AUGUST MEETING:

Coal-mining, one of the district's main industries for many years, and the reason for the existence of other industries, was the subject of Mr. Gordon Sellers' address at the August meeting.

The speaker covered the history of coal in Illawarra from the earliest days—and it was news to most of us that a coal seam is visible in low cliffs near the beach at Bellambi where Bass and Flinders camped on the night of 28-29 March, 1796. (Mr. Sellers is seeking to have this seam officially named "The Flinders Seam").

Next year coal was found by the "Sydney Cove" survivors on their long trek up the coast from Gippsland. Governor Hunter sent Bass to investigate and report on the Coal Cliffs. But more easily worked and more accessible seams were found soon afterwards at Newcastle, and many years elapsed without the Illawarra seams being worked.

The first attempts to work them, made by Captain Westmacott at Thirroul in 1828 and Austinmer in 1839, failed, partly because of opposition by the Australian Agricultural Company, which had been granted a monopoly of coal-mining in the colony. This had lapsed by the time James Shoobert began production in 1849 from the first Mount Keira Mine, which was about 100 feet lower than, and in a different seam from, the present Kemira (formerly Mount Keira or Osborne-Wallsend) Colliery. The latter, the first mine in the Bulli
seam, was opened by Mr. Sellers' great-great-uncle William Robson.

Over the next few years numerous collieries, including Mount Pleasant, Bellambi, Bulli and Russell Vale (later South Bulli) were opened, but most ceased operations, at least temporarily, after a few years. There was a renewed burst of activity in the late seventies and eighties, with the opening of Coalcliff, North Bulli, Mount Kembla, Corrimal and Metropolitan (Helensburgh), and the reopening of Bellambi and South Bulli. South Clifton was a latecomer, and there were various smaller mines which mostly had short lives.

The usual method of working was the bord and pillar system. The coal was drilled by hand and blasted, using black powder. The larger pieces were then filled into skips of one ton or less capacity, which were hauled to the pit-mouth by ponies (later replaced in some mines by steam-operated rope haulage).

All the mines except Coalcliff and Metropolitan used inclines operated by various methods—steam-powered direct rope haulage, self-acting inclines on which the full wagons descending hauled up the empties, and endless-rope skip inclines—to get the coal to the foot of the hills. Smashes when wagons got out of control were not uncommon, and frequently spectacular.

From the inclines tramways—some worked by horses, some by locomotives—ran to Wollongong Harbour or to jetties in the lee (when southerlies were blowing) of Red Point, Bellambi Point, Sandon Point at Bulli and Long Point at Austinmer. (Because one of the Red Point jetties served the Mount Kembla Colliery, the locality came to be known as Port Kembla). Except for Wollongong Harbour (and much later Port Kembla), all these places were dangerously exposed. Jetties were frequently damaged by storms, and a number of the colliers wrecked, more than once with loss of life. Nevertheless the shipment of coal by sea continued till after the Second World War.

At Coalcliff no incline or connecting tramway was needed—the skips were run straight from the mine tunnel on to the most exposed and vulnerable jetty of all.

Before the Metropolitan at Helensburgh was opened, the main Illawarra railway had come through, and its coal always went out by rail.

Naked lights were used in the mines in the early days. As gas became prevalent most mines changed to safety-lamps—a change some of the men were very reluctant to accept, as naked lights were less trouble and gave better illumination. Naked lights were blamed for the memorable disasters at Bulli (1887) and Mount Kembla (1902), which are well-known. Less well-known was the Corrimal Colliery fire of 1902, almost farcical in its origin (a miner in a fit of temper threw down his hat and naked light, igniting gas issuing from the floor) but potentially equally dangerous. Fortunately the fire was isolated and ultimately extinguished. After the Bulli explosion, safety-lamps were introduced in the mine, but, incredible as it seems, there was a return to naked lights three years later. No wonder many men left the mine—the wonder is that any stayed.

In the early days most of the mineworkers were local men and part-time farmers. The boom in the eighties resulted in men being
brought in from overseas, and the growth of hut and humpy settlements around the mines — also in strained industrial relations, strikes, lockouts and much bitterness.

Notable “firsts” in the Illawarra coal industry include:

The first use of turpentine piles in wharf construction (by Robert Longmeré in the South Bulli jetty, 1862);

The first electrically-driven underground haulage in any Australian mine (South Bulli, 1905);

The first use anywhere in the world of alternating-current signal systems (installed by G. Green and A. G. O. Sellers at South Bulli about 1905).

The last item is a reminder that Mr. Sellers’ address had behind it not only his own lifetime’s experience, but a long family tradition in the mining industry, of which we were fortunate to have the benefit.