



NEW ZEALAND
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NEW ZEALAND ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION NEWSLETTER



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LETTER TO THE EDITORBrunner Mine

Dear Sir,

Prior to reading Oliver and Wood's article on the excavation at the Brunner coke ovens (Vol.24:4, Dec. 1981) I would have thought it impossible to analyse the archaeology of such a site without reference to the catastrophic event which occurred there 86 years ago.

On 26 March 1896 an underground explosion in the mine killed 67 miners. Their communal grave can be seen at the cemetery at Stillwater a few miles upstream from the mine. About 50 of the miners had been married and between them had provided for some 200 dependents, the majority of them children. The effects of the tragedy upon the small mining communities about the Grey River is not hard to imagine. Incredibly the authors of the article refer to 1896 only in passing as a year (presumably one of several) of low coal production.

One of the aims of archaeology is to extend our knowledge of past events in history in order that we can relate more directly with the labours and lives of our ancestors - a facile explanation of a complex discipline perhaps, but one many of the interested public would endorse. The December cover photograph on the Newsletter of the three workmen at the mine promised an absorbing story which simply didn't materialise. Archaeology should tell us more about the people who built the railway and mine buildings, tended the coke ovens, despatched the coke and coal to their industrial destinations, and so on, than archival history has been able to, but the article fails to do this.

The disaster is an important part of West Coast history. As a child living in Greymouth I cannot remember a time when I didn't know that the brick chimney rising out of the scrub above the steep Grey River bank marked the site of the mine. As school children we all knew its history and occasionally visited the mine site and the grave at Stillwater.

I appreciate that the article is specifically about the coke ovens but to be readable to people such as myself I think a broader description of the mine and the adjacent communities is vital if the Newsletter is to be interesting reading.

Gerry Barton
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