

MT KEMBLA MINE DISASTER MEMORIAL.

Initially known as the MacCabe-McMurray Memorial the images show the changes throughout time 1905 - 2015.

This loved monument has had three homes, two light brackets, two urns, at least three sets of lighting forms, it has been neglected, vandalised, fought over, loved, repaired, misaligned and weathered the effects of time. Yet it still stands as an important part of our community's memory.

The memorial has been the subject of discussions in several forums, the most comprehensive source of information can be found in 'The Mt Kembla Disaster' by Stuart Piggin and Henry Lee 1992 and in the Illawarra Historical Society Inc Sept/Oct 2002 article by Carol Herben.

The suggestion that a monument be erected to MacCabe and McMurray's heroic deeds which cost them their lives, was made in Parliament in the weeks following the disaster. The government waved the import tax on the Italian marble and donated the Pymont bluestone base, but the task of planning for and erecting the memorial was undertaken by a local Wollongong committee. They wanted it to be an elegant memorial that was both 'worthy of the deed' and practical including 'a drinking fountain by day and a lamp by night'.

The undertaking was fraught with problems, and it is a testament to their resolve that it was a success. Some of the challenges they faced included: support from the miners union being conditional on the inclusion of all victims names not just MacCabe and McMurray; finding a suitable commanding location to erect the monument with eight sites highly debated; the design of the monument and inclusion of certain symbols; and the spelling of the victims names. In the end the monument was designed by Wollongong's Frederick W. Rose; all the names of the victims were included (although some errors occurred); a cross and miners lamp were left off the memorial symbolism; and the site finally decided upon was the commercial centre of town, the corner of Crown and Keria Street Wollongong (Piggin and Lee 1992:241-243).

Some of us on Kembla Jottings and Lost Wollongong back in 2015 were pondering the dates for the changes in lights and new brackets on the monument over time and it was Julian Marr's research that resolved our discussions. Once an account of all costs were made for the erection of the monument in 1905, the committee discovered a surplus in the MacCabe-McMurray Memorial funds and so decided to replace the existing lights with better four burner gas lights. A tender by J J Parsons for 6 pounds 3 shillings was then accepted, and before the year was out, the memorial had new lights and decorative curved cast iron brackets. Only two of the burners were lit on week days while all four were lit on Saturdays and special events which led one member of the public to remark "It seems funny to have two fine lights on the MacCabe-McMurray monument, and only use one. It seems like spoiling the ship for a penn'orth of tar" (Illawarra Mercury 1905 25th August).

With the introduction of electricity to Wollongong and complaints about the dilapidated, broken lights hanging off the monument, new shades and electric lights were installed circa 1922. By 1932 the Lighting Committee reported that the electricity fittings be removed from the monument due to their dangerous condition (Illawarra Mercury 1931 Sept 11th).

As early as 1913, there were calls to have the monument moved by the business community which was met with strong objections. The complaints continued right up to 1934 when the Miners Federation was still opposing any attempt to remove the monument and demanded that the lights and water be reinstated. However by 1937 with increase pressure, vehicular traffic and road works the monument was finally removed to Rest Park, Wollongong with the consent of the Miners Federation. "That it had successfully tormented the business community for 32 years is a measure of the power of sentiment unleashed by the disaster" said Piggin & Lee (1992:245).

All photos of the monument at Rest Park (the park was situated between Burelli Street and Globe Lane, Wollongong) show it was no longer sitting on the bluestone steps and no longer had any lights. What happened to the lights is unknown. While in the park, the monument was vandalised, knocked over and the marble cracked. Fred Kirkwood thought it was time to bring the monument home to the Mount where it belonged. In August 1973 it was erected on the grounds of the Soldiers' and Miners' Memorial Church Mt Kembla where it remains to this day (Piggin and Lee 1992:246). A few peculiarities occurred during the move, the base was misaligned so does not face the front, the column elements were accidentally placed in the wrong order, and at some point possibly before the move, it received a different urn to sit atop of the column. It no longer serves as a fountain by day nor a light by night.

For the 2002 centenary commemorations \$2000.00 were spent in restoration and cleaning the monument by a stonemason (Herben 2002). Today it still serves as a treasured and valued link to our past. Located in a prominent position on Cordeaux Road it reminds us never to forget those who died and the families who suffered.

The monument is once again in desperate need of TLC, the top of the urn is missing, its surface is heavily weathered, stained and dirty, the lead lettering corroding and old repairs require attention.

For those attending the July Walk and Talk tomorrow be sure to have a look at the memorial on your first stop down at the Mt Kembla Soldiers' and Miners' Memorial Church.

Mt Kembla Disaster Memorial Monument



August 1905
Crn Crown Street and Crown Lane, Wollongong

Italian marble monument created by F Rose. Original gas lights, straight brackets and drinking fountain on bluestone base and steps.

UOW Collection, Photographer O.G. Rienis



Circa 1910
Crn Crown Street and Crown Lane, Wollongong

New curved light brackets with four burner gas lights were installed just months after the unveiling due to surplus funds.

UOW Collection, Photographer unknown



1932
Crn Crown Street and Crown Lane

(back view of monument)
Electric lighting installed circa 1921, road asphalt now covers the first step. Calls to move it made as early as 1913.

Photo Sydney Mail 1932 March 23



Circa 1940s
Rest Park, Wollongong (1937-1973)

Lights, water and steps were not reinstated after the move to Rest Park, Wollongong.

Illawarra Images Collection



2015
Soldiers' & Miners' Memorial Church
Mt Kembla (1973- present)

Base and column pieces misaligned. New urn installed circa 1970s, top of urn now missing.

Photo Personal Collection