THE SAGA OF THE KEIRA TRAMLINE

In his *Transporting the Black Diamond* (Canberra, 1968), Mr. Gifford Eardley has told in detail the story of the development of the tramline which carried coal from Mount Keira Colliery to the harbour at Wollongong. It had, of course, been very necessary to improve on the old method of coal transportation, which consisted of drays which lumbered through the streets of Wollongong. Parenthetically, it is rather tragically amusing to contemplate that, after nearly one-and-a-quarter centuries, officialdom still apparently considers it proper that coal should be hauled through residential areas. Only the means of haulage—now motor transport—has changed; and at least the technologists of the 1850s did overcome the problem until comparatively recent years. Their method was to use railways; hence the need for a tramline.

Controlled gravitation of skips down the rail incline from the Osborne-WallSEND Colliery (now Mount Keira mine) brought the coal to a point at the base of the foothills where the shortest route lay almost due east to the harbour. There was no problem about a tramline from there to approximately the present line of the Princes Highway (Flinders Street), because the colliery owned the intervening land. But from this point eastwards the line would have to find a way through the grant of Charles Throsby Smith; and this was where the saga began. Mr. Eardley says that Smith “was not amused,” as if he should simply have grinned and borne the bisection of his lands by a tramline, presumably on the basis that what was good for the colliery was just too bad for him. Nobody could say that he was not a good citizen; yet surely it was not unreasonable that he should protect his own interests. As so often happens, there were rights and wrongs on both sides. Mr. Eardley presents Smith as the unreasonable resister of the territorial claims of the colliery, but in this he is both wrong and unfair. The record should be put straight, and this can be done by reference to the minutes of a Select Committee of the Legislative Assembly, for it took an Act of Parliament to overcome the resistance of “Old Charley” Smith, as he chose to call himself.

To be quite exact, most of the contested land was no longer Smith’s. His first wife having died, he married the pretty widow of a Mr. Peter Jackson, and thereupon made a settlement of his lands to two trustees, Michael Hindmarsh and David Johnstone, for the benefit of his new wife during her lifetime with remainder to his issue, present and future. He had had seven children by his first wife. and then went on to have another three by his second, so that the family interest was both numerous and strong. Nor were they any more likely to be put upon than their virile sire. Neither the trustees nor their later successors in office were likely to be allowed to become lax.

Negotiations began for purchase from Smith of the requisite strip of land. Smith himself was inclined to agree, but by then he had no real say. The family considered a lease for ninety-nine years might be granted, rather than a sale of the strip, and the colliery owners (Messrs. Robson, Jackson, Tulip and Nixon) agreed. On reconsideration, the family reduced the proposed term to fifty years, which the mining partners agreed to accept, whereupon the term
was further reduced to twenty-five years. The partners naturally thought this short period would not warrant the cost of construction of a line. Bad as this was for them, their reaction may be well imagined when it was rumoured that the family had now decided that a term of only seven years would be granted. An outward and visible sign of this reaction was the presentation to Parliament of a petition by the mine-owners for a special Act to vest the desired land in them compulsorily. Nothing less, it would seem, would suffice in their view to defeat the unyielding Smiths.

Parliament received the petition which contained a draft Bill, and on 13th October 1859 referred it to a Select Committee of nine members. The Committee called for reports on the Bill by the Chief Commissioner of Railways, who in turn called for comments by the Engineer-in-Chief for Harbours. These came available on 15th December, and were considered by the Committee—those were the days!—on the same day. It had already taken evidence from the promotors of the Bill in October, and in the interim "Charles Throsby Smith, of Wollongong, landowner," presented a further petition asking that the Bill contained in the first petition should not be allowed to become law.

(To be continued)

—EDGAR BEALE.
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(Continued from November Bulletin)

Two issues stood to be determined by the Committee. The first was whether a compulsory acquisition of lands was justified at all. This was easily decided; the promoters had no difficulty in establishing, and indeed the Smith interests do not seem to have denied, that the mining and shipping of coal was highly desirable, that without proper haulage facilities the colliery-owners were unable to compete, and that there was a great future for the coal-mining industry in Illawarra. It was said—bless their innocence—that estimates put a production capacity for the Keira measures of a mere 30,000 tons per annum over fifty years.

The second issue was much harder. This was a matter of how, where, and on what conditions the line should be created. The official reports, and only brief evidence taken from David Johnstone, clearly established that the Smith family opposition was not by any means perverse or illogical. Rather did it become apparent that the promoters of the Bill had not sufficiently thought out their proposals. They had been too free not only in their assumptions on Smith’s lands, but also on Government land at the harbour, part of which they proposed should be made over to the exclusive use of the colliery. The official report declared that this would give the Keira mine-owners a monopoly of access to the harbour over other existing and future collieries in Illawarra whose coals were to be shipped at Wollongong, because this was the only harbour at that time. Perhaps this fact engendered a feeling of sympathy for the Smith interests; and certainly the Committee recognized that the colliery owners had chosen a route across the Smith land which was easy of construction for them but which had dire results, not only for the landowners, but the public too, since roads would be diverted, gates and fencing-off was not provided for, even public safety was not respected. To the engineers the plans themselves were not “of any service.” And so far as concerned the Smith private interests, David Johnstone was able to point out an alternative line which avoided the serious disadvantages of bisecting Smith’s farm, encroaching upon Campbell Street, and cutting Smith off from some important water-holes. This line was along the backs of allotments between Smith and Campbell Streets, a line which was ultimately adopted. And thus it became apparent that whilst the Smiths, for a consideration, might have suffered these disadvantages for a short period, fifty down to twenty-five down to even seven years, a longer period was alike unthinkable and unreasonable.

Clearly, the colliery owners had much more thinking and planning to do; the many objections, public and private, had to be met. Unhappily, no doubt, and facing further expense such as cuttings through solid rock, the colliery owners retired to reconsider their proposals. The extent of their further deliberations is shown by the fact that whereas the original draft Bill had consisted of only four clauses, imperiously sweeping in their effect, the amended Bill contained eighteen, later reduced to seventeen. And when the Parlia-
mentary Committee met for the last time on 23rd February 1860 the only matter remaining to be determined was the toll or way-leave charge, which was discussed at sixpence per ton. So it came about that on 23rd May 1860 “The Mount Keira Tramroad Act of 1860” received the Royal assent.

In truth, it was only one of several Acts relating to railways for mining purposes passed during those years, for obviously the coal-mining industry in general was gaining impetus. As regards Illawarra, two Acts of 1862 incorporated the Osborne Wallsend Coal Company, and permitted the construction of the Mount Pleasant Tramroad from the mine along the seashore to the old harbour, which was extended into Belmore Basin in the 1860s. Whether other landowners fought as hard for their rights as the Smiths did in protecting their interests is another subject of study. So far as the Smiths were concerned, they had to go on fighting, because the failure of the mine-owners to build a bridge over the cutting through Keira Street caused the Smith interests to institute proceedings for enforcement of the statutory obligations on the colliery proprietors. Thus it is apparent that if the Smiths played it hard, equally so did the colliery owners.

In this way then, the Mount Keira tramline came into being, and even today the modern observer can see the line, partly marked by cuttings and embankments, and partly detectable by land usages apparent on the map.

Another point arises in these days of sensitivity to coaling facilities: what was it like to have a tramline running through a rather sleepy 19th century township? This will be examined in a later instalment of this article.

(To be concluded)

—EDGAR BEALE.