BOILING DOWN THE IRON HORSES:

Since the steelworks first began, steam locomotives have been part and parcel of its operations.

No. 1 blast furnace was the first plant commissioned at Port Kembla in August 1928. By that time five locomotives had been transferred from the works at Lithgow and Cadia to move iron ore, coke, limestone, hot metal and slag.

As these locomotives were old and small a more suitable locomotive was ordered from the Porter Locomotive Company of America, which specialised in industrial locomotives. It arrived in March 1930 and immediately proved most successful.

At Lithgow the tradition had been to name the locomotives after native birds and animals and thus the new Porter Locomotive was named “Bandicoot.” A smaller engine previously carried the name at the steelworks at Lithgow.

Following the commissioning of No. 1 blast furnace, steelmaking started at Port Kembla in 1931. This expansion, together with the construction of the first by-product coke oven battery, the late No. 2 battery, required further motive power. Two locomotives identical to the “Bandicoot” were ordered from the Clyde Engineering Works in Sydney, placed in service in December 1936 and February 1937, and named “Brolga” and “Bronzewing.” Every detail down to the brass nameplates was the same as the pattern engine, except for the brass bell, which by this time had disappeared from the “Bandicoot.”

When No. 2 blast furnace was commissioned in May 1938, two more locomotives were ordered from Clyde Engineering, named “Baradine” and “Burrawa.” These differed slightly from the previous engines, being altered to suit local conditions. The cab roof was lowered and the sand domes removed from the top of the saddle tank to give clearance to pass under the metal and slag spouts of the blast furnace cast houses.

The first three Porter locomotives were painted black, lined out in red and with the company name across the saddle tank in red. The two new engines arrived in deep green, lined out in black and yellow and their names painted in yellow lettering on the tank sides. For the next five years, all locomotives were made to conform to the new colour scheme.

Under war conditions no engineering firm could undertake the construction of steam locomotives, but the problem was solved by the Works building three locomotives themselves, most of the machining and fitting being carried out by apprentices. The three were placed in service in August and November 1943 and February 1944 and named “Bellbird,” “Badger” and “Bantam.” They were painted black and lined out in red with brass nameplates. The five earlier engines were then painted similarly.

The eight locomotives were the mainstay of the locomotive fleet until the advent of the diesel-electrics from May 1950 onwards.

The Porter locomotives continued to handle blast furnace and steel furnace slag for a further 21 years until there were adequate diesel loco-
motives to cover all work.

On December 19, 1971, the Porter locomotives were finally withdrawn from service. While stored, they were maintained in working order so that they could be immediately returned for service, but the need did not arise.

Two of the locomotives will be retained for preservation. “Badger” is to be placed on show at the Visitors Centre alongside “Wallaby,” which was transferred from Lithgow in 1932 and withdrawn from service 10 years before the Porter locomotives.

“Bronzewing” has been donated to the N.S.W. Rail Transport Museum, the Wollongong Branch of which is planning a live steam museum at Albion Park. Track is being laid for “Bronzewing” to be displayed alongside other steam locomotives that have been acquired.

[Abridged from an article in “Kembla News,” 14 February, 1975. Information was supplied by Mr. J. L. N. Southern (Foundation Member), whom we thank for permission to reprint].

SNIPPETS FOR LOCAL HISTORIANS:

2.—The giant figtree and the Aborigines.

I confess to having always treated with scorn the old furphy inscribed on the memorial at the giant figtree to the effect that it was narrowly saved from destruction by something approaching a revolt of the aborigines when they found that roadmakers were planning to cut the tree down, which, it is said, explains the curve of the road. That much must surely be rubbish. When the road was put through, such as it was, there was no such thing as a fixed line, and the easiest way was the best. Even now, surely, a modern bulldozer would rather go round than through the huge bulk of the tree.

And yet there seems to be some element of truth in the story, and I for one am prepared to eat my words to some extent. The same excellent diary of Rev. W. B. Clarke to which I referred in the March Bulletin describes this part of his party’s route on 6 January 1840, when they left Wollongong for Kangaroo Valley via Dapto: “The road first leaves that over Keira to the right” (i.e. the crossroads); “then descends to a country much like the coal district of England—through a woody region to Charcoal Creek, which is bridged by palm trees, passing an enormous fig-tree at the foot of which old Timbery, a black, was born, and which his people venerate. There is another tree which the blacks say contains the names of their tribe and its history, by some hieroglyphical interpretation of its branches: a real genealogical tree.” That tree does not seem to have been preserved; yet that is the one about which they would revolt, surely, rather than one which was by comparison a mere subject of veneration. For myself, I would accept Clarke’s observation, but would not draw any conclusion beyond his actual words.

—E.B.