

The 120th Anniversary of the Mount Kembla Mining Disaster: its significance in the history of the Catholic Church in the Wollongong District

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Six-year-old John James Parsons junior¹ was sitting on the back fence of the family home at 40 Young Street in Wollongong when he heard the explosion. It was a few minutes past 2 p.m., on a cold, windless Thursday 31 July 1902 and there had been a gas explosion at Mount Kembla Mine. Eleven kilometres (six miles) away in Wollongong what John Parsons heard was a distinct rumble, ‘like a cannon’, he later reported. At Mount Kembla, the mountain rocked, flames shot out of the mine’s mouth and ventilation shafts, and ‘thousands of tons of stone, bricks, earth, timber and iron were belched onto the surrounding mountain side.’ The gas explosion was so great men were blown apart. The smoke from the explosion was drawn back into the oxygen-less shaft and then expelled. ‘A great cloud of smoke rose above the mountain. ... The explosion was heard twenty miles away at Helensburgh to the north and Jamberoo to the south.’²



Waiting at the pit top: wives, mothers, men off shift: everyone from neighbouring houses and farms rushed to the mine – and waited. ...and waited. Many stand, but many women sit, waiting anxiously; and many look to the mine’s entrance.

¹ Author’s grandfather

² Piggin, S. and Lee, H., *The Mount Kembla Disaster*, Sydney University Press, 1992, p.46 An excellent account of the disaster and aftermath. Statistical data comes from this book.

Two hundred and sixty-one men and boys were at work down the pit and twenty-two were working on the surface on 31 July. The explosion caused 95 recorded fatal casualties on the day, including fourteen youths: two were 14 years old, three were 15 years old, one was 16 years old, four were 17 years old, three were 18 years old and one was 19 years old. It remains the worst mining disaster in Australia's history in terms of loss of life.³ The explosion left thirty-three widows and 120 children fatherless. There were some unidentified bodies; there was one body not found. Among the disaster victims twenty-five Catholics had died: twenty were buried at Wollongong, two at West Dapto and one at Albion Park, while nineteen-year-old Michael Brennan's body was not found. Nevertheless, Father John Byrne, Priest-in-Charge of Wollongong, included his name in St Francis Xavier's Burial Register at the bottom of the list of deceased miners with the notation 'Body not found'. One miner, Patrick Francis Purcell, an engine driver, was in the engine house when the 'fire-ball' demolished the building. Paddy received extensive burns and many other injuries and was hospitalised until his death, as the twenty-fifth victim, on 6 April 1904 aged 45. He was buried at Wollongong on 8 April, bringing the tally of fatalities from the disaster to 96.

The Purcell and Egan families were decimated by this disaster. The families had built a concrete cricket pitch on the Purcell property and there were enough members of both families to make up a team to play social cricket games in the village. The deaths of Purcell and Egan men at the pit that day caused homes and pitch to be abandoned.⁴



CONVEYING THE DEAD BODIES FROM THE MINE TO THEIR HOMES.

Leaving the pit: coffined bodies of the dead were removed to their homes

The Requiem Mass for twenty of the deceased Catholics was held at St Clement's Church in Mount Kembla on Saturday 2 August. The coffined bodies were then transported to Wollongong Cemetery for burial. 'The bodies arrived at dusk. Fathers Byrne and Dunne called for buggie lamps and after nightfall conducted the burial service'⁵ for Matthew Peace, James

³ Until the Victorian bushfires of 2009, the loss of life as a result of the Mount Kembla Mine explosion was the worst for an Australian peacetime disaster.

⁴ McNamara, JL, *Life at Cordeaux River New South Wales*, self-published, 2007, p. 162

⁵ Piggan, S. and Lee, H., *The Mount Kembla Disaster*, Sydney University Press, 1992, p.92

Purcell and James' sons Thomas, James and John according to the Parish Burial Register. The following day, Sunday 3 August, Thomas, Dennis, Michael and Edward Egan, Michael, Edward and Daniel Gallagher, Edward Gill, Stephen Gleeson, Patrick McCann, Thomas and Walter Morriss, John Murphy, John Ryan and Francis Stewart were buried. Father Hayden officiated at the funerals of James Head and Daniel Healey, who were buried at Dapto on 2 August and of William Doherty who was buried at Albion Park on 3 August.

Catholic Victims of the Mount Kembla Mining Disaster, 1902

| NAME | AGE | OCCUPATION | BURIED |
|--------------------|-----|-------------|--------------------------------|
| Michael BRENNAN | 19 | Wheeler | Body not found |
| William DOHERTY | 28 | Miner | Catholic Cemetery, Albion Park |
| Dennis EGAN | 20 | Miner | Wollongong |
| Edward EGAN | 19 | Miner | Wollongong |
| Michael EGAN | 29 | Miner | Wollongong |
| Thomas EGAN | 32 | Miner | Wollongong |
| Edward GALLAGHER | 38 | Miner | Wollongong |
| Daniel GALLAGHER | 50 | Miner | Wollongong |
| Michael GALLAGHER | 45 | Miner | Wollongong |
| Edward J GILL | 28 | Miner | Wollongong |
| Stephen GLEESON | 33 | Miner | Wollongong |
| James HEAD | 30 | Miner | West Dapto |
| Daniel HEALEY | 32 | Miner | West Dapto |
| Patrick Mc CANN | 36 | Miner | Wollongong |
| Thomas F MORRISS | 26 | Miner | Wollongong |
| Walter J MORRISS | 52 | Miner | Wollongong |
| John MURPHY | 49 | Miner | Wollongong |
| Matthew PEACE | 38 | Miner | Wollongong |
| James jnr. PURCELL | 37 | Shiftman | Wollongong |
| James snr PURCELL | 64 | Miner | Wollongong |
| John PURCELL | 33 | Miner | Wollongong |
| Patrick F PURCELL | 45 | Eng. Driver | Wollongong |
| Thomas PURCELL | 39 | Miner | Wollongong |
| John RYAN | 33 | Miner | Wollongong |
| Francis STEWART | 38 | Miner | Wollongong |

Father John Dunne of Bulli and Father William Hayden of Albion Park visited each of the bereaved families the following weekend, while the Good Samaritan Sisters from St Mary's Convent Wollongong frequently visited the families following the tragedy.

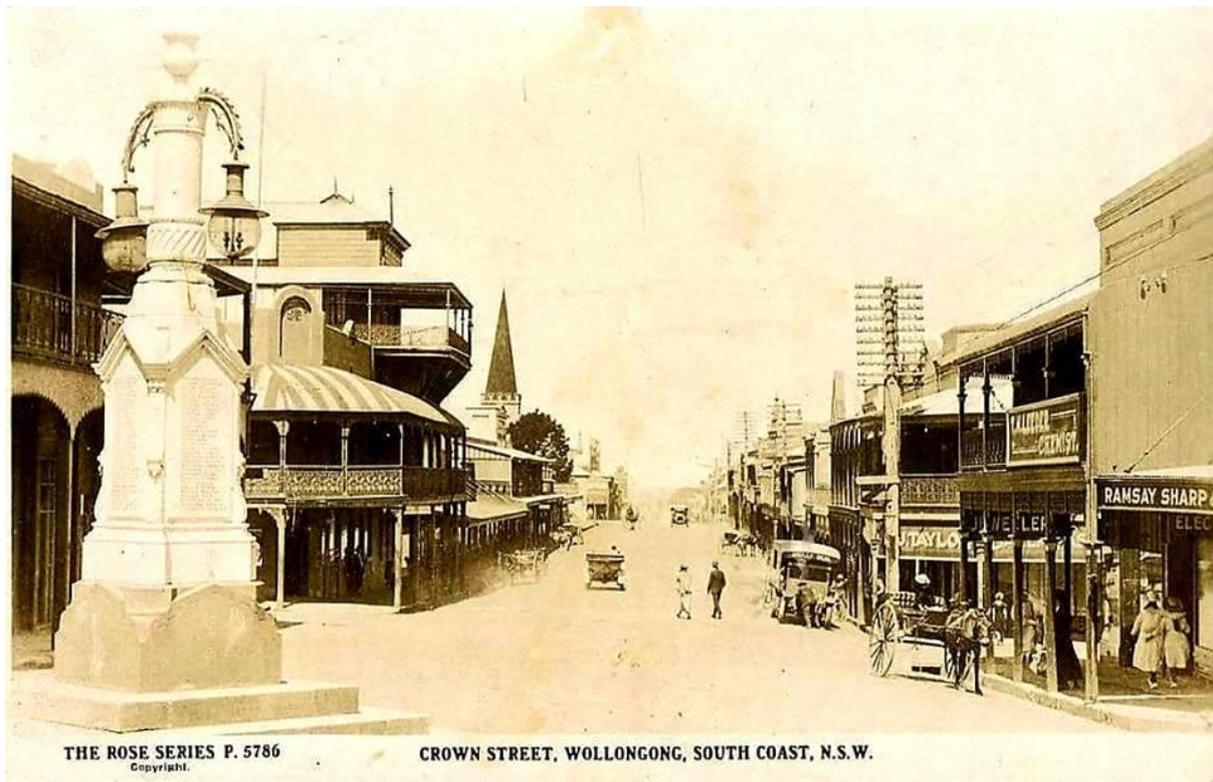
Twelve months' later the death of His Holiness, Pope Leo XIII on 20 July 1903 could not divert the people of Wollongong from the memory of so many deaths at Kembla:

At St. Francis Xavier's Church on Sunday morning [26 July] the church was very tastefully decorated in black and white in memory of the late Pope. The orchestra, under the conductorship of Mr. W. Dwyer, rendered the *De Profundis*, the congregation remaining

standing during the playing of the *Dead March in Saul*. Special reference will be made tomorrow to the Mount Kembla disaster.⁶

At St Clement's, the first anniversary of the tragedy was commemorated on Sunday 2 August with Mass, while Mount Kembla's Methodist Church held a special service. On the same page of the *Illawarra Mercury* advising readers of the special services at Mount Kembla, an 'In Memoriam' appeared for James Head inserted by his sisters (Ellen, Mary and Amelia):

He left his home in perfect health,
Not thinking death was near –
But his hour had come; he had to go,
The dearest Lord had willed it so.



Mount Kembla Mining Disaster Monument near the Crown Lane - Crown Street intersection. The attached gaslights were installed by John James Parsons senior, plumber, of Young Street, Wollongong. His son had heard the explosion on that fateful day in 1902.

The memories remained strong for years after the disaster, as a notice in an August 1916 issue of the *Illawarra Mercury* indicated: 'Memorial — A service was held in the Catholic Church, Mount Kembla, last Sunday in memory of those who perished in the Mt. Kembla disaster, this being the fourteenth anniversary of that dreadful calamity.'⁷ Down the years it became an annual commemoration:

Up to the end of the First World War, the Catholics appeared to commemorate the disaster most conscientiously. From 1920 the Church of England seized the initiative

⁶ *Illawarra Mercury*, Saturday, 1 August 1903, p.2

⁷ *Illawarra Mercury*, Friday, 4 August 1916, p.2

and has retained it ever since. In the non-sectarian atmosphere of Mt Kembla no one appears to have objected to this arrangement.⁸

However, as Saint Francis Xavier's *Church Notice Book for 1933-35* records, this was not true. In the thirties, for instance, the parish priest announced that on the closest Sunday to the anniversary a commemoration would be held 'with a general Communion in the Mount Kembla Church at 8.30 and Benediction in the afternoon at 3.30.'

The mining villages along the escarpment were in some ways isolated and insular, but the Town of Wollongong wanted to retain the memory of the heroes and victims of this enormous tragedy. A Mount Kembla Mining Disaster monument was erected near the Crown Lane-Crown Street intersection in Wollongong and was officially unveiled on Saturday 12 August 1905. John James Parsons senior manufactured and installed the gas light lamps attached to the stone monument. Before a crowd estimated at between four to five thousand, John Beatson, the secretary of the memorial committee and Mayor of Wollongong, let slip the British flag covering the monument. Among the twelve speakers at the unveiling was Father PJ Walsh, the priest-in-charge of St Francis Xavier's.

In time, it seemed the disaster faded from the centre of civic memory: in 1937 the monument was removed to the edge of town at the Wollongong Rest Park and later it was re-erected at Mount Kembla in the grounds of the Anglican Church. It is here each year that a commemoration service has been held. A sociological survey in 1977 for which I was an undergraduate interviewer found that

The population of Kembla is no longer predominantly engaged in the mining industry. The memory is no longer perceived as relevant to the community, ...Its increasingly gentrified population appears to be more interested in arts and crafts than in coalmining or its history.⁹

Today the population has grown and the socio-economic status of the suburbs within the parish of Unanderra (of which Mount Kembla is now a part) has changed from the days dominated by a mine, farms and mining families. There are only a very few older parishioners who recall the stories of their parents about the disaster and the impact on bereaved families. An archivist can tell the story but not revive the memory – and this disaster is almost beyond human memory. However, whatever the memories – in stone, in one's mind or in one's family history – there is an enduring obligation for us to recall the victims in prayer: Eternal rest grant unto them, O Lord and let Perpetual Light shine upon them. May their souls and the souls of all the faithful departed, through the mercy of God, rest in peace. Amen

⁸ Piggin, S. and Lee, H., *The Mount Kembla Disaster*, Sydney University Press, 1992, p. 268

⁹ Piggin, 1992, p.276