

NEWSLETTER

of

MUSWELLBROOK SHIRE LOCAL & FAMILY HISTORY SOCIETY INC (Founded 11th June 1958)

Affiliated with Royal Australian Historical Society

ABN 34611778680

PO Box 450 Muswellbrook NSW 2333

Editor Lionel Ahearn

No. 4 August 2019

PRESIDENT'S REPORT 2018/2019

Another successful year has passed and it is time to look forward to electing another group of executives for the coming twelve months. The past year has been a busy one with a great deal being accomplished. This only happened with the continued support of the dedicated group of active members who are present at all events. Sadly, like nearly all clubs, we have failed to attract any young members to carry on the work into the distant future.

Nearly all Saturday morning have been busy with research being carried out for visitors, both local and from as far away as Western Australia. Our financial position remains strong and our income has again managed to cover all costs plus provide a small surplus. Thanks goes to our Treasurer Mal Rothe for his work. The sale of books continues with the need to print a few more copies each week. The launch of 'Standing the Test of Time' proved a success with over a hundred books sold. At this launch the Society also awarded Life Membership to two of our long term and dedicated members, Helen Ellis and Bruce James.

The Society was also involved in the launch of a book entitled, 'Upper Hunter Shows ...snippets from the first 140 years', compiled by Ted George. This book was launched at the Muswellbrook Show and to date about 150 books have been sold.

Once again thank you to all those rostered on each Saturday morning for keeping the doors open and adding to our database records. A special thank you to Heather Meissner, our Secretary, and Garry Meissner, our Chief Research Officer, for their continued dedicated attention to detail which continues daily, mostly unseen, but without which the Society would find it hard to continue. Thanks also to the Committee Members who work quietly and consistently to see that all duties are fulfilled without fuss.

During the last few months we have begun to update our technology. Over the following year this will continue. This will include the replacing of some computers with more up to date machines which will be faster and able to handle the later programs. Other equipment that gives us trouble will also be looked at to see if it can be updated or replaced.

Also, thank you to Eve Ellis, Helen Ellis, Margaret Dolahenty and their helpers who continue to index the information and documents that constantly arrive. These records are invaluable, especially when people come to do research. Hopefully somehow in the future we are able to save these records in a digital format that can be kept off site in case of an unforeseen disaster. The records are invaluable and could never be replaced.

Copies of valuable research records, compiled by Rob Tickle, have also been donated to the Society. As these records are his personal copy right material, our Society is extremely fortunate to have received and they will be used for strictly research purposes.

DETAILS ABOUT THE SOCIETY

Objectives:

- To collect, preserve and promote the social, cultural and physical history of Muswellbrook Shire, its environs and its people for future generations.
- to promote public access to our collections and research facilities, and
- to provide information, advice and assistance to individuals, community groups, organizations and businesses.

Meetings

The Society meets on the third Tuesday of each month starting at 7.00 in the Society Room at the rear of the Muswellbrook Library. All members and visitors are welcome to attend the meeting and stay for a cuppa, biscuit & a chat after.

Premises

The Society maintains its records in a section of Muswellbrook Library. You will find us at the rear of the Library. The Research Centre is open every Saturday from 9.30am to 1.00pm. The Research Centre may be opened at other times by appointment. Bus & tour groups are most welcome.

Annual Fees

Single \$25 Double \$35 Pensioner Single \$15 Pensioner Double \$25

The Hon Secretary may be contacted via the post office box or email mei2@bigpond.com The Society also has a web presence thanks to Darrin Khan and Lionel Ahearn at <http://www.mbkhistorical.org> and a research site at <http://research.mbkhistorical.org>

Throughout the year Society members have taken the opportunity to take part in outings which proved very successful. In September Glen Fellows opened his shed for a Society visit which was followed by a BBQ lunch. November saw us visit and view Geoff Wolfgang's collection of heritage equipment still kept at his property. While many items are now being housed at the Denman Heritage Site there was still a huge treasure trove to examine and see working. In June this year we had the privilege to visit and view Bengalla Homestead and share an excellent morning tea provided as usual by the members. Further outings are already being organised for the coming months and I'm sure they will be equally successful and informative.

Our Christmas Party was also a great success. It took place at the Segenhoe Inn in Aberdeen and I believe everyone enjoyed themselves. It was a pleasure to see our patrons, State Member for Upper Hunter, Mr Michael Johnsen, and Mayor of Muswellbrook, Mr Martin Rush join us for this occasion.

A group from the Society has been working with Margaret Ashford to publish a book based on the writings of Mac Bridge. A full box of writing pads contained his memories of early life in the Upper Hunter. It is hoped to have this ready for launch in September. I must also thank those who contributed articles to include in the Newsletters over the year. I also have been given some for future issues but please keep them coming. Contributors so far have included Bill Spicer, Ian Ellis, Helen Ellis and Rob Tickle. My thanks to you as it has made my job much easier in filling the pages each second month.

Another project that has continued over a period of many years has been the organisation and preservation of newspapers. While the Society has the Muswellbrook Chronicle on microfiche reels it was found that the photos do not print satisfactorily. Aided by a donation of books containing earlier editions from the Chronicle Office, we now have boxed and preserved a large quantity of the early Chronicles. Over ninety five per cent of The Hunter Valley News has also been scanned and is available for research.

The Society continues to accept and display museum items and we are thankful for the work and interest shown by Glenda Murray and Terry Gill. This ensures that these items and the collection are not forgotten.

Once again this year Garry Meissner, Bill Spicer and I were able to assist South Muswellbrook School in providing a guided walk to sites in Bridge Street and Market Street. Around one hundred children took part and some interesting questions were asked, not always what was expected.

In the past twelve months the Society has welcomed seven new members; Scott Pagan and Maxine James, Yarralumla, ACT, Kerry Davies, Muswellbrook, Ian and Val Ellis, Muswellbrook, Jim McDougal, Lambton and Mr Roger G Mauldon of Garran, ACT

Thank you to everyone for your assistance. It has been greatly appreciated.

Lionel Ahearn President 2018/19.

New Executive Officers for 2019/20

President	Lionel Ahearn	Vice President	Helen Ellis
Secretary	Heather Meissner	Treasurer	Mal Rothe
Public Officer	Mal Rothe	Publicity Officer	Helen Ellis
Research Committee Coordinator		Garry Meissner	
Assistant Researchers	Eve Ellis	Margaret Dolahenty	Ted George Lynda Newman
Pre 1900 Research Officer	Rob Tickle	Publication Editor	Rob Tickle
Heritage Officer Coordinator	Garry Meissner with Rob Tickle as consultant		
Newsletter Editor	Lionel Ahearn		
Committee Members	Garry Meissner, Eve Ellis, Glenda Murray, Ted George, Margaret Dolahenty, Rosemary Logue		

Fees for 2019/20

As per procedure membership fees were set at the June Meeting and remain the same for 2019/20. For those who have not already please see Mal Rothe as they are now overdue.

See Details about the Society for fee details.

Congratulations and Many Happy Returns

Two of our members celebrated important birthdays recently

Congratulations to Margaret Dolahenty on her 80th and to Ian Ellis on his 90th. We wish you good health and many more.

THE BAERAMI VALLEY SHALEFIELDS.



Looking up the Baerami Valley towards the shalefields

The Baerami Valley Shalefields are located towards the head of the Baerami Creek road and are in Reuben's Arm, named after the then adjacent landholder, Reuben Rose of Kelvingrove. Reuben was to have a long connection with all those seeking to exploit the shalefields.

The shalefields, situated within the Sydney Basin Permian coal measures and located under the Tertiary sandstones overlying them, originated some 250 million years ago from an accumulation of restricted types of fine plant matter such as spores, pollen grains and algae deposited in low-lying still freshwater lakes and swamps. This matter was deeply buried and compressed over subsequent eons of time while at the same time undergoing complex chemical changes. Most of the shale in these fields gives an average of about 100 gallons of oil to the ton of shale and the seams generally range from 2 ft. to 3 ft. in thickness. The estimated reserves of oil-shale in the accessible part of the local field is 20 million tons within a 5 sq. mile area.

The first piece of shale found in the valley was discovered lying on the nearby flats on the Rose property in 1904 but it was not until 1908 that its mountainside origins was discovered by Reuben's son Fred.

Activity in the exploitation of the Baerami Valley shalefields was to extend over the next 40 years and was to evolve into four distinct phases involving four distinct groups of entrepreneurs. In the first instance starting from 1910 local mining leases started to be taken up and in 1915 several 20 year leases were taken up by Daniel Grove, a Sydney entrepreneur, and his associates. Reuben Rose, was then appointed their local agent and their mine manager and a lengthy correspondence between the two then ensued. Robert George Nichols, of some geological capacity, was sent up and with local, Bob Rose, was employed looking for shale outcrops and digging exploratory tunnels. By 1917 two tunnels had been dug, both up to fifty metres long. In the previous year 1916, Grove advertised for an Oil Education Plant but none was forthcoming.

It was in 1916 that Sir Albert Gould, formerly a Singleton solicitor, but now a senator in the Commonwealth parliament, a director of the City Bank of Sydney and a shareholder in the 'The Great Cobar Copper Mining Syndicate' became an active participant in the Baerami 'Kelvingrove' venture and maintained this interest until 1925.

The Government geologist, came, inspected the area in 1918 and in his report he said that two short tunnels had been dug up to 160 feet long as well as a few small openings. A rough estimate of the oil content was 100 gallons to the ton.

In 1922 a separate small Muswellbrook company dug three tunnels on the northern side of the field. In two of their tunnels they found no shale at all and in the other there was only an 8" seam. This tunnel was called Jaeger's tunnel and was utilised until 1927. Jaeger erected a small retort on the site in 1925 and it was 3 am in the morning when the first oil ever produced in the valley flowed from the retort for a short time. Some of the local Muswellbrook District people working with this venture were Charlie Hutchinson and Percy Killen (who were working on the retort the day it produced oil) as well as Stan Blind, Prowse and Barber. This enterprise had folded by 1927.

By late 1926 the syndicates associated with Daniel Groves had ceased operating and all leases had been surrendered after an involvement of circa sixteen years. During those years six mining leases had been taken up and three short tunnels had been dug, one being 30 metres long, and the testing of shale samples undertaken. Taken overall the achievements of all the participants in the development of the shalefields had been limited.

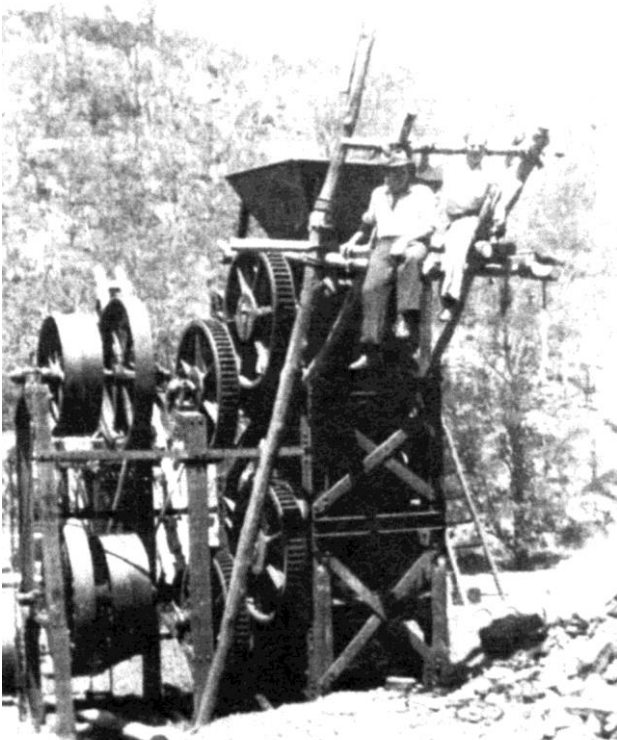
It was not until two years later that new attempts were made by others to further exploit the shalefields. All these new participants in the attempted exploitation of the Baerami Valley shalefields over the next 13 years were to be Adelaide based. Their time in the valley largely coincided with the time of the greatest depression Australia and the world ever suffered and their operations were influenced by it and the measures the Australian and state governments instituted to alleviate the conditions then prevailing.

The first Adelaide based miner on the scene was the Widdin-Baerami Shale Oil and Coal Co. which was formed at the end of 1928. One of its main backers was Sir J.C. Young who was the owner of The Big Orange Mills in Adelaide. He had started to take an interest in the shale deposits in 1928 and was one of a number of South Australian entrepreneurs to do so.

Local leases were taken up on behalf of this Company in July 1930 by their local manager and resident, Reuben Rose, and work immediately began. In September 1930 Reuben's son, Fred, noted that in the number one tunnel a seam near the entrance was yielding 63 gallons per ton and when at 50 ft. yielded 100 gallons to the ton and at 130 ft. in yielded 160 gallons to the ton. In no. 2 tunnel a yield of 130 gallons to the ton was obtained.

A big prospecting and shale-mining effort from June 1931 to February 1932 was undertaken as a result of a £100,000 government scheme to help unemployed miners. The local venture received £5000. About a dozen tunnels were dug up to 200 ft. long and 1500 tons of shale extracted. The individual tunnels were named after the boss of each tunnel. Thirty unemployed miners from the mid-Hunter were employed for 8 months and there were 30 tents nearby down near the entrance to Reubens Gully. In 1932 there were 37 men on the books of the Baerami Miners' Lodge, a branch of the Workers' Industrial Union. The miners each had their own cricket, tennis and football teams. Operations at the mines closed down in February 1932 and most of the miners had left by July. No further mining activity was to take place for the next 5 years until mid 1937.

The next mining venture that took place was by the Baerami Oil Shale Syndicate which was formed by mid 1937 and had as its initial directors George French and Herbert Walsh. They secured leases of 4390 acres being leases nos. 6, 7, 8, 13, 14, 16, 21 and 22. On 27 November 1937 this company was sold to The Baerami Shalefields of Australia for £1250 in cash and £25,000 in fully paid shares of £1 each. Its directors were French, Walsh and Nottle. They were paid £150 per year plus expenses. This company then split into two companies—Colonial Petroleum Oil Ltd. and Baerami Shale Oil and Petroleum Ltd. Colonial was the operating arm of the venture and was registered on 12 September 1938 by French and Nottle and had a nominal capital value of £87,000. It was known locally as Colonial. A handicap to this company was that its leases, all on the northern side of the shalefields, had thinner seams which also yielded less oil per ton. This company was the one whose directors put the most effort and resources into attempting to develop the shalefields as a going concern. Both French and Platt and their four sons lived there on the spot. They were employing about 15 men, a third being locals. A number of associated buildings and structures were erected.



Hilton Fitzgerald and Trevor Folpp on part of the retort

A Miller retort was then installed and was in operation towards the end of 1940 when a successful public open day was held attended by Spooner, a cabinet minister, and Darcy Rose, the then local parliamentarian, as well as many locals including the author. Operations continued until about 1942 probably due to a lack of finance. A caretaker was then appointed for a time. But that was the end of the venture.

The other mining Co. from Adelaide was the Standard Oil Co. of Australia Ltd. (originally formed in 1919) now had £2,500,000 capital behind it and expectations of producing 30,000,000 gallons of petrol per year.

This company was reputed to have had a long history and to have never made a profit. (The Bulletin 30 October 1940). The company had purchased six mining leases totalling 3840 acres from a previous company on 31 August 1937 for £25,000. Standard Oil was the largest of all the mining companies that had operated in the valley and it had a nominal capital of £1,000,000 but was still a rather small speculative company albeit with an impressive name. Three members of the Moate family were the driving force behind this company. This company formulated rather grandiose plans for their venture including plans for a township. They had an option to purchase 110 acres of freehold for this venture nearby. This area was divided into building lots and was surveyed for power lines, water supply and sewage. In July 1938 the company announced that three extra tunnels were to be dug and others extended. Wages were £1 per day. In September 24 men were being employed a significant number of these were local men. In 1939 a report showed that the Company had expended £37,000 since the start of operations. This figure had expanded to £80,000 by 1942 the year it ceased operations at Baerami.

In that year, 1942, the Commonwealth government received a requested report from the American Mission it had appointed to look into the possibility of the development of the oil-shale development in Australia. This report favoured the development of the Baerami shale deposits. The report foresaw 2300 tons of shale being mined each day for the production of 37,300 gallons of oil annually involving the employment of 850 men. There would be a local town near the mine with water supplied to it at a cost of £100,000. The oil would be pumped through a pipeline to a refinery near Muswellbrook.

The Australian government rejected the section of the report that applied to the local Baerami shalefields and no government support for it ensued, rather the government preferred to back the further trial of the Newnes shale oil operations over the other side of the Dividing Range and deferred any action on the Baerami shalefields

This adverse action resulted in the cessation of the Standard Oil Company's operations in the valley

On 7 April 1942 the Standard Oil Co. made its leases available to the newly-formed Sydney based company, Shale and Oil products Co-op Ltd., its members being Balmain Electric Light and Power Co., Peters, Grace Brothers, and Tooths. Owing to the fact it was then wartime and that petrol was rationed these companies needed transport-fuel and they thought they would supplement their supplies by distilling their own.

The Company's plan was to erect retorts and a refinery at Sandy Hollow and cart 100 tons of shale per week down from the mines. It had started production about the middle of 1942 and production continued until August 1945, a period of just over three years of continuous production during which time 300,000 gallons of petrol would have been distilled and sent to Sydney.



The Bayliss Tunnel

The 100 ton per week of shale used was mined from the readily accessible hillside Bayliss tunnel and speared down a chute into two 5 ton trucks (A Ford and an International) owned and driven by two locals, the owners and contractors, Allan and Billy Train, (each truck doing two trips per day). They were driven by them 26 miles down an indifferent gravel road to the 25 Gotting retorts at Sandy Hollow which operated 7 days per week and 24 hours per day on a three shifts per day basis. The coal used to heat the retorts was delivered from Muswellbrook by train to the local railway station and then carted to the retorts.

The 20 local men employed to operate the retorts and the refinery were paid £3 per week.

It cost almost f4 per ton to produce and cart the shale to the retorts. The finished product in the shape of fifty 44 gallon drums per week had to be taken by lorry to the nearby railway station and shipped to Sydney where the shareholders in the company were able to buy the product for 8/- per gallon.

Production ceased in August 1945 coinciding with the end of the war and owing to the fact that the petrol produced was a lot more expensive than that at the bowsers.

No shale has been mined at the Baerami Valley Shalefields since 1945 and the area is now part of the Wollemi National Park. The 22 tunnels remain as do many remnants of the structures erected there. The sum cost of these endeavours had run into many thousands of pounds. The 30 odd years of intermittent action at these shalefields has now faded into a distant memory.

Our thanks to Ian Ellis for this contribution.

Sydney Street

Further Information on Early Owners and Occupiers

This part of Muswellbrook originally formed part of Sir Francis Forbes' Skellator station. Following the death of Sir Francis and the advent of the 1840s depression, his family were in some financial difficulty. The decision was made to subdivide the area around where Muscle Creek joined the Hunter River and raise much needed finances. Possibly this was not the best time to speculate in land with a depression forming, but three sections were laid out and a number of blocks sold.

This short article will look at the east side of Sydney Street between Muscle Creek and Maitland Street. The first to purchase a block was John Ferguson on 20 December 1842 when he paid £30 for Allotment 2 Section 1. Next were Peter Daw and Pierce Hegarty, both on the 15 June 1843. Daw purchased Allotment 1 Section 1 next to Muscle Creek for £50 and Hegarty purchased Allotment 5 Section 1 on the corner of Sydney and Maitland Streets for £30. In 2017, this is the Prince of Wales Hotel site. The next purchaser was Betsy Hunt who purchased Allotment 4 Section 1 for £30, her block was to the north of Pierce Hegarty. Last purchaser was Peter MacNamara who also paid £30 for his Allotment 3 Section 1. So, originally there were only five blocks between Maitland Street and Muscle Creek. Over time, the five blocks would be subdivided into smaller parcels and it becomes difficult to determine the owner of each portion of land.

Peter Daw died 2 October 1861 and by his will left his estate to his wife, Ann. She married Dominic O'Donnell on 2 June 1865. In 1870, the first year of the Municipality of Muswellbrook, the rate book indicates that Mrs O'Donnell had four buildings on her land on which she was to pay rates. There was a house in which she lived, a cottage/shop rented to Daniel Hall, another shop rented to Clark & Sheath and a cottage rented to Mrs Leonard. On 10 June 1874, she sold part of the Portion 1 to Abraham Clark, butcher of Muswellbrook for £100. In 1875, the rate books indicate that Abraham Clark had the block next to Muscle Creek (now part of the road), next was D Hall with house and bakery renting from Ann O'Donnell and next Mrs O'Donnell's house. Mrs O'Donnell owned property in this area up until 1893.

Next door was the property of John Ferguson. This is the property where Malcolm Campbell started in Muswellbrook; the freehold of the property was to remain with the Ferguson family until 1912. After Malcolm Campbell moved to Bridge Street John Crocket leased the property until 1875. John was Malcolm's brother in law, it is unknown if he ran a store here on behalf of his brother in law or traded on his own account. Interestingly, Malcolm Campbell owned two houses on the south side of Ferguson's building which he retained until 1886. During that period they were rented by Charles Priest, tinsmith. He purchased them from Malcolm Campbell and they remained in the Priest family until at least 1907.

Back to Ferguson's store, over the next 30 years a number of people rented the building, William Hotspur Percy (he moved to Singleton and started Percy's Hotel), Walsh & Spratt, Finlay Kenny, J Minch, A Skinner, James Clark, JM Harper, WH Smith, William Abraham, AJ Clark and JT Clark.

Betsey Hunt, now married to John Bowen, labourer of Muswellbrook, sold her Allotment on 23 November 1860 to Richard Hurst, yeoman of Muswellbrook for £25. He erected two buildings on the land and held it until 1876 when it was sold to Ann Gosper; she held the land until at least 1907.

On 30 August 1847, Pierce Hegarty sold his store to John Richards, draper of Sydney for £400. This site was to become the Cross Keys Inn and was held by many members of James Cross's family.

This is a quick look at a small part of South Muswellbrook, there are many gaps, but with more research, more will be revealed. Two sources have been used for this article, information from Land Title Records – Old System and Muswellbrook Municipal Rate Books. Rob Tickle

Our thanks to Rob Tickle for this contribution

Please keep the contributions coming. They are greatly appreciated