

THE RESCUED RETORT

On the side of the Cordeaux Road at Mount Kembla, a short distance below the gateway to the Nebo Colliery, stands a retort [ed: a sturdy, cylindrical chamber made of iron or steel and used to burn material such as oil shale under pressure and in a rarefied atmosphere]. This retort was placed there in 1988 by Mr. Fred Kirkwood, the well-known Mt. Kembla historian. It is the last of twenty which were used to distil the oil at the kerosene shale mine during 1865-78.

We have no old-timers now whose reminiscences go back to this historic mine, and to my knowledge there are no photographs we can refer to [ed: two or three engravings of the site were published in Sydney newspapers during its lifetime].

The late Mr. Alex Fleming, in his publication *The Pioneer Kerosene Works at American Creek, Mt. Kembla, NSW* (IHS 1966) made a brief reference to the companies operating this kerosene mine, and on page 6 stated the "... the

Illustrated Sydney News of January 18th 1873 has a dramatic description of the refining process." Part of this description was as follows:

"... The furnaces are four in number, kept continually ablaze, and each heating a nest of five retorts, built into the wall in pyramidal form. The workmen are divided into two gangs, one for day and one for night, the hours being from six to six; and it is the business of each gang to see that the whole twenty retorts are filled and drawn twice during their twelve hours. . . .

The sight of drawing the retorts is one not easily forgotten, the fierce roar of the flames making us shudder as they dart their fiery tongues at the men raking out the refuse with tools resembling iron garden-hoes six times magnified.

The blazing matter falls into an iron wagon running on a tramway, directly under the openings of the retorts; and so intense is the heat that it is one man's business to dash buckets of water on the burning mass."

I have been told that after the closure of the mine [in 1878] and the disposal of the sheds and machinery the twenty retorts were placed outside the miners cottages at Kembbla Heights and used as water tanks. When the town water supply was connected to the homes the retorts were discarded and rolled down their backyards or into the bush, where they lay for many years.

When the Steelworks became the owners of the Kembbla mining property the retorts were gathered up, taken to the Steelworks, and I am told melted down. Only one escaped this fate, and for many years lay hidden in the bush behind one of the miner's cottages. Fred Kirkwood knew of its hiding place, and during our Bicentennial year of 1988 he approached the management of the Steelworks and gained permission to retrieve the retort, aided by a donation from the Coal Board.

With the help of my son with his truck and crane it was lifted for its last journey and placed on a cement slab laid down by Fred and his sons. It now stands beside Cordeaux Road a short distance from where it started work, and appears to be in good condition considering its fiery beginning. If it could only speak, what stories it would tell! It is no oil painting, but it now stands as a permanent monument to the memory of those men who worked in that early kerosene shale mine - the first in Australia.

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