

Mid-week dance, Womens Institute, Denniston, 1944.



Dressing up for Guy Fawkes, Denniston, 1930s.  
Left to right: Irene Hearne; Caroline (Minnie) Hill; Joan Holl; Caroline Hearne.



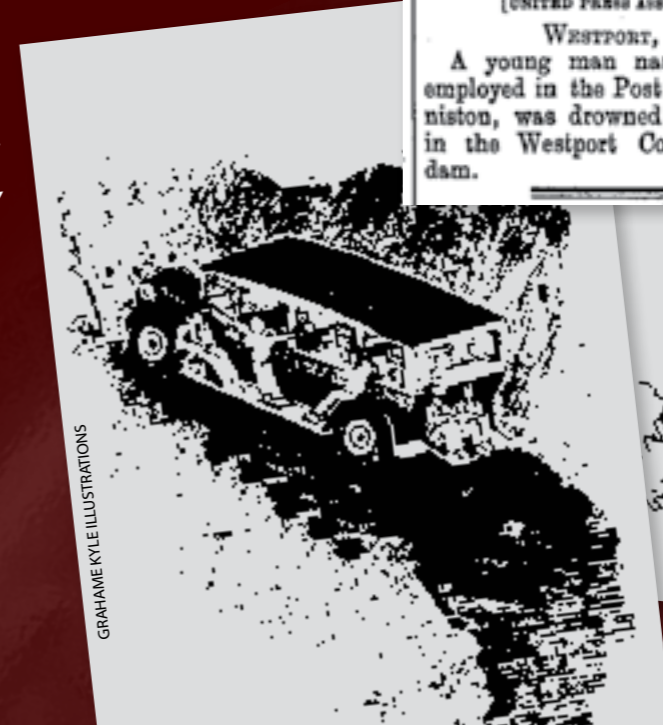
ALEXANDER TURNBULL LIBRARY, WELLINGTON



*"In winter we got dry grass and twigs and lit it inside a treacle tin with holes punched near the bottom... we had the tins on string and would twirl them around over our heads to get them alight... then we all gathered around to keep our hands warm while we plotted the next game or excursion over the hills. Behind some of the houses at Burnetts Face, long icicles hung for weeks on end... we would break bits off to play with."*

*"In summer we swam in the power house dam... it was warm and better under than out if the wind was up. You could swim in some of the creeks but they were pretty cold. One year we had a huge rock we jumped off... you had to land on a small patch of sand way below amongst jagged rocks... it was scary but everyone did it."*

**ACCIDENTS & FATALITIES.**  
(UNITED PRESS ASSOCIATION.)  
WESTPORT, December 5.  
A young man named McGlone, employed in the Post Office at Denniston, was drowned while bathing in the Westport Coal Company's dam.



GRAHAM KYLE ILLUSTRATIONS



Burnetts Face

1910



ALEXANDER TURNBULL LIBRARY WELLINGTON

*"I think we were lucky to have such good teachers in such an out-of-the-way place."*

Jack Jones

*"I would not have wanted to grow up anywhere else"*

Jack Higgins

**EDUCATION AND BRASS BANDS**

Many Denniston folk, particularly the men, recall their childhood on Denniston with memories similar to those of youngsters in rural communities throughout New Zealand – roaming free in the outdoors, catching "crawlies" (freshwater crayfish) in the streams, playing amongst machinery, giving teachers a hard time and fetching Dad home from the pub. Perhaps what made Denniston a little different was its isolation coupled with a strong mining culture. Boys were expected to leave school by 14 years of age and get a job, not just to bring much needed money into the family, but preferably to follow their fathers into the mine and continue the struggle to fight for better working conditions. Principles of socialism and the importance of education were strong amongst many Denniston miners, as was the tradition of the brass band. It was regarded as an honour to be good enough to play in the New Zealand championship-winning Denniston Brass Band. Girls were not encouraged to enter the mine – traditionally, women down the pit was thought to bring bad luck. A girl's place was home-making.

Sports and entertainments flourished with strong community support. At Denniston the Miners Hall (called the Big Hall) and at Burnetts Face the Mission Hall were the centres for most entertainments throughout the 1900s including concerts, visiting minstrel groups, recitals, dances, balls, plays, boxing and wrestling matches, children's fancy dress parties and movies. Rugby, soccer and hockey were the main sports, often with rival teams from Denniston and Burnetts Face motivating a good show on the field. Teams came from all over the West Coast to compete for the Toll Cup, a six-a-side hockey tournament.

**BOBBY ROBERTSON**

Bobby Robertson left school at 13 and started work as a spragger at Wooden Bridge sheds. He continued to educate himself with books from the Burnetts Face Library and by attending night classes at the Denniston School of Mines, first obtaining his Deputy and then at 26 years of age his Under-viewer qualifications. Education beyond school was vital to the mining industry. The two libraries on The Hill and the School of Mines played a significant role in the lives of many men.

**JACK JONES**

*"We lived in the last house up Coalbrookdale. There was no road. A steep cliff behind and the rope road in front left only a small patch of land for our house. We walked to school but often hung onto the back of a coal tub and rode on the moving wire cable which pulled the tubs along. We would jump as the cable went over a roller. This was highly illegal, frowned on by adults and in hindsight very dangerous, but was quite common among the boys."*

**SHIRLEY RUSSELL**

One day during a school holiday, when the mines weren't working, some of the newly recruited clipper-on boys at the Coalbrookdale Sheds organised a contest to see who would be the best and fastest clipper-on amongst the students. Very typical of Denniston, girls were included. It was won by 11 year old Shirley Russell with three tubs in five minutes. Her father took a short-cut home the following week and saw the tallies chalked up on the wall. He was not impressed with his daughter's risk to her fingers!



FRIENDS OF THE HILL MUSEUM

Patricia and Alf Kitchin ready to deliver papers, Top Road, Burnetts Face.

*"The condition of accepting the paper round job was that you had to deliver a dry paper. Quite a tough order for Denniston's weather. There were no plastic shoulder bags in those days. You would run up to the house and knock on the door and wait for it to be opened. One time the lady of a house with no porch left me standing in the pouring rain, only to come to the door and declare that her paper was wet and she would not pay for it!"*



Denniston theatricals.

FRIENDS OF THE HILL MUSEUM COX COLLECTION



ALEXANDER TURNBULL LIBRARY WELLINGTON

School group having a nature study lesson beside The Incline, 1944. In the background their fathers' bread and butter (coal truck) whizzes by.

**SLEDGING THE INCLINE**

One practice never mentioned at home was sledging the Incline. Two pieces of wood were nailed under a plank at the exact gauge of the line and riders reached some break-neck speeds before spilling off or braking with their boots. There was never a major accident so parents did not need to know about this daring pursuit.

**TOMMY KERR**

Tommy Kerr gained notoriety for purloining the classroom strap and throwing it into a tub going into the mine. Miraculously it was spotted days later at the bins. It was retrieved and back at school within the week, intact and capable of being used to administer the standard punishment.

The Burnetts Face Brass Band

1914



ALEXANDER TURNBULL LIBRARY



FRIENDS OF THE HILL MUSEUM

Depression miners group, Burnetts Face 1932. Food was in short supply. When it became available it was cooked in 44 gallon drums and shared amongst the community.



FRIENDS OF THE HILL MUSEUM

Young workers at the Wooden Bridge clipping sheds.

Many Denniston boys left school at 13 to start work as spraggers and token callers. Many continued to educate themselves by attending classes at the Denniston School of Mines. One visiting Mines Inspector reported that he was impressed at the large number of miners who attended the classes which he said were of a very high standard. The inspector commented on the intelligence of the attendees. The photograph at above illustrates a typical crowd of young workers at the clipping sheds and includes some school boys in uniform, probably eager to leave high school and join the camaraderie of the miners.

PIT-PROPPED PASSAGES

MINERS

*Above us, below us  
Around us  
We feel the mountains push  
For we have tapped  
Its arteries of anthracite  
And bored into its veins  
Of bright bituminous.  
  
Termite men, forsaking sun  
We desecrate the resting place  
of trees that shook  
In prehistoric winds then  
Fell when hillsides folded and  
Shattered rocks came tumbling.  
  
Our eyes black-smudged  
Over white in the fluttering  
Half-light lamp flame  
See the coruscating seams  
That we shall fracture*

*With our steel and  
Splinter with our charges.  
  
In clattering tubs we  
Shove our fossil spoils  
Through narrow ways  
To meet the outside airs:  
Look closely at the  
Long-imprisoned rainbows  
Freed at last to  
Scintillate below  
An older sun.  
  
In these dark-stopped  
Pit-propped passages,  
Walls weep and wetas  
Leap across our lights:  
We have survived  
Stone-fall, coal-fall  
Fire-damp and flood.*

*But thoughts of  
What has been  
And what may be  
Do not deter us.*

Morris Marshall 1 January 1971



ALEXANDER TURNBULL LIBRARY WELLINGTON



FRIENDS OF THE HILL MUSEUM

End of shift, Coalbrookdale.



FRIENDS OF THE HILL MUSEUM

Blacksmith and apprentice, Coalbrookdale.



ALEXANDER TURNBULL LIBRARY WELLINGTON

Journey home, 1945.

MEN WHO WORK IN THE DARK

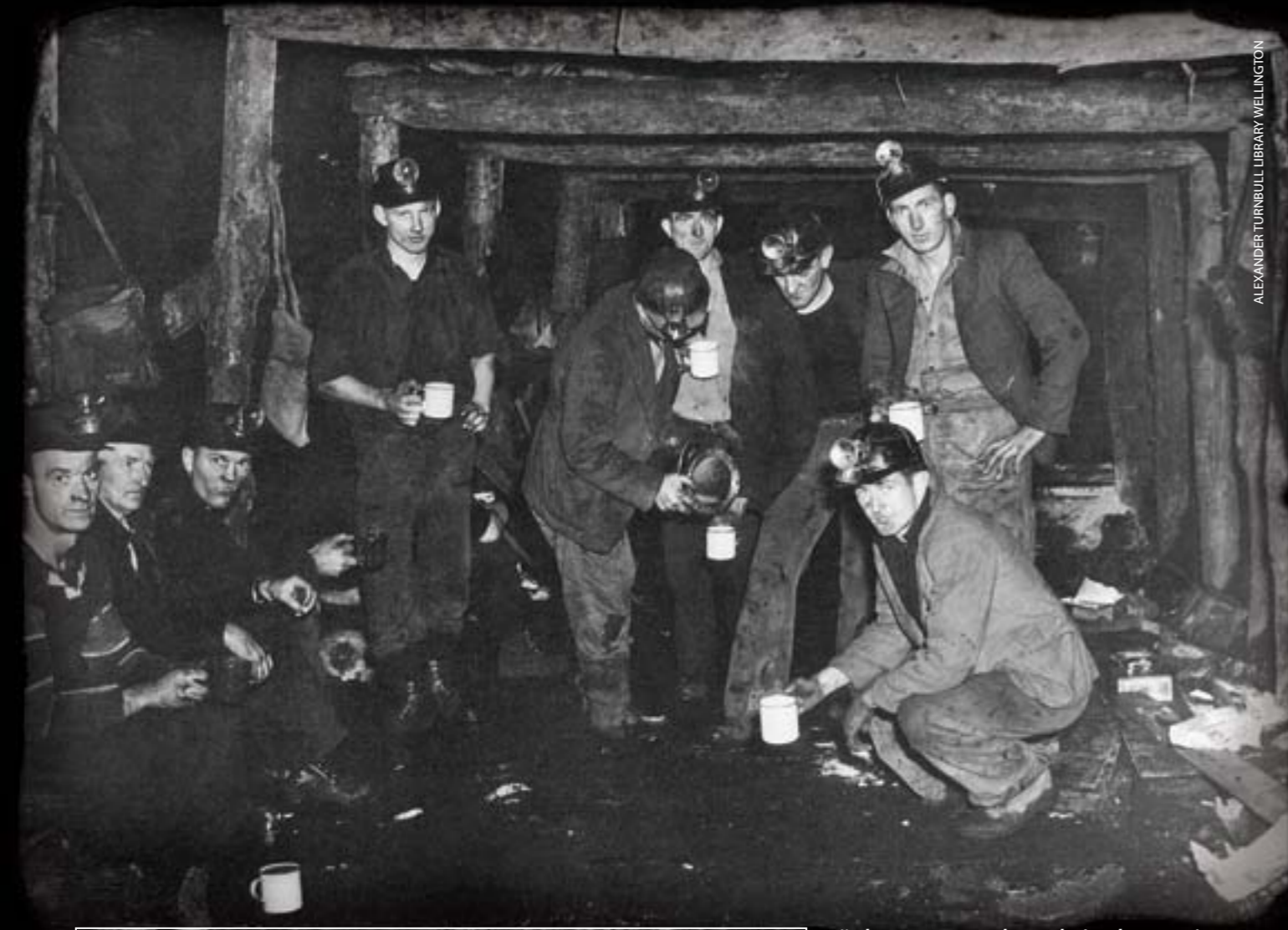
Over the years working conditions for Denniston miners improved slowly but working underground was hard and dangerous work. The Plateau was disadvantaged in its remote, mountain-top location, but to help offset this there was one significant safety point in its favour. There was very little volatile gas and dust. Only one accidental explosion occurred in the Denniston mines and no one was injured. Deaths underground occurred in other ways, such as collapsing roofs, falling coal, pit prop failures and runaway coal tubs. Coal was extracted by the

bord-and-pillar method where pillars of coal were left to support the roof until a section was fully developed. Then the miners would retreat, extracting the pillars ("robbing them") so the roof collapsed behind them.

Equipment was rudimentary. No coal cutting machinery was used until 1936. That was the year hard hats were introduced, and miners had to buy their own. For men who toiled in a dim, sweaty environment it was a time of great relief when they could knock off and follow that hard-hewn coal out of the mine. In the early days they would head home to a tin bath by a warm fire, followed by a change into dry clothes. Bath houses were built at the Ironbridge and Coalbrookdale Mines around 1922 and a replacement bath house built at the Denniston power house in 1939.

*"When robbing a pillar you had your ears in the roof... listening for the signs of a roof collapse."*

Geoff Kitchin, Denniston miner.



ALEXANDER TURNBULL LIBRARY WELLINGTON

**FRANK ROBERTSON**

*"What I remember most are the earthquakes – Murchison and Inangahua especially. I was in the mine for the last one. Everything was shaking. An older experienced man said "Stand behind a big prop – you'll be alright." I did. Then the flat pieces that jam the props to the roof fell out and my big prop was swaying. The other man took off and I thought – he's the experienced one! I'm running too... I'm going all the way. I did, but not all the men left the pit."*

**OLIVER INSULL**

*"My first day underground I walked with the other miners down the 144 steps into the black artery of the pit (Whareatea Mine). With our carbide lamps penetrating the pitch darkness I followed with beating heart. Down a tunnel with only the light from our lamps showing the way. At the end the horse-driver was waiting with a race of coal tubs to be winched. This was my new job. As each race of empties came down the winch I had to push them into a siding, then the horse-driver and I pushed the full tubs onto the line and coupled them to the rope. I gave the signal and watched them slowly disappear into the blackness. The horse-driver disappeared with the empties. I had a wooden seat to sit on. I would wait for the signal telling me a race of empties was on its way. I had a book to read by the light of my lamp but I was aware of the constant drip of water, the quiet stillness and the pitch blackness beyond the perimeter of my lamp. Here all alone, except when the horse-driver came, I spent the day. I sat with my vivid imagination, waiting for the roof to collapse. It never did."*

Boys had to be 18 years old to go down the mine. Some lied about their ages or altered documents to get down there to work as soon as possible.

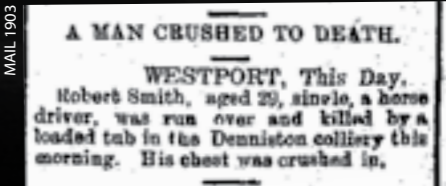
**CAKEWALK DICK AND DOBBIE DOBSON**

Cakewalk Dick was the horse Dobbie Dobson drove in the Ironbridge Mine. It got the name for the stepping antics it got up to when he came to a flatsheet. One day Cakewalk refused to turn off the main drive to the working face. Miner Brickie Marr wanted to give Cakewalk a wack but Dobbie thought there was something wrong. As they hesitated, a fault in the roof started to run. It was a big fall.

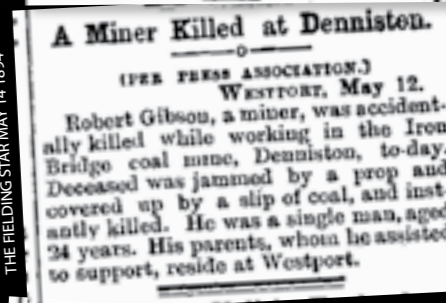
*"Tons and tons of stuff came down, coal, props, stone, everything. I reckon it was the horse that saved us."*

The short, strong pit ponies could haul boxes of coal at speed through dark mines, rarely losing their footing. Their sensitivity ran to knowing when one tub too many was hitched to their race and when to jump clear of a runaway tub. Mostly stabled underground, the ponies were well cared for by the miners who brought treats of fresh fruits and vegetables. When the mines shutdown at Christmas the ponies were let out to spend two weeks in the pastures around Waimangaroa. Some Denniston children recall how the released ponies galloped full speed down the hill.

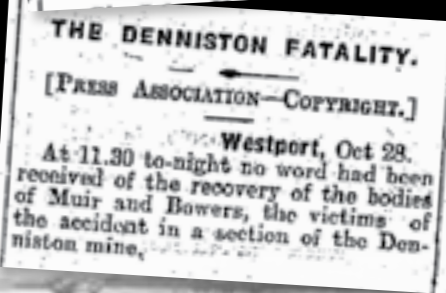
THE NELSON EVENING MAIL 1903



THE FIELDING STAR MAY 14, 1894



THE COLONIST 1910



FRIENDS OF THE HILL MUSEUM

*"There was a break (crib time) at 9.30am and one at 2.30pm... we took our sandwiches in a tin... and made sure our bags were hung well out of the way of the rats."*

Robbie (Heathcote) Cooper : mining at Denniston in 1948



ALEXANDER TURNBULL LIBRARY WELLINGTON



DEPARTMENT OF CONSERVATION WEST COAST

*"Damn Denniston  
Damn the track  
Damn the way both there and back  
Damn the wind and damn the weather  
God damn Denniston altogether."*

**TRACK HISTORY**

Blasted, picked and shovelled out of a steep hillside, the Bridle Track was opened in 1884. People no longer had to trudge up and down the Incline. Now they had to trudge up and down a track, but the danger of being struck by railway wagons on their journey was eliminated. Slips often blocked the track, leaving the people on the plateau isolated for short periods. Some disliked the track at any time while others thought nothing of travelling it in any weather. At night some used a 'bush lantern' – a candle stuck in a bottle with its bottom removed and held upside down by the neck.

For those who lived on the Hill, completion of a vehicle road in 1902 was a great occasion. Development of transport led to the decline of the towns on top of the Plateau, as workers could commute daily to the mines from down by the sea. From a population peak of around 1,500 in 1911, the community registered eight in 1981.

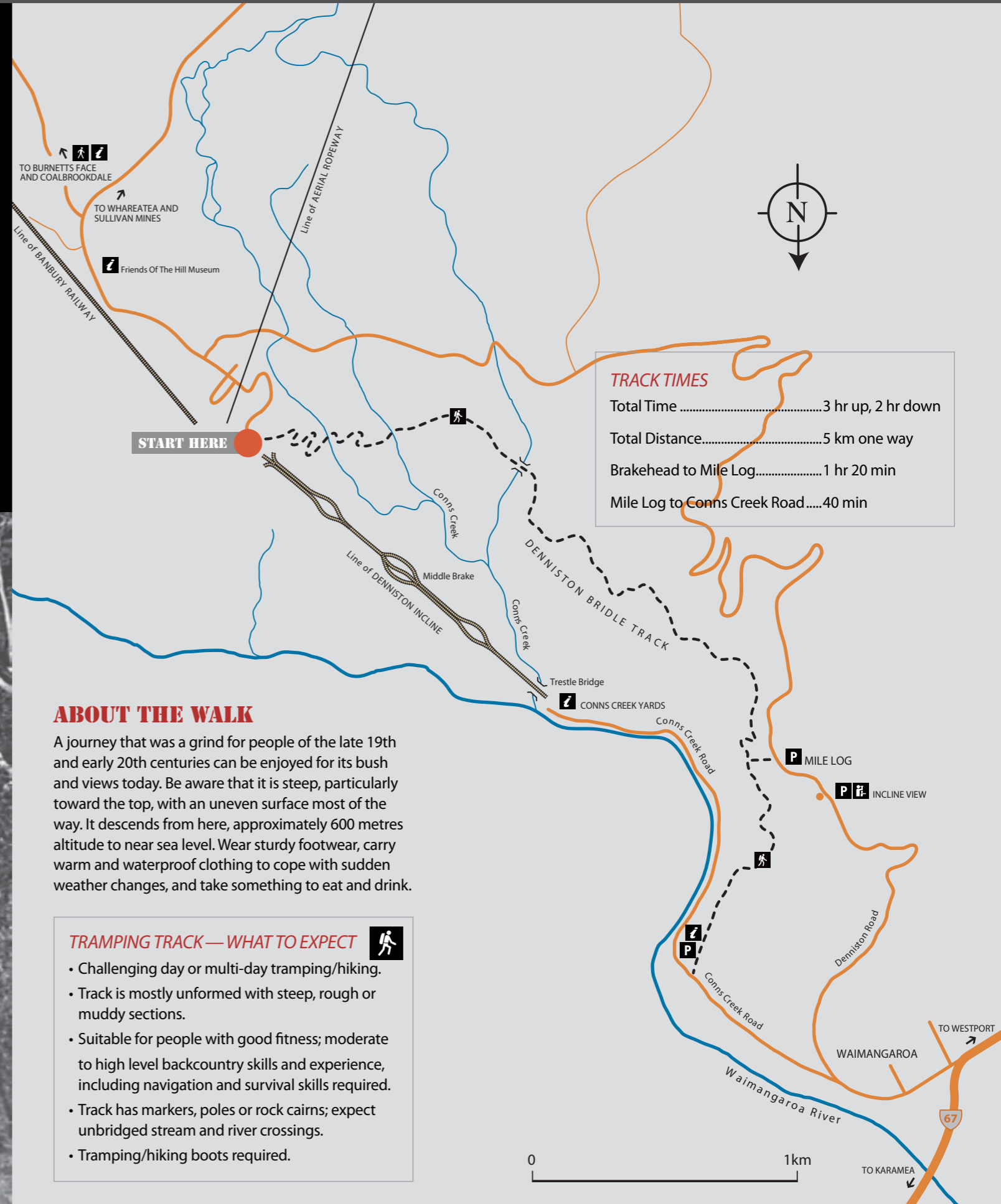
GRAHAM KYLE DEPARTMENT OF CONSERVATION WESTPORT



1930



DEPARTMENT OF CONSERVATION WESTPORT



**ABOUT THE WALK**

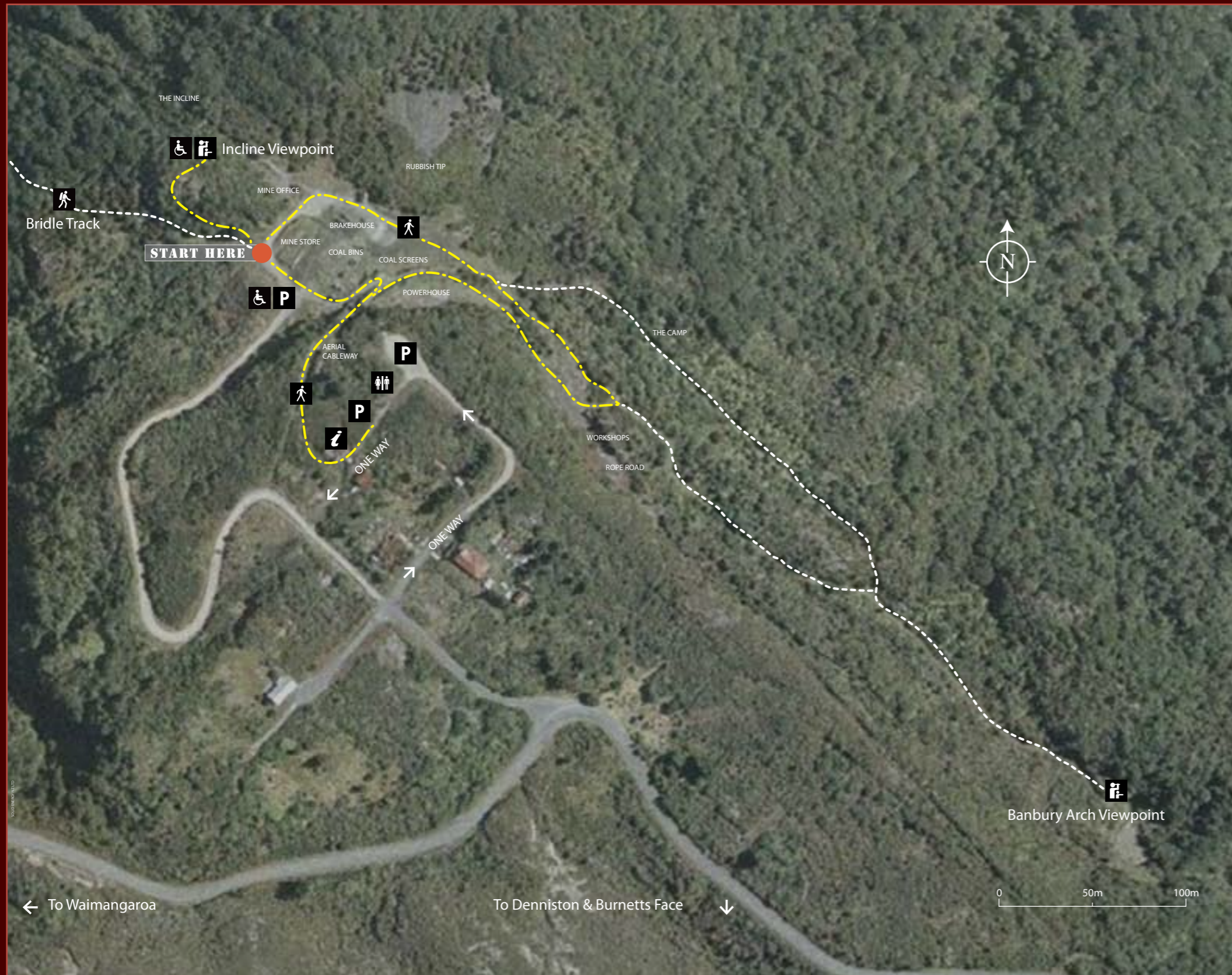
A journey that was a grind for people of the late 19th and early 20th centuries can be enjoyed for its bush and views today. Be aware that it is steep, particularly toward the top, with an uneven surface most of the way. It descends from here, approximately 600 metres altitude to near sea level. Wear sturdy footwear, carry warm and waterproof clothing to cope with sudden weather changes, and take something to eat and drink.

**TRAMPING TRACK — WHAT TO EXPECT**

- Challenging day or multi-day tramping/hiking.
- Track is mostly unformed with steep, rough or muddy sections.
- Suitable for people with good fitness; moderate to high level backcountry skills and experience, including navigation and survival skills required.
- Track has markers, poles or rock cairns; expect unbridged stream and river crossings.
- Tramping/hiking boots required.

# EXPLORING DENNISTON

## DENNISTON BRAKEHEAD WALK



DOC rangers on the Incline Viewing Platform, located where the Brakehead used to be and looking out to Waimangaroa and the Tasman Sea. The Incline can just be made out on the left.