



Denniston

West Coast – Tai Poutini



Denniston was the main township of a unique collection of mining towns built to service the coal mines on the Denniston plateau. It is accessible via nine kilometres of winding, sealed road from Waimangaroa, and it offers magnificent views down to the coastal plains north of Westport, Cape Foulwind and the mouth of the Waimangaroa River.

Denniston was certainly one of New Zealand's most isolated and difficult mining towns to live in the country. The current road was not built until 1902, with the first access being either up a steep pack track or in a coal wagon up the Incline. The fact that former inhabitants remember it fondly, and that people still choose to live there, speaks volumes for its past social values and enduring mystique.

History

In July 1860 German geologist, Julius von Haast, discovered a coal seam in the southern headwaters of the Waimangaroa River. He named the valley Coalbrook Dale after a coal mining village in Shropshire, England, and a rocky cliff above the valley Burnett's Face after his companion.

In 1873 after a favourable report on the tonnage of extractable coal in the area, the Westport Colliery Company (later Westport Coal Company) was formed in Dunedin, opening a mine on the plateau in 1878. Before long there were three townships, including Denniston, several mines and a complex system of rope roads bringing coal across the plateau to the top of the Denniston Incline.

While Denniston was one of the most productive coal mines of its day, the engineering works that enabled the transport coal from the mines to the wharfs and then on to markets around New Zealand, are also significant.

To bring coal down from the plateau, the colliery owners needed a system that would deliver wagons full of coal from the heights of the plateau. Then return empty wagons back to the top. James Burnett, Haast's companion in 1860, recommended the construction of a self-acting incline, as straight as possible.

The self-acting incline was powered by gravity, with a loaded New Zealand Railways Q-wagon of around 12 tonne plunging down a 1 in 2.22 descent. Huge drums were anchored at the top of the incline and mounted together on a common horizontal shaft. Each drum was wound with 4-inch thick wire rope in the opposite direction to the next drum. As a full wagon was lowered and wire rope paid out, a second drum, turning in the same direction, wound the second rope on, bringing up an empty wagon.

Late in 1878 construction of the incline began and on 24 October 1879 the Denniston Incline was officially opened.

Known by locals as the 'eighth wonder of the world' the incline efficiently delivered vast quantities of coal (an average of 14 wagons per hour) from the

Denniston Incline



Denniston Plateau to the Conns Creek railway yards near Waimangaroa for nearly 90 years. It also carried people and goods up and down until other transport routes were improved.



Denniston street

By 1895 the Denniston Incline carried the largest tonnage of coal in the country. At its peak, in 1906, almost 350,000 tons of coal travelled down from the incline in a single year. It was one of the biggest engineering projects undertaken in New Zealand in its time.

In the early 1960s there was a big decline in the demand for coal and New Zealand Rail began to write-off the Q-wagons used on the Incline. On 16 August 1967 the incline and the branch railway line were both closed. The Inangahua earthquake on 24 May 1968 buried the upper part of the incline under a huge rockfall. Coalcorp, the last government agency to mine at Denniston, closed its operations in 1995. Private companies continue to mine today on the plateau on a comparatively reduced scale.

Communities at Denniston

Once the incline was constructed a township quickly developed with the opening of a school in 1882, postal service in 1883 and a police station and alternative access route via a bridle track in 1885. As the settlements grew there were also hotels, churches, sports facilities (including a swimming pool, tennis courts and a recreation ground), a volunteer hall, a hospital, a high school, renown brass bands and, in 1902 a proper road.

The total population of the area peaked at almost 1500—including 842 at Denniston – in 1911. The mines, collectively the country's biggest producer, had already yielded their greatest annual output the previous year when a workforce of 446 hewed and trucked away 348,335 tons of coal.

Despite the town developments, living conditions did not advance at the same rate. An architect appointed by a royal commission to report on the plateau townships in 1919 described them as "disgracefully dirty, with large families crammed into dank little shacks in a dreary landscape with an appalling climate". His call for replacement of the existing settlements with a model mining township went unheeded, although

much better houses were built in the 1920s.

Reduced coal production during the 1930s and improved road transport accelerated a drift away from the plateau towns. Coalbrook Dale and Burnett's Face were deserted by 1956, while Denniston's population was down to 310 and still dwindling.

Conserving our heritage

Although many of the industrial and domestic building have long gone, the remnants of the town and the mine remain as an evocative reminder of life on The Hill. DOC recognises the importance of Denniston, highlighting it as one of the important historic places it looks after on the West Coast. The New Zealand Historic Places Trust also recognises the significance of the place having registered a Denniston Historic Area, the Incline and Banbury arch as places of national significance. These relics are under constant threat from natural decay, the reclamation of the site by vegetation and the impact of negligent visitors. DOC and local interest group, Friends of the Hill work closely together to lessen the impacts of these threats ensure the history of Denniston is preserved for all to appreciate.

Further information

Friends of the Hill run an excellent museum with photos, static displays and other information in the old School manual training building at Denniston. Contact: Gary James (contact details on website). See also web site: www.denniston.co.nz/

Coal Town, the museum in Westport, also has good displays including a replica section of incline complete with a coal wagon.

There are a range of publications that provide a wealth of extra information about Denniston:

Coaling from the Clouds by R. J Meyer (NZ Rail Locomotive Society publication 1977) provides excellent information on the operation of the incline.

The Denniston Affair by WA Munro (published by the author, 1951).

The Hill by Cecilia Adams (JW Baty Ltd, Christchurch, 1971).

The Denniston Miners' Union, 1884–1984 by Len Richardson (Denniston Miners' Union, 1984.)

Denniston, Then and Now by Les Wright (Friends of the Hill, 1998).

www.doc.govt.nz.



Denniston Camp

