

Why we do what we do



The aftermath of the explosion.

While the explosion may have been felt as far as away as Wollongong, down in No 6 shaft the mines deputy day manager, David Evans, was unaware of the explosion. When told by wheelers' overman Mat Frost that something was wrong in No 1 shaft, both men sped to the scene. Upon discovering smoke coming out of No 1, they made their way towards the air shaft, where they opened separation doors to send the smoke to the upcast shaft, preventing it from circulating around the mine.

Separated escapeways

The two men then made their way further into the mine, gathering together some 90 men along the way. Evans and Frost claimed to know of some old shafts no longer in use that could possibly lead them back to the surface. But after some discussion, only 70 men agreed to follow them.

Signage

Evans and Frost led the men even deeper into the mine. For what must have seemed an eternity to the trapped and no doubt terrified miners, they struggled through old, and to them unknown, shafts. They often had to resort to crawling as they encountered even older long-wall workings. Yet after almost three torturous hours, they emerged safely from the mine.

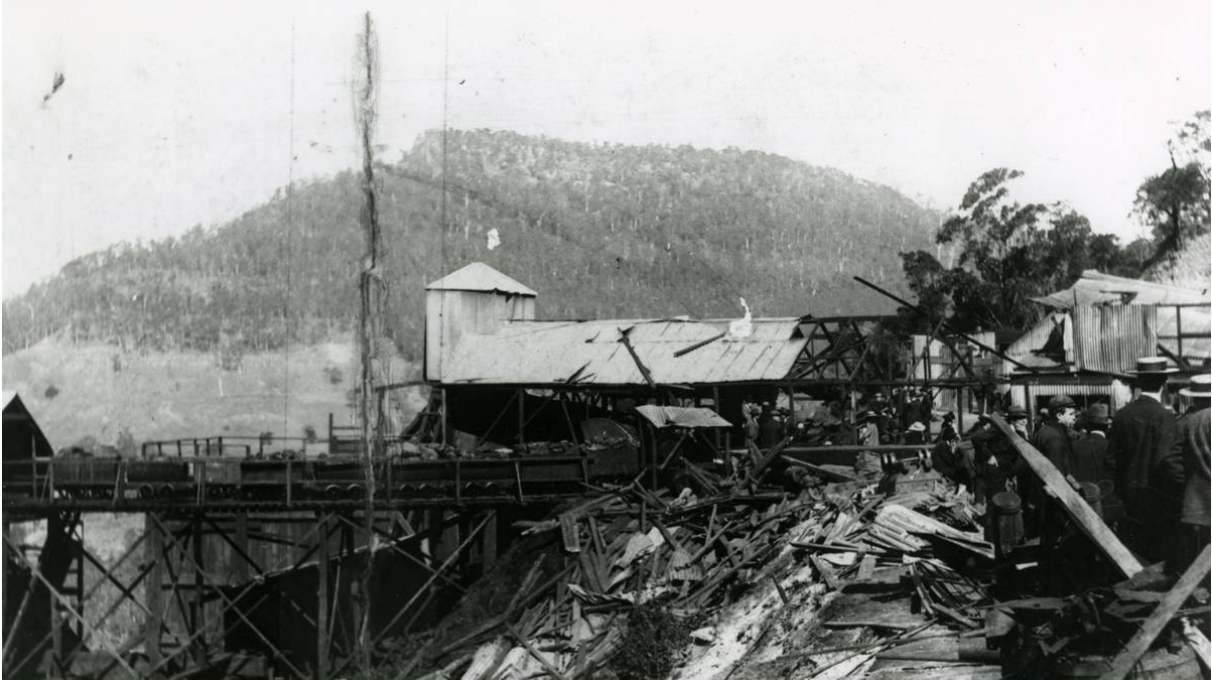
The 20 men who decided not to follow Evans and Frost, and instead make their own way to the surface, unfortunately perished in the mine, overcome by carbon monoxide fumes. **Self rescuers**

Meanwhile on the surface, former Keira Mine manager, and ex-mayor of Wollongong, Major Henry MacCabe was charged with co-ordinating the rescue effort. He also had to contend with the hundreds of volunteer rescuers who had converged on the mine. Fifteen years previously, MacCabe had played a vital part in the rescue efforts at the Bulli Mine disaster, and would do so again this day.

Sadly, though, he was one of only two men not at the mine at the time of the explosion to lose his life because of it. The other was nightshift deputy William McMurray, both men dying after being overpowered by toxic fumes.

After leading the 70 miners out of the shaft, David Evans immediately joined another rescue party and re-entered the mine, not coming out until past 2am the following morning. He went down again the next day to help recover the bodies of those who did not make it out. Frost also went back down the mine with another rescue party, and also joined Evans in the recovery effort the following day.

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The ruins of the engine shed at Mt Kembla Mine, close to the mouth of the main tunnel.

Pictures: From the collections of the Wollongong City Library and the Illawarra Historical Society

Mat Frost later told the inquiry into the disaster that Evans' "actions and cool-headedness resulted in the survival of many men that day, and if not for him the death toll would have been far worse."

In all, 95 men and boys died that day, including MacCabe and McMurray. Another man - Patrick Purcell - was in the engine house when it was completely destroyed by the explosion. Like Brownlee and Wilson in the weigh cabin, he escaped, although with severe burns. However, unlike the other two, he died after a painful two years in hospital. His death brought the total of lives lost in the explosion to 96.

George Adams, who bade farewell to his wife Jane earlier that morning, was one of the 70 men led out of the shaft by Evans and Frost, so was able to return home that night. However, the scars and memories of that horrific day stayed with him until his death.

Astonishingly - given the resources of the time - the only body not recovered from the mine that day was that of a young wheeler named Mickey Brennan. It is said that his father had a coffin made for his son, and that he searched the mine for two painstaking years trying to find Mickey's body. Heartbroken at being unable to recover his beloved son's remains, he walked into the ocean, taking his own life.

Folklore has it that up until the closure of the Mount Kembla Colliery, Brennan's ghost wandered throughout the mine shafts making strange noises. Then in 1970 when the mine finally closed, he is said to have moved into the cellar of the nearby Mt Kembla Hotel.

In the days following the disaster, speculation arose that the explosion was caused by dangerous gas levels in the mine. This was quickly refuted by then MP for Wickham and Minister for Mines, John Fegan, and fellow MP for Shoalhaven, Mark Morton.

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The funeral procession of 11 coal miners killed in the Mt Kembla Colliery disaster.

A Sydney Mail photograph, August 9, 1902:

The photograph shows the funeral cortege turning south from Crown Street into Kembla Street.

The mine manager, William Rogers, also stated categorically at the time that the mine was "absolutely without danger from gases".

Then on August 7, he and a group of mine managers examined the mine, confirming his earlier statement, and concluding that the explosion was not gas-initiated, but instead the result of a "wind blast".

They claimed this wind blast was created by a goaf fall, which subsequently raised a coal dust cloud that was ignited by the naked lights of the miners.

The claims of the mine managers that the explosion was not caused by a build-up of gas were dismissed at the inquiry following the disaster. Indeed, evidence emerged that not only had gas existed in potentially dangerous quantities, mine officials had been aware of the fact.

As there were so many deaths the inquiry, headed by Coroner Charles Russell, centred upon only two of the deceased - William Meurant and William Nelson. The inquiry heard testimony from 28 witnesses, over 22 days, and at its completion found that "William Meurant and William Nelson died at Mount Kembla Colliery from carbon monoxide poisoning produced by an explosion of fire damp ignited by naked lights in use in the mine and accelerated by a series of coal dust explosions starting at a point in or about number one level back heading and extending in a westerly direction to the small Goaf marked 11 perches on the mine plan."

Following this verdict, another inquiry was held into the competency of mine manager William Rogers. In September 1903, Justice Hayden announced: "After careful consideration, Rogers' certificate would be suspended for a period of 12 months."

The Mt Kembla Colliery was soon reopened, and in October of 1904 William Rogers was reinstated as manager of the mine.

The inquiry had also found the ventilation system of the mine was antiquated and inadequate. However, even after the loss of so many lives, it wasn't until 1925 that mine management replaced

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the old ventilation system with a modern mechanical fan and, astonishingly, it was not until the 1940s that the use of naked lights in the mine was abandoned.

The Mount Kembla Colliery continued to produce coal until it was finally shut down in 1970. During its lifetime, the mine produced over 14 million tonnes of coal.