

Coal Mining Then & Now



The Rothwell Haig Coke Ovens at Tivoli c1900

Woodend, North Ipswich & Tivoli

The first recorded coal mines in the central Ipswich area started at Woodend in 1848. These were simple enterprises, little more than openings on the riverbank and the coal was carried out by wheelbarrow. Several unlicensed mine openings had also been scratched out at this time at the “coalfalls” in the river (in the vicinity of Woodend/Coalfalls) and at Tivoli.

The industry grew and by the end of the 19th century (1890’s), several major coal seams were being worked at major mines including Waterstown, Eclipse, Bremer, New Tivoli and Perseverance, and a number of smaller mines including Tantivy, Nil Desperandum and Rothwell-Haig. Very little now remains as evidence of the once-thriving industry in this area.

Tivoli Branch Railway Line:

The long, narrow parking area opposite the gates of The Workshops Rail Museum indicates the route of the former Tivoli Branch Railway Line. The line was built in 1898 from the Railway Workshops to several mines in the Tivoli area. In 1913 the Metropolitan Water Supply and Sewerage Board built a tramway from the railway yard at Tivoli to take coal to the Mt Crosby water works.

Former Abermain Power Station, off Mt Crosby Road, Tivoli:

The site contains a large white concrete structure visible from the road and highway, built in 1952-3. Termed a “packaged” power station, it stood adjacent to the Haighmoor-Tivoli Colliery and was the first Southern Electric Authority power station to be located on a coalfield. It ceased operation in 1967 and the chimneys no longer exist.

Coke Ovens:

The coal from the North Ipswich/Tivoli area proved to be suitable for making coke. Batteries of coke ovens were built at several mines including Haighmoor, Rothwell-Haig, Mihi/Klondyke, Old Tivoli, Wright’s and Waterstown/Abermain. These were not highly-mechanised or technically advanced. They were filled by a workman using a shovel; the oven door was bricked up; the oven was fired; and gaseous products were driven off. After 72 hours, the charge of coke was quenched with water and, when cool enough, was unloaded by shovel.

At the industry’s height, there were about 300 ovens on the North Ipswich coalfields. Now, remains exist at only two mine sites – Haighmoor at Tivoli and Klondyke at North Ipswich.

Bremer River And Coal Barges:

A riverside position was a considerable advantage for a mine, particularly prior to construction of the Ipswich-Brisbane railway. Riverboats could call in to obtain their fuel directly from the mine, and excess coal could be transported by punt to boiling down works, to ships in Brisbane or other customers.

Mines were opened at North Ipswich and Tivoli, often with tramways leading to the river. Coal was loaded into wagons underground, brought to the surface, hauled along the tramway and tipped directly into barges for transport to Brisbane. This practice continued until modern times, with several large coal-loading facilities being built at Tivoli. Barges owned by the Riverside Coal Transport Company carried coal to powerhouses in Brisbane and later to export facilities at the Port of Brisbane. Barging ended in April 1998. Disused or derelict coal-loading facilities can still be seen along the river.



*A coal barge and tug on the Bremer River
(photo courtesy of New Hope Corporation)*



Disused coal loading facility at Tivoli

Rosewood, Walloon & Thagoona

Mining began at Walloon in the 1870s but the output proved to be of poor quality until deeper tunnels were dug in the 1880s. A former mariner Captain John Rea opened the Caledonian mine at Thagoona in 1889. Mining began near Rosewood in 1904 and has continued until the present day.

Road between Rosewood and Grandchester:

Between Ipswich and Grandchester, signs of former mining activity are visible such as heaps of overburden and the remains of loading platforms. Sidings once ran from the railway stations to collieries to assist with loading coal.

Jeebropilly:

The mine closed in February 2007, but the coal washing plant has continued to operate to process coal from New Oakleigh mine at Rosewood.

New Oakleigh Colliery, Rosewood:

The open-cut mining operations of New Oakleigh are visible from the road between Rosewood and Tallegalla. The mine, owned by New Hope Corporation, is not expected to continue operations beyond 2009. It is the **last coal mine in Ipswich**.

Steam Railway at Cabanda:

The Rosewood to Marburg branch line opened in 1912 to service the town and the sugar mill at Woodlands. The mill closed in 1918 but the line remained open for coal traffic. It closed in 1965 although some short sections operated until 1995. The stopping places on the line were used to drop off coal skips to be filled at local mines and collected on the next railway run. The Railway Historical Society has taken over the Cabanda-Kunkala section of the line and operates steam railway trips on the last Sunday of each month. (More information www.arhs-qld.org.au)

Disasters and the Mines Rescue Brigade

The annual Queensland mining reports provide a grim record of accidents and deaths in local mines. Some occurred underground, caused by explosions or roof falls, while others involved accidents while hauling trucks and wagons.

A few of the worst events are listed below. Interwoven with the story of disasters is the story of the Mines Rescue Brigade and the heroic work of its members.

Pictured right: Fellow miners and rescue works pause for a moments silence in the shadow of the Box Flat disaster. (photo courtesy of the Courier Mail.



1893: First Eclipse Disaster. In the destructive floods of 1893, water entered the Eclipse Colliery at Tivoli and seven miners were drowned including Thomas and George Wright, sons of the owner. After the floods subsided, volunteers had to search the mine to recover the bodies as there was no trained rescue service.

1910: A Mines Rescue Brigade was established at the Ambulance headquarters at North Ipswich. A small Rescue Station was built five years later.

1918: Second Eclipse disaster, when miners accidentally broke through into a flooded tunnel and were drowned.

1919: Seven deaths in local area, including 2 at Redbank Mine and 3 at Cardiff.

1923: Crown land at Booval was acquired and a new Rescue Station was built. The cost of running the station was shared by the Mines Department, the State Government Insurance Office and Queensland Coal Owners Association.

1928: Redbank Disaster, three men killed. This was a major operation for the Mines Rescue Brigade and it proved the value of using breathing apparatus. The mine site was located in the vicinity of what is now Redbank Plaza.

1945: Four men killed in explosion at New Ebbw Vale No 3 mine at Woodend.

1946: Five miners killed in separate accidents in Ipswich region.

1949: A new Rescue Station (the current brick building) opened at Bundamba, near the Ipswich Racecourse.

1972: Box Flat Disaster, 17 men killed in a massive underground explosion. These included eight Rescue Brigade members. Another man died later as a result of his injuries.

1980: The last canary retired from the Mines Rescue Station. Caged birds were used to indicate lack of oxygen in mines (the birds did not die), but were replaced by gas detection apparatus.

1997: The last underground mine in the Ipswich region closed. There was no longer any need for a Mines Rescue Station and it also closed.

Box Flat Memorial, Swanbank: This memorial beside Swanbank Road honours the miners who lost their life as the result of an underground explosion in the early hours of the morning on 31 July 1972.

Former Mines Rescue Station, Brisbane Road Booval:

The current building was constructed in 1949. It is now integrated with the modern buildings of Ross Llewellyn Motors.

Denmark Hill

Denmark Hill Conservation Park:

People walking around the tracks on Denmark Hill can still see a few traces of former mining.

The City Colliery was opened by a group of investors in 1912, in spite of initial opposition from the Council which did not want a mine so close to the city centre. A railway siding was built from the West Ipswich station to transport the coal and a tunnel was driven in below Moffat Street, reaching the Aberdare Seam. By 1919, the mine was employing 50 men. In that year, it was sold to Henry Noble, owner of the largest group of coal mines in Queensland, and renamed Noblevale No 6. Noble installed electricity, better ventilation and made other improvements. However the mine had problems including fires and an unsafe roof. Other tunnels were opened in later years but were never very successful.

The last mining ended in 1952.

Today, the Park Circuit follows part of the former tramway along which coal skips were hauled. Coal can be seen beside the track, and there are a few concrete and metal remains near the western end of Quarry Street.



The City Colliery (Photo courtesy of Qld Mining Journal 1914)

Goodna, Redbank & Collingwood Park

The first recorded coal mine in Queensland was started by John Williams in 1843 to supply the Hunter River Steam Navigation Company with coal for its paddle steamers. The site was on the riverbank at Redbank, near the junction of Six Mile Creek. A mine opened at Goodna in 1865. Evidence of the former mining industry can still be seen in the area.

Westfalen Parklands Nursery, 27 Bailey Street, Collingwood Park:

Formerly Westfalen Colliery No.3, in 1965 leases were taken out by the Kathage Brothers and mining commenced a few years later. Mining was in the Main Seam, believed to be a combination of the Bluff and Four Feet Seams. It continued to operate until 1987 when it was closed and much of the equipment dismantled and removed.

Goupong Park Strike Monument, Collingwood Park:

The first strike in Queensland took place at the Redbank Mine owned by Campbell and Towns. On 7 June 1861, a deputation of miners confronted Robert Campbell with demands including a pay rise of one shilling a ton. Campbell rejected the claims, the miners went on strike and were later arrested and tried for illegally conspiring to injure Campbell's interests. The jury found them not guilty.

Dinmore, Swanbank & New Chum

Along the motorway, artificial hills of overburden are a sign of previous mining. The area was originally dotted with underground mines, but open cut operations took over in the 1980s. There is now no mining in this area.

Timekeeper's Cottage, Southern Ipswich Bypass near the Swanbank turnoff:

This small brick building was used by the timekeeper who kept records as the men went down the mine and returned to the surface.

Swanbank Power Station:

The first stage, Swanbank A, began operating in 1966. Other units have been progressively commissioned since that time. The station has been a major user of Queensland coal, but part of the power produced now is from natural gas and from methane produced nearby from recycled waste. The original stage, Swanbank A, was demolished in 2006.

Pioneer Steam Railway, Swanbank:

This popular attraction is a reminder that until the 1960s when steam locomotives were phased out, Ipswich coal was vital for the operation of railways in Queensland.

(More information www.qpsr.net)

Blackstone

The first coal mine at Blackstone opened in the mid-1860s, owned initially by a partnership of solicitor John Malbon Thompson and experienced miner Lewis Thomas, but later by Thomas alone. Welsh miners, including some of his own family, began to arrive in Ipswich to work for him. The coal seam they mined became famous as the Aberdare Seam and it made Thomas wealthy.

He was elected to Parliament and became a patron of the local community.

Apart from Thomas's mines, there was a number of smaller mines in the area including Cardiff and Borehole.

Brynhyfryd Park, cnr Thomas and Mary Streets, Blackstone:

The name of the park recalls the mansion *Brynhyfryd* (Pleasant Hill) which once stood at the top of Blackstone Hill. Built by coal magnate Lewis Thomas in 1890, it was a magnificent three-storey building with a tower and a hydraulic lift, surrounded by terraced gardens. The property was bought by Rylance Collieries in 1936 and the house was demolished. The park was the location of the former double storey Blackstone School of Arts building which was a gift from Lewis Thomas.

United Welsh Church, Thomas Street:

This is the only Welsh Church in Queensland. When Welsh miners began to arrive in Ipswich in increasing numbers in the 1880s, they decided that their nationality took priority over minor sectarian differences and established a United Welsh Church.

The church building was constructed in 1886 on land donated by Lewis Thomas and became the centre for social life in the predominantly mining community. An eisteddfod was held on New Year's Day 1887 and eventually grew to become the Queensland Eisteddfod, still contested every Easter.



Local coal magnate Lewis Thomas



Coolgardie Mine with Brynhyfryd visible in the distance on Blackstone Hill

Historical Time Line

- 1827:** A convict settlement is established at “the Limestone Hills” (Ipswich) to quarry lime. Coal seams are discovered in the area and samples are sent to Brisbane. There is no record of mining being carried out, but it is likely that some coal was obtained for local needs.
- 1843:** John Williams opens first recorded coal mine beside the river at Redbank.
- 1848:** Mine opens at Woodend.
- 1854:** Mines open at Tivoli.
- 1857:** New mines open at Redbank.
- 1861:** First strike in Queensland by miners at the Redbank Mine.
- 1865:** Goodna Mine opens.
- 1904:** Ipswich officially becomes a city. In this year, 1002 men are employed in the local mining industry, producing 80% of the state's coal output.
- 1905:** First electric coal-cutters are used in Ipswich at Box Flat.
- 1910:** A Mines Rescue Brigade is established at North Ipswich at the Ambulance headquarters.
- 1950:** About 1900 people are employed in local mines, producing 58% of the state's coal output.
- 1953:** Abermain Power Station opens at Tivoli – first power station to be built on a coalfield.
- 1958:** Mechanisation of continuous miners commence replacing labour intensive hand worked operations.
- 1959:** The Australian Coal Industry Research Laboratory (ACIRL) opens in Ipswich.
- 1965:** Open cut mining commences.
- 1966:** First stage of Swanbank Power Station begins operating.
- 1970s:** Open cut mining starts to become important in the Ipswich region. By 1978, there are 12 open cut mines.
- 1980:** About 1040 people are employed in local mines, producing 7% of the state's coal output.
- 1983:** Rail link from Bundamba to Port of Brisbane completed to a major new export terminal.
- 1988:** Safety in Mines Testing and Research Station (SIMTARS) opens at Redbank.
- 1997:** New Hill Mine closes – last underground mine in the region.
- 1998:** End of transporting coal by barge on the Bremer and Brisbane Rivers.
- 2000:** Only 200-300 people are employed in the mining industry in the Ipswich region.
- 2007:** Jeebropilly mine closes, leaving only one coal mine operating in the Ipswich region – New Oakleigh at Rosewood.

Further Reading

- R.L. Whitmore, **Coal in Queensland** (3 volumes).
- Pete Thomas, **The Coalminers of Queensland**.
- Robyn Buchanan, **Ipswich in the 20th Century**.