

## **The Bellbird Colliery Disaster, Cessnock, NSW, 1923 and the Mines Rescue Act, 1925**

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**O**n 1 September 1923, twenty-one miners perished as the result of a fire in No 1 Workings at Bellbird Colliery, situated near the village of Bellbird, three miles south-west of Cessnock, in the Northern coalfield of New South Wales. The Bellbird disaster was 'unparalleled in the history of the coalfield'.<sup>1</sup>

This account traces the early history of the Hetton Coal Company and outlines the operations of the Bellbird mine. It describes the unsuccessful rescue attempts, temporary sealing of the mine and the recovery efforts using breathing apparatus. Recommendations of the two inquests are described, and the various influences that led to the establishment of mines rescue stations in New South Wales are identified. Also considered is the importance of the disaster in the setting up of the stations.

### **History and Background**

The Bellbird colliery was owned and developed by the Hetton Coal Company Ltd, established in 1885 with a capital of £106,000. It mined the Borehole seam located at Pig Island, Carrington, which lay on the Hunter river estuary below Newcastle Harbour. At a company shareholders meeting held in August 1907, the attention to acquire 3,3060 acres<sup>2</sup> of leasehold Crown land at Bellbird Creek near Cessnock was announced. In common with other large Newcastle-based mining companies, faced with diminishing reserves and increasing costs, the company was attracted to the rich Greta seam of the South Maitland area.<sup>3</sup>

In February 1908, the company informed the New South Wales Mines Department that contractors had been engaged to drive two entry headings into the Greta Top Seam in a southerly direction, with the travelling tunnel 60 yards west of the haulage tunnel. These tunnels were numbered 1 and 2 but were worked collectively as No. 1 Mine or Workings. Two other tunnels (known as Nos 3 and 4) worked as Mine No. 2 and were completed in 1918. When it was first developed the mine was officially known as Hetton-Extended but renamed Hetton -Bellbird in 1911, though locally it was known, as the Bellbird mine.<sup>4</sup>

Originally, a furnace at the base of the upcast shaft ventilated No. 1 Workings with aid of a Sirocco fan installed in 1913. The shaft, 16-feet in diameter and 91-feet deep was initially part of the No. 1 Workings. When No. 2 Workings were later developed, a connecting stone-heading was driven to the No. 1 return airway linking with No. 1 Workings. At the time of the disaster, the underground electric power was generated in the mine's surface power station by three kVA steam-powered Bellis and Morcom generating sets, connected to AEG alternators (installed 1912) and one 3000 kVA General Electric turbine set installed in 1920. Therefore by 1923 Bellbird was

considered a modern mine with electricity used for haulage, pumping, coal-cutting and lighting purposes and possessing numerous telephones. A private railway connected to the Government railway at East Greta Junction serviced the mine.<sup>5</sup>

Worked by the bord and pillar method, the Greta seam (between 14 feet and 28 feet in thickness), being bituminous, was in great demand by gas companies and the state railways. Bellbird coal was first sent to market in 1912. At the time of the disaster, a total of 615 persons were employed at the colliery, 441 of them underground. In 1911 the Mines Department was reporting that the mine had produced 13,442 tons of coal and by 1922 there was a daily average output of 1,700 tons.<sup>6</sup> This constituted an output of medium proportions compared to other mines in the New South Wales Coalfields.

The first mine manager appointed in 1908 was Alexander Mathieson, with Herbert Miller as under-manager. In 1923 the major personnel were James Mathieson (Alexander's son) as manager, George Noble under-manager; mine electrician/engineer Paul Cook; surveyor, Milton Mathieson (manager's son), together with eight deputies. Chairman of the Board of Directors was William Angus, with James S. Hutchinson as company Secretary. The company offices were located in Sydney. Hetton-Bellbird, like other major colliery companies, had a close commercial relationship with its shipping agent, in this case McIlwraith McEacharn Ltd.<sup>7</sup>

Besides having a reputation of being a 'model mine', Bellbird was also considered relatively safe compared to some others in the coalfield, although there had been seven fatalities reported at the mine between 1917 and 1923.<sup>8</sup> No inflammable gas had been found and no evidence of spontaneous combustion discovered, although some other South Maitland mines were prone to the phenomenon. Two minor fires had been reported in 1917 and 1919. The mine was worked with naked lights except when inspections were carried out with safety lamps.<sup>9</sup>

Prior to the disaster, no days were worked during May, June and July due to intermittent industrial action in the coalfield as a result of the so-called 'Major Crane Strike'.<sup>10</sup> Most of the miners lived in the Bellbird village that boasted approximately 1,000 inhabitants with the majority owning their own homes some being described as 'mostly set in large garden plots'. Forming part of the Cessnock Shire and created a village in 1910, its development coincided with the growth of the mine. Several other coalmines were located in the neighbouring districts. Described as a 'quiet village' with well laid-out streets, it was surrounded by a range of green hills giving it a rural appearance.<sup>11</sup>

### **The fire, rescue attempts and aftermath**

A fire that was probably associated with explosion-liberated gases caused the Bellbird disaster. The fire started immediately after the morning shift of 450 men had left the mine at 1pm on the 'back Saturday', and afternoon shift deputy Frederick Moddie was the first to notice smoke underground as he was proceeding down the haulage tunnel shortly after 1pm. At the surface, Milton Mathieson was the first to observe visible signs of a serious fire.<sup>12</sup> There were a total of 32 men working on the afternoon shift with 20 engaged in No. 1 and 12 at No. 2 Workings. Together with a member of a

rescue party, all of the 20 employed in No. 1 perished before reaching their workplaces when overcome by gas and smoke as they attempted to make a rush for the surface.

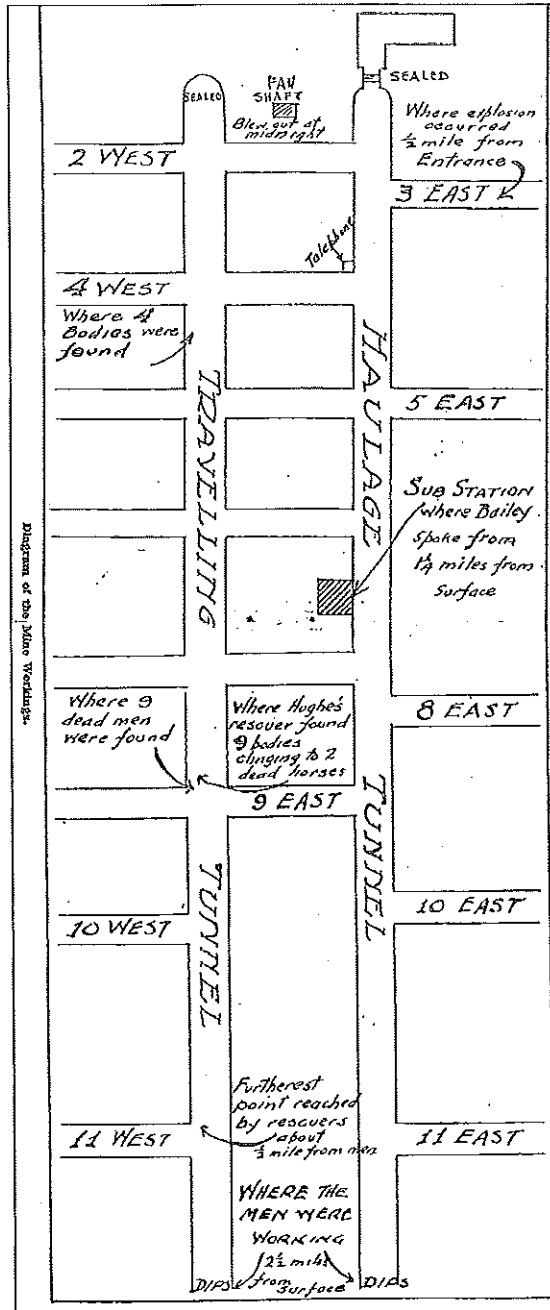
At the first inquest, deputy Robert Wilson recounted his experience of the early stages of the disaster. Wilson recalled that he and Moodie passed deputy James Snedden at No. 4 West. They had inspected Nos 10, 11 and 12 East and 11 West districts. Apparently Snedden enquired of the two 'How are things?' They replied, 'All right!' Moodie then went further down the haulage road at No. 5 East and was confronted with dense smoke forcing him to retreat to No. 4. He warned deputies Snedden and Wilson together with Robert Eke (who had joined them) of the danger, telling them 'to go back'. Eke reached the telephone cabin and rang the colliery office four times without any response and overcome with smoke left the cabin without informing those in the colliery office (at the surface) of the danger. Snedden immediately returned to the surface informing under-manager George Noble of the fire. Deputy Moodie attempted to extract his men from the tunnel but was never seen alive again. Noble and Milton Mathieson who joined Snedden, Eke and Wilson in the tunnel, heard several explosions. Mathieson and Eke, overcome with gas then returned to the surface with Wilson to mobilise assistance.<sup>13</sup>

In a press statement, Joshua Jeffries, Superintendent, Abermain Collieries, summarised his role in the rescue effort. In the absence of the manager James Mathieson (away near Wollombi) he arrived at the mine at 3pm and went down the travelling tunnel. He found nine men and two horses dead. He suggested to mining managers John Brown (Aberdare) and Alexander Kirk (Aberdare Extended) that all hands be brought to the surface, and that the rescue work and the recovery of the bodies be determined on an organised basis. Manager Mathieson who arrived at 6pm endorsed the proposal and Jeffries called for volunteers at the mouth of the tunnel to assist in the rescue operations. He received an overwhelming response as more men came forward than he could safely take. Jeffries emphasised the grave risks involved and organised the men into two shifts to recover the bodies: the idea being to have only a few men in the mine at one time. He selected 16 men and was accompanied by several mine managers including John Fallons (Cessnock No. 2) and Mr. Howie (under manager Aberdare South). One rescue party brought out four bodies and a new party then left the surface to bring out the remaining fifteen. This party comprised J. Mathieson, J. Brown, and Government Inspector R. Lewis, deputies William Gallagher and William Hughes, and Jeffries. Jeffries went in again with the second party. Two distinct explosions were heard and there was evidence that poisonous gas had been generated. The party decided to retreat but found it difficult to return by the route previously followed.<sup>14</sup>

According to Jeffries, he divided the party into two groups: Brown, Marshall (manager-Aberdare Central) and Hughes took one course; and Jeffries, Mathieson, Lewis and Gallagher took another, passing through separation doors into the old workings with the intent of reaching the surface by the new No. 2 tunnel. Manager Mathieson remembered that there was a brick stopping which if breached would give them a chance of reaching the surface. They reached a 9-inch thick brick stopping-wall used to separate the intake and return airways. Working in shifts, using two pocket knives to scrape away the plaster between the bricks, together with an old sleeper as a

battering ram, they finally managed to break through the wall. Feeling the effects of the gas they were barely able to struggle another 600 yards to the tunnel mouth.

Figure 1: No. 1 Mine Workings



Source: B. Singleton & G.W. Rickwood, 'The Story of the Bellbird Disaster', Supplement, *Daily Guardian*, 1923, Cessnock, no date, p. 9. Published to raise money for families of victims. Unfortunately John Brown from the first party was badly gassed. Marshall

attempted to drag him out of the tunnel as they struggled to reach the tunnel mouth. According to evidence submitted at the inquest, Brown urged Marshall to save himself. He is alleged to have said: 'I am done; I can go no further, look after yourself'. Marshall, powerless to save his companion, released his grip. A rescue party later found Marshall wandering around aimlessly. Under-manager George Noble who was rescued in an exhausted state, later revealed that he had seen an active fire in No. 8 East, being the only person involved in the disaster who was reported as seeing a fire.<sup>15</sup>

Press reports praised the rescuers profusely. Many were overcome with gas and smoke but still made multiple entries into the mine. Two rescuers singled out for their bravery was contractor William Ghallagher and decorated Great War veteran and wheeler Peter 'Digger' McCluskey. Both made at least four trips into the gas-filled mine in an attempt to rescue their mates and to recover the bodies of their dead comrades.<sup>16</sup> In Parliament later, Walter F. O'Hearn MLA (Maitland) described the volunteer rescuers as 'soldiers of the industrial field'.<sup>17</sup>

### **Sealing**

Several local mine managers and mines inspectors assembled at the mine office on Saturday evening (1 September) to discuss the condition of the mine. It was unanimously agreed that any further attempts at rescue and recovery would be futile and risk further loss of life. Three representatives of the local lodge of the Miners' Federation, James Ford, Joseph Jacks and George Perkins were consulted, and after the position was explained they concurred with the decision. Rescue attempts were then abandoned, leaving six bodies still entombed. The sealing of the mine commenced at 9.30pm on Saturday night and was completed at 1pm next day. The four tunnels were sealed first with sand, soil and timbers followed by the upcast shaft. During the sealing process, at 1.45am on Sunday, an explosion burst through the temporary stoppings in the tunnel and another occurred in the fan shaft, resulting in two volunteers having narrow escapes. The violent explosion shook some houses in the Bellbird village. After the sealing was completed a large volume of smoke was seen pouring out of the fan shaft.<sup>18</sup> Within three weeks of the explosion, as the No. 2 workings were not damaged by fire or explosion, the decision was made to re-open this part of the mine and resume production.<sup>19</sup>

### **The funeral**

An estimated 25,000 people lined the route to the Cessnock cemetery to witness the funeral procession of the 15 dead miners on Monday 3 September, thus reflecting the collective grief of the community over the disaster. As a mark of respect, both the Northern and Southern coalfields remained idle for the day, local businesses (except hotels) were closed and massed bands from neighbouring colliery towns and villages led the procession. Last rites were administered at an inter-denominational service. Included in the procession were local civic dignitaries, state and federal parliamentarians, mine directors and officials, union representatives and 510 'comrades of the dead'. The funeral received wide press coverage in local, regional and national

newspapers.<sup>20</sup>

**Table 1: *The Victims***

Victims	Age	Marital Status	Occupation	Residence
Malcolm Bailey	28	married	sub-station attendant	Bellbird
John Brown	48	married-2 children	mine manager	Aberdare
George Chapman	32	married -2 children	wheeler	Cessnock
Andrew Corns	21	single	wheeler	Cessnock
Frederick Fone	21	single	waterman	Cessnock
Jack Graber	43	married-5 children	miner	Bellbird
William Griffin	30	married-1 child	miner	Bellbird
William Hartley	27	married -2 children	miner	Cessnock
Alfred Hines	25	married -1 child	miner	Cessnock
Maurice Hyams	28	married	miner	Aberdare
George R. Kelly	22	single	wheeler	Cessnock
Joseph Lambert	22	single	driver	Cessnock
Gordon Locking	25	married-3 children	miner	Bellbird
J. McLaughlin	36	married-3 children	miner	Cessnock
Charles A. Mills	38	married-4 children	miner	Cessnock
Frederick Moodie	53	married-2 children	deputy	Cessnock
John Morgan	50	married-1 child	miner	Bellbird
Harold Richards	39	married-3 children	miner	Cessnock
Phillip Roberts	21	single	wheeler	Bellbird
George Sneddon	33	married-6 children	miner	Bellbird
John Stewart	38	married-3 children	miner	Bellbird

Source: adapted from *Newcastle Morning Herald*, 3 September 1923; *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 3 September 1923, and [http:// archive.amol.au/Newcastle/greta/bellbird](http://archive.amol.au/Newcastle/greta/bellbird), accessed 27 July 2009, p. 55.

**Note:** John B. Brown, manager of the Aberdare Shaft Colliery died as part of a rescue party. Among those who perished in the disaster, six were born outside of Australia. They were: John B. Brown (Scotland), Jack Graber (Germany), George R. Kelly (England), Joseph F. Lambert (Canada), John Morgan (Wales) and Phillip Roberts (England).

### First inquest

The inquest into the death of the 15 miners whose bodies had been recovered was held over nine days from 2 September to 4 October by Coroner George Brown at the Cessnock Court House before a jury of six, the majority having mining experience. Forty-two witnesses were examined, 23 of them called by the police, seven by the Miners' Federation representative and two by the colliery company. In part of the coroner's summing up he remarked that the inquiry had been the longest and most important that had been held in the Maitland coalfield. Compared to similar inquests into mining disasters this was a lengthy inquiry and served virtually as a substitute for a royal commission that later was so robustly demanded by various interests.<sup>21</sup>

Dr Henry, who had examined the 15 bodies, stated that 'all died from carbon monoxide poisoning and there were no visible signs of burns'. In evidence, deputies Snedden and Wilson both agreed that Bellbird was a safe, well ventilated mine, free of gas. Although some witnesses complained of 'bad ventilation' and the air 'being crook', others reported that smoking occurred in the mine and that wax matches were used. One miner claimed that 'a couple of thousand cigarettes were smoked every day in the mine, but had never seen a brattice caught fire through a lighted cigarette'.<sup>22</sup>

J. Jeffries, Superintendent of Abermain Collieries, Stanley McKensy,

Superintendent Hebburn Collieries, and Alexander Kirk Manager of Aberdare Extended Colliery all advocated the use of safety lamps throughout the Maitland field and called for naked lights to be withdrawn. Some evidence favoured stone dusting being made compulsory in dry and dusty mines as a safety measure. This implied that some of the managers (not the majority) believed that explosive gases or coal dust was to blame. Jeffries who gave evidence for one-and-a-half days was adamant that there had been no spontaneous combustion and that the fire was a main road one. He lauded the work of the rescuers claiming that, 'All the training in the world could not have been improved on what was done at Bellbird. I will never forget the way the men behaved ... the work of the rescuers was magnificent'.<sup>23</sup>

There was a difference of opinion between some local mine managers over the use of breathing apparatus in the early stages of rescue operations. Some managers, including J. Jeffries, stated that they preferred to take fresh air in with them (by improving ventilation) as opposed to using the apparatus. Nevertheless, none of them objected to its use in certain circumstances, as long as the operators were well trained and fully equipped, and that the rescue was well organised. Most of the mining managers giving evidence favoured the establishment of a central mines rescue station in the South Maitland coalfield.<sup>24</sup>

The body of Malcolm Bailey (sub-station attendant at No. 6 West) had not been recovered with the 15 others on 1 September. According to evidence submitted at the inquest, mine engineer, Paul Cook had telephoned Bailey from the surface to acquaint him with the fire and to deliver a warning to those underground of the impending danger. Bailey was unable to hear the message and Cook remained on the phone for three quarters of an hour without success. Bailey had only been married for nine months and in the previous month had changed shifts with another man.<sup>25</sup>

After long deliberation the jury verdict was: 'That the fifteen deceased, met their deaths at Bellbird ... from carbon monoxide poisoning, caused through a fire or an explosion; but there is no evidence to show how such fire or explosion was caused'.<sup>26</sup> The jury added the following riders to its verdict:

- The evidence ... does not prove how the disaster originated. Therefore the jury recommends that; gentlemen of mining experience be appointed and vested with the powers of a Royal Commission, to ascertain the real cause.
- The great weight of evidence shows that the mine was a safe one; but the jury believes that as similar accidents are likely to recur in any of the South Maitland collieries, ... recommends that: a central rescue station, with trained staff be established, equipped with most the modern appliances known, for the saving of life in such disasters.
- The jury believes that the Coal Mines Regulation Acts of 1912-13 are obsolete. The Acts do not enforce sufficient precautionary measures for the protection of underground employees engaged in collieries and therefore should be amended.<sup>27</sup>

#### **Chief Inspectors report and recovery of bodies**

At the completion of the inquest, J.P. Hindmarsh, Chief Inspector of Mines commenting in his annual report, stated that there was no organised attempt at rescue immediately

after the disaster when time was an important factor and when there was a possibility of saving life. He was particularly critical of the role of under-manager George Noble and the general lack of organisation and leadership.

... after seeing the position himself, instead of wandering around the pit, he should have returned at once to the surface, especially when he knew that the manager was unfortunately absent from the colliery. An organised effort would have at least been made to save them.<sup>28</sup>

Following the disaster, the Bellbird management acquired 22 sets of breathing apparatus (known as 'Proto' suits). In early 1924, teams of volunteers were trained in working with the suits with the purpose of recovering No. 1 Workings. Commencing on May 1924, an airlock was constructed in the 14-inch thick wall that was sealing the tunnel entry and from within the airlock an entrance was made through the seal into the pit at the entry to the tunnel. Once in the mine, the 'Proto' teams (comprising 5 to 12 miners) constructed 12 airlocks that were advanced progressively in small stages until the mine was recovered. With the Proto work completed, No. 1 Workings resumed operations on 18 January 1925.<sup>29</sup>

On 27 May 1924 one Proto team found the body of Frederick Moodie clutching a safety lamp in one hand and a 'yard-stick' in another at No. 2 West. His body was not returned to the surface until 2 June to allow fresh air to circulate in the vicinity. The body of John Borland Brown was discovered 'lying at full length across the travelling tunnel' at No. 4 West on 20 June. He was officially identified by his personal belongings, which included his watch and office key. A party clearing debris found Fred Fone's incinerated body on 26 September. Bodies of William Hartley and Alexander Corns were found on 15 December 1924 at No. 9 West. Malcolm Bailey's body lay in the mine until 19 May 1965, when miners making changes to mechanization, found his skeletal remains.<sup>30</sup>

Following the reopening of No. 1 Workings, departmental officials expressed their concern over the continued use of naked lights in the mine. Perusal of internal Mines Department minutes reveal that the Under-Secretary, acting on the observations of the Chief Mines Inspector, wrote to the Chairman of the Bellbird's board enquiring whether he was going to prohibit the practice. He underscored the matter by referring to the four fires that had occurred in No. 2 Tunnel since the 1923 disaster. The Board responded by indicating in a letter that 'the position of naked lights was under consideration'. In one internal minute the Under-Secretary noted that under existing legislation mines inspectors had '... no power to alter this method of working'.<sup>31</sup> In reality, naked lights were in use at Bellbird until October 1946 when they were replaced by battery-powered safety lamps.

During the recovery operations, the Proto men discovered evidence which appeared to verify George Noble's testimony at the first inquest that he had seen a fire at No. 8 East. Some in the local mining community had doubted the accuracy of his testimony of events, especially as he had wandered alone in the gas filled tunnel before he was rescued in a debilitated condition. However, as a result of explorations carried out as part of the recovery operations, some of his statements were verified. Near the



seat of the fire at No. 8 East, at the extreme end of the haulage tunnel (known as the bridge), a skip was found. It was inscribed with a notice in chalk, in Noble's handwriting, 'office, overcome, GN'. It indicated that the message was addressed to the mine office and bore Noble's initials. Some of the under-manager's discarded clothes were also found there. Some believed that the explosion had left sufficient traces to prove the veracity of Noble's account of his activities and observations on that fateful 1 September 1923.<sup>32</sup>

### **Second Inquest**

Cessnock Coroner George Brown held the inquest into the deaths of Brown and Moodie on 20 May 1925. H. Rogers appeared for the Hetton-Bellbird Company, J.P. Hindmarsh for the Mines' Department and T. Hoare for the Miners' Federation. The jury verdict was that:

... they both died from carbon monoxide poisoning caused by the Bellbird mine fire. The weight of evidence points to the conclusion that the origin of the fire was in the vicinity of Eight East and that it was caused by a naked light.<sup>33</sup>

This corroborated the findings of the first inquest but the Coroner did not support the theory that a possible cause of the fire was electrical, as the fuses in the sub-station would have been 'blown-out'. He stated that:

There is no doubt that the fire was caused by a naked light, probably by a cigarette butt, or a lamp on a miner's cap coming into contact with some inflammable material. There is no evidence to show that the fire was the result of a deliberate act on the part of one of the employees or not. I am of the opinion however that it was probably the result of carelessness on the part of one of the employees.<sup>34</sup>

The jury added two riders to its verdict:

1. We recommend the appointment of a Royal Commission of competent persons to make a searching inquiry into the workings of the South Maitland field, in order to further safeguard the lives of underground workers.
2. The jury expresses the hope that the Government will carry out the recommendations of the previous inquest and establish rescue stations with Proto apparatus and a properly equipped staff for live-saving in connection with mining disasters.<sup>35</sup>

### **A Royal Commission for Bellbird?**

In New South Wales, during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, it had been customary to hold a royal Commission or a statutory inquiry (headed by an eminent judge or barrister) for the purpose of enquiring into those mining disasters that had incurred multiple fatalities. Royal Commissions, in particular, possessed special powers, and as they often contained members with extensive engineering and mining expertise, their recommendations carried a certain gravitas and legitimacy.<sup>36</sup>

The political situation in 1923 was that a Nationalist Party Government, with George Fuller as Premier was in power in New South Wales, supported by a newly

formed Progressive party. The situation changed in the 1925 election when there was a shift to Lang's Labor party.<sup>37</sup>

Following the disaster, Premier Fuller's statement in the Legislative Assembly that an inquiry was necessary, was reinforced in the Upper House when on 5 September, Sir Joseph Carruthers promised a 'full and immediate inquiry into the possible cause and to determine any precautions necessary to prevent future accidents'.<sup>38</sup>

Although there was persistent lobbying and agitation by the Miners' Federation for the appointment of a royal commission into the disaster, the Mines Minister J.C.L. Fitzpatrick and the Fuller Cabinet resisted the initiative. A large deputation, comprising state and federal parliamentarians from mining seats and representatives of the Miners' Federation met Premier Fuller and officials of the Mines Department at Parliament House on 13 September 1923. It canvassed the Government's support for a commission and legislation that would provide for mine rescue stations. It also urged the Government to amend the Coal Mines Regulation Acts to ensure miners' safety.<sup>39</sup> A notable member of the deputation was John M. Baddeley, MLA (Newcastle), and later Labor Minister for Mines. In the Assembly, just three days before the disaster he had expressed his concerns over the issue of miner's safety especially in the South Maitland field.<sup>40</sup> It would appear too, that many in the local community were seeking answers as to the definitive causes of the tragedy, to bring some closure to the disastrous event.

An examination of departmental papers revealed a definite opposition to a commission-type inquiry. Responding to a letter from William Davies MLA-(Wollondilly), the Under-Secretary wrote that:

... there is no useful purpose served in appointing a Royal Commission until the mine is re-opened and probably not then. Explosions following the fire spread it to other parts causing several distant fires.<sup>41</sup>

In an internal minute to the Minister, the Chief Inspector of Coal Mines maintained that

I am of the opinion that no Royal Commission can elicit any further evidence than was placed before the jury until the mine is reopened and probably not then.<sup>42</sup>

Later he indicated that

If a Royal Commission is appointed then ... it should contain mining experts or a technical commission to enquire into and report as to the best and safest methods of working the thick coal seams of the South Maitland district and to enquire into and report as to the best means of preventing self-heating or the spontaneous combustion of coal.<sup>43</sup>

This could be interpreted as the departmental official attempting to focus attention away from ascertaining the specific causes of the Bellbird tragedy, and reorienting it towards a broader agenda of mine workers' safety, particularly in the South Maitland field.

In an Estimates debate, Baddely accused the Fuller government of renegeing on its promise to set up a Bellbird Royal Commission. He also highlighted the high incidence of fires that had occurred on the South Maitland field due to spontaneous

combustion. In the debate M.A. Davidson MLA (Sturt), argued that:

I don't think there was ever a time in history that a government refused to appoint a royal commission to enquire into the causes of a disaster in order to prevent a reoccurrence.<sup>44</sup>

In the coalfield, the Miners' Federation threatened strike action unless a commission was set up but financial difficulties that arose out of the 'Major Crane strike' had reduced union funds and militated against such action. Reacting to pressure and protest from the Miners' Federation and local lodges, the Under-Secretary (Mines Department) penned the following minute:

It is not desirable that a Royal commission be appointed. The fire in this case was probably caused by an infraction by some of the workers ... of the rules laid down regarding careless use of matches etc.<sup>45</sup>

The Commission issue and that of miner's safety in general became politicised in September 1924, when Albert C. Willis, Secretary of the New South Wales Branch of the Miners' Federation, sent an open letter to the Sydney press. He criticised the Fuller Government for its inaction over Bellbird and on mine safety generally. Premier Fuller had presented bravery medals to the Bellbird rescuers praising their heroism. Willis complained that the Premier, rather than lauding the courage and bravery of the rescuers, should pay more attention to preventing mining accidents.<sup>46</sup> Fuller resented the imputation that his government had neglected miners' interests. Dismissing Willis's charges, he stated that since the Government had been in office, there had been greater use of safety lamps and he foreshadowed that Mines' Minister Fitzpatrick was preparing a draft measure to establish rescue stations to serve coal and shale mines. Attempting to score political points, Fuller recalled that the Labor Government, when in power, had not considered it necessary to appoint an inquiry into miners' safety.<sup>47</sup>

### **Background to the Mines Rescue Act 1925**

The issue of establishing mines rescue stations staffed with trained personnel had been advocated since the early part of the 20th century. Many in the mining community had for some time sought some central locations in the New South Wales coalfield where rescue equipment and trained staff could be located in a state of readiness in the event of emergencies. Nevertheless it was not until the period after the Bellbird tragedy, coupled with the election of the Lang Labor Government that the reform became law in the form of the Mines Rescue Act 1925. The issue had a long gestation period.

The movement in favour of the stations and the use of life-saving equipment had its origins in various factors, events and developments. Some momentum can be traced to community reaction to a series of widely publicised mining disasters that occurred in both New South Wales and Queensland (especially the Mount Mulligan tragedy in 1921). A significant event in New South Wales was the disaster in 1896 at the Stockton Colliery, Newcastle, resulting in nine fatalities, when two separate parties of rescuers perished attempting to find the source of a fire that had already killed two of their work mates. It was claimed that if breathing apparatus had been present some of the men

could have been saved.<sup>48</sup>

An early advocate of the use of breathing apparatus in mining accidents was Dr W. L'Estrange Eames. In the wake of the Stockton disaster, Eames and Mines Inspector William Humble influenced the New South Wales Government to purchase two pneumatophors (breathing apparatus) on an experimental basis. Eames advocated the setting-up of life-saving brigades and in 1901 put forward a plan detailing a mines rescue organisation to serve the New South Wales Northern Coalfield. Also influential was British experience whereby central rescue stations were made statutory in 1910 after having existed on a voluntary basis prior to that year. Inspector Humble had visited several British rescue stations on a study tour in 1912 and on return made several recommendations.<sup>49</sup>

In December 1911, as the result of union pressure, Labor Mines Minister Alfred Edden MLA (Northumberland), convened a conference in Newcastle comprising departmental officials, mine owners and union representatives. It considered a plan to establish rescue stations at Kurri Kurri and Wallsend and also the purchase of specialised life-saving equipment. It focused specifically on the need for such arrangements to be provided in the South Maitland field, which was susceptible to underground fires. New South Wales Chief Inspector of Coal Mines, A.A. Atkinson stressed the urgent need for these facilities. Edden proposed that the Government would fund half of the cost of the erection and maintenance of the stations but though a committee was formed to consider the proposals, little progress was achieved. Doubts were raised over the value of the apparatus in untrained hands, whereas mine owner interests objected to the possible cost that it would impose on the industry and viewed it as a new form of government regulation. There was certain indifference on the part of many owners who considered the apparatus as 'untried', experimental and needing improvement'.<sup>50</sup>

Although the issue remained on the agenda of the Miners' Federation, there was little consensus in the industry over their introduction and the exigencies of World War One took precedence. As there were no serious mining accidents in the Northern Coalfield from the 1905 Stanford Merthyr disaster (with six fatalities) until the Bellbird tragedy, the urgency of the issue appeared to dissipate. However, the experience gained by the men of the Army Tunnelling companies during the First World War was influential in the eventual setting up of a professional mines rescue system in New South Wales. These men had served in trench rescue stations at the front in Belgium and France, and according to one source, on their return home 'several hundred Australian men had been trained in Britain in mines rescue'.<sup>51</sup>

In September 1921, the coal dust explosion at Mount Mulligan, Queensland resulting in 80 deaths, served to revive the issue and increase the momentum towards the introduction of rescue stations. Reacting to the Queensland tragedy, Labor Mines Minister George Camm MLA (Sturt-Broken Hill) convened a meeting of union delegates and owners at Newcastle on 13 December 1921, to consider the introduction of the stations and use of the artificial breathing equipment. Union spokesman J.M. Baddeley suggested a scheme jointly financed by both Government and the mine owners.<sup>52</sup>

### **The Importance of Bellbird**

The Bellbird disaster was certainly significant, for it influenced the eventual passage of the Mines Rescue Act 1925 by the New South Wales Parliament. It was given wide coverage in the press including detailed accounts of the lengthy inquest proceedings. This tended to increase public awareness of and sensitivity to the issues, and highlighted the hazardous nature of coal mining. It also focused attention on the need for an organised system of mining rescue using the latest developments in artificial breathing apparatus. The successful use of the Proto apparatus in the recovery operations of No. 1 Workings silenced most of its critics who had doubted its value in rescue operations. The value of the equipment in the hands of trained personnel was clearly demonstrated. It was shown that the Proto equipment could be used in the vital small window of opportunity in the first hours of a disaster, and would also be valuable in preventing the death of rescue personnel.<sup>53</sup> Therefore momentum for the introduction of the facilities grew and a consensus developed. Indicative of this sentiment was the opinion of Mr. J. Barnett, a check inspector in the Maitland district reported in the *Labor Daily*. He asserted that the Bellbird recovery experience had clearly demonstrated the importance of rescue apparatus in disasters. He added:

It has been proved that with the Proto life-saving apparatus, men can penetrate into areas where there are poisonous gases, and do laborious work for considerable periods. The workers should stand solid and demand that rescue stations be installed ... equipped with the most modern rescue appliances, trained men and the necessary ambulance requirements.<sup>54</sup>

Following the success of the Proto suits in the Bellbird recovery process, throughout 1924 and 1925 there was increased pressure on the Mines Department from the State Labor caucus, union executives and miners' lodges for the introduction of a measure providing for rescue stations.<sup>55</sup> Additionally, some of the mine owners, especially in the northern coalfield, began to see merit in the proposal and when Labor won office believed that their establishment was inevitable. It appeared to them that if they did not get 'on board' early then they would not be able to influence the fine detail of the eventual legislation.

Immediately after the Bellbird disaster, two Newcastle-based parliamentarians, H.J. Connell and W. Davies undertook a short study tour of the mines rescue station at Bundamba near Ipswich, Queensland. Serving 28 mines in the district, it was noted that funding was shared between the Queensland Government, the State Insurance Office and the mine owners.<sup>56</sup>

In January 1925 resolutions were passed at miners' meetings at Cessnock and Kurri Kurri demanding greater efforts to secure miner's safety through the construction of rescue stations. The Delegate Board of the Miners' Federation made similar representations to the Mines Minister. Furthermore, Owners and Managers from the Northern Coalfield met with the Under Secretary of the Mines Department regarding the establishment of rescue stations in the Maitland and Newcastle fields. They presented a proposal that the Government should set apart areas of land at both Cockle Creek and Neath to provide for the erection of stations in central positions in the

Northern coalfield. They requested that the Government either subsidise or extend a grant towards the reconstruction of the stations, and maintained that given that the State Government derived revenue from coal royalties it should contribute something towards station construction.<sup>57</sup> On 13 November 1924, Nationalist Mines Minister J.L. Fitzpatrick introduced a bill in the Assembly providing for the introduction of a mines rescue scheme but it was stalled due to Opposition amendments and then lapsed because of the dissolution of Parliament prior to the 1925 general election won narrowly by Labor.<sup>58</sup>

Under Labor, departmental officers advised the minister that, in order to fund the mines rescue scheme, a general levy should be imposed on each ton of coal and shale produced, as the funding would fall equitably on the industry. Pre-empting the decision to impose a general levy on all mines, and intent on taking a unilateral position, the J. and A. Brown Company wrote to the Under-Secretary in June 1925 announcing its intention to erect a mines rescue station at their Richmond Main colliery site to serve their colliery as well as Pelaw Main and Minmi. The company also indicated that they were prepared to pay for the whole cost of construction, installation and maintenance of the station provided that they were immune from any financial liability imposed by the Government. They also preferred that its mines should constitute a separate district from others in the South Maitland field. It appeared that former Premier George Fuller had promised John Brown an exemption from any contribution to the scheme and that he would be allowed to 'conduct his own affairs'. A notation by the Under-Secretary made on the letter from Browns' advised the minister that no exception should be made as it would be 'inequitable on other mine owners'.<sup>59</sup>

Some owners had urged Fuller to provide them with land grants and some form of financial assistance towards the erection of the rescue stations. They argued that the proposed stations were analogous with fire stations and brigades that were funded from the public purse. In response the Department agreed to land grants where it was necessary but opposed financial assistance maintaining that the rescue stations situation was more comparable with that of marine safety where ship owners supplied the safety equipment.<sup>60</sup>

The setting up of rescue stations formed part of the Labor Party's agenda of industrial reform and had been advocated by the Miners' Federation for many years. Mines Minister Baddeley introduced Labor's Mines Rescue bill into the New South Wales Legislative Assembly on 2 September 1925. It differed from the former Nationalist Government's version in that it placed the obligation of financial liability for funding the stations on the mine owners. Under the measure they were charged with constructing, maintaining and equipping the station buildings, together with providing the training for the rescue staff appointed. Another change to the bill was the inclusion of a miners' representative on the station's district committee to supplement the owner-elected members. The bill had a trouble-free passage through state Parliament indicating a certain consensus over the measure.<sup>61</sup> Even before the Act was operational, Northern mine owners had agreed in July 1925 to proceed with the erection of a rescue station on Crown land at Neath, South Maitland field (although eventually built at Abermain) and at Cockle Creek on the Newcastle field. In the latter case, the Cabinet had decided to

enter into negotiations with the landowners, the Sulphide Corporation.<sup>62</sup>

### **Mines Rescue Act 1925**

The legislation that became operational on 31 December 1925 provided for the establishment of an organised mines rescue system in New South Wales coal and shale mines. Central mines rescue stations were to be set up in four defined and separate districts, in the South Maitland district at Abermain; in the Newcastle field at Cockle Creek; in the Western district at Lithgow; and in the Southern district at Bellambi. It also provided for the establishment of rescue brigades at certain mines where there was no permanent rescue corps in the district. The central rescue stations were to be equipped with sets of breathing apparatus, other necessary appliances as well as a motorcar in readiness for emergencies. Provision was also made for the appointment of a station superintendent together with suitable buildings for the station and for the superintendent's residence. Where necessary, the stations were to be erected on Crown land and Government ten-year loans were extended to companies to cover expenditure on construction, maintenance, equipment, and on training the safety personnel. Under the Act, mine owners' contribution to the scheme was based on a general levy on each ton of coal produced from a mine the proceeding year.<sup>63</sup> Later, on 28 May 1926, a regulation was promulgated setting out the rate of levy contribution payable by owners. The rates were:

South Maitland District:	0.4 of a penny per ton of coal or shale;
Newcastle District:	0.77 of a penny per ton;
Western District:	2.24 pence per ton
Southern District:	2.25 pence per ton. <sup>64</sup>

Owners' contributions were to be paid into a fund controlled by a district committee, with the money used to cover the cost of salaries and wages, purchase of equipment, accessories, and appliances, as well as 'maintenance, and administrative expenses of the station'. The district committees were to comprise one district check inspector (representing the employees) and not less than three or more than five persons elected by the owners. The stations had to set up a 'thoroughly trained permanent rescue corps' appointed by the committee that would be on immediate call. Each station had to keep at least 15 complete suits of breathing apparatus on site. Where the minister found it unnecessary to establish a permanent corps, the Act provided for the establishment of rescue brigades attached to individual mines. Their size was dependent on the number of workers employed underground.<sup>65</sup>

In 1926 the Mines Department reported that in the South Maitland district, the station and residences had been erected, a superintendent and six members of the permanent corps appointed and 15 Proto suits acquired. It commenced operations on 20 March 1926. Three other stations at Cockle Creek, Bellambi and Lithgow were all expected to be operational by 1927.<sup>66</sup>

New South Wales borrowed heavily from British experience and practice in rescue operations. This was particularly the case in the design of stations that were

'closely modelled on their British counterparts' especially that at Dinas, Rhondda Valley, South Wales. Additionally, the legal framework of the New South Wales stations and their organisational structures were closely based on that set out in the British legislation.<sup>67</sup>

### Conclusion

Although some theories were put forward as to the cause of the Bellbird fire and explosions, no single cause was definitively identified and no responsibility was apportioned to any individual or group. However, it could be assumed that a naked light originating from an unknown source caused the disaster. In some respect, the source of ignition remained a mystery. Demands for a Bellbird royal commission to enquire into the possible causes were ignored.

Nevertheless, at the same time that the Mines Rescue Bill was being introduced into Parliament, the Lang Cabinet authorised the setting up of a broad-ranging royal commission, charged with reporting on the 'best methods of working [the] state's coal seams compatible with miners' safety'. Its report did not refer to the Bellbird disaster specifically, but did consider some of the problems experienced in coal-getting in the South Maitland field. Some<sup>68</sup> of its recommendations were incorporated in the *Mines Regulation (Amendment) Act 1926*.

In real terms, the causes of the disaster were perhaps not as important as its effects. The recovery of the entombed miners' bodies by trained rescue teams using breathing apparatus demonstrated the value of a professional approach to mines rescue and advanced the cause of mines' rescue stations. It is not implied that there was a direct cause-effect relationship between the disaster and the 1925 legislation. As indicated, a variety of factors influenced the decision to establish the system. Enthusiastically promoted by the New South Wales Miners' Federation and the Labor caucus, an organised, trained and fully equipped corps of rescue personnel had been advocated for some time. Several mine managers had declared their support for the stations, especially as the rapidly expanded South Maitland field had experienced serious underground fires and this concern was reflected in the recommendations of the two inquests. Also, many in New South Wales mining circles were aware of the mines' rescue models adopted inter-state and overseas and expressed the view that the state lagged behind other jurisdictions. In the wake of the disaster, it appeared that a consensus crystallised around the issue and authorising legislation followed.<sup>69</sup>

Critical to the passage of the legislation was the commitment of the Lang Labor government to industrial reform. Additionally, several Labor parliamentarians representing coalmining constituencies urged the Government to enact the initiative. Important too in mobilizing support for the initiative was the *Labor Weekly* (organ of the Miners' Federation) under the management of A.C. Willis. Some early resistance to the scheme from some miner owners was overcome when it was revealed that the scheme would be administered locally and that the owners were to elect the majority of the members of the district committees.<sup>70</sup>

In terms of fatalities Bellbird still ranks as the worst mining disaster in the



Northern coalfield. As coalmining was the lifeblood of Cessnock and district, the disaster is indelibly etched in local folklore, and memories of the tragedy were regularly revived on the anniversary of the event. Memorial services were held at St. Matthew's Anglican Church, Bellbird, on the Sunday closest to 1 September. For many years too the local press published detailed accounts of the disaster with vivid recollections told my rescuers or their relatives, while several press stories emphasised the heroism of the rescue teams. Therefore, the date 1 September, occupied a special place in the memories of many mining families. On the 67<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the tragedy a memorial stone recording the names of the 21 victims was erected in a small 'rose garden' opposite the site of the former Bellbird mine.<sup>71</sup>

It is perhaps some consolation that the disaster provided a 'wake-up call' for the State Government to legislate finally for the provision of mine rescue stations in New South Wales.

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#### **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> *Newcastle Morning Herald* [hereafter *NMH*], 3 September 1923.

<sup>2</sup> Units used in this paper: 1 acre = 0.4047 hectares; 1 foot = 0.3048 m; 1 yard = 0.9144 m; 1 (long) ton = 1.01605 tonnes.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*; *Annual Reports*, NSW Department of Mines, 1908, p. 158, and 1923, p. 59.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *NMH*, 5 September 1923; Information provided by former Bellbird manager, John Shoebridge, December 2010.

<sup>6</sup> *Annual Report*, NSW Department of Mines, 1923, p. 59.

<sup>7</sup> K.J. Reynolds, 'The Coalmines of NSW: A History of South Maitland Coalfield, 1900-1966', MA Thesis, University of Newcastle, 1968, pp. 11-16; R. Gollan, *The Coalminers of New South Wales*, Melbourne University Press, Parkville, Vic., 1963, p. 17.

<sup>8</sup> Information provided by John Shoebridge, 22 April 2010; *Annual Reports*, NSW Department of Mines, 1917-23.

<sup>9</sup> *NMH*, 7 September 1923.

<sup>10</sup> *Annual Report*, NSW Department of Mines, 1923, p. 76. The 'Major Crane Strike' involved intermittent work stoppages in the South Maitland Coalfield, originally called over the unsuccessful attempts to provide work for unemployed miners from the Newcastle field. When the Abermain-Seaham Co. refused them employment, the miners at Abermain No. 1 and 2 pits went on strike for one day in 1922. This resulted in the conviction of local lodge secretary W. Nelson under the *Master and Servants Act*. Numerous one-day strikes occurred in 1923, especially on court-sitting days in protest of Major Crane, the magistrate who convicted Nelson. See, Reynolds, *History of South Maitland Coalfield*, p. 77; E. Ross, *A History of the Miners' Federation*, Australasian Coal and Shale Employees Association, Sydney, 1970, p. 77.

<sup>11</sup> B. Singleton and G.W. Rickwood, 'Story of the Bellbird Disaster', *Daily Guardian Supplement*, 1923, Cessnock, p. 12. No specific date. Published to raise money for victims families.

<sup>12</sup> Coalminers were paid on a fortnightly cycle of wage payment on the 'Pay Friday' with the following day known as 'Pay Saturday'. In the alternate week the same days were referred to 'Back Friday' and 'Back Saturday'. A. Metcalfe, *For Freedom and Dignity: Historical Agency and Class Structures in the Coalfields of NSW*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1988, p. 233; *NMH*, 3 September 1923.

<sup>13</sup> *NMH*, 20 September 1923.

<sup>14</sup> *The Sydney Morning Herald* [hereafter *SMH*], 3 September 1923.

- <sup>15</sup> *NMH*, 29 September 1923.
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 25 September 1923; *Lithgow Mercury*, 25 September 1923.
- <sup>17</sup> *Cessnock Eagle*, 17 March 1923.
- <sup>18</sup> *Annual Report, NSW Department of Mines, 1923*,
- <sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 4 September 1923.
- <sup>21</sup> Extensive coverage of the first inquest contained in *NMH*, 3 September to 5 October 1923.
- <sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 20 September 1923; Ross, *History of Miners' Federation*, p. 77.
- <sup>23</sup> *NMH*, 4 October 1923.
- <sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>25</sup> *SMH*, 6 September 1923.
- <sup>26</sup> *Annual Report, NSW Department of Mines, 1923*, p. 62.
- <sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>29</sup> Detailed accounts of the role of the 'Proto' teams in the recovery process are contained in *Annual Report, NSW Department of Mines, 1926*, pp. 58-63; <http://archive.amol.org.au/newcastle/greta/bellbird> pp. 60-61, accessed 29 July 2009.
- <sup>30</sup> *NMH*, 19 and 26 June 1924, 15 December 1925, 20 May 1965; *Northern Standard*, 2 July 1965.
- <sup>31</sup> Internal minute (undated), 'Naked Lights at Bellbird', Chief Mines Inspector to Under-Secretary, Department of Mines; letter dated 29 January 1925, Under-Secretary to Chairman of Hetton Bellbird Board, Mines Special File 150, State Records New South Wales [hereafter SRNSW].
- <sup>32</sup> *NMH*, 6 December 1924.
- <sup>33</sup> Copy of NSW Police report of Coroner's inquest into deaths of J.B. Brown and H.F. Moodie, Cessnock, 1 June 1925, Mines Department File 150, SRNSW.
- <sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>36</sup> Examples of royal commissions and statutory inquiries into NSW mining disasters include: *Report of the Royal Commission into accidents at Lithgow Valley colliery, 1886*; *Report of the Royal Commission into Bulli Accident 1887*; *Report of the Court of Inquiry into Dudley Colliery Explosion, 1898*; *Report of the Royal Commission into Mount Kembla Colliery Disaster, 1902-03*.
- <sup>37</sup> D. Clune and G. Griffith, *Decision and Deliberation: The Parliament of New South Wales 1856-2003*, Federation Press, Sydney, 2006, pp. 226-27.
- <sup>38</sup> *NMH*, 6 September 1923; *New South Wales Parliamentary Debates* (hereafter *NSWPD*), 5 September 1923, pp. 645-46.
- <sup>39</sup> Transcript of meeting between Premier and deputation representing parliamentarians and Miners' Federation, Parliament House, Sydney, 13 September 1923, Mines Department Special File 150, SRNSW.
- <sup>40</sup> J. Baddeley MLA, reported in *Common Cause*, 5 September 1923.
- <sup>41</sup> Letter dated 19 January 1924, Under-Secretary of Mines to W. Davies MLA, Mines Special File 150, SRNSW.
- <sup>42</sup> Internal minute dated 3 October 1924, Chief Inspector of Mines to Mines' Minister, Mines special File 150, SRNSW.
- <sup>43</sup> Internal minute dated 9 October 1925, Chief Inspector of Mines to Premier's Department, Mines Special File 150, SRNSW.
- <sup>44</sup> *NSWPD*, 14 November 1924, pp. 2429-44.
- <sup>45</sup> Internal minute dated 2 July 1924, Under-Secretary of Mines, Mines Special File 130, SRNSW.
- <sup>46</sup> *SMH and Daily Telegraph*, 11 September 1924.
- <sup>47</sup> *SMH*, 18 September 1924.
- <sup>48</sup> P. Bell, *If Anything Too Safe: The Mount Mulligan Disaster of 1921*, James Cook University, Townsville, 1996. For Stockton Colliery disaster see *SMH*, 5 December 1896; also comprehensive coverage in E. Tonks, *Beneath Tidal Water: The Story of Newcastle's Harbour Collieries*, Headframe Publishing, Charlestown, NSW, 1985, pp. 20-25.
- <sup>49</sup> R. Geale, *The First Rescue Station: the Development of a Mines Rescue Station on the Northern Coalfields of Northern New South Wales*, Newcastle History Monographs, Newcastle City Council, Newcastle, 1989, pp. 11-12.
- <sup>50</sup> *SMH*, 4 and 8 December 1911.
- <sup>51</sup> Geale, *First Rescue Station*, p. 45.
- <sup>52</sup> *SMH*, 13 December 1921.
- <sup>53</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, 16 May 1924.

<sup>54</sup> *Labor Daily*, 8 May 1924.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> *Cessnock Eagle*, 12 September 1923.

<sup>57</sup> Transcript of meeting between mine owners and managers of Northern Coalfield with Mines' Minister, 22 May 1925, Mines Special File 183, SRNSW.

<sup>58</sup> *SMH*, 14 November 1924.

<sup>59</sup> Letter from J. and A. Brown Ltd, dated 12 June 1925, to Under-Secretary (with notation) 'Mines Rescue Stations', and internal minutes dated 30 April and 17 July 1925, Mines Special File 183, SRNSW.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> *NSWPD*, 2 September 1925, p. 511; 10 September 1925, pp. 702-703.

<sup>62</sup> *SMH*, 24 June 1925.

<sup>63</sup> *Mines Rescue Act 1925*.

<sup>64</sup> *NSW Government Gazette*, 28 May 1926, Regulation 54.

<sup>65</sup> *Mines Rescue Act 1925*.

<sup>66</sup> *Annual Report, NSW Mines Department 1925*, pp. 36-37. It is significant that in the interim period between the proclamation of the 1925 Act and the completion of the station buildings, the Hetton-Bellbird directors made their Bellbird facilities and apparatus (used in the recovery) available to the newly established South Maitland Mines Rescue Committee. A number of emergency calls were attended from Bellbird including the Rothbury explosion (1925) and an inundation at Lily Rose colliery (1926). In both cases the teams successfully recovered a single body from a hostile atmosphere. Information kindly provided by John Shoebridge, 22 December 2010.

<sup>67</sup> Geale, *First Rescue Station*, p. 45; Internal Minute, dated 30 April 1925, Under-Secretary of Mines, Mines Special File 183, SRNSW.

<sup>68</sup> *SMH*, 24 June 1925; *Report of the Royal Commission into the Coal and Shale Mines of NSW (Edmund Report) 1926*; *NSW Coal Mines Regulation (Amendment) Act, 1926*.

<sup>69</sup> Welsh-born, former miner and *Labor Daily* editor, Albert Charles Willis stressed that the New South Wales state 'lagged behind' other jurisdictions in its provision of mine safety. Willis who was Secretary of the Miners' Federation (1916-25) was nominated to the Vice-Presidency of the NSW Legislative Council by Premier J. Lang. It was reported that Willis exercised a certain measure of control over the Premier, see *Labor Daily* 14 May 1924.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*; Albert Charles Willis, <http://www.adbonline.au/biogs> accessed 7 October 2010.

<sup>71</sup> *Newcastle Sun*, 1 September 1961, 27 July 1965, 2 September 1967, 3 September 1973; *NMH*, 3 September 1973, 21 August 1989; *Northern Star*, 1 September 1961.