The Wensleydale Coal Mine

The presence of brown coal along the west branch of Wormbete Creek, seven miles due south of Winchelsea, was discovered by Bert Armistead and Ken Strickland in well-sinking operations during the 1914 drought. The Victorian Mines Department tested samples and found the coal to be of good quality, but no large-scale mining eventuated for a number of years.

Around 1919 Messrs. H.F. Richardson and M. Templeton began prospecting the area in earnest. This activity raised the interest of Melbourne and Geelong businessmen who in 1921 formed a company called Western District Coal Mines Pty. Ltd. to work the deposit. The Company obtained options on the site and began testing the seam, but soon sold out to the Otway Coal Company Ltd. W. McCann of the Fyansford Cement Works took a keen interest in the mine, and it was reported that Geelong support for the venture was motivated by the City's annoyance at unreliable interstate coal shipments that interfered with running the City's factories.

Boring revealed substantial reserves estimated at 4,000,000 tons covered by a thin layer of overburden (around five metres), and this convinced the Company to proceed. For the first two years of mining the Company extracted coal by means of shafts and drives while the open cut was prepared. This coal was sold on the Geelong market and was used at the Fyansford Cement Works and in domestic applications. The coal was rated at 9666 BTU's when dried, and one and a half tons proved equivalent to one ton of black coal. Road cartage costs to Geelong were extremely high, eighteen shillings per ton, and the Company determined to find a cheaper means before full production commenced.
The Victorian Railways were approached and asked to lay a ten kilometre spur from Winchelsea to the mine. The mine site was elevated above the Geelong to Colac railway, and it was suggested that the loaded trucks could be gravitated to Winchelsea. Needless to say, the Victorian Railways took a cool view of the proposed spur. Its method of operation was unorthodox and it would cost £70,000 to install. Local representations by parliamentarians and councillors failed to convince the Railway Minister of the need for the line. The Company was therefore forced to consider financing it or, alternatively, using the Wensleydale railway, five kilometres to the east. The gradients encountered between the mine and the Wensleydale railway station were adverse to a gravitational railway, so an aerial tramway was decided on.

The aerial tramway ran due east from the mine to near the Wensleydale railway station. The tramway plant was obtained second-hand from Queensland and delivered in pieces to the Winchelsea railway station, from where it was carted to the site by horse-drawn vehicles. The tram was carried on steel pylons set in concrete, with the tallest pylon being 25 metres above the surface. A cable tension station was sited at the half-way point. One hundred buckets, 600 mm wide, 600 mm deep and and 1200 mm long of slightly more than half a tonne capacity, were suspended from the rope and the entire apparatus driven by a steam engine sited at the western end and fired on brown coal. The structure was erected in 1923-24 and ready for operation late in 1924.

A Ruston proctor steam shovel of three cubic metres capacity was purchased to remove the mine's overburden, and at the time it was claimed to be the largest shovel in Australia. The overburden was deposited by the shovel
Foot of tramway incline from floor of open cut to surface installation, 1925  
(photograph: A. Clissold)

into trucks running on a 3 ft. 6 in. gauge tram laid on the open cut floor and these trucks were then propelled to the foot of an incline and winched up to a dumping area comprising an elevated circular track mounted on trestles up to five metres high. It was proposed to obtain a small locomotive to work this section of tramway but this did not eventuate.

The coal was also transported by the spoil tram but was discharged into a conveyor before the crest of the tramway incline. The conveyor transported the coal to the top of a five storey screening plant where shaking tables sorted the coal into three types and dropped it into storage bins. The buckets for the aerial tram were loaded in a pit below the bins and in order to do this the buckets were taken off the rope, spotted under a lever-operated shutter, filled and then guided back onto the rope. At the
Main surface installations: boiler house in foreground, conveyor and coal screens/bins in background, 1926

Looking along ropeway towards Wensleydale from loading point, 1926 (photographs: A. Clissold)

Wensleydale terminus of the tramway the coal was deposited into hoppers placed over the railway so that direct gravity loading of rail trucks was possible.

The Company also fitted out the mine with a steam-driven power plant; an absolute necessity since the Wormbete Creek flowed through the open cut. At its peak, the mine employed thirty five men and initial provisions were made for worker accommodation by constructing two huts out of a planned eight. The entire development cost the company around £80,000.

Coal began moving over the tramway in 1925, and during the next three years approximately 6,000 tonnes was despatched by rail. The main market was in Geelong, with industrial establishments being the major users. Coal-winning temporarily ceased in 1928, probably due to marketing difficulties, and did not resume until 1931. The revival proved shortlived. After sending out a further 8,000 tonnes of coal on the tramway, the mine shut down in 1932 when competition from New South Wales black coal proved too strong.
The Company went into liquidation in 1935 but the plant and equipment were left intact with Mr. H. Hanna acting as receiver. A few years later a new company called Otway Coal Company Pty. Ltd. was formed to take over the assets of the mine. This Company soon changed its name to the Wensley Bray Coal Mine Pty. Ltd. and in 1943 re-opened the mine. The Wensley Bray Company also assumed control of the aerial tramway and railway siding but did not use this facility. The tramway had been damaged by bush fire in 1939 when the loading bins and ropeway housing at the Wensleydale end were destroyed and it was not repaired.

Coal from the mine was carted by motor trucks to Winchelsea railway station or direct to Geelong consumers. Most of the equipment of the old Otway Coal Company was dismantled or abandoned with the exception of the Ruston shovel and the surface tramway plant. The Ruston was used for overburden stripping on the upper levels of the mine where the spoil was deposited into motor trucks and driven away for dumping nearby. The coal was blasted from the face on the lower level and loaded by a small diesel shovel into tramway trucks, taken by horse haulage to the foot of an incline, winched up the side of the open cut and discharged into a crusher and screener at the top from where the road trucks were loaded.

In the first full year of production (1944), 8678 tonnes of coal was mined, and by 1948 it had risen to an average of around 600 tonnes per week. The revival of the mine reached full fruition in 1951 when the State Government purchased the mine and made an agreement with Roche Bros. Pty. Ltd. to operate it on the Government's behalf. It was at this time that the remains of the aerial tramway to the Wensleydale railway were dismantled. Roche Bros. turned the operation into a gigantic enterprise. Drag lines,
scoops and a large fleet of motor trucks kept the coal moving until 1959 when the mine was worked out.

The site of the open cut is clearly visible today along with fragments of a storage bin. All remains of the pre-1951 days have been obliterated by later mining operations at the site. Fragments of foundations for the aerial tramway can be seen along the route while at the railway siding will be found several buckets, a pile of coal and ground impression of the installations.