

TIRRIKIBA: PLACE OF FLAME, MESSAGES, MEMORIES

The Newcastle Historical Society's December, 2001 Christmas celebration in the Wickham Seamens's Mission was enlivened when Clyde Wilkie displayed a precious family memento. It was a telegram printed on a colorful Xmas greetings form. Sent in December 1936 from Tirrikiba Post Office to Lieut. Bessie McFarlane, Salvation Army Camp, Main Beach, Southport, Queensland. Clyde, now a retired Salvation Army brigadier, later married Lieut. Bessie. With emotion he read these words:

'Loving wishes for a Happy Xmas...Mum, Dad, Alex, Mervyn.'

Clyde, a former Queenslander, commented on the changes in Southport since 1936 and that 'he didn't know where Tirrikiba was'. The writer did!

In a moment a door of history opened to reveal the story of Tirrikiba.

On 14 June 1920, John Molloy, District Postal Inspector, Newcastle, submitted his proposal for the naming of a new post office to be built on the corner of Peter (now Kitchener Parade) and Crebert Streets, Mayfield East. (The site was on land encompassed by Crebert and George Streets on which the Sydney Soap & Candle Works built and opened a factory in 1886, later J. Kitchen & Sons. The new office was to be built by the rapidly developing BHP steelworks and staffed by the Post Office, to serve the needs of the company, subsidiary industries and the growing population.

A detailed map shows us that the office was close to Mayfield East Public School, very close to BHP's main office, three quarters of a mile from Tighes Hill Post Office and one and a quarter miles from Mayfield's Allowance Office. Also there were 562, 421 and 490 houses in Mayfield, east, west and south respectively, and two street letter receivers.

As plans for mail arrangements proceeded the 'adoption of a suitable designation for the new office' caused John Molloy to seek the help of W. J. Enwright, Solicitor, West Maitland, the 'recognised district authority on Aboriginal lore'. (The famous playwright Nick Enwright is a descendant).

In June 1920 Mr Enwright submitted the following names:

Nikkinba - place of coals;	Mulubinba- place of the swamp fern, native name of Newcastle;
Nulkaba - place of iron;	Kuttalba - place of smoke;
Murabunba - place of flowers;	Tirrikiba - place of flame.

Alternative names considered included, Steelville, Steelworks, Steelborough. Mr Molloy felt future Australian steelworks could claim such names which would cause 'complications...with postal, telegraphic and cable communications'.

Also he excluded most of the native names because of similarity to other places in Australia. He chose Tirrikiba because of the steelworks furnace's night glow and its meaning flame, fire or red in the Aboriginal language. Also the 'term is purely Australian...and will become familiar throughout the world as in the case of Broken Hill'. Posterity can be grateful for his choice.

Tirrikiba opened on 1 November, 1921 and remained so until it was renamed Mayfield East on 1 August, 1952. Why? Mr Bob Power, former Newcastle West Postmaster, suggests technological change: the Morse Code system was superseded by T.R.E.S.S. (Teleprinter Reperforator Exchange Switching System). This revolutionary advance in the public telegram system meant that a telegram lodged at say, a Newcastle suburban post office could be sent direct by teleprinter to say Innisfail, Queensland in minutes. It eliminated the Morse system. However, as a former Post Office secretary to many former Morsecodian Postmasters, I can testify to the intelligence, acuity and speed of such men. It seemed to me that their exacting training in the 'old dot-dash' transmission equipped them with a special diligence and wisdom.

Bob Power, who relieved there in the 1930s, recalls that Tirrikiba (TK Station) was equipped, not only with Morse Telegraph facilities to handle all BHP communications, but staffed with highly skilled Morse Telegraphists: Mr Fred Snushall, Postmaster and Mr Roy Smith, Postal Clerk and Telegraph Operator and Mr Alan Black, Mr Alvin Osland, and Mr Morrie Fitzgerald.

All relieving officers were required to hold top Morse Code qualifications. The BHP NEWS marked Roy Smith's retirement in 1960 after 40 years service with the Post Office:

'Mr Smith is recognised as an expert on the Morse key; in 1915 he had to pass a test of 20 words per minute, and later exceeded 30 words.'

When BHP began steelmaking in 1915 during WWI at Port Waratah the 'Australian Communications system consisted of telephone and telegraph services. Headquarters were in Melbourne. Trunk line circuits were subject to breakdown along the thousands of miles strung along railway lines. So BHP supremo, Essington Lewis favoured the reliable Morse service to telephone usage.'

A copy of one of Essington Lewis's complex coded telegrams, filled with figures, slashed fractions and 296 words long, survives in Bob Powers' archives. Sent 1 July 1933 and printed on the old style Commonwealth of Australia - Postmaster General's

Department form it evokes not only the pressures of steelmaking but the determined skill of the Morsecodian denoted by the initials of FS, Fred Snushall.

With the coming of the WWII, years BHP converted to the Printer Circuit and all their traffic was transmitted direct to their main Melbourne Office. This sounded 'the death knell of TK as a telegraph station'. Other industries still used the telegraph service, but in time, along with the private mail bag delivery to Lysaghts, Australian Wire Rope Works, Stewart & Lloyd, Rylands and others, service ceased.

Mrs Ilma Felton, of Stockton, knew Tirrikiba, too. As a child from 1913, Ilma lived with her family at Top Camp, Mosquito/Moscheto Island, overlooking the Hunter's (COQUUN) North Arm. By 1920, river pollution affected the oysters in Fullarton cove. This caused her specialist oysterman father, Herbert Darwin Deamer, to move his family to The Bluff, Fullarton Street, Stockton. In the years 1933-36 she was one of a dozen women shorthand-typiste-secretaries in Rylands' office. Daily, Ilma boarded the Steelworks Ferry at Clyde Street and crossed the harbour to the BHP wharf. On her way to work through the works she called to collect Rylands' mail from Post Office Box 245. Maps reveal that Crebert Street once ran through the works. Islanders called the wharf Crebert.

John Molloy was right. Tirrikiba, that truly Australian name, became known with BHP around the world. The Tirrikiba office and BHP's fiery furnaces are no more. New technologies arise at breathtaking pace. And Bob Power, born 1912, says: 'The days of Morse are over...we've sent the last GN (Goodnite). But the memories of TK...remain in the history of the Morsecodians' Fraternity.'

And in the precious Xmas 1936 telegram sent to Clyde Wilkie's beloved wife which opened a door into our local history.

Vera Deacon

Vera Deacon 1 April 2002

REFERENCES: In 1996, while researching Mosquito/Moscheto Island Post Office history I noted references to Tirrikiba Post Office, a name dimly remembered from my Mayfield East school days. Post Office Archives held by Australian Archives Office, Ref. S.P.32 Box 41, 290 and 372 (Non-official offices). Also map and letters of John Molloy.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS: Mr Bob Power, New Lambton for access to his notes, documents and records. Mrs Mavis Ebbott for material on Nick Enwright.

JUST ARRIVED

New Marlborough
4 June 1920
1920
745

Acceptance of
similar was
found for
Hawke's Bay
with 6
1/2

Dear Mr. Mollie

I cannot trace either of these words and am suspicious of them as place names. The nearest to them are murrain - murrin = often repeated quickly Moroun to be alive moron to be alive and Uma-pa a portion of verb to do

Mulubamba the place of the swamp fern was the native name of Newcomb. Two appropriate names would be Nekkinba = place of coals. Nulkaba = place of iron Gumpoaba = clayey place. Kuttalba = place of smoke. Kourba = place of mangroves Zirikiba = place of flame. Murabamba = place of flowers.

Kurri-Kurri = the beginning the first
willing the last or behind

The names given are in the language of the Kullkull which was spoken from Sydney to Keweenaw

Yours sincerely
W. G. Campbell

Separate action is proceeding in the matter of mail arrangements for the proposed new office in the vicinity of the Newcastle Steel Works.

2. Consideration has been given to the question of adoption of a suitable designation for the new office, and in this connection Mr. W. J. Ewright, Solicitor, West Maitland, who is recognised as the district authority on aboriginal lore, furnished (letter attached), the following native terms, together with their interpretation, pointing out that these names are in the language of the Kullhng tribe, and which was spoken from Sydney to Kempsey:-

- (a) Nikkinba - Place of coals;
- (b) Mulubinba - The place of the Swamp Fern. Was the native name of Newcastle.
- (c) Hulkaba - Place of Iron.
- (d) Tumoolia - Clayey place.
- (e) Kuttalba - Place of smoke.
- (f) Kounba - Place of Mangroves.
- (g) Tirrikiba - Place of flame.
- (h) Murahunba - Place of flowers.

3. The term (a) too closely resembles Nikenbah an existing office in Queensland. Similary (b) resembles Mullumbimby in New South Wales; (d) Pamoolah in New South Wales; (f) Koondah, Victoria; Murahunba (h) somewhat resembles Murrumburrah, and the interpretation is not appropriate for the locality. On the contrary the locality of the Steel Works attracts attention at night time, owing to the glare from the furnaces and which is noticeable for many miles around. In the day time smoke is the distinctive feature. Item (c) is not strictly applicable to the locality, as the iron ore must be brought to the place. Item (e) is suitable, but the last two syllables are the same as in Tamalba, an existing office in the vicinity of Newcastle.

IA.20/745.

4. Tirrikiba appears to meet requirements - the interpretation clearly described the locality - the term is distinctive, but somewhat lengthy, including four syllables.

5. As an alternative to a native term consideration has been given to the selection of a name indicating the Industrial aspect, such as Steelville, Steelworks, Steelborough, etc., and although the Newcastle Steel Works are the first of its kind in Australia, and have a prior right to either of these terms, I am not prepared to recommend either, for the reason that other Steel Works may be established elsewhere in Australia, when complications would doubtless arise with regard to postal, telegraphic and cable communication.

6. It is claimed, with good reason, that these Works, which have made remarkable progress since established five years ago, including a period of four years of war, will when fully equipped rank equal to any similar works elsewhere, and the name of the Post Office serving that place will become familiar throughout the world, as is the case of Broken Hill.

7. The term Tirrikiba is purely Australian, and for that, as well as other reasons quoted above, is considered suitable in the absence of any other more suitable name.

7. The Secretary, West Maitland Land Board was also referred to on 7.6.20, in the matter of a suitable designation, but a reply has not yet been received thereto.

(1) The Lands Department might be asked for its concurrence or otherwise as to the suitability of Tirrikiba (local native term, for a place of flame) for adoption as the designation of a new Post Office, which it is proposed to open in the vicinity of the Newcastle Steel Works.

I so recommend.

John J. Mackay
District Inspector,
NEWCASTLE,
14.6.20.

Ask the Land Dept as suggested by the Inspector

E. J. [unclear]
15/6/20

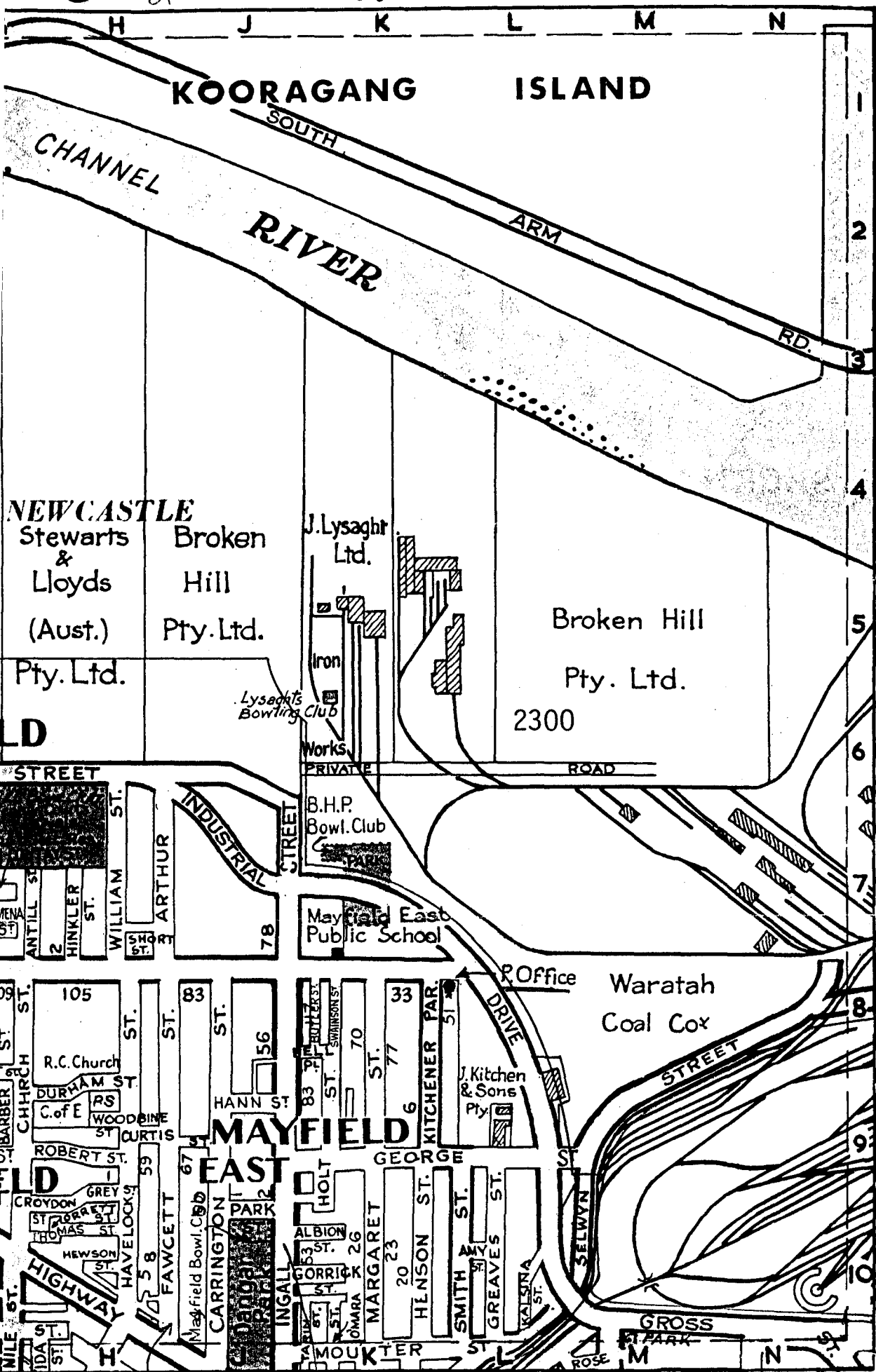
W. S. P.

Under Sec. Dept. of Lands.

COPY RECEIVED
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MAP 7

KOORAGANG ISLAND



DATE
OR
YEAR
OF
DIREC-
TORY
?

10
JOINS

JAS. CONLIFFE
"OSCAR VILLA"