

Recognition of Mining Heritage in South Australia

By R Keith Johns MAusIMM

HISTORICAL

The shipment of 40 boxes of silver-bearing galena from Wheal Gawler to England in April 1841 marked the first production of metallic ores in Australia. The Glen Osmond Mines, barely eight kilometres south-east of the centre of the City of Adelaide, would yield 1700t lead and 1.5t silver in the decade that followed. But there would soon be more and better on offer – from copper.

Spectacular outcrops of copper carbonates were discovered at Kapunda in 1842. Their development led to a highly successful enterprise during the period 1844-79 that aroused widespread investor interest. Smelters were erected in 1849 and a refinery in 1861.

Of greater significance and even more spectacular was the discovery of copper carbonates in outcrop near Burra Creek in 1845. Soon, the Burra Burra Mines were to assure the Colony a period of unprecedented growth, prosperity and world renown – set to contribute a large proportion of world copper output during the period 1845-77. The oxidised ores proved to be easily worked and of high grade. The largest copper smelters outside of Swansea (Wales) were erected in 1849.

Any doubts that may have existed with regard to South Australia being a major copper province were dispelled by discoveries of copper mineralisation at Kadina in 1859 and at Moonta in 1861. Smelters were erected at Wallaroo in 1861; the mining companies amalgamated and, until closure in 1923, operated mines that were large even by modern standards, extending to a depth of 470 fathoms.

The Cornish influence during the formative years of the Colony was profound. Discovery and development of copper deposits in South Australia was timely since these coincided with decline of copper and tin mines in Cornwall. Cornish miners in their thousands were drawn to the new opportunities offered



Wallaroo Mines – view easterly from office shaft.



Moonta Mines – Hughes shaft and engine house.

through indentured migration schemes. Thus, mining methods, haulage and processing of ore and pumping of water from the mines were based on Cornish technology.

Literally hundreds of other mines were opened and duly closed (many times, in some cases) by the turn of the Century elsewhere in South Australia, but their histories depict a story of small size and low grade, droughts and acute water shortage, remoteness and transport difficulties.

Mining has contributed greatly to the economic development of South Australia: on immigration, notably from Cornwall; on infrastructure, through growth of the City of Adelaide and of the towns serving the mining communities; in improved communications, roads, railways, ports; in provision of capital for investment in other enterprises; for the promotion of education, notably at the University of Adelaide; and in the development of social character.

South Australians would take their skills to the Victorian Goldfields in the 1850s and to Broken Hill. Ores from “The Hill”, since discovery in 1893, have been railed to Port Pirie – now the site of the world’s largest lead smelter and refinery.

The Australian steel industry was founded on iron ore from The Middleback Ranges after 1915. In due course, mine sites of renown at Iron Knob, Radium Hill, Coober Pedy, Leigh Creek and Roxby Downs will acquire significance comparable to the mining districts of the nineteenth century.

MINING HERITAGE PRESERVATION

South Australia has a long, rich and fascinating mining heritage that is recognised as being of international importance, exhibiting features that set it apart from other Australian mining districts.

In 1984, the Department of Environment and Planning and the Department of Mines and Energy undertook a systematic review and assessment of the State’s mining heritage. The aim of the review was to identify sites and items for inclusion on the State Heritage Register, for documentation of relics and assets,

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their characterisation, interpretation, assessment and management, integrated with the need for conservation, improvement and preservation to public benefit.

Nineteenth-century copper mining heritage is the cornerstone of the Cornish cultural festival, Kernewek Lowender (held biennially in the "Copper Triangle" of northern Yorke Peninsula), which attracts 100,000 visitors during the week of festivities in May. There, and at other centres, the Cornish influence which dominated in the operational copper mining phase for a period of 80 years has inspired the recognition, interpretation and preservation of those mining relics for historical, educational and tourism purposes. Thus, during the period 1981-91, over \$500,000 was expended on interpretative trails, signage and information brochures at the following:

- Glen Osmond Mines (lead – silver)
- Kapunda Copper Mine and environs
- Burra Mines, smelts and township
- Moonta Mines, environs and Wheal Hughes
- Kadina township, Wallaroo Mines
- Wallaroo smelters and environs
- Jupiter Creek, Echunga Goldfield
- Talisker Silver – Lead Mine (in Talisker Conservation Park)
- Peterborough gold battery
- Sleep's Hill quarries (quartzite)
- Almanda Silver Mine (Scott's Creek Conservation Park)
- Barossa Goldfield (Para Wirra Recreation Park)
- Blinman Mine
- Inneson gypsum workings, township (Innes National Park)
- Broken Hill – "The Silver Trail"

Further to the above, \$1,000,000 was expended on conservation work, reconstruction and stabilisation (of surface facilities and underground workings) at Burra, Moonta and Glen Osmond as part of Jubilee 150 (1986) celebrations. Guidebooks were published to enhance tourism interest at major mine sites and their townships.



Burra Burra Mines – Morphett's shaft and engine houses

Other mining heritage sites available for visitors access include: Callington (copper), Chapel Hill (gold), Watt's Gully (gold), Willunga (slate), Port Pirie Museum, Iron Knob Museum, Nuccaleena (copper), Sliding Rock (copper), Leigh Creek coalfield, Bolla Bollana smelter, Yudnamutana copper mines, Waukaringa goldfield, Radium Hill (uranium), Andamooka opal field, Coober Pedy opal field and Broken Hill (The Geocentre, Line of Lode, Delprats Mine, Junction Mine, South Mine and Block 10).

The South Australian Department of Mines and Energy published literature relating to mining history and heritage to satisfy perceived requirements for recognition of a centenary (1982), a sesquicentenary (1986) and a bicentenary (1988). Other authors were also inspired at that time, including those who wrote books and those who presented papers to AusIMM conferences and which were subsequently published, such as at the 1986 SA Mining Heritage Seminar and 1993 Centenary Conference – both held in Adelaide.

SUSTAINABILITY

The South Australian Government has an obligation to support the conservation and promotion of the State's mining heritage assets – an obligation which is no longer being met. Unfortunately, such heritage is gradually being lost due to declining financial support in recent years from Government agencies and local communities, lack of coordinated effort to preserve and promote this heritage and a perception of irrelevance to the future of the State. Such recognition should not be seen as a drain on public funds but rather as an exploitable asset to promote the history and culture of the State, to convey aspects of hardship, persistence, innovation and the benefits that have resulted.

Likewise, it is cause for regret that the mining industry of today is singularly disinterested in providing financial support when it would appear they have much to gain through promotion of positive aspects of their industry, in enhancement of achievements and traditions of their predecessors and to improve public image.

Heritage sites are not realising their full potential because of inadequate resources to manage and to promote them, declining visitor numbers, shortage of volunteers to manage the sites, and inadequate funds to maintain those assets. It is ironic that support has waned when there would appear to be a great opportunity to take advantage of imminent recognition of World Heritage Status for Cornish Mining Heritage in Cornwall.

R Keith Johns – was formerly the Director General, SA Department of Mines and Energy. He is a member of the Mining Heritage Trust Advisory Committee (National Trust of South Australia), a member of The AusIMM Mineral Heritage Committee (representing South Australia and Broken Hill) and has a Masters of Science from The University of Adelaide.