A PEEP AT A COAL MINE:

It was about noon on a close sultry day in February, that we paid a visit to the Mount Keira coal mine. Two miles' walk from the town of Wollongong, through a country undulating and mostly cleared, brought us to a branch road which led to the mine. Still as we pursued this long lane fenced on both sides, little rude homes with their corn and cabbage plots presented themselves, and the dense copse wood of the mountains remained only in the disfiguring half-burned stumps or grim leafless trees dead and seared by fire. A few cows roamed through the pasturage, just springing up fresh and green, after the recent rain; and now and then the glad voice of childhood startled the silence. Ever and anon we seemed to view the ocean, bordered by low sand hills, or white beach, and to trace the little town through the patches of high dull trees, still possessing some arid portion of ground. As we ascended the mountain side the enclosures ceased, and the path was cut through the forest. On either side of the road lay deep glens, thickly wooded. Vines bound together the cabbage, palm, myrtle and tea tree, and the large leaves of the tree nettle spread conspicuously among the branches of the red cedar, and the feathery plumes of the tree fern and Bangalee Palm, whilst the staghorn fern, and numerous other parities clung to every branch. The clear notes of the Bell Bird rung from a hundred throats, and lesser feathered songsters twittered and chirped. Another cottage broke upon the almost solemn naturalness of the scene, and a decent young woman, with her chubby boy in her arms, offered us a rest in her neat
dwelling. There is something affecting in the presence of these little homesteads in the wilderness; man must have toiled long before the dense wood has yielded to his hand, and that dwelling, albeit, rude and low, has arisen! A few geraniums and pumpkin vines added a grace to the scene, and from the door the good wife pointed out the noble view which offered a strong temptation to the pencil. The miner’s wife related to us the alarm she had recently received from a bush fire. The devouring element had swept down the sides of a gully lying before the cottage, and a spark, favoured by the wind, flew across, and lodged in the dry leaves surrounding a noble group of stagshorn fern clustering round a large tree near the door; suddenly the wind changed and the flames were blown across to the bark root of the hut. The weather was intensely hot, it was one of those three hot days of the February of the present year—and the dry bark, almost ignited by the sun, was presently in a flame. No water was at hand, having to be brought from the mine, full half-a-mile distant, and the only liquid at command was a cask of beer, this was thrown on the blazing fire, and happily extinguished it.

Still ascending, we reached the object of our visit. The face of a high pile of rocks had been cut away, and a small plateau or “yard,” as the collier called it, built before the openings to the shaft. A spring dripping in cool drops from the rock was, during wet weather, swollen into a cataract, and swept away the yard repeatedly, he informed us, and a drain had been cut to carry off the water and prevent a like occurrence. The “old shaft” is cut into the rock on a level with the plateau, but soon sinks as the seam dips, and being below the level of the outer yard, was damp, and a little drain was conducting a clear rill from the rocks when we visited it. Our guide, who might have been taken for the impersonification of a coal genii, lighted a little lamp and bade us follow him. Mounting a pile of coal, we stood before the “new shaft,” also cut in the face of the rock, and here we entered. A coal waggon, capable of containing 1000 cwt. occupied the entrance, but a push from the collier’s hand sent it lumbering away down its tramroad with a strange underground echo out of sight. Not far from the mouth a passage connects the two shafts, but it is filled with lumber, as the air entering at the tunnel passed into the other without visiting the distant recesses of the mine.

The old shaft penetrates 100 yards, but the new one has not yet reached such a distance.

The height of the excavation did not permit of walking upright. We did not penetrate far, as our companions objected to a living entombment. The little flame of the lamp playing on the rock and coal wall and glittering on the pools of water, added not a little to the novelty of the scene, and the sooty form of the guide contributed to make a strange picture. Once again on the yard, we surveyed the beautiful prospect before us, and turned an admiring eye upon the superb vegetation towering upon the cliffs above the tunnels. The surface now presented was marked by seams and stripes, and was, we believe, traversed by belts of slate of different formations.

The mine is the property of J. Shoobert, we were informed, and worked by the enterprising proprietor.—L.A.

—The Illustrated Sydney News, 14th April, 1855.