John Hetherington, Father of Queensland’s Coal Industry

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Any male migrant seeking immortality through having his name inscribed in the pages of the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* would be advised to choose his career with the utmost care. A recent analysis of the volumes covering the period up to 1890 indicate that his chances of success would be highest if he entered politics or, if finance permitted, settled on the land. Slightly worse odds would result from a successful career in the church or as a public servant, while the odds against him would be doubled if he opted to be a writer or a merchant. If, on the other hand, the immigrant yearned for anonymity he would do well to enter the mining industry, particularly coal mining where his chances of inclusion would be over one hundred times less than in politics.

Coal is Australia’s largest export earning industry, and Queensland is the major coal exporting State. Yet it is represented in the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* by a single collier — the redoutable Lewis Thomas who did so much to put Ipswich on the industrial and cultural map. In this paper I wish to register the claims of one humble collier whose contribution certainly equalled, and in some ways greatly exceeded, that of Lewis Thomas. He laid the foundations of industrial relations in the industry, he brought new mining technology to Queensland, he opened up coalfields in the State and he established its cement industry. He was mayor of Brisbane on three occasions and in 1921 was toasted as the father of Queensland’s coal industry. Yet today his name is practically unknown, even in the industry which he did so much to foster. His name was John William Hetherington.

**THE EARLY DAYS**

Hetherington was born in 1860 in Wellington (Brancepeth) in the Durham coalfields of northern England, the second child of Cumberland miner William Hetherington and his wife Elizabeth. His first taste of pit life came at the age of nine when he was employed as a trapper at Waterhouses Colliery near his home. This involved spending long hours in complete darkness, crouched by the side of a roadway, opening and closing doors to permit the passage of coal skips and men without unduly interrupting the current of air through the workings. In 1878 the family of father, mother and seven children
came to Australia as assisted migrants, arriving in Brisbane aboard the clipper *Devon*. John Hetherington raised the money for a railway ticket to the collieries of Ipswich by working on the wharves as a labourer. Unable to find a job in the mines, he returned to Brisbane and laboured for the wholesale greengrocers, S. and N. Howes, where his strength and skill in moving sacks of vegetables earned him rapid promotion to storeman and the nickname of "Potato Jack". Marriage in 1881 was cut short by the death of his wife, and he returned to Ipswich where he found work as a miner and remarried in 1884, this time to Amelia Phillips. A five-year stint in the pits concluded with a period at New Chum Colliery at Dinmore, after which the ambitious young collier again returned to Brisbane, this time to establish himself as a coal merchant in Main Street at Kangaroo Point. His technical ingenuity matched his powerful physique, and he patented a new design of mine-cage safety hook which was demonstrated successfully on the cages at New Chum Colliery in 1895.  

New Chum Colliery was owned by James Gulland who had been a coal proprietor in Ipswich since 1870. He traded under the name of the Tivoli Coal and Coke Company Limited, the Brisbane agency for which was held by his brother-in-law, the engineer Robert Smellie, who was also his partner in a sugar cane venture at Mourilyan in north Queensland which did very well in the early 1880s. The two families were very close, and when Smellie lost his wife under tragic circumstances in 1883 while on a visit to Scotland, his single surviving child, Florence, was adopted by the childless Gullands.  

At the end of the 1880s the Mourilyan sugar venture ran out of luck; the plantation was afflicted by drought, prices were depressed and the partners were forced to mortgage some of their property to cover their debts. Smellie’s health began to fail, saddling Gulland with the task of managing the ailing sugar plantation and piloting it towards the inevitable liquidation which took place in 1897. During this period the ageing coal master turned to Hetherington for assistance in running the Tivoli Coal and Coke Company Limited, making him Brisbane agent on Smellie’s death in 1898. Hetherington then merged his coal interests with Gulland’s and was made general manager of the Tivoli company. In 1899 he called tenders for sinking shafts at Goodna on land which Gulland had purchased twenty years earlier from the executors of Robert Towns, but the project was not a success and it was abandoned in 1904, leaving New Chum as the company’s only operating coal mine.  

Meanwhile Gulland’s adopted niece, Florence, was growing up; while on holiday in New Zealand in 1898 she met Percy Rylance, and they were married three years later. Rylance set up in Brisbane as a shipping and forwarding agent, operating out of the same offices as Gulland and Hetherington.
By 1902 Gulland had cleared the mortgages resulting from the Mourilyan debacle and trade was improving, but just when the future looked bright he was forced to retire through ill health, and he died in 1904. His wife, Elizabeth, was the chief beneficiary, but she had little business experience and she gave Hetherington power of attorney over her interests in the Tivoli Coal and Coke Company Limited. A year later she settled most of her estate, including her interests in the company, on her niece Florence Rylance, and nominated Hetherington as the trustee. This gave him complete control over the operations of the company, although the capital was shared with Florence and, through her marriage, with her husband. The partnership of Hetherington and Rylance was established in 1907 to formalise the position and his trusteeship over Florence Rylance’s business affairs finally ended in 1909 with the death of Elizabeth Gulland.

In 1906 Hetherington moved into local politics by winning one of the two Kangaroo Point seats on the Brisbane City Council. His wife and family began participating in the social and charitable life of the city, and his daughter, Ena, was nominated as a debutante of the year in 1908. By his mid forties, then, Hetherington had established himself as a successful Queensland businessman and was ready to play a bigger role in the life of the State.

HETHERINGTON THE NEGOTIATOR

Hetherington undoubtedly saw his stake in the partnership of Hetherington and Rylance more as a passport to the respectability of colliery proprietorship than as an entity to be nurtured and expanded. True, he initiated coal prospecting operations at Rosewood and on Bribie Island but they came to nothing, and he kept clear of the partnership’s major asset, the New Chum Mine at Dinmore, which continued to be managed by Michael Jeffrey who had worked there for over thirty years. An important step in the rising tide of his fortunes was his election in 1907 as president of the West Moreton Colliery Proprietors’ Association in the early stages of what turned out to be protracted negotiations with the emerging coal miners’ union.

Unionism had been strong in Queensland in the prosperous 1880s but it had then suffered a severe decline in the depressed 1890s with the miners’ union in Ipswich being declared “practically defunct” in 1902. However, by 1904 a Brisbane Trades and Labour Council had been re-established, and a Queensland branch of the Australian Workers’ Union was formed in the following year. In such an environment Ryott Maughan (the Labor MLA for Ipswich) called on the local miners to reactivate their dormant union but his appeal at first fell on deaf ears.
Then, early in 1906, the Stafford brothers announced a change in the terms of work at their Whitwood Colliery in Ipswich by which the responsibility for wheeling the coal from the face would be separated from the labour of hewing it; a miner would then be able to remain longer at the face and cut more coal per shift, allowing the management to reduce the hourly hewing rate. A similar division of work had been accepted at other local collieries, but the Whitwood men objected, fearing it would reduce their total pay. They came out on strike and appealed to other local miners for support. The Staffords were prepared to negotiate new rates but they would not consent to arbitration from delegates elected at a meeting of local miners. Both sides were hampered by the absence of a mechanism for negotiating hewing rates on a district basis, but an acceptable local rate was ultimately agreed for Whitwood. The *Queensland Times* pointed out that a ceiling on total coal production, a common hewing rate, and a sliding scale which related changes in the price of coal to the hewing rate were required if cut-throat competition was to be avoided and financial stability achieved in the industry. These changes were clearly unattainable until the proprietors and the men formed organisations which were mutually acceptable and could limit output and negotiate wage rates.

Neither side was in a hurry to move and it required further prodding from the *Queensland Times* before the West Moreton Colliery Proprietors' Association was formed; by mid 1906 it had begun preparing a draft scheme. The miners were quicker off the mark. They made president a stocky, wiry, softly-speaking Welshman, Alfred Zarbina Waters, and at their first meeting chose the title of the West Moreton District Coal Miners' Union. Five months later the union took the initiative by posting notices of proposed new pay rates at all the mines on the Bundamba section of the Ipswich field. The owners ignored the claim and it was left to the Liberal MLA for Bundamba, James Cribb, to call the sides together, when they were addressed briefly by the Secretary for Mines, James Blair, before getting down to their deliberations.

The first business was to elect a chairman, and the eldest of the Stafford brothers, William, was voted to the position — despite the fact that he was the senior partner in the colliery where the strike which precipitated the decision to re-form the union had taken place! Stafford was no stranger to negotiation, having been chairman of the Bundamba divisional board for a number of years, but he was clearly unwell and by common consent Hetherington soon took over the chairmanship and with it the presidency of the owners' association.

A wide range of topics was discussed and the contentious points had all been resolved by the end of 1906 except for the base rate from which a sliding wage scale could operate, where there was deadlock.
for almost a year. Patient negotiation by Hetherington, a buoyant demand for coal and a government rebate on exported coal settled the matter and a hewing rate of 2s. 11d. per ton was finally accepted; the agreement was signed at the end of 1907 with the provision that it was to remain unchanged until the end of 1909.13

The conference members celebrated the signing of the agreement by a steamer excursion to Redcliffe with Hetherington as host. Following lunch at the Redcliffe Hotel there was an exchange of courtesies, including the presentation by the union to the colliery proprietors’ association of a framed photograph of the miners’ delegation. Three months later, at a social gathering in Ipswich, a reciprocal presentation was made by Hetherington on behalf of the colliery proprietors’ association. The editor of the Queensland Times complimented both sides on the way they had worked together to produce a fair wage for the men and a fair profit for the owners. Seldom can industrial relations machinery have been launched in such a laudatory and co-operative atmosphere; it was in sharp contrast to the stoppages, trauma, suspicions and sackings which had greeted the arrival of permanent miners’ unions in New South Wales forty years earlier and which had become an entrenched part of its industrial scene.14

Hetherington’s masterly handling of the negotiations was a major step in his career. His abilities were soon in demand in other negotiations and in 1909 the government appointed him to

Conference between Proprietors and Miners in 1907-8. (Courtesy Queensland Newspapers Pty. Ltd.). Hetherington is the dominant figure seated in the centre of the group, with Waters on his left and Noble (vice-president of the proprietors’ association) on his right.
Queensland's first Coal Mining Industry Wages Board. Concurrently he was gaining the respect of his fellow aldermen and the Governor-in-Council appointed him to the office of mayor of Brisbane when the Progressive and Reactionary parties were deadlocked in 1910 over the building of a new town hall. His massive physique, commanding air, abundant energy and fair but forthright style led the editor of the *Queensland Times* to warn its readers that "... fractious aldermen may look for short shrift during his term of office".\(^{15}\) He and his wife, Amelia, made a striking couple, and their appointment as mayor and mayoress was popular with the citizens of Brisbane.

### THE BLAIR ATHOL CONNECTION

In 1909 Hetherington had accepted the position of managing director of the Blair Athol Coal and Coke Company Limited. Although coal had first been mined on the Blair Athol field in 1890 the mines were hopelessly uncompetitive because of the lack of a local market and the absence of a railway link. At federation, three small collieries, Eldorado, Hope and Imbil were working a seam 1.5 metres thick which later came to be called the No. 2 Seam. However, William Thomas, a partner in the local syndicate running Imbil Mine, had recently found another seam below the No. 2 which was more than 6 metres thick. Over the next few years this exceptional seam (later known either as the No. 3 or the Big Seam) was found in other parts of the field but no tests were made of its quality because coal mining in the district was barely economic.\(^{16}\)

We now know that the Blair Athol coal deposits lie in a small Permian basin approximately 4 kilometres wide and 7 kilometres long on the western margin of the Bowen Basin. Coal had been discovered by chance in 1864 during well-sinking, but the discovery had remained unexploited until Howard Smith had opened a small mine immediately to the south of the Blair Athol property in 1890, since when the surrounding land had been prospected fairly thoroughly to shallow depths; by 1905 it was covered by a patchwork of licences and leases of continually changing ownership. In that year the Secretary for Railways was persuaded to make a start on building the railway from Clermont which had been promised for many years. This immediately stimulated prospecting activity, particularly in the south-east corner of the field where the railway line was expected to enter Blair Athol *en route* for a terminus on Howard Smith's lease. One of the partners in the Imbil and Federal mines, Thomas Simpson, held a mining lease astride the projected railway line and had located the Big Seam there; he had named the lease Wallsend and was sitting tight awaiting developments. Another of the partners, William Window, had taken out prospecting licences over land to the east and south of Simpson's lease.\(^{17}\)
The spokesman for Simpson and Window in their lease negotiations had been a Clermont solicitor, Paul Risien, who had organised other mining ventures in the district and had taken out a prospecting licence over land to the west of Simpson's. He knew that large-scale mining was only possible with adequate funding, and realised that a good place to seek it was in Rockhampton which was flushed with optimism and money following the success of Mount Morgan Mine. Here he gained the support of a prosperous draper, James Stewart, who had been chairman of the Mount Morgan Gold Mining Company Limited and still dabbled in mining ventures. In 1909, Stewart and his brother-in-law, Robert Macfarlane, joined Risien, Kenneth Grant (the MLA for Rockhampton and a commission agent in the town), and William Black (the Brisbane coal agent), in floating the Blair Athol Coal and Timber Company Limited. Macfarlane, an accountant, was made chairman of the company, and Grant, Black and Risien became directors, but they obviously required an experienced mining engineer on the board and John Hetherington was invited to become managing director, taking up a substantial package of shares through the Hetherington and Rylance partnership. The company then acquired the coal prospecting licences and mining leases held by Risien, Simpson and Window, who closed their tiny mines and were recompensed by the issue of paid-up shares and the appointment of Simpson and Window to the board as local directors.\textsuperscript{18}

In the middle of 1909 Hetherington arrived in Blair Athol to lay out the Wallsend Mine on what had been Simpson's lease, and to supervise the start of operations; he was at the height of his career and he tackled the project with characteristic thoroughness and energy. As manager, he appointed William Jeffrey (the son of his friend Michael Jeffrey, the manager of Hetherington and Rylance's New Chum Colliery in Ipswich), who reached Blair Athol early in June 1909. The mine was developed along traditional lines, with the exact depth of the seam first being located by a vertical exploration shaft which was later utilised as an air shaft. The shaft reached the Big Seam at a depth of 25 metres and was still in coal after being sunk a further 12.6 metres to the water-table. A tunnel was then driven to the foot of the shaft, the connection being made late in September 1909. Twelve miners began developing levels, and a double tramway, equipped with main-and-tail haulages and powered by a small steam-engine, was laid up the tunnel to a heapstead from where the coal was tipped down a chute into wagons sitting in a siding below. All was ready for the opening of the railway line in 1910, and an average production rate of 100 tonnes per day was exceeded during the first year of operation. The company, flushed by success, announced its intention of raising this to 500 tonnes per day.\textsuperscript{19}
Hetherington was determined that the mine should be a showpiece of modern coal mining technology. A power-house was constructed so that the tunnel could be lit by electricity; the incline was re-equipped with endless-rope haulage, a larger ventilation shaft was sunk, and an office and powder magazine erected on the surface. Electric coal-cutters and borer drills were introduced underground, and an electrically-driven, triple-ram pump was installed; horses were brought in to assist with haulage on the twelve production levels. By 1911 over one hundred men were at work, plans were being prepared for driving a tunnel under the railway to other company leases, and experiments were in hand for working the Big Seam at two levels in order to increase to 6 metres the thickness of coal that could be extracted. Hetherington’s skill as a mining engineer was recognised in 1910 when he was elected to membership of the Australasian Institute of Mining Engineers, and the pride of the local inhabitants in his achievement was reflected by the comment of the mining warden that:

... the mine gives every opportunity for the practical illustration of every modern device or invention to aid its working development on the most comprehensive scale.20

Hetherington was unable to visit Blair Athol during the whole of 1910 because of his mayoral duties, but did so in the following year, accompanied by his wife and representatives of the press to whom he demonstrated the equipment which had been installed. Their admiration can hardly have extended to the township which was a miserable affair. Miners had been recruited from as far afield as Ipswich and some two hundred people were camped in shacks or tents within half a kilometre of the mine. There was no running water, a restricted supply being brought in by the railway department in tanks, and three cases of typhoid were reported in the year, including the manager William Jeffrey who subsequently contracted pneumonia and was admitted to hospital in Clermont. Living conditions did improve, however, and by the end of 1912 (when production had reached almost 300 tonnes per day) it was considered safe for Jeffrey’s wife and family to join him in Blair Athol.21

Meanwhile, entrepreneurs were taking out prospecting licenses and leases to adjoining land and selling them to the company. This left the company with the responsibility for their development, and the government became increasingly firm in imposing penalties when insufficient work was done on them. At the end of 1910 Hetherington negotiated an agreement with the government for siting a second mine due north of the Blair Athol township which could tap a number of the leases. Wallsend was renamed Blair Athol No. 1 so that the new venture could become Blair Athol No. 2, and it consisted of a tunnel driven down to the Big Seam in a westerly direction. Progress was so leisurely that it took three years to reach the Big Seam, open
a few levels, and lay a railway siding. Production had hardly commenced when the company complained of a fault hindering the advance of the tunnel and the government granted an exemption from further work while the position was investigated; the No. 2 mine was formally closed in June 1914.  

In Brisbane, Hetherington’s negotiating abilities continued to be in demand. During the tramwaymen’s strike in 1912 the coal miners joined other unionists in escalating it into a general strike, ignoring their agreement with the proprietors to give due notice of any industrial action. The strike had little effect on coal supplies, however, with New South Wales exporters invading the north Queensland market and coal being railed into Brisbane from Queensland mines where the strike had unofficially been called off. The Brisbane Employers’ Federation sensed total victory and refused to discuss any terms with the unions other than an unconditional return to work. Many capitulated, but the miners fought on until mounting criticism of their leaders for not holding a secret ballot before deciding to strike forced them into secret meetings with Hetherington who was acting as spokesman for the proprietors. Only after he had persuaded the union executive to sign a formal undertaking on behalf of the miners that they would give fourteen days’ notice of any future decision to strike was there a resumption of work, the undertaking being signed in the Brisbane offices of Hetherington and Rylance on the same day as the general strike was officially called off. Although a defeat for the miners’ union which was compelled to put a 10 per cent levy on members’ earnings to rebuild the depleted strike fund, there was no rancour and the miners’ executive confessed “... that the majority of the colliery-owners in Queensland have treated the union in a most fair and gentlemanly way ...”. It was another triumph for Hetherington and his negotiating skill.  

OTHER VENTURES

Hetherington’s success in opening a large, modern mine at Blair Athol brought invitations to manage other, more speculative, ventures such as the short-lived Callide Coal and Timber Company Limited. A substantial coal deposit at Callide, 100 kilometres west of Gladstone in central Queensland, had been discovered in 1890 but developers were faced with the problem of carting the coal to the coast by horse and dray (which was quite uneconomic) or persuading an unwilling government to build a railway. Bearing in mind that Admiralty tests in 1903 contradicted earlier reports of the high quality of the coal, the attitude of the government was understandable, but three years later Lionel Ball (the assistant government geologist) discovered that the Admiralty sample had misguidedly been taken from a shallow tunnel in the bank of a creek where it could have been adversely
Alderman and Mrs. Hetherington in 1909. (Courtesy Queensland Newspapers Pty. Ltd.).
affected by “meteoric water”. In 1911 therefore, a Gladstone syndicate was formed with the specific object of extracting representative samples from the coal deposit for testing.\textsuperscript{24}

The syndicate, calling itself the Callide Coal and Timber Company Limited, was led by a local newspaper proprietor, John Kessell, but none of its members had any technical expertise and they must have been delighted when they persuaded Hetherington to join them as managing director. The first task was to establish the geology of the field by remapping it, but the government refused to commission the work until representations by Hetherington and the local MLA, Edward Breslin, succeeded in getting Ball and a topographer assigned to the work. The company then arranged for the original No. 1 shaft to be cleaned out, and Hetherington made a thorough inspection early in 1912. He ordered a steep tunnel to be driven from the surface into the lower section of the seam, hoping to collect samples from a sufficient depth for any problems of surface oxidation to be avoided, and he reported good progress after another visit in May. By August 1912, 5 tonnes of the coal had been brought to the surface and bagged ready for dispatch. This time the coal was sent to the Department of Harbours and Rivers for testing on the hopper barge \textit{Bream}, and to the Railway Department for trials at their Ipswich depot. Both departments utterly rejected the coal because of its very small heat content and complete absence of caking properties. The conclusions were so similar to those reached by the Royal Navy nine years earlier that the company had no hesitation in going into voluntary liquidation and leaving the Callide coalfield for others to develop.\textsuperscript{25}

The formal floating as a private limited company of Hetherington’s partnership with Rylance took place in 1913 with the major shareholder, Florence Rylance, becoming a director and Hetherington continuing as managing director; the other directors were Percy Rylance and Hetherington’s son, Norman. For Hetherington the most significant event of the year, however, was his appointment as the first chairman of the Queensland Cement and Lime Company Limited.\textsuperscript{26}

In 1913 Queensland was consuming over 36,000 tonnes of Portland cement annually, with 70 per cent of it coming from Europe at a shipping cost of more than £3 per tonne. The local company was floated in the belief that cement could be made at Darra (near Brisbane) for two thirds of the imported price but it took over four years to get into production because of insufficient capital, disgruntled staff, unsuitable equipment and wartime shortages. Hetherington’s role in the struggle for survival was crucial and was recognised by the directors when they later put on record that “… during the darkest period of the company’s existence he confidently
carried on and guided its affairs through insurmountable difficulties".\textsuperscript{27}

A decline in demand for Blair Athol coal after 1912 was signalled by the closure of the Great Fitzroy copper mine near Rockhampton and then aggravated by the closure of local meatworks, the running down of operations at Mount Morgan and the opening of the two coal mines at Baralaba. After 1915 the Labor government took a hard line on unworked mining leases and the company was refused further exemptions on the No. 2 mine which was therefore reopened, the supposed fault which had led to its closure being passed without difficulty. When the government demanded that work recommence on the old Hope, Imbil, and Eldorado leases, a reluctant start was made on Blair Athol No. 3 Mine close to the boundaries between the three leases and almost 2 kilometres south-west of the No. 2 mine. A shaft was sunk to the No. 2 Seam which the three little mines had once worked successfully, a small head frame, a tiny winding-engine and vertical boiler were placed in position, and the company received an exemption from further work until a railway connection had been built. Hetherington was out to impress the government with the scale of what had been done and proudly declared that:

\ldots when the Railway Siding, which I recommended to be put in, is finished, it will be the finest mine in the district as the coal is of such excellent quality.\textsuperscript{28}

Development at the No. 2 mine was concentrated in a northerly direction where productivity was high although the wastefulness of extracting less than 3 metres of coal from a total seam thickness of at least 15 metres was obvious. Hetherington devised a multi-level mining technique, but workings in the lower part of the seam were greatly troubled by water and the mine had insufficient steam to drive the massive pumps which were required to clear it. However, the No. 2 mine was systematically upgraded over the next few years in readiness for taking over from the No. 1 mine but when this took place in 1923 the demand for the coal was at a low ebb. In 1925 the company had only twenty men working underground with a further nine on the surface; it was producing a mere 50 to 60 tonnes of coal per day and the work-force had resigned itself to half-time working. Moreover, the No. 3 mine, which Hetherington had called \ldots the finest in the district \ldots \) never came up to expectations and it was offered on tribute with the work-force being transferred to the No. 2 mine.\textsuperscript{29}

In 1914 and 1915 Hetherington supervised a prospecting programme for the Blair Athol company on the Newry Islands (lying off the central Queensland coast). A new Brisbane cross-river ferry was named after him, he was made a member of the Stock Exchange and he even found time to build a family house at Kangaroo Point, naming it \textquoteleft Brancepeth\textquoteright after the place of his birth. When he was
elected mayor of Brisbane in 1916 on a programme of low rates and improved drainage his only concession to the additional work-load was to vacate the presidency of the coal owners' association although he continued to act as its chief spokesman on important matters until well into the 1920s. The civic appointment was popularly received, Hetherington being perceived as a person who "... has a broad outlook in business matters and an outspoken manner of giving his views that is refreshingly simple to the average person's interlect". His wife was applauded for her charitable work, and the couple were re-elected the following year. It was during his third term that there was a big expansion in the lighting of Brisbane streets by electricity, and the governor laid the foundation stone for the new town hall. This was the development which had provoked deadlock in the city council in 1910 and Hetherington's appointment as mayor. It was hardly his fault that World War I delayed building to such an extent that construction had barely started in 1918 when the prospect of the formation of a Greater Brisbane municipality led to the cancellation of the project and, later, its replacement by a new plan.  

**THE OPEN-CUT PROJECT**

Although Blair Athol coal could be mined more cheaply than any other coal in Queensland, high transport costs and severe competition began to price it out of the market after World War I. The government recognised the problem and agreed to look sympathetically at reducing rail charges if the Blair Athol Coal and Timber Company Limited and the Newcastle Coal Company (the two chief producers on the field) examined the possibility of reducing their production costs by adopting open-cut mining methods. Professor Sir Edgewood David, the luminary of Australian coal mining, visited Blair Athol and warned that there would have to be a large increase in output to justify the capital cost of open-cutting. The Newcastle company said it would be unable to find a market for the additional coal, but Hetherington bravely committed his company to the experiment, choosing a site adjacent to the failing No. 1 mine where the geology was understood and the shallowness of the Big Seam was favourable to surface mining. A boring programme was initiated to test the thickness and strength of the overburden, there was a call on the shareholders for £12,500, and arrangements were made to borrow a further £750,000 if it became necessary.

Hetherington's plan was to excavate a pit, 13.5 metres in depth, and use the overburden to build a permanent ramp out of the pit at a gradient of 1 in 5. The earth would be moved by a dragline and horse drays, and a substantial timber gantry built above the ramp to carry the rails of a double tramway terminating at a height of 12 metres on a platform for the haulage engine. A steam-shovel would
deepen the pit to the top of the Big Seam, sending the overburden in tipping wagons up the tramway to extend the ramp; this part of the work would involve the removal of almost 70,000 cubic metres of earth. The next step would be to continue the ramp downwards through the Big Seam, blasting the coal if necessary, and forming a slot 11 metres wide which would be widened in sections as coal production proceeded. The coal would be hauled out of the pit in specially-designed 15-ton wagons, passed through a breaker, screened, and loaded into railway wagons standing in one of four sidings beneath the gantry; the fines would be treated with molasses, briquetted, and sold separately. William Jeffrey, the manager of the No. 1 mine was appointed manager of operations, and the governor of Queensland, Sir Matthew Nathan, turned the first sod in June 1922.32

The earthmoving contract was awarded to Manuel Hornibrook who arrived on the site in September 1922. It was his first major job and he brought some £12,000 of equipment with him, including a small dragline and a steam-shovel. Both machines were put to work, the gantry was finished, the tramway laid, and overburden removal was proceeding before the end of the year. A generator was installed to provide electric light for night shifts, the manpower increased to over forty, and in May 1923 the steam-shovel began uncovering the seam. Then, when the earthmoving contract was almost completed and some 3,000 square metres of coal had been exposed, the project was overwhelmed by misfortune. Heavy rain upset the schedule, influenza decimated the work-force and the steam-shovel broke a vital component. A replacement was cast in Rockhampton, and a machine shop was hurriedly erected by the side of the open pit for repairing and overhauling the equipment. Hardly had the shovel returned to work than it fractured the main axle and had to stand idle until a replacement could be found in Sydney. Suddenly, without explanation and before a single load of coal had been mined, Hetherington abandoned the project and Hornibrook dismantled his equipment and departed. With the No. 1 mine already closed and no suitable employment available in the district, the manager, William Jeffrey, returned to Ipswich with his family. Most of the gantry timber was recovered and used for building a coal bunker at the No. 2 mine, and the government exempted the company from any further work on the site.33

The reason for closing down the project after allowing it to go so far must still be a matter for debate. Hetherington and Hornibrook were tough and experienced men, unlikely to give up easily in the face of physical difficulties. The fall in domestic demand had forced Hetherington to seek overseas sales where there should have been a reasonable chance of success because the coal had good steaming properties, was relatively low in ash, and was hard enough to stand shipment. The railway department was sympathetic towards reducing
its charges, and the insuperable difficulty seems to have been the absence of a central Queensland port with specialist coal-loading facilities. For over twenty years a deadly feud had been fought between Broadmount (situated on the north bank of the Fitzroy River) and Port Alma (on the south bank) for the coal trade of central Queensland. Hetherington favoured Port Alma at first and considered stationing a crane or elevator on the wharf to handle the company’s coal, but when the Blair Athol company finally chartered its own collier (the ss Scalark) in 1921 it operated out of Broadmount. Hetherington had hoped that his would be the forerunner of an export trade of at least 1,000 tonnes of coal per week, but the initiative collapsed in 1924 in the face of the poor loading facilities and the high rail haulage costs, despite a concession on Blair Athol export coal.  

**FINALE**

The Blair Athol open-cut was Hetherington’s last major enterprise. In politics he contested the seat of Maree (which included Kangaroo Point) on behalf of the United Party in the State general election in 1923 but was narrowly beaten by the sitting member, William Bertram, who was also the speaker in the Legislative Assembly. His many responsibilities had left him little time to foster the twenty-year-old partnership with Rylance and in 1924 he and his son sold their shares to Rylance and his nominees. Perhaps the mutual support, trust and understanding so essential to the success of such enterprises had been absent. Certainly the two men exhibited an absolute contrast in life-styles and objectives. The unsparing pace at which Hetherington had driven himself began to tell and in 1925 he stood down as a city council alderman. In 1926 he suffered the first of a series of heart attacks, and three years later he was struck down by two attacks in less than a week; the second overwhelmed him and he died peacefully in Brisbane at the age of sixty-eight, internment taking place in the Buhmba cemetery in Brisbane.  

Hetherington personified the ambitions of the thousands of immigrants who fled from the poorer parts of Britain in the second half of the nineteenth century to seek a brighter and better life in a new country. Untrained and uneducated, he fought his way to the top levels of Queensland’s industry, commerce and society through native ability, robust health, hard work, opportunism and a fair share of good luck. The masterly way in which he laid the foundations for harmonious industrial relations in Queensland’s coal mining industry is in itself a tribute to his understanding of human nature. At a dinner in 1921 his massive contribution was recognised when the members of the Queensland Colliery Proprietors’ Council toasted him as “The father of the coal industry” in Queensland.  

He had his failures of course, and the attempt to open a mine for Gulland at Goodna in 1901 was one of them. His prospecting ventures
— in Rosewood, and on Bribie and the Newry islands — were consistently unsuccessful. Blair Athol No. 3 was a disappointment, as was the opne-cut project; indeed his high hopes for the future of the Blair Athol coalfield had vanished completely by 1925, and it was to be another sixty years before they could be fulfilled. However, these setbacks must be balanced against his massive contribution to the development of Queensland’s resources, and he deserves to be acknowledged as one of the State’s most versatile, humane and talented mining engineers.

NOTES

2. *Queenslanders as we see ‘em*, 1915, n.p.; *Queensland Times* (hereinafter QT) 14 October 1884, 26 October 1895, 18 February 1910; *Queenslander* (hereinafter Q) 18 July 1929, p. 17; Mic Z 1959, Folio 381/579/1929 QSA; Marriage certificate No. 779 2773 Ipswich; Queensland Patent, No. 3089; Mrs. C. Hetherington (personal communication).
4. Papers held by Rylance family; Brisbane Cemetery, Toowong, entry 92, September 1898; Q 8 October 1898, p. 680; *Queensland Post Office Directory* (hereinafter QPOD) 1900 p. 33; *Brisbane Courier* (hereinafter BC) 16 June 1906; QT 18 February 1910; R.L. Whitmore, *Coal in Queensland: The Late Nineteenth Century* (St. Lucia; University of Queensland Press, 1985), pp. 144-5.
6. QT 14 November 1903, 18 February 1904; Papers held by Rylance family; BC 29 May 1908, p. 7; Queensland Mines Department, Licences for Coal Prospecting Areas (hereinafter CPAs) 38-46 incl., Brisbane; S118/1909 QSA.
7. Q 15 June 1907, p. 24, 8 August 1908, p. 22, 6 November 1908, p. 11; BC 18 February 1910.
8. QPOD, 1908, pp. 85, 104.
12. QT 3 November 1906, 8 November 1906, 6 December 1906, 11 December 1906, 13 December 1906, 25 April 1907, 11 May 1907, 1 June 1907, 6 June 1907, 27 August 1907.
13. Ibid., 27 August 1907, 29 August 1907, 26 September 1907, 10 October 1907.
15. QT 30 August 1909, 18 February 1910.
16. Whitmore, *op. cit.*, pp. 284-91; Queensland Mines Department, Mining Lease (hereinafter ML) 5, Clermont; Q 2 June 1906, p. 11.

17. QT 22 August 1905; Queensland Mines Department, MLs 13, 23, CPAs 53, 54, 57, 61, 64, Clermont; Office of Corporate Affairs, Rockhampton, No. 3 of 1909, Blair Athol Coal and Timber Company Limited.


21. QGMJ 13, p. 31; Q 23 May 1911, p. 14; QT, 4 June 1912, 20 June 1912, 3 November 1912.


25. QGMJ 12, pp. 385, 615, 13, pp. 146, 229, 255, 524, 582; AR 1903, p. 123, 1911, p. 82.


32. QGMJ 23, p. 221, 24, p. 196.


36. QT 11 July 1921.