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by

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At a spot some thirteen miles southwest from Hobart you may see occasional puffs of smoke rise from a dense thicket of blackberry bushes. The smoke is from a burning coal seam and the blackberries conceal an airshaft of a coal mine worked for more than half a century.

Mr. Gustav Thureau, Government Geologist, visited the area in 1881¹ to inspect and report upon the Southern Coal Measures at Sandfly. He found one 30 ft shaft and several adits being worked for coal of such good quality that he expressed wonder that so little work was being done. He noted that a tramway with heavy gradients would be needed to transport the coal to North West Bay from the level of the existing workings and suggested that the new diamond drill about to arrive from America should be used to ascertain whether the whole series of coal measures could be worked from one main adit at a much lower level. Shortly afterwards, a tramway from the Huon R. near Southbridge was proposed by the Huon River Coal Company and it was agreed that a reservation would be provided through Crown Land. This tramway does not appear to have got beyond the proposal stage.

In December 1891 the Sandfly Coal Mining Company, Registered, No Liability secured by Act of Parliament² the right to construct a railway of not less than two ft. six in. nor more than three ft. six in. gauge from Margate to the mine, near the saddle between Allen's Rivulet and Sandfly Rivulet.³ The Company was to have the rights and responsibilities of a common carrier and was required to submit its scale of charges for approval. Mails were to be carried free of charge and Members of Parliament were to be given the privilege of free travel to the same extent as was required of the Government Railways. By way of assistance to the Company, all Crown Land in a strip two miles on either side of the straight line from the harbour to the mine was withdrawn from sale, lease or licence until the railway was complete or for a period of eighteen months. Permission was granted to take, free of charge, from adjoining Crown Land such timber, clay, stone etc. as might be needed for the construction of the line and to dump any material or rubbish on Crown Land. A minimum rate of expenditure for two and a half years was specified to ensure prompt action by the Company.

In April 1893, Mr. Alex Montgomery, Government Geologist, reported at length upon the Sandfly Coal Mine.⁴ The Company had not done any work on the mine and was still searching for a route for the tramway. He examined numerous outcrops in dense forest and again reported well on the quality of the coal. Access was so poor that any coal mined so far could have been packed out only on men's backs. He estimated that the reserves

of coal could be as high as 20 million tons. North West Bay could, he considered, become a good coaling station for the ships of Her Majesty's Fleet and the lines of ocean steamers calling at Hobart. Some £50,000 would be necessary to construct the railway and wharves and open up the mine for large scale production. He recommended that at least six bores should be put down with the Department's diamond drill to prove the location of seams and four holes totalling 2,130 ft. were drilled in 1895-96.

There was no further activity until 1903 when two syndicates held leases. Mr. Twelvetreves, the Government Geologist, reported^s in October that some good coal in seams up to five feet thick had been exposed but real production still awaited the construction of a tramway from North West Bay to the mine. The route being considered at that time still involved a steep drop of about 1,000 ft. from the saddle to Allen's Rivulet and thence by easy grades to Margate.

Almost one year later these two syndicates united to form the Sandfly Colliery Company Limited which started operations with a flourish by working three shifts to mine one hundred tons of coal for steaming trials in a warship. Tenders were let for the carting of the coal to Margate. This company engaged Huckson and Hutchinson, Engineers and Surveyors, of Hobart to prepare plans for a tramway. A substantially different route via Poverty Gully and Nierinna was selected and work began on the line and a wharf at Margate in the first quarter of 1905. Apart from a few short level sections the two ft. gauge line climbed continuously from sea level to about 1,500 ft. at the mine in a length of $12\frac{1}{4}$ miles, almost double the straight line distance. The Government sold to the Company eight miles of rails which had been purchased for a tramway to Farrell on the West Coast, a project which was abandoned. One locomotive and a number of side-tipping trucks were bought for use during construction of the line. The Company did some of the earthworks and bridges itself and had the remainder done by contract. Bad weather and a scarcity of good material for track ballast hampered construction in the early stages but in 1906, when the rails were laid on the bridge at $6\frac{1}{2}$ miles, a good ballast pit was opened up there and the rate of progress improved. Rail connection to the mine was established in August 1906. In the meantime the Company had carried out considerable exploratory work and installed machinery at the mine. A second locomotive and several vertical-sided trucks suitable for carrying coal arrived on site early in 1907. The Company reported that the line, wharf, rolling stock and accessories had cost some £18,000. In January 1907, a representative of the Launceston "Weekly Courier" visited the works and his report, couched in glowing terms, was published a few weeks later. The article was reprinted in a well-produced glossy-paper brochure. Both were illustrated with a dozen photographs by J. W. Beattie. The Company bought and hulked the forty-seven years old brig 'Fairy Rock' for the transport of coal from Margate to Hobart.

The Sandfly Colliery Company produced 8,500 tons of coal before going into liquidation late in 1907, still owing the Government most of the £2,250 for the rails. For some time in 1908 the tramway was leased to Mr. Oates of Huonville for the carriage of timber, including squared logs, 20 in. by 20 in., 90 ft. long. A tragic accident occurred in March when the trucks carrying two such logs skidded on greasy rails and left the track at the "top" bridge killing one man and badly injuring another.

Late in 1908 the Tasmanian Wallsend Colliery Company took over the assets of the Sandfly Company, including the debt to the Government, and prosecuted the mining work with some vigour. The main workings were from a tunnel at tramway level and two other seams about 300 and 500 ft. respectively lower were worked, the coal being raised to the main tramway by a surface haulageway. This Company produced 16,000 tons of coal but ceased production in 1910 when the main seams ended abruptly at faults. For the four consecutive years, 1907-10, the Sandfly coal mine was the third highest producer in the State, the best effort being 7,677 tons in the part-year 1910. The Company continued to operate the tramway for the public, carrying timber, vegetables, small fruit, etc. When in 1913 efforts by the Company to promote the establishment of large sawmills failed the tramway was offered to the Government. On the advice of departmental heads the offer was declined and the rails and rolling stock were then advertised for sale in Tasmanian newspapers. Local residents reacted promptly by petitioning the Minister for Lands and Works to have the tram retained as a public service. The tramway mining easement 153-W was declared void in December 1913 and forfeited for non-payment of rent and nearly half of the original debt for the rails was still outstanding. The Company continued to try to persuade the Government to purchase the tramway and in August 1915 engineers from the Public Works and Railway Departments inspected the line and rolling stock. On their advice the Government again declined to purchase and the Company negotiated a sale with a Victorian firm. The Government then reversed its decision and in September 1915 agreed to buy the tramway. A request by a newly formed coal-mining syndicate to lease the tramway from the Government drew another petition from the residents along the line to have the tramway controlled by the Council. The Bill to purchase the tramway was rejected early in 1916 but after further inspections and reports by the P.W.D. and T.G.R., the Wallsend Colliery Tramway Purchase Act* was finally approved in December 1916. The tramway service had been maintained throughout this period.

Just what had the Government bought for its £4,500? Extracts from the reports by Mr. F. Groom Butler to the Engineer-in-Chief and by Mr. Wm. R. Deeble, Chief Mechanical Engineer, to the Commissioner for Railways describe the situation :

Mr. Butler, 30th September, 1916 :

"The line generally, has been well and substantially made for this class of Tramway . . . but has been allowed to get very much behind in the matter of repairs and maintenance.

The Formation, both in cuttings and embankments is about 9 feet wide with well laid out curves, and even gradients, the banks having slopes of about $1\frac{1}{4}$ to 1 with substantial log culverts under them where wanted. The rails are generally in a good state, but 4 different sections and weights have been used. From the Wharf to 6 miles in 20 lb, German rails, flat-footed, in 26 ft. and 18 ft. lengths. From 6 miles to 7 miles, the rails are lighter, being about 16 lbs. per yard in 15 feet and 18 feet lengths. These rails are too light and have been supported by an abnormal number of sleepers. From 7 mile to 8 mile — the rails are 30 lb. Iron, single topped chair rails, in Cast Iron chairs. These rails are evidently some of the Old Deloraine to Mersey Tram rails, and are similar to those on the Smithton to Pelican Point Tram. From 8 miles to $11\frac{1}{4}$ miles the rails used are of the 43 lb. steel section of the Tasmanian Government Railways. From the $11\frac{1}{4}$ miles to the terminus at the mine ($12\frac{1}{4}$ miles) the same lighter sections of 20 lb. or 16 lb. are used. The line on this length has been practically abandoned since the mine closed down.

The grades on the line have been well laid out and carefully kept, the steepest being about 1 in 27 or 28 though there is a large proportion of the line laid to far more easy grades. The steeper grades have been connected with vertical curves, though no attempt has been made at any compensation for sharp curvature. The curves have been well and carefully laid out and made, and especially on the seaboard end of the line are surprising easy radius, of course as the line climbs into the hills the curves have been laid to smaller radius down to $1\frac{1}{2}$ chains.

There are at present five dead end sidings along the line at various points. The table drains are in a very bad state and are practically blocked throughout the line from end to end.

The scrub and brushwood have been allowed to grow up on the line throughout its length and it is very important that this should be cut down for about 10 feet on each side of the line and burnt as soon as dead and before the surrounding country gets dry enough to be burnt out. There is not room enough at present for the locomotive to pass without risk of damage to the motions and fittings &c. At each bridge the scrub has encroached to such an extent as to be an absolute menace to the structure from bushfires and how they have escaped so long is a mystery. The wharf at the seaboard terminus is a well built and substantial structure about 10 years old with a truck-elevating track to over the bins used for loading coal by gravitation to the holds of the various vessels berthing at the wharf, but these bins are not of any further use unless the coal mines are reopened. The wharf is also available for loading such general goods timber, firewood, fruit &c., as may be handled by the tramway.



'The Sandfly Coal Mine, January, 1907'
Courtesy of Tasmanian State Archives

There are 10 bridges on the line all built of timber obtained locally and they were when new evidently substantial and carefully constructed. The original bridges No. 5 and 6 have been burnt out and those re-erected in their place have not been nearly so well built.

The following are rough details of the various Bridges.

No. of Bridge	No. of Spans	Height at Centre	State of Repair etc.
1	11/21'	27'	Very fair order
2	13/12'	18'	Very fair order
3	13/12'	14'	Good order
4	9/12'	16'	Good order
5	5/21'	15'	Not in good order
6	4/21'	15'	Not in good order
7	3/21'	12'	Fair order only
8	10/21'	35'	Good order
9	8/21'	32'	Good order
10	6/21'	27'	Good order

In the event of the Tramway being purchased by the Government, I would suggest if possible that, to put this tramway in fair working order that the following repairs be put in hand as soon as possible.

No. 5 and 6 Bridges be thoroughly overhauled and new beams put in. *The remainder of the bridges* be carefully inspected and new timber put in where required.

The scrub round bridges to be cut back to at least $\frac{1}{2}$ chain from same.

The scrub be cleared from off the line to at least 10 feet from centre line and then burnt and from the neighbourhood of Log Culverts.

The table drains be opened out and deepened throughout and fresh ballast openings put in where required.

The water tanks be renewed as previously stated herein.

New sleepers be put in where absolutely necessary. Five new Cattle Baulks be installed where required and the Track generally fettled, straightened, and lifted to a good top.

This work would, I estimate cost at least £300 and would employ 2 men for twelve months or a larger number for a proportionate period. I consider that three handy men used to this work would be the best number to employ, to traverse the line from end to end and systematically get the roadway into proper repair. The necessary timber for sleepers and bridge repairs and culverts can be obtained at minimum cost from the adjoining Crown Lands.

The material on this line is still fairly valuable and, if removed and sold at the present price of second hand railway material . . . would be worth about £4,500.

In conclusion I wish to thank Mr. T. A. Tabart, Jnr., for his courtesy in

placing a locomotive at my disposal, and for information supplied to me ; also Mr. G. E. Miller, the Caretaker of the Tramway, for his attention and hospitality during my visit”.

Mr. Deeble, 10th October, 1916 :—

“The valuation of the rolling stock and sundries is :

	£
No. 1 Locomotive	300
No. 2 Locomotive	400
8 Bogie Wagons @ £35 each	280
Weighbridge	50
2 Side tip wagons @ £4.10.0 each	9
2 Underframes complete for ditto, @ £2.10.0 each	5
1 Locally made passenger vehicle	10
Duplicates and sundries	10
	£1,064

No. 1 Locomotive — 10 tons Krauss, 4-wheeled coupled, 2-wheeled leading bogie, date 1906. This engine is in good working order.

No. 2 Locomotive — 8 tons Krauss, 4 wheeled coupled, date 1900. This engine has had no internal examination of boiler and it is now 16 years old. Engine has been standing idle for two years. An internal examination of the boiler should be made before the engine should again go into regular work.

Wagon Stock — There are 7 double 4-wheeled bogie trucks by R. J. Pickering and Co., near Glasgow, of 7 tons capacity, and 1 double bogie by Salisbury, Launceston, of same capacity. They are medium sided wagons. Floor area 16' x 5' ; sides 2' 6" deep, but they are easily convertible into flat wagons when required. These wagons are all in good working order, but require painting to preserve them from deterioration.

The above remarks apply also the locally made passenger car, tip trucks, and weighbridge mentioned in the valuation of stock”.

The Act provided for the acquisition and/or establishment of a one-chain easement along this line so that the tramway could be leased to an individual or Municipal Council. Provision was made for the repair work listed by Mr. Butler to be effected and the tramway was leased to the Kingborough Council in 1917 for an initial term of three years at the nominal rental fee of five shillings per annum.

Before the Council took over, some of Mr. Butler's forebodings were realised when in February 1917 a bushfire swept in from Longley, damaging many sleepers and destroying No. 10 bridge. The Department promptly arranged for the bridge to be renewed.

There is little on record during the first three years of the Council's lease.

The tram usually ran two or three times a week and daily in the small fruits season. At some time, probably during the Council's lease, No. 9 bridge was replaced by an embankment on the same grade and alignment. Its condition had been reported by Mr. Butler as "fair order only". A local syndicate took up the Sandfly coal leases when shipping strikes in 1917 cut off mainland supplies and sent nearly 1,600 tons of coal down to Margate before closing down at the end of 1919. Prospects for re-opening the mine were not good, other traffic had declined and in January 1920 a bushfire totally destroyed the high bridge (No. 7) at the mid point of the line, with the larger locomotive and several loaded trucks stranded on the far side. The Council promptly overhauled the small engine and maintained freight services as far as the burnt bridge for another two years. In the meantime the stranded engine was deteriorating as neither the Council or P.W.D. could afford to rebuild the bridge. After considerable delay a timber shed was built round the engine near the 7¼-mile peg and a nearby resident appointed caretaker. In November 1921 the Department suggested that the lease be cancelled and the line pulled up. The Council requested that the line be retained but early in 1922 a contract was awarded to the Catamaran Coal Company Proprietary to pull up the line from the mine to the bridge. When this work was nearing completion a temporary line with a curve of only 50 ft. radius was built around the gully in June 1922 and the locomotive was brought back to Margate. The same company secured a second contract to pull up the remainder of the rails. The Catamaran Coal Company bought the 8-ton engine, three 7-ton trucks and rails for 3 miles 11 chains of tramway for its line at Recherche and the Carbide Company bought the 10-ton engine, three 7-ton trucks and rails for 4 miles 20 chains of tramway for its Ida Bay limestone quarries. The remainder of the rails were stacked at the Margate wharf for use on departmental works and a few were sold. The last rails were not removed from Margate until 1934.

Most of the formation of the tramway is still clearly visible. The road from Kaoota^a to Allens Rivulet runs on the formation for one mile, some of it is in use as access tracks on farms, some is grassed over in pasture, much is covered in scrub. All the bridges have long since been burned, some embankments have subsided and some, including the biggest in the "Gorge Section" at Thomson's Creek, have been overtopped and washed away by storm flood waters. The easement is being disposed of by the Lands Department and much of it is now private property.

In 1922 the Department of Mines produced a comprehensive report^a on the coal resources of Tasmania. The management of the succession of companies and syndicates who had worked the Sandfly coal mine were trenchantly criticized for their lack of definite mining policy, failure to clean clay and shale out of coal sent to market and generally unsuitable handling arrangements. The number of tons of coal produced per man employed at the Sandfly mine was only about one third of the correspond-

ing figure at the Mt. Nicholas mine, St. Mary's, for the period 1907-10. Based on the 1895-96 diamond drilling and the extent of the seams proved by mining, the reserves of coal economically available were then estimated at 4-1/3 million tons.

There was virtually no action at the Sandfly mine all through the 1920s, but after a slow start in the early thirties the mine was re-opened and from 1937 to 1971 small scale hand mining was carried on continuously, initially by the Fogartys and for the last twenty-four years by the Roberts. Some Hobart people may remember seeing coal lorries bearing the name "Kaoota Coal Company" about twenty years ago. Production of bituminous coal — that worked by the original companies — ceased in 1941 and from that date only semi-anthracitic coal was produced for use in households and hop drying kilns and for lime burning at the lime kilns at Granton, the calcium carbide works at Electrona and the newsprint mills at Boyer. The total production of coal during this era of mining exceeded 52,000 tons. However, the ground is badly faulted and a recent programme of diamond drilling has failed to locate any further semi-anthracitic seams which may be worked economically and mining operations at Kaoota have ceased once again.

Despite the quality of the coal and the high hopes of a succession of owners, the mine has produced only some 80,000 tons in over ninety years. Whether the impending world fossil-fuel crisis will eventually bring about a re-opening of marginal coal mines such as this one must for the present remain a matter for conjecture.

REFERENCES

1. Parl. Papers 1881 (H.A.), No. 109.
2. 55 Vict. Private.
3. Now Kellaway's Creek.
4. Parl. Paper 1893, No. 50.
5. Report on the Sandfly Coal Mines, W. H. Twelvetrees, 12th October, 1903.
6. 16 Geo. V., No. 27.
7. The original drawings show that the bridges listed as 7, 8 and 9 actually occur in the order 8, 9 and 7. Site inspections confirm this.
8. The name of the Post Office near the coal mine was changed from "Woodstock Crossing" to "Kaoota" (aboriginal for "dusk") in 1923.
9. Geological Survey, Mineral Resources No. 7, The Coal Resources of Tasmania, 1922.