of the Wollongong coal trade since its inception. The Mercury reminded its readers of the first load of Mount Keira coal taken into Wollongong on a bullock dray by James Shoobert in 1849, to be shipped in 'Old Billy' (the William the Fourth) at the little basin.

101 Appropriation Act of 1879. 43 Vic. No.10. Nothing appeared for the purpose under the heads of "Secretary for Public Works" or "Supplementary".
102 *Illawarra Mercury*, 1 June 1880.
103 Appropriation Act of 1880. 44 Vic. No.4 (Item 198). See also *Illawarra Mercury*, 21 November 1879.
105 *Illawarra Mercury*, 28 November 1879.
106 Quoted in *ibid.*, 8 January 1880.
107 *Wollongong Argus*, 22 July 1880.
Then, in the 1860s, there was the Mount Keira mine’s wooden, horse drawn tramway and the opening of Belmore Basin and the new coal staiths in 1868. Now, in 1879, it proudly announced, the Osborne Wallsend Company, was using steam locomotives to haul its coal—the day of the iron horse had arrived in Wollongong itself. Campbell and Hart congratulated the whole town on this achievement; in no time coal would replace butter as the district’s staple product. The new age was manifest in the locomotives and coal wagons which ‘now whisked along the well laid railway constructed for the purpose’, looking ‘businesslike and keeping pace with modern improvements.’

In this atmosphere of progress and plenty a variety of schemes luxuriated for new industries, sufficient to distract attention and energy from the visionary Illawarra Railway proposal. In February 1879 Patrick Lahiff raised again the idea that a gas company, using local coal, be formed to light the streets of the town. Not much would happen on this front until 1881, but another of Lahiff’s projects really captured the local imagination. This was his campaign to establish an iron industry.

Lahiff had been smitten with the idea since at least 1875, probably earlier, based on local deposits of iron ore, limestone and, of course, coal. In February 1880 he urged the immediate establishment of an iron works, noting that a ton of pig iron could be produced at a cost of only 30 shillings—a handsome inducement, he believed, for any investor. Campbell and Hart loved the suggestion. They considered it one of ‘transcendent importance’ for Wollongong, one which would place the town at the centre of the modern age. At first, said the Mercury, the works would produce only pig iron, but then rails would follow and eventually ‘higher branches of the trade would be attained.’ Wollongong, it continued, could manufacture iron very cheaply and ‘command an almost insatiable demand and world wide market, as unquestionably the present is an iron age.’ In April Lahiff produced more detailed costings, for an iron works employing 23 men and making 150 tons of pig iron a week. Nature, he

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109 ibid., 21 February 1879.
111 Illawarra Mercury, 13 February 1880.
112 ibid., 24 February 1880.
stated, had created Wollongong as the ‘Garden of New South Wales’, but it had also provided its inhabitants with the resources to turn it into the ‘Black Country’ of the Colony.¹¹³

This was the kind of talk that Wollongong’s businessmen appreciated, and by June speculation was rife about the opening of an iron works when a member of the prominent Sydney shipping firm, Scott, Henderson and Company, visited the district with an experienced iron manufacturer. The *Mercury*, reported that the two were pleased with what they saw, and speculated that they were there with the backing of English capital. Campbell and Hart convinced themselves that a works with some 300 employees was in the offering.¹¹⁴ Like the gas company, however, little happened to advance the scheme until well into 1881, the Illawarra Railway again taking centre stage from late 1880.

For a short time the dairy industry rose to prominence again. In January 1880 a cheese factory was opened at Dapto by James and Thomas Wilson, who operated similar large concerns in Victoria.¹¹⁵ It began well, taking up to 600 gallons of milk a day from local farmers, who received 2.5 pence a gallon; this was equivalent to seven pence a pound for butter, which was then fetching only four to five pence a pound in Sydney.¹¹⁶ Within weeks the factory had 1000 cheeses in stock (six tons) ready for sale in Wollongong and Sydney¹¹⁷ and by the beginning of February it had an agent in Sydney.¹¹⁸ Great things were expected. However, the business closed on 22 April, following a rise in the price of butter which caused farmers to stop sending in their milk.¹¹⁹

There were brighter stories. At the southern end of the district, George Fuller, ‘proprietor of the greater part of Shellharbour’, had combined with ‘some Melbourne speculators’ to open a blue metal quarry at Bass Point. A jetty was to be built for the use of ‘several large vessels’ which would take the metal to Melbourne and elsewhere. The company intended to employ 100 men when the quarry was fully developed.¹²⁰ In April 1880 the Shellharbour Blue Metal Company issued a prospectus, seeking £4000 of public capital to add

¹¹³ Quoted in *ibid.*, 9 April 1880.
¹¹⁴ *ibid.*, 25 June 1880.
¹¹⁵ *ibid.*, 9 January 1880.
¹¹⁷ *ibid.*, 20 January 1880.
¹¹⁸ *ibid.*, 3 February 1880.
¹¹⁹ *ibid.*, 9 & 23 February 1880.
¹²⁰ *ibid.*, 19 March 1880.
to the £1000 held by the proprietors.\textsuperscript{121} By the end of 1880 a 480 foot long jetty had been constructed and the first shipments of blue metal were made, the enterprise employing about 15 men.\textsuperscript{122}

Other cheering news was provided by George Osborne's new Wollongong brick manufactory which, it was hoped, would develop an 'extensive' trade.\textsuperscript{123} With the population increasing there was some chance that it might. A parallel venture by Wollongong's businessmen was the establishment of the Illawarra Building Society in early 1880 to provide housing loans, particularly for 'struggling and industrious men.'\textsuperscript{124} The Society's first directors were Archibald Campbell of the \textit{Illawarra Mercury}, Aquila Parsons, who had inherited his father's ironmongers and tinsmiths business, John Payne, owner of a wheelwrights' shop, and T.G. Dobinson.\textsuperscript{125}

The mining industry was also showing signs of expansion. In September 1879 Francis Osborne, sole proprietor of the Osborne Wallsend mine following the suicide of his brother James in 1878, was reported to be considering opening a new mine just north of Wollongong, with a railway connecting it to Wollongong Harbour.\textsuperscript{126} At Shellharbour, a 'few gentlemen' were said to be considering opening a small mine at Yellow Rock near the Macquarie River. Their object was to supply coal to the local dairy farmers' steamer the \textit{Dairymaid} as well as to householders in the Wollongong district, owing to an increasing scarcity of firewood.\textsuperscript{127} At the larger, less speculative end of the market, the Bulli Coal Company had commenced a new tunnel in order to boost output,\textsuperscript{128} and the Mount Kembla Coal and Oil Company was beginning operations. There was even the possibility that the Company might ship coal at Wollongong Harbour as well as at its Port Kembla jetty.\textsuperscript{129} By August 1880 a few men were

\textsuperscript{121} \textit{ibid.}, 13 April 1880.  
\textsuperscript{122} \textit{ibid.}, 7 December 1880.  
\textsuperscript{123} \textit{ibid.}, 13 January 1880.  
\textsuperscript{124} \textit{ibid.}, 6 February 1880.  
\textsuperscript{125} Occupations from Organ and Doyle, \textit{op.cit.}, pp.86 & 141.  
\textsuperscript{126} \textit{Illawarra Mercury}, 5 September 1879.  
\textsuperscript{127} \textit{ibid.}, 26 September 1879.  
\textsuperscript{128} \textit{ibid.}, 7 November 1879.  
\textsuperscript{129} \textit{ibid.}, 11 June 1880.  Ebenezer Vickery and the Company's engineer William Burrall confirmed this in January 1881 when seeking Parliamentary approval to construct a railway from the mine through private property. See \textit{Report from the Select Committee on the Mount Kembla Coal and Oil Company's Railway Bill}; together with the \textit{Proceedings of the Committee and Minutes of Evidence}, p.5. In \textit{Votes and Proceedings of the Legislative Assembly}, Session 1880-1, Vol.1.
beginning the work of opening out its coal seams at Mount Kembla,\textsuperscript{130} and by the end of the year 36 men were employed at this task.\textsuperscript{131}

In the midst of all this activity and speculation John Biggar had been uncharacteristically quiet. He had not, however, been idle. For much of the time he had involved himself in a new venture, as an exporter of small consignments of Wollongong butter to England in the cold rooms of the Peninsular and Oriental line's steamships. His Sydney agents informed him that the reports from London were encouraging, and in June 1880 he urged local farmers and landowners to contribute £2000 to £3000 for the construction of an ice works and cold storage room, to keep butter and cheese in good condition until it could be shipped to Sydney for sale there or for export to England.\textsuperscript{132} Biggar had not forsaken the Illawarra Railway, though. He said that the cold storage facility was a poor substitute for the Railway and, in one of his now rare public forays on the subject, he told his colleagues in January 1880 that the Railway was essential if Wollongong was to achieve the greatness and prosperity for which it was destined. There was, he asserted enthusiastically, enough coal in the district to pay off the national debt of Great Britain.\textsuperscript{133} Biggar was interested in anything that would make money and he had, of course, already made one failed attempt to open an export market in London for Wollongong butter in the early 1870s.\textsuperscript{134}

He involved himself intensively in preparations for the Sydney International Exhibition of 1879. At a local exhibition, a kind of dress rehearsal, the Mercury found Biggar's display of 18 minerals to be found in the district the most impressive.\textsuperscript{135} When the time came to pack the collection for shipment to Sydney, Biggar did it all by himself, 'no trifling task' which took him well into the night.\textsuperscript{136} He may well have been animated by the report that a number of English 'gentlemen' would be attending the Exhibition to scout out investment possibilities.\textsuperscript{137} At any rate, Biggar was not interested in simply advertising the quality of the coal on display

\textsuperscript{130} Illawarra Mercury, 10 August 1880.
\textsuperscript{131} Annual Report of the Department of Mines, New South Wales, 1880.
\textsuperscript{132} See Illawarra Mercury, 7 November 1879 & 19 March, 14 May & 18 June 1880.
\textsuperscript{133} ibid., 9 January 1880. The occasion was a farewell dinner for a businessman who was leaving the district.
\textsuperscript{134} See Chapter 6.
\textsuperscript{135} Illawarra Mercury, 9 September 1879.
\textsuperscript{136} ibid., 16 September 1879.
\textsuperscript{137} ibid., 26 August 1879.
from the three Wollongong companies. That was in his general interest, but among the blocks of Wollongong coal exhibited was one from a little coal property at West Dapto, owned by John Biggar.\textsuperscript{138} It stood alongside a coal sample from Broker's Nose, just north of Wollongong, owned by fellow businessman and chairman of the Railway League, Percy Owen.\textsuperscript{139} Early in 1880 Biggar was appointed to represent the Wollongong district at the Exhibition,\textsuperscript{140} a position which would have allowed him to discuss directly investment options with 'gentlemen' from both England and Sydney.

The Exhibition over, Biggar resumed his place at the head of public affairs in Wollongong from the middle of 1880. Two events facilitated this—an attack in the \textit{Sydney Morning Herald} on the quality of Wollongong coal, and the resignation of Samuel Gray as Member for Illawarra. In May the \textit{Herald} despatched a reporter to Wollongong, to write a series of articles on the district.\textsuperscript{141} His report on the local coal trade disparaged the quality of the coal and claimed that, while it was inferior to that of Newcastle, the southern coal proprietors were intent on putting the northern mines out of business.\textsuperscript{142} On this occasion there was swift unity of action. The Mayor was questioned to call a public meeting to discuss the best means of countering these remarks which were 'calculated to damage the commercial interests of the district.'\textsuperscript{143} At the meeting Biggar led the charge, quoting at length from testimonials provided by public authorities, steamship companies, manufacturers and the Royal Navy, attesting to the excellence of the local product. Those who opposed the expansion of the Wollongong coal trade, he said, would not listen to the evidence. He stated that he had written to both the \textit{Sydney Morning Herald} and the \textit{Daily Telegraph}, refuting the claims of the \textit{Herald's} reporter. His letters had not been published. Thus, he had his colleagues dip into their pockets to have their resolution condemning the \textit{Herald's} report and affirming the quality of Wollongong coal published in the Sydney press.\textsuperscript{144}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{138} \textit{Official Record of the Sydney International Exhibition, 1879}. Government Printer: Sydney 1881, p.103.
\item \textsuperscript{139} \textit{ibid.} Owen's name is misprinted as "Evans".
\item \textsuperscript{140} \textit{Illawarra Mercury}, 23 March 1880.
\item \textsuperscript{141} \textit{Wollongong Argus}, 27 May 1880.
\item \textsuperscript{142} \textit{Sydney Morning Herald}, 12 May 1880.
\item \textsuperscript{143} \textit{Illawarra Mercury}, 28 May 1880.
\item \textsuperscript{144} \textit{ibid.}, 1 June 1880.
\end{itemize}
This episode was followed closely by the resignations from the Legislative Assembly of both Samuel Gray and Samuel Charles. Charles resigned his Kiama seat on 16 June, followed by Gray in Illawarra six days later.\(^{145}\) The two were brothers-in-law,\(^ {146}\) with substantial land holdings that would have increased greatly in value with the advent of the Illawarra Railway. They held large properties in the Kiama district, and Gray owned land in Wollongong itself as well as 203.5 acres just outside the district, at Port Hacking.\(^ {147}\) However, they apparently had had enough of politics. In their day they had prosecuted vigorously the cause of the Illawarra Railway, but without result. Within days of their resignation they were on board the Californian mail steamer *Australia*, taking the Pacific route for a stay in England.\(^ {148}\)

Wollongong’s businessmen had been saved the trouble of removing Gray from his seat. The question now was who would replace him as their Parliamentary agent. Rumours of Gray’s resignation had been current since early June when the *Argus* noted that John Biggar might be a candidate for the vacancy.\(^ {149}\) That prospect was put to sleep by reports that Alexander Stuart himself was interested. Both the *Argus* and the *Mercury* were delighted at the thought. The former expressed no regret at Gray’s going. Thus far, it stated, the seat of Illawarra had been represented by ‘men of very mediocre capabilities’; Stuart, however, as ‘a large shareholder, if not the largest’ in the Coalcliff mine, was of a different stamp.\(^ {150}\) The *Mercury* described him as a man of ‘ability and sterling general quality’, but his central appeal lay in the fact that, apart from Parkes and Robertson, now in coalition, he was the only individual capable of forming and leading ‘a strong party’.\(^ {151}\) Here was a potential Premier.

Stuart was very interested in the Illawarra vacancy. He had been out of the Assembly since November 1879, when he resigned his East Sydney seat to take up the post of New South Wales Agent General in London. This offer had been made by Premier Parkes, anxious to remove his most dangerous political opponent.\(^ {152}\) However, Stuart’s private affairs took a turn for the worse. His extensive investments led him to the verge of bankruptcy and aborted

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\(^{145}\) *New South Wales Parliamentary Debates* (First Series), Session 1879-80, Vol.3, pp.2860 and 1907.

\(^{146}\) Connolly, *op.cit.*

\(^{147}\) *New South Wales Government Gazette*, No.125, 4 April 1879, p.1591.

\(^{148}\) *Illawarra Mercury*, 22 June 1880.

\(^{149}\) *Wollongong Argus*, 8 June 1880.

\(^{150}\) *ibid.*, 17 June 1880.

\(^{151}\) *Illawarra Mercury*, 15 June 1880.

\(^{152}\) Martin, *op.cit.*, p.328.
the London appointment. The sale of the Coalcliff mine to a company was rumoured. He managed to recover his position, and now sought to resume his place in public affairs. Although a Sydney merchant with investments all over the Colony, all that interested the Illawarra Mercury was that Stuart owned a local mine and had been an influential supporter of the Illawarra Railway. It considered him a ‘local man.

Over 400 Illawarra electors signed a requisition asking Stuart to nominate. It made particular reference to his support for the Illawarra Railway, and leading the signatories were John Biggar, Percy Owen and Archibald Campbell. Stuart feigned surprise, claiming that he had no particular wish to re-enter Parliament but had been forced to change his mind by this ‘spontaneous call of so influential a portion of the Electors of Illawarra’. Another two candidates were to contest the seat with him: Andrew Lysaght, owner of the Queen’s Hotel in Wollongong, and Peter Orvad, owner of the Denmark Hotel at Bulli. The opposition was directed more at Biggar than at Stuart. All candidates pledged themselves to support the Illawarra Railway. As Lysaght noted, ‘no man would dare to seek the suffrages of the Illawarra electors and say he was opposed to a railway to this district.’ At the nomination for the seat on 5 July, Patrick Lahiff, no friend of the Illawarra Railway, in proposing Lysaght’s candidature described Biggar as ‘a sort of electoral Warwick, who thought he could do as he liked in selecting and appointing members.’

He was right. Biggar was the kingmaker in Illawarra. At the by-election, on 7 July, Stuart won handsomely, winning majorities at all eight polling places to collect a total of 686

153 He was some £70,000 in debt, including £20,000 owed to the Oriental Bank and £20,000 to Robert Towns and Company. Parkes believed that Stuart had been ‘clever in concealing his insolvent position’. Daniel Cooper, the Colony’s de facto Agent General (Martin, op cit., p.319), advised the Premier from London that Stuart’s appointment would, under the circumstances, be unacceptable there. Daniel Cooper to Henry Parkes, 8 April 1880. Sir Henry Parkes Correspondence, Vol.50. Mitchell Library A920.
154 Illawarra Mercury, 2 April 1880.
155 Connolly, op.cit.
156 ibid.
157 ibid., 15 June 1880.
158 ibid., 25 June 1880.
159 Quoted in ibid.
160 Advertisements in ibid, 6 July 1880, and Wollongong Argus, 8 July 1880.
161 Quoted in Illawarra Mercury, 6 July 1880.
162 Quoted in Wollongong Argus, 8 July 1880.
votes to 437 for Lysaght and 14 for Orvad. From this point the Illawarra Railway movement began its resurrection. Apart from Gray’s farcical effort to get his resolutions before the Assembly in early 1879, nothing had been done since the defeat of April 1878. Thus, two full sessions of Parliament, from 10 September 1878 to 13 July 1880, had passed the Railway by. On 22 July 1880, however, Alexander Stuart told a meeting of his Wollongong constituents that ‘something should be done for Illawarra during [the] next session of Parliament.’ He focused on the Illawarra Railway, telling them that the only argument of any worth against it had been the need to push the Colony’s three trunk lines into the interior. The railway proposals sanctioned by Parliament in 1879, he said, had ‘wholly done away’ with this objection. He therefore urged them to agitate for their Railway, to keep their just claims in the minds of the public and the decision makers.

The Wollongong Argus used the speech to attack Biggar. The Railway League, it stated, comprised but ‘a few gentlemen’ whose work had not been highly visible for some time. Biggar and Gray were blamed for this. The criticism was repeated some weeks later when the Argus inquired sarcastically, ‘Where is the Metropolitan and Illawarra Railway League? Ask Biggar and Co.’ It soon had its reply.

On 12 October Biggar convened a meeting of the League’s General Committee, to consider the best means of pressing the Ministry to include the Sydney-Jervis Bay railway in the next round of Loan Estimates. A memorial had been drafted for presentation to the Minister for Public Works. Signed by Percy Owen, it sought a sum for that part of the Illawarra Railway already surveyed from Sydney to Kiama and asked that the Kiama-Jervis Bay survey be proceeded with at once. The local Railway movement sprang back to life. Before the General Committee meeting was held in Wollongong, the Dapto Committee met and appointed

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163 Illawarra Mercury, 9 July 1880.
164 Quoted in ibid., 6 July 1880.
165 Quoted in ibid., 27 July 1880.
166 Wollongong Argus, 29 July 1880.
167 ibid., 19 August 1880.
168 Illawarra Mercury, 12 October 1880.
delegates, including Henry Osborne junior, to represent it on the deputation to the Minister.\textsuperscript{169} The Bulli Committee met for the same purpose,\textsuperscript{170} as did that at Kiama.\textsuperscript{171}

The General Committee determined the final shape of the deputation, which was to include John Stewart and John Marks, former Members for the district and now Members of the Legislative Council; Alexander Stuart; Dr. Harman Tarrant, a medical practitioner, who had replaced Samuel Charles as Member for Kiama; John Roseby, the Member for Shoalhaven; Henry Clarke, the Member for Eden; Edward Greville, the Member for Braidwood; five Sydney Members (Angus Cameron—West Sydney; John Davies and James Greenwood—East Sydney; William Hezlett—Paddington, and John Lucas—Canterbury); Francis MacCabe, representing the interests of the Osborne family; Percy Owen; John Biggar; Archibald Campbell; Andrew Lysaght; seven other General Committee members, and delegates of the Railway League’s local Committees. Biggar was able to tell the meeting that he had been telegraphed by Alexander Stuart with the news that the latter had made the necessary arrangements with the Minister for Public Works for the deputation to go ahead.\textsuperscript{172}

This evidenced a degree of public activity and co-ordination that had been entirely absent since April 1878. Indeed, the election of Stuart, whom the \textit{Mercury} said ought to be elevated to the Cabinet,\textsuperscript{173} had already resulted in one deputation taking to the Minister for Public Works a series of requests for the improvement of Wollongong Harbour. In his address to the electors on 22 July, Stuart said that the Harbour ought not to be neglected. He had adopted the view that had been advocated firmly by Biggar—that the Illawarra Railway would take Wollongong coal to Sydney and the world, with the Harbour servicing Victoria and the other southern Colonies.\textsuperscript{174} Stuart led the deputation which, interestingly, included not only businessmen from Wollongong (Andrew Armstrong, Percy Owen and Archibald Campbell) but the Members for Kiama, Harman Tarrant, and Paddington, William Hezlett.\textsuperscript{175}

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{169} \textit{ibid.}, 15 October 1880. \\
\textsuperscript{170} \textit{ibid.} \\
\textsuperscript{171} \textit{ibid.}, 29 October 1880. \\
\textsuperscript{172} \textit{ibid.}, 19 October 1880. \\
\textsuperscript{173} \textit{ibid.}, 13 July 1880. \\
\textsuperscript{174} \textit{ibid.}, 27 July 1880. \\
\textsuperscript{175} \textit{ibid.}, 17 August 1880.
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Stuart told Lackey that the Harbour works had come to a virtual standstill and set out his electors’ demands for the deepening of the Harbour, a new jetty, the removal of Black Buoy Rock and the completion of the sea wall along the breakwater. Lackey was most accommodating, in stark contrast to his treatment of the Wollongong deputation of December 1879. He gave an undertaking that the water in front of the new jetty would be deepened and that the sea wall would be completed. Black Buoy Rock, he said, would be an expensive item. Nonetheless, he expressed his regret that his and his predecessor’s earlier promises about the Rock had not been kept and agreed to have the Engineer-in-Chief of Harbours prepare an estimate for its removal.

Stuart then whisked the deputation off to wait upon James Watson, the Colonial Treasurer. He told Watson that the appropriation of £720 as a subsidy for a tug at Wollongong Harbour was not acceptable. His constituents needed and demanded a tug boat. Watson promised that tenders would be called ‘without delay’. They were, within weeks. Then, in November £10,000 was placed on the Appropriation Estimates for 1881, for the continued improvement of Wollongong Harbour.

The Illawarra Railway met with the same Ministerial enthusiasm when Stuart presented the Railway League’s memorial to Lackey on 5 November. The Minister declared that he had always supported the proposal and he promised to advocate it strongly within both the Ministry and the Parliament. Lackey did point out that the current Parliament having reached its statutory limit, the deputation would have to await the outcome of the general election before anything definite could be done. He added, however, that he was confident that this time the movement would attain its object.

This was an Illawarra Railway deputation unlike any of its predecessors. It possessed a confidence that bordered on arrogance. Apart from the presence of the southern districts

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176 ibid.
177 Quoted in ibid.
178 *New South Wales Government Gazette*, No.349, 27 August 1880, p.4415. Tenders were invited from ‘persons desirous of supplying and maintaining an efficient steam-tug for use at Wollongong, on the basis of an annual subsidy from the Government.’ The tug was to have no less than 30 horsepower. The closing date for tenders was extended from 3 to 10 September (*ibid.*, No.356, 3 September 1880, p.4566), and finally fresh tenders were called, for a tug with a horsepower of no less than 20 (*ibid.*, No.373, 21 September 1880, p.4900).
179 *Illawarra Mercury*, 11 February 1881, and Appropriation Act of 1881. 44 Vic.No.27 (Item 387).
180 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 6 November 1880.
Members and businessmen, there was an unusually large attendance by Sydney interests, including the Mayor of Sydney, who introduced the deputation, and the Mayors of West Botany, St. Peter's, Marrickville and Petersham, to mention a few. In fact, the Sydney metropolitan and suburban representatives greatly outnumbered their southern counterparts. The street in front of the Department of Public Works building was said to resemble a 'cab stand', and the Minister's spacious interview room was crowded to excess—only half of those in attendance managed to cram themselves in. Following the Minister's statement of approval and his promise of support for the Illawarra Railway, Stuart and Tarrant paid for a champagne lunch for all 70 members of the deputation at the Exchange Hotel. In toasting the health of the Illawarra Railway, Stuart made special reference to the work of John Biggar, including him in the toast.

In the space of a few months, then, the Illawarra Railway had stepped out of the void to occupy a premier position on the political agenda. It was extraordinary enough that a movement that had dropped from public view for some 15 months should return with such vigour and confidence. Even the Mercury was surprised that a Railway League Committee had been formed in Kiama which, it noted, had not been particularly active in the movement to date. More extraordinary, however, was Lackey's virtual commitment of the Ministry to the scheme—a Ministry, it must be remembered, which was headed by Henry Parkes, the movement's arch enemy. Clearly, there had been private developments and negotiations.

This was hinted at strongly in a statement from the Railway League Executive, no doubt replying to the criticism of the Argus, that it had never wavered in the pursuit of its objective. Rather, it had acted on advice to avoid 'general agitation' on the question. Indeed, the boast was made that:

The pentup desire for a railway among the inhabitants of these districts and in Sydney and the suburbs could have been called into demonstrative action on any day.

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181 Wollongong Argus, 11 November 1880.
182 Illawarra Mercury, 12 November 1880.
183 Sydney Morning Herald, 6 November 1880.
184 Illawarra Mercury, 29 October & 5 November 1880.
185 ibid., 12 October 1880.
186 ibid., 5 November 1880.
Why had the leaders of the movement avoided this tactic? The answer to that lay in the growing need of the Colony's merchant capitalists and pastoralists in the mid/late 1870s for a more co-ordinated approach to railway development.