AFTERNOON TEA AT MOUNT KEMBLA

Members of the Society were delighted to receive an invitation from the Illawarra Vintage Car Club to visit their premises at the old Mount Kembla Mine, to have afternoon tea with their members and to hear an address from Mr. Fred Kirkwood. So on Sunday, 8th March, in perfect early-autumn weather, a large number of members and their families met at Mt. Kembla at 2 p.m. and duly followed a 1928 Rolls Royce to the club premises.

The array of vintage cars proved very interesting and the afternoon tea was delightful, matched only by the superb views from the mountainside.

Mr. Kirkwood spoke mainly of his early days in the Mount Kembla Colliery, where he had begun work on leaving school in 1923. In those days there was no access to secondary education from Mt. Kembla because there was no transport to Wollongong, so on leaving school most boys automatically joined their fathers in the mine which had begun its operations in 1881.

In 1923 the mine still lacked a bathroom, so men walked home in their pit clothes to make use of bath water heated in a kerosene tin on top of the kitchen stove. The bathroom at the mine was installed in 1927, and on the day of our visit the vintage cars were parked on the concrete floor which is all that remains of it.

If a man were injured in those days he had to be carried out on a stretcher for up to three miles or more, and until 1920 only a hand ambulance was available to convey him to hospital in Wollongong. The horse ambulance became available in 1920, and finally a motor ambulance in 1925.

Mr. Kirkwood made special mention of the wonderful comradeship which existed amongst the men working in the mine and of the strong spirit in the local community. Few could dispute his claim that in those days the contract miner was the hardest-worked man in the land, filling 7 or 8 skips per day for about 17/- ($1.70) and putting in his own roof supports as he advanced. In addition, many of these men walked three or four miles from their homes to the mine, then another three miles or so to the workforce inside. There was no holiday pay, no sick pay, no social service benefits: it was truly a case of work or starve. Purely hand operations continued until the introduction of machines for undercutting in about 1938. The mine ceased operation about 1970 and most of the buildings and installations were removed soon after.

Today it is difficult to believe that so much of the mine could have disappeared in a short period of little more than ten years. The only building that remains is the old stable, now occupied as the
headquarters of the Vintage Car Club. This was a two-storey iron-sheeted structure with feed loft above and horse stalls below. Unlike the deeper shaft mines to which ponies were sentenced for life, the horses at Mt. Kembla were brought out to the stable at night.

Mr. Kirkwood led the more agile members of the party to the entrance to the tunnel through which the men passed on their way to work on the day of the great disaster of 1902 in which 96 lives were lost. He also showed a plan of the mine with the names of all the men working that day and their work positions in the headings, crosses indicating fatalities. This is indeed a valuable document which should eventually find its way into a museum. In almost 90 years of operation, twenty-five other men lost their lives in the mine.

Members of the Society are deeply grateful to Mr. Kirkwood and members of the Vintage Car Club for a very pleasant and interesting afternoon, not forgetting the afternoon tea. We should now give some thought to how we may return their hospitality.

—F.W.O.