

TRANSCRIPT OF INTERVIEW WITH

MRS. BERTHA BATHURST DOWNIE

of 24 BARTON STREET, MAYFIELD N.S.W.

INTERVIEWED BY JUDITH HUGHES

OPEN FOUNDATION STUDENT

UNIVERSITY OF NEWCASTLE

DATE 24th JUNE, 1988

SUBJECT AUSTRALIAN HISTORY  
RESEARCH PROJECT - REGIONAL HISTORY

MAYFIELD 1910 - 1920 THE IMPACT OF DEVELOPMENT OF THE  
BROKEN HILL CO. PTY LTD STEELWORKS

This is Judith Hughes, Open Foundation Student at the University of Newcastle interviewing Mrs. Bertha Downie of Mayfield. Mrs. Downie will be talking with me to-day about the Mayfield area in which she has lived for the past 77 years. We are at Mrs. Downie's home at 24 Barton Street, Mayfield on Saturday, 25th June 1988. Mrs. Downie has lived in this house since 1918.

Mrs. Downie was born in Sydney in 1889, the seventh child of William and Isabella Ferrier of Scotland. Mrs. Downie attended Sydney Girls High School and became a school teacher, teaching at Erskineville and Minmi and later at Mayfield West and East Infants School. In 1911 Mrs. Downie moved to Mayfield and has been a respected member of the community for the past 77 years.

Judith Hughes Mrs. Downie, when you moved to Mayfield, did you move here as a single lady or did you move here when you were first married.

Mrs. Downie When I was first married.

Judith Hughes Yes, and you moved into this house here?

Mrs. Downie No, to a house in Dora Street, that is, behind the hotel. There is a large weatherboard house, bigger than this house, the weatherboard house is still there behind the hotel in Dora Street. Opposite there in Dora Street, there were no other houses, there was a paddock of land opposite.

Judith Hughes So the area ----

Mrs. Downie One tiny little weatherboard shop and a country pub.

Judith Hughes So the area was not very densely populated.

Mrs. Downie No, not at all, from what we call the terminus, that is from the Stag and Hunter Hotel, you know.

Judith Hughes From the corner of Maitland Road and Hanbury Streets?

Mrs. Downie From the corner of Hanbury Street and Maitland Road. From there to the Waratah Station it was tea tree scrub on both sides with frogs croaking in the ponds. No houses, no houses at all.

Judith Hughes Whereabouts did you attend church?

Mrs. Downie I went right down Hanbury street, you know Hanbury Street?

Judith Hughes Yes.

Mrs. Downie It was a rough road, no curb and guttering or anything like that,

with gas lamps, just gas lamps, it was summer afternoon and I went right down over the railway line at Waratah Station.

Judith Hughes Did they have the overhead bridge then?

Mrs. Downie No, no, you always went over the railway line.

Judith Hughes And you went to church at Waratah. Was there a "real" church there?.

Mrs. Downie No, over the railway line, there was a big hotel there and behind the hotel there was council chambers. (Pause)

Judith Hughes Yes?

Mrs. Downie Because we had a Mayor, an alderman and there was to be a young student from Sydney who went to the same school as I did and I knew him well, and he was going to preach that night and I went to hear him and that is why I went alone. I went over the railway line and turned around at the back of the hotel. The council chambers are not there now. They have been pulled down of course, and then they had the service and then I came out alone and came back over the railway line and along Hanbury Street. Going down Hanbury street, where the Presbyterian Church is now was a big drain. The drain is still there but it has been covered over of course for the roadway.

Judith Hughes It is underneath the road now?

Mrs. Downie Yes, underneath the roadway, but the drain is still there, But the night I went down there or any other time I went down that way there were two little wooden bridges over the drain, one on one side and one on the other, but there were no people living down there. But there were a couple of men talking on the bridge on the other side you see, and when I came over this side and came walking up this man came over behind me you see. I thought he was following me so I ran and HE ran - (Laughter)

Judith Hughes Just like the things that happen to young ladies to-day, isn't it, when you think someone is chasing you. And what happened?

Mrs. Downie There was one house up near the terminus, as well call it, the terminus, near Maitland Road, there was one house that belonged to the milkman and I got hold of the gate there and I thought, if he touches me I'll scream you see. as there might be some one inside, you see, but he just dashed past me --

my ears were all shaking and my heart was beating and I heard CLANG CLANG CLANG of the old steam tram - AND HE JUST CAUGHT IT.

Judith Hughes He was running for the steam tram !

Mrs. Downie Yes he was running for the steam tram and he thought I was too !

(Laughter.)

Judith Hughes I can understand that, perhaps you may have felt a bit offended that he wasn't chasing you (Laughter from Mrs. Downie) Perhaps it was nice to think he was! - But not in those days.

Mrs. Downie (Laughter) No, oh no!

Judith Hughes The Mayfield area itself, how was it regarded as a suburb?

Mrs. Downie At that time it was regarded as THE suburb of Newcastle because it had the best -- what do you call it ?

Judith Hughes Perhaps the housing or quality of housing ?

Mrs. Downie No, No, what is the word I want!

(Mr. Jim Downie, the son of Mrs. Downie who was present at the interview was able to prompt Mrs. Downie )

Mr. Downie Best transport system, It was the first steam tram route from Newcastle to Mayfield.

Mrs. Downie It was the best transport and it had the best housing and it was a beautiful locality, and lovely hills. And the name -- hesitation from Mrs. Downie.

Mr. Jim Downie The name Mayfield was after May Scholey.

Mrs. Mrs. Downie Yes. May Scholey and that was Scholey's paddock around where Kara is now.

Judith Hughes Where Kara Nursing Home is now?

Mrs. Downie That was Scholey's land, where Essington Lewis had the boarding house for young cadets. That was Scholey's home and he had that all under cultivation. There were summer houses and arbors.

Judith Hughes So the services and facilities Mayfield had to offer as a suburb in those days were regarded as being very high by Newcastle standard with the steam tram coming to Mayfield.

Mrs. Downie Mayfield was THE SUBURB!

Judith Hughes There are some very lovely homes in Mayfield, some very lovely old homes.

Mrs. Downie A lot of those Hamilton homes came a long time after I came to Mayfield.

Judith Hughes Yes I can understand that. The steam tram, was that the only steam tram in Newcastle. Did the service go in any other direction.

Mrs. Downie - hesitation - Mayfield was the first but it came very quickly to other suburbs.

Judith Hughes What about churches, schools and stores?

Mrs. Downie There was a church in Mayfield, around the corner from here where there is now a very beautiful church, a poem of a building really. There was a little church demolished to make way for it and that was the church that was a present from Mr. Arnott, the buscuit maker, he built the church for them.

Judith Hughes Was that an Anglican Church?

Mrs. Downie That was a Methodist church. The Anglican church was new after I came. They only had a tiny little one, which is not there now and since I came in 1911 both the Anglican and the Roman Catholic church in Church Street have been built.

Judith Hughes What about a store? Where would you have gone to do your grocery shopping.

Mrs. Downie The butcher and the grocer both came over from Waratah.

Judith Hughes So they both came over from Waratah ?

Mrs. Downie : Waratah was further ahead than Mayfield in those days, Waratah. You could get the train out, you could go to Newcastle by train, don't forget.

Judith Hughes On the Maitland line.

Mrs. Downie Yes, yes you could go over to Waratah, a lot of men went into their businesses in town. There was a man who lived up the street, he was a Solicitor in town, Mr. Baker, he would come down past here in his pony and trap and his groom would take him to Waratah station to board the train to go right into town to his place of employment.

Judith Hughes What about the green vegetables, did someone come to the house?

Mrs. Downie A Chinaman

Judith Hughes A Chinaman?

Mrs. Downie Only a Chinaman

Judith Hughes He would grow his own vegetables?

Mrs. Downie All along the river bank were Chinamens gardens, right along where all the works are now, when I came here that was all Chinese gardens and as a matter of fact there was a vineyard there too, a wine making place.

Judith Hughes Well that is interesting, what happened to that?

Mrs. Downie Mr. Crebert ran that and thats where Crebert Street got its name.

Judith Hughes Well thats most interesting.

Mrs. Downie B.H.P. bought up all the land.

Judith Hughes What year did the B.H.P. commence here in Mayfield?

Mrs. Downie 1915

Judith Hughes How did that change the face of Mayfield.

Mrs. Downie EVERY 33 FEET OF LAND GOT A HOUSE ON IT. LIKE THAT. (Mrs. Downie clicked her fingers to emphasize her comment)

Judith Hughes Quickly, good quality houses?

Mrs. Downie Well you can see at the moment, all along the street, they wern't there when we came here. When we bought this house it was all bush. When they built the Commonwealth Steel it was in the bush so it wouldn't interfere with residences. The Monastery paddock came from Bull Street to Maitland Road, cut Mayfield in halves, the Monastery. They had a farm at the Monastery, they were self supporting, the Jesuit priests who were there. They were quite self supporting and they brought out paspalum seeds from Ireland and all the lawns in Mayfield can thank the priests for the paspalum in them.

Judith Hughes Well that is interesting, when I go out with my little weeding wand, trying to kill off the paspalum I will know where it came from!

Mrs. Downie ,(Chuckles at my comments) That would have come out about 1900 or so, its good fodder for the cattle and thats whey they bought it out for their farm for cattle feed and of course it blew all over Mayfield.

Judith Hughes We have trouble with Kikuyu, which I believe was imported from South Africa and planted to kill the paspalum. Now we have a lot of paspalum and a lot of kikuyu and not much else. You were saying that once the B.H.P. came to Mayfield there was a dramatic increase in houses built and obviously a dramatic increase of people coming into the area. Were these local people or people who came out from for the work.

Mrs. Downie Yes there is a place in Mayfield - what do they call it - ~~Com~~mie Town - and they built houses, the works built them on both sides of the street, nice brick houses and they bought out skilled workers from England and Scotland.

Judith Hughes Yes - to start the B.H.P.?

Mrs. Downie Yes and when I was living here the band played when they arrived in Mayfield, the band played and led them down into their homes, where the fire was set and the pantry was full of food - Thats ~~P~~ommie Town!

Judith Hughes That no longer exists as a area, has it just been absorbed as part of Mayfield.

Mrs. Downie Yes.

Judith Hughes In that case there would have been a great deal of extra people in the area. Did that improve services, bring stores and merchants into the area?

Mrs. Downie Oh yes. We got a chemist, the side where the National Bank, you know the National Bank.

Judith Hughes I do indeed, a very fine building.

Mrs. Downie Yes, well a chemist shop is next to it. built exactly the same, well the chemist shop was on the corner so the chemist sold it on condition they built his shop for nothing and if you look on one side you can see the Bank and the chemist shop both have the same architecture.

Judith Hughes And the chemist shop has been there all these years, the same with the National Bank?

Mrs. Downie Next to the chemist on that piece of land to begin with, a Mr. and Mrs. Hunter had a tin shed from which they sold fruit, it was the only one in Mayfield, the nearest fruit shop was in Islington. They sold fruit and they made so much money, if you look on the top you can see Hunter Buildings, and they built those five shops.

Judith Hughes Along Maitland Road?

Mrs. Downie Of course, a chemist came, a wine shop and a boot shop and a something else shop, you know what I mean.

Judith Hughes Perhaps a baker.

Mrs. Downie Yes and Susmans on the corner, had the Corner Hotel, they must have sold out to Mr. Amos because Mr. Amos demolished it and he built the Amos Hotel, a big one you see.

Judith Hughes I can recall the name Amos in the Mayfield area.

Mrs. Downie He built the Stag and Hunter you see. He also built the Oak hotel at Tighes Hill. The Steelworks made Mayfield of course.

Judith Hughes What would have happened to the Chinese Gardens if the B.H.P. had purchased all the land. That would have moved all the Chinese gardeners away. Where would the area have been for growing vegetables then?

Mrs. Downie Of course we would have got them from the Markets. By that time we would have had shops and grocery shops, they all came with the Steelworks.

Judith Hughes Would that have been about the time some of the schools were established in the area. What year did Mayfield West and Mayfield East school open.

Mrs. Downie Mayfield West school in 1924.

Judith Hughes Was that the year you started teaching?

Mrs. Downie I taught in 1924, the very first year Mayfield West opened, with only 5 teachers.

Judith Hughes As a teacher how many students would you have had, bearing in mind the great influx of people to the area.

Mrs. Downie I've had 68 at one time, never less than 50.

Judith Hughes Was this because of a shortage of teachers.

Mrs. Downie Not exactly, no, not a shortage of teachers, but because of the war, you must remember the war, there was a shortage then, that's when I went to help. But there has never been a shortage of teachers by any manner of means. It was just the war time, the men and the women were in the services.



Judith Hughes There probably would have been a lot of men who did not return from the war, this would have compounded the problem.

Mrs. Downie A lot of women would have had gone to the boys school and when the boys came back they would have been transferred to the girls schools. You've got to think of all that, so you've got to remember that, its not just a bald statement that there was a shortage of teachers, you can't say that, it all depends on the time.

Judith Hughes Of course.

At this stage we paused for a cup of tea, graciously served by Mr. Jim Downie. While we were having our cup of tea Mrs. Downie was telling me of the journey made to Newcastle to buy medicine for one of her children as in the early 1910's Mayfield did not have a chemist. Mrs. Downie had travelled into Newcastle by tram to have the prescription filled:---4---

Mrs. Downie Can I have it done in a hurry? Why he said, have you got a boyfriend waiting around the corner. I said NO! I am trying to get the tram back home!

Judith Hughes This was all to have a prescription filled at a chemist. You had to go all the way into the Bank Corner?

Mrs. Downie Yes you had to go over the bridge, my children used to call it the High Devil bridge, because there was no chemist in Mayfield. When I came no shops at all, I'm telling you. One little general store, one weatherboard store where all those shops are at the terminus.

Judith Hughes What about the medical facilities, were there doctors here?

Mrs. Downie Yes there was a doctor.

Judith Hughes Can you remember the doctor's name?

MRS. Downie Yes. Dr. Fahey - F.A.H.E.Y. There was a hotel on the corner, Susman's Country Pub and beside it were 2 little weatherboard houses together and then there was the paddock and then the little shop I was talking about. Mr. Stronach, Stronach was the name of the man who had the shop. S.T.R.O.N.A.C.H.

Judith Hughes Stronach is still a name well known in Newcastle, a builder in Newcastle.

Mrs. Downie Yes, you could interview them.

Judith Hughes When you moved into this house, which is a very lovely home,

where would you have been able to purchase things you needed to furnish your home?

Mrs. Downie OH yes there were stores in Newcastle. Who were the people I was talking about - oh yes! O'Conner Brothers in Cooks Hill did beautiful work.

Mrs. Downie We used to walk up and down the street in Newcastle, you know Hunter Street. The hotels used to be open till 11 o'clock in those days. You would have walked up and down.

Judith Hughes Was that part of you entertainment in those days, just to walk and and down.

Mrs. Downie. Yes, yes and go and have an ice cream or peach melba or banana split, or something like that.

Judith Hughes No McDonalds?

Mrs. Downie No No! (laughter) .

Judith Hughes Was there anything particularly interesting that may have happened in Mayfield, to yourself or to the community or to someone you knew? When you arrived or say in the first 10 years, that you may feel would be of interest.

Mrs. Downie I was here 4 or 5 years before the war. We spent our lives entertaining or visiting. What are you doing on Thursday? Oh come to my place or I'm going to so and so's on Thursday and that all our life was.

Judith Hughes Your entertainment was the social life.

Mrs. Downie We left our cards. I have my card case inside, you carried your card case around for when you called on people. When you called they had a tray for you to drop your cards on. Not everytime, only the first call.

Judith Hughes So when someone new came into the area you would visit these people to make them feel welcome and take you card?. If they were home you would be received and entertained.

Mrs. Downie The war stopped all that in 1915, all you could here then was the click click click of knitting needles, if you went to the pictures or to a play, all you would hear was the click click click of knitting needles, knitting socks for the soldiers.

Judith Hughes Thank you Mrs. Downie for talking with me to-day and for sharing with me, your memories and experiences during your first decade as a resident

of Mayfield. The years between 1910 and 1920 were busy and very fast moving for Mayfield and you have contributed much to its history.



Mrs. Bertha Downie was born in Sydney in 1889 and was educated at Sydney Girls High School. After teaching in the Sydney area Mrs. Downie moved to Minmi where she was an educator. In 1911 Mrs. Downie moved to Mayfield where she has been a resident for the 77 years. Mrs. Downie has taught at both Mayfield East and Mayfield West schools and as an active member of the community has contributed much to the area where she has spent the greater part of her life.

During our interview Mrs. Downie was able to vividly recall her life in the early 1910's, the topographical history, the services and life style of the Mayfield area. Her recollections of the arrival of the Broken Hill Co. Pty Ltd Steelworks and the great influx of workers, together with the rapid growth and the changing face of the area, revealed a tremendous change in that decade.

In the latter part of the 19th Century and the early 20th Century, Mayfield was a sought after residential area and was settled by many well known Newcastle families. The gently sloping hill overlooking the Hunter River offered scenic beauty and the advantages of climate. Access to Newcastle commercial centre was easily gained by the rail line from Newcastle to Maitland.

Little was offered in the way of community services and the retail trade was very limited. Most of the homes in the area were serviced by trades people who delivered groceries and dairy products to the door daily. The vegetables were grown by Chinese market gardeners on the fertile river flats. Laden with produce in their baskets, which were balanced on their shoulders, these gardeners offered their goods to the homes on a daily basis. Mrs. Downie recalls having to travel by steam tram from Mayfield Terminus, being the intersection of Maitland Road and Hanbury Street, to the Bank Corner at the western end of Hunter Street Newcastle, to buy medicine from a chemist. Mayfield area was serviced by one doctor, a Dr. Fahey, and little law enforcement was needed.

In 1915 when the Broken Hill Co. Pty Ltd opened the Steelworks, the face of Mayfield changed. Mrs. Downie recalls the speed at which a house was built on every 33 feet of land. Many skilled workers were brought from England

and America and building became a booming industry, despite the shortage of materials brought about by the demands of the Great War. An area in Mayfield that became known as Pommie Town was built especially for migrant steelworkers, and Mrs. Downie recalls the procession and ceremony when the workers and their families were paraded to their new homes. The houses had fires of welcome alight in each hearth and a pantry stocked with food.

The rapid increase in population brought many trades people to the area and many established business houses from other areas quickly located in Mayfield. The tram line was upgraded and services established to supply the increasing needs of a growing population.

Mrs. Downie witnessed vast changes in the Mayfield area between her arrival in 1911 and the end of the decade. Mrs. Downie believes the Steelworks was a great contribution to the area however the face of Mayfield was changed permanently.

Note: Mrs. Bertha Downie was born in 1889 and has been blind since the age of 80. During the interview it was necessary to verbally acknowledge Mrs. Downie's comments to enable her to proceed with the conversation.

ESSAY

JUDITH HUGHES

AUSTRALIAN HISTORY - REGIONAL HISTORY RESEARCH PROJECT.

OPEN FOUNDATION 1988 - WEDNESDAY CLASS

TERM III

ASSIGNMENT DUE September 7th, 1988

SUBJECT Mayfield 1910-1920 The Impact of Development of the  
Broken Hill Co. Pty Ltd. Steelworks

1.

A pattern of living was well established in the Mayfield area in the early 1910's. The area was one of a semi-rural community which had attracted many prominent business men to settle there during the late 1890's and early 1900's. In the short span of 10 years this changed dramatically.

Mayfield in the early 1910's was in the northern part of the municipality of Waratah and the geographical advantages were well recognised. The gently sloping hills gave access to rural land to the south and the Hunter River flats to the north. Substantial homes were built and the area became a socially acceptable place of residence. The fact that many of Newcastle's business men had chosen Mayfield as their home gave credence to the desirability of the area when land became available for sale and development.<sup>1</sup>

The tramline was extended to Mayfield in 1901 and together with the rail link from Waratah to Newcastle made the business area of Newcastle most accessible. Little commercial development had taken place in Mayfield, with the private homes being serviced by traders who called on a day to day basis.

In 1910 the Labor Government led by Premier James McGowan, appointed Frederick Paul General Manager of the Steel Company of Scotland to advise his Government of the viability of a steelworks in New South Wales.<sup>2</sup> Problems arose, concerning the size and cost of the proposed works and in 1912 the Broken Hill Pty. Co. Ltd engaged American David Baker to advise on the advantages of a private steelworks in Australia. David Baker recommended Newcastle, because of the abundant supply of coal, water and labour.<sup>3</sup> It was politically and financially expedient for the Government to support the private steelworks and on 24th January, 1913 the first stages of the Broken Hill Co. Pty Ltd Steelworks began. The Broken Hill Co. Pty Ltd had purchased 25 acres of suitable land on the southern bank of the Hunter River.

1. J.C. Docherty, The Making of an Australian City, Marrickville NSW, 1983, p.31.
2. B.H.P. Company, Newcastle Steelworks: Undated 1911-1915
3. *ibid.* p. 32.



2.

The residents of Newcastle and particularly Mayfield had little idea of the magnitude of the project. The public concept was that a small steel foundry would be built. However in 1913 it could be seen that the Government was in favour of total industrialisation of the area. A Newcastle Morning Herald dated October, 15th 1914 stated that "we shall then see in Newcastle the birth of what will certainly become the most extensive secondary industry in the Commonwealth" <sup>4</sup>

Mayfield expanded rapidly during the early years of the steelworks construction. Many skilled workers were brought from England and America and with them came the need to provide accommodation. Housing construction boomed despite the shortage of materials during the period of World War I. By the middle of the decade Mayfield was beginning to experience the social and environmental problems of rapid expansion. The quiet rural-type atmosphere quickly disappeared. The noise and the vibration of the heavy machinery could be heard and felt several miles away. Air pollution soon became evident and was quickly accepted as part of the Mayfield environment.

Many business men began trading in the area, such as Giles Pharmacy and Vasse's Department Store. Produce merchants opened stores, hotels were built and the tramline was upgraded. Mayfield, because of its close proximity to the Steelworks became a popular housing area for the workers.

The Dominican nuns found their convent in Kerr Street too small for their needs and purchased the property known as Redcliffe on the corner of Havelock and Crebert Streets. <sup>5</sup> The Chinese market gardeners who once had large gardens along the Hunter River flats were lost in the expansion of the Steelworks.

While the expansion of the Steelworks went ahead, subsidiary industries flourished, attracting more people to the area. Community and social problems developed and the families who had once enjoyed the quiet lifestyle of Mayfield escaped to a more acceptable suburb.

4 Newcastle Morning Herald Article, Newcastle Steel Works 15.10.1914

5. Mayfield, Photographs and Paper Cuttings Vol.3.

The larger land holdings and properties of the inhabitants who left the Mayfield area were sold for housing estates.

Social and technological advancement changed the face of Mayfield. The period of 10 years between 1910 and 1920 saw the greatest upheaval that occurred in the history of the area. The advent of the Broken Hill Co. Pty Ltd Steelworks, along with subsidiary industries changed Mayfield from an elite residential area to a rapidly developing working area. The urban way of life quickly overran the slower life style that was characteristic of the early part of the 20th Century.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- DOCHERTY, J.C. Newcastle - The Making of an Australian City. Southdown Press  
Pty. Limited, Marrickville NSW, 1983
- DOCHERTY, J.C. The Second City  
Social and Urban Change in Newcastle, New South Wales,  
1900-c.1929
- BROKEN HILL PROPRIETY COMPANY LIMITED Newcastle Steelworks Undated 1911-1915.  
L.H.D: 672.099442 BRO:Vol.1.
- MAYFIELD Volume 3, Photographs and Paper Cuttings Ref.LHD: 919.442/May 161.3.
- NEWCASTLE MORNING HERALD Article, Newcastle Steel Works, 15.10.1914

UNIVERSITY OF NEWCASTLE

OPEN FOUNDATION COURSE

1988

I, Berta Barbara Downie give my  
permission to Judith Hughes

to use this interview, or part of this interview, for  
research, publication and/or broadcasting (delete one of  
these if required) and for copies to be lodged in  
the University of Newcastle

Archives

for the use of other bona fide researchers.

Signed B Downie

Date 6 September 1988

Interviewer Judith Hughes