

Mining Disaster Remembered 100 Years On

ON SEPTEMBER 1, 1923, 21 MEN LOST THEIR LIVES AT BELLBIRD COLLIERY IN THE WORST MINING DISASTER OF OUR DISTRICT. ONE HUNDRED YEARS LATER THEIR LIVES WERE HONOURED AND REMEMBERED.



Twenty-five thousand people attended the mass funeral held on September 3, 1923, (clocking from far and wide to pay final respects, businesses closed as the mining funeral proceeded through the streets, 310 men in the Bellbird Colliery, headed by their lodge officers, followed the coffin to accompany the men on their final journey.



The memorial at Bellbird to honour lives lost in one of the district's worst mining disasters.

Coal Services Mine Rescue and the Mining and Energy Union (MEU) together with the Coalfields Local Herold Association hosted the memorial to commemorate the centenary of the Bellbird Mining Disaster. Parliament and local government, miners' representatives joined the descendants of the miners to pay their respects and to ensure the lessons learnt from the tragedy are never forgotten.

MEU President Robin Williams spoke about the history of the disaster followed by Mines Rescue General Manager Alister Whyte re-creating how the disaster led to changes in legislation and the introduction of the mines rescue service. Mary Swanson MP, Clayton Barr MP and Cassnock Crp Council Mayor Jay Sarval all heartfeltly spoke on how the tragedy had shattered the tight knit

mining community but also united 100 years' silence was held to honour the 21 men who perished in the disaster. The men's names (or bellbirds as they are commonly known) were also spelt tribune on this historic occasion.

THE DISASTER As the day shift at Bellbird Colliery that night, 650 men departed the mine and the afternoon shift took over. Not far away in turn burnt at the time of the disaster, hundreds of miners' children were at the Saturday afternoon matinee watching the silent movie "The Little Church around the Corner". The film depicted a disaster in an American coal mine and hinted that they knew that another tragedy was unfolding so close to home.

The Deputy on shift for the small afternoon crew was Fred Moodle and as he read over the reports there was nothing to indicate anything was amiss. First entered the mine following the men who had already gone ahead and shortly after encountered thick swathes of black smoke from an underground fire that was consuming the workings of the 5 East mine and spreading to other areas. Racing back to the surface he raised the alarm.

As word got out, men began to gather, desperate to begin rescue efforts. Some men headed straight back in to help but were ultimately lost his life in the effort to save his mates.

Despite the unimaginable and extremely dangerous conditions there was no shortage of volunteers with dozens of men fishing their lines to bring out the missing miners.

At the same time there was only six sets of pneumatic winding apparatus in all of NSW and more at Bellbird Colliery, so the men had only the most rudimentary equipment, often nothing more than a wet handkerchief covering their mouths.

When it became clear that any more attempts to rescue the men still underground was futile, the agonising decision was made to seal the mine so the oxygen supply to the fire would be cut off. Fifteen bodies had been recovered by the rescue parties and six men were left behind as well as six pit ponies. Much more

than simply work horses, the ponies were trusted and beloved companions.

The Colliery was sealed and not reopened until May 5, 1924 when specially trained rescue teams using Peto equipment began the difficult and dangerous work of recovery. Frederick Moodle was found on June 2 and John Brown on June 17. It wasn't until December 18 that William Handley and Alexander Games were found, shortly followed by Fred Tope on December 27. Melvoin Bailey was not found until 41 years later in July 1965 when at last all the men could finally be pulled to rest.

THE AFTERMATH Twenty-five thousand people attended the mass funeral held on September 2, 1923, locking from far and wide to pay their respects. Businesses closed as the mining community mourned. As the funeral procession made its way through the streets, 510 miners from Bellbird Colliery, headed by their lodge officers, followed the coffin to accompany the men on their final journey.

Forty-one children lost their fathers on that fateful day. The families were entitled to money under the Workmen's Compensation Act 1916, however the maximum amount payable

was 500 pounds. To put that in perspective, the wife of Jack Graber who had five children to support the fifth being born only weeks after the disaster) was to receive an amount equalling 18 months of her husband's wages.

Thankfully, relief funds were established to help the families and donations came from all sources including government, union, businesses, churches and individuals. The entire community rallied together providing both material and moral support. The tragedy resulted in enormous support and public awareness of the importance of mine safety.

The inquest after the disaster found the 21 men had all succumbed to carbon monoxide poisoning. While the inquest was unable to explain the cause of the fire, some accounts were critical of many unsafe work practices, such as unsustainable emergency

phone lines and lack of hazard reporting and control. The inquest also revealed that some workers did not have safety lamps.

Mining lodges had been lobbying for the introduction of mines rescue stations since 1921 and the results of the inquest proved the vital need for emergency equipment and trained emergency and rescue officers. The disaster became the catalyst for the Bill to establish a mines rescue service which was tabled in the NSW Parliament in 1924 and the Mines Rescue Act 1925. The first NSW Mines Rescue station was established at Abernath in 1926. To this day Coal Services Mines Rescue provides training for rescue brigades in coal mines and has rescue stations in all major coal fields in NSW to ensure the safety of all workers in the coal mining industry.



Lines lost were George Malcolm Bailey, John Brown, George Chapman, Alexander Games, Frederick Bone, Jack Graber, William Griffin, William Handley, Alfred Hines, Melvoin Bailey, George Kelly, Joseph Lambert, Gordon Locking, Jeremiah MacLoughlan, Charles Mills, Frederick Moodle, John Morgan, Harold Richards, Phillip Roberts, George Swadden, John Stewart.

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