

1881, May 7th. *Newcastle Morning Herald & Miners Advocate*, p.8

The Fortification Works and the Old Coal Workings under Flagstaff Hill

The contract in connection with the fortifications and defence works at Newcastle has, as our readers are aware, already reached a very decided point on Flagstaff, or "Captain Allan's" Hill. The contract for carrying out the works under plans and specifications from Colonel Scratchley, has, for some months past, been steadily progressing under the contractor, Mr. James Russell, and more recently under the immediate supervision of a civil engineer from the Colonial Architect's office – Mr. Campbell. Already a greater portion of the gun pits, magazines, galleries, and other cuttings and excavations are more or less complete, but an unexpected cause for alarm as to the future progress of the work seems to have recently cropped up. We allude to the early-days tunnels and drives for coal under the basement of the hill, which some half a century ago were carried out by the then authorities with convict labour. Of late it has been evident, during the act of blasting at sundry times, that something was wrong with the understructure. This having led to enquiry, the fact of the hill being honey-combed with old workings underneath has brought to mind. In order to examine into their condition, numerous longitudinal cuttings and drives into the hill-side have been made; cutting rectangularly into a series of chambers – propped and beamed. A gang of men are at present occupied running these out, in order to ascertain their exact bearings with regard to the new superstructure overhead. Mr. Mackenzie, Examiner of Coal Fields, accompanied (amongst others) by Mr. Thomas Mills, an old miner, who worked at the spot nearly forty years ago, made a preliminary examination of the drives yesterday, so far as they were opened. Some of them are fully seven feet in height, others narrowing down to three or four feet – the seam being narrow as a rule. Whilst groping through the darkness, the party came across a not uninteresting relic of old Newcastle days. This consisted on a number of iron leg-chains and manacles with which some unlucky, overworked and brutally treated unfortunates had doubtless many years before been fastened. They also brought to light a well formed glass pickle-bottle, evidently used as a pepper-pot. Its mouth, for this purpose, was ingeniously closed by an old copper coin carefully let into the orifice and perforated in numerous places. These curios are now to be seen in the contractor's office on the hill top. So far as the danger of the workings is concerned, we do not venture to offer an opinion. Doubtless the matter will be duly laid before the higher authorities, with a view to having a thorough and complete investigation made. To shut the door when the steed shall have escaped, will prove of little service, nor would it suit the public taste should any such contingency arise as the sliding away of a hill side when several twenty ton guns are placed in position, and heavy casement battery armament is erected. The matter, however, is in thoroughly good hands, and can fairly be left to those whose duty it is to attend to it.

Transcribed by Gianni Di Gravio
3rd August 2006

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