

## MINMI



Minmi c1900 -

*John Turner Collection, University of Newcastle*

### **Name: Mechanics Institute – School of Arts**

This is a story of a town that struggled to survive for over 170 years and during those years the mining town of Minmi endeavoured three times to establish a Mechanics Institute cum School of Arts and, despite the concerted efforts of members of the community, each effort failed after a few years. There appears to be two main reasons for the demise of such institutes in the town which I will try to address on what scant information is available for researchers. The attempts to establish a centre of adult learning were made in 1878, 1891 and 1914.

Unfortunately for research purposes a dedicated School of Arts building never eventuated and the location of the last two institutes were not recorded. We can note from newspaper articles that they were rented premises. Also there has not been an historical society in the town although Minmi did fall under the Wallsend Historical Society in a small way.

Firstly a history of Minmi which might help explain the problem. The village of Minmi is situated 8 kms west of Wallsend and approximately 17 km west of Newcastle city.

The traditional owners of the land around Minmi are the Pambalong (Big Swamp) Clan part of the Awabakal Tribe, Minmi is an Aboriginal word that translates to *Place of the Giant Lily*. The area was rich in foods that included goanna, wallaby, kangaroo rats, emu, in fact most native animals as well as natural flora to supplement the Pambalong's diet. They existed in the area for 40,000 years until the advent of Europeans who brought with them diseases and alcohol which they had no defences against. In 1833, in Jonathan Warner's return of names of the Awabakal people, those coming under the Pambalong Clan numbered 45. By 1893 there was no trace of the Pambalong Clan in the area.

After European settlement the Minmi area was originally worked as cattle country and part of the agricultural holdings of Alexander Walker Scott, W C Wentworth and John Eales.

William Charles Wentworth, remembered primarily for the crossing of the Blue Mountains in 1813 with Blaxland and Lawson, held large holdings around Minmi most he had purchased when Crown Lands were sold in 1837. He purchased huge acreages of land throughout New South Wales speculating on the growth of the Colony. Wentworth was a politician, lawyer, pastoralist and newspaper owner and exceedingly wealthy.



A W Scott<sup>1</sup>

Alexander Walker Scott made two trips to Australia before finally making the decision to settle here in 1831. He took up a large grant on Ash Island near Newcastle and purchased land at Minmi where he grew tobacco and flax. In Newcastle he established an iron foundry and a slip at Stockton and also built large tanks on Moschetto Island to supply salt to Sydney. Scott was anxious to establish a railway between Newcastle and Maitland and, undeterred by Governor Gipps comments, he became a shareholder in the Hunter River Railway Co. His interest in furthering education led him to be the founding treasurer of the Newcastle Mechanics Institute. A member of both the Legislative Assembly and the Legislative Council, Scott devoted his spare time to entomology.

In 1842 Ludwig Leichhardt stayed at a place he described in his journals as “*Mr Scott’s cattle station, Minmi*”. Scott was one of Leichhardt’s sponsors and taught him bushcraft over a period of a few months. To add weight to this story also in 1842 Biraban and Bo-win-bah, headman of the Pambalong Clan, guided Leichhardt on his excursions around Newcastle.<sup>2</sup> Scott was the father of Helena and Harriet Scott known, even to this day, as the Scott sisters whose magnificent drawings are recognised world-wide. Their work *Australian Lepidoptera* is still the hall mark of entomological drawings.

In the late 1830s Harry Styles is the person recorded as first discovering coal at Minmi but it was not until 1848 that the first coal mine was opened by William Robson and John and Edward Turner. It was Edward Turner who first challenged the system in place at the time that gave the coal monopoly in the Colony to the Australian Agricultural Company.

*Styles Grove* farm of 50 acres was part of some 598 acres owned by Alexander Scott which Styles purchased in 1841. *Styles Grove* was to feature in the later history of the area as the mansion of James Fletcher, politician and mine manager and in recent times as the site of Bishop Tyrell Anglican College.

For the convenience of the miners at Minmi most housing was located within easy walking distance of the mine - the location of the village with its steep hills surrounding it and the swamp to the north contributed to the township not spreading. A small number of more substantial houses were built for mine management, not in the town but on the hills overlooking the town.

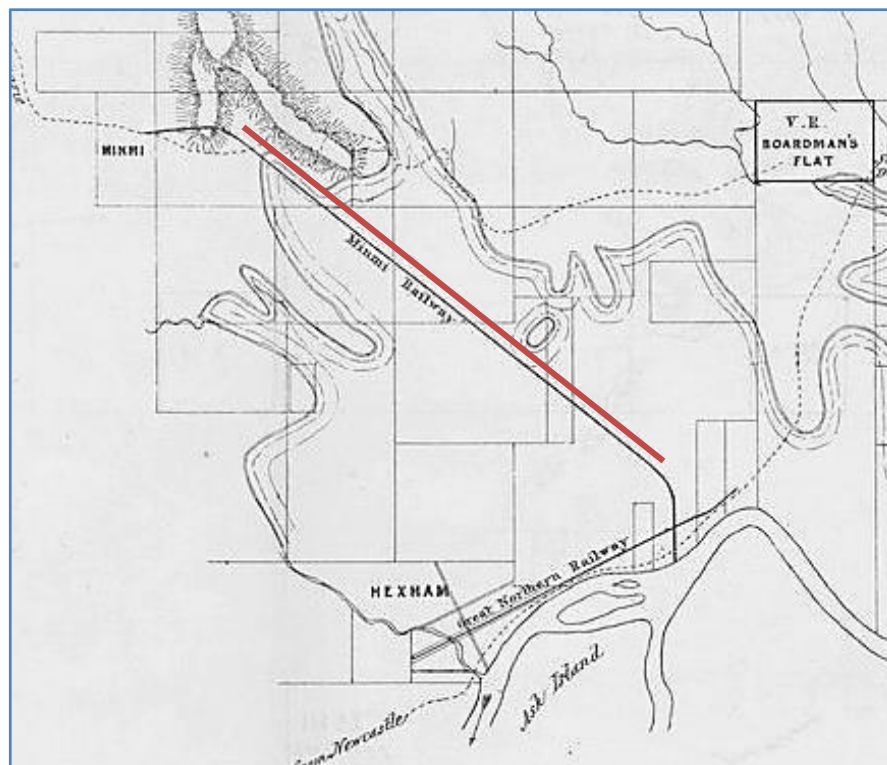
John Eales gained the mineral rights to 640 acres at Minmi and started the first truly commercial mine in partnership with John Christian. Recognizing the possibilities of the youthful coal-mining industry, they began mining near Minmi in defiance of the Australian Agricultural Company’s monopoly. A Government enquiry into the coal industry was held and a decision handed down on 17 August 1847 to take the monopoly away from the Australian Agricultural Company.

Eales' mine was located on a ridge separating Minmi and Back Creeks and when coke became more profitable he took the opportunity to build coke ovens next to his mine. The coke ovens, like all industry of the time, did nothing to improve the health of the residents. Within several years Eales was exporting large quantities of coal from the *Duckenfield* collieries, and in 1848 the Sydney Gas Company chartered the *Currency Lass* to carry his coal to Sydney. Most of the coal was shipped to Sydney which at that time was desperate for coal as their timber forests had been decimated for building and for fuel.

To facilitate the shipping of his coal, and after negotiating with various land owners and with, finally, an Act of Parliament Eales and his partner Christian gained official sanction to build a railway line across the Hexham Swamp connecting the mines with the Hunter River at Hexham. It was Turner, however, who years before had done most of the work by employing surveyors. This line avoided the long, circuitous and expensive route across the mountains and around Hexham Swamp. By the end of 1856 the coal railway and wharves were complete. The rail tracks were initially made of wood and the wagons pulled by horses or bullocks.



John Eales<sup>3</sup>



Section of a map drawn by J Francis Adams Licenced surveyor dated 17 September 1857 clearly showing the tram line across the swamp. Original held by the University of Newcastle, Cultural Collections

Like most employees of the time the miners were very poorly paid for the arduous and dangerous work they were engaged in, and in an effort to acquire better conditions a strike resulted. Eales met the miners demands but when the present contract expired he again reduced the wages resulting in another strike. This time Eales did not give in and gave the miners, who were living in cottages supplied by his company, notice to quit. As a consequence most of the miners left. With the workforce depleted and other problems the mine closed and Eales and Christian were forced to sell.

Fortunately for Minmi James and Alexander Brown were on the scene and twelve months later, in 1859, purchased Eales' coal mine together with all its infrastructure including the tramline and, according to the bill of sale, 25 houses for mine employees. James and Alexander Brown had also opened coal mines in a challenge to the Australian Agricultural Company. The Brown brothers had first hand knowledge of the coal at the Duckenfield pit as some years earlier Eales had commissioned James Brown to sink and develop his pit.

In 1859 the rent for one of the company houses was 1/- per week an acceptable price but Minmi was a company town and facilities taken for granted in other towns with a local government body were not available. Decent roads and waste collection were something the residents only dreamed of. This resulted in quagmire roads in wet weather and cesspits on the allotments. It wasn't until 1902 that the Progress Association managed to rid the town of cesspits.

J & A Brown, who had steamships to maintain as well as the usual colliery engines and locomotives, established an engineering works at Minmi in 1861. The workshops figure large in contemporary accounts of Minmi and one resident recalled, in an article, not very flattering to Eales, published in the *Newcastle Chronicle* of 8 June 1863 that:

*“Minmi, in the hands of the first proprietor, Mr John Eales, languished and nearly died, but when the Browns came with their army of skilled workmen, their beautiful machinery and plant of proper description, things went ahead astonishingly well and in a short time, a little town, as if by magic of an enchanter's wand, sprang up amongst the gum trees”.*

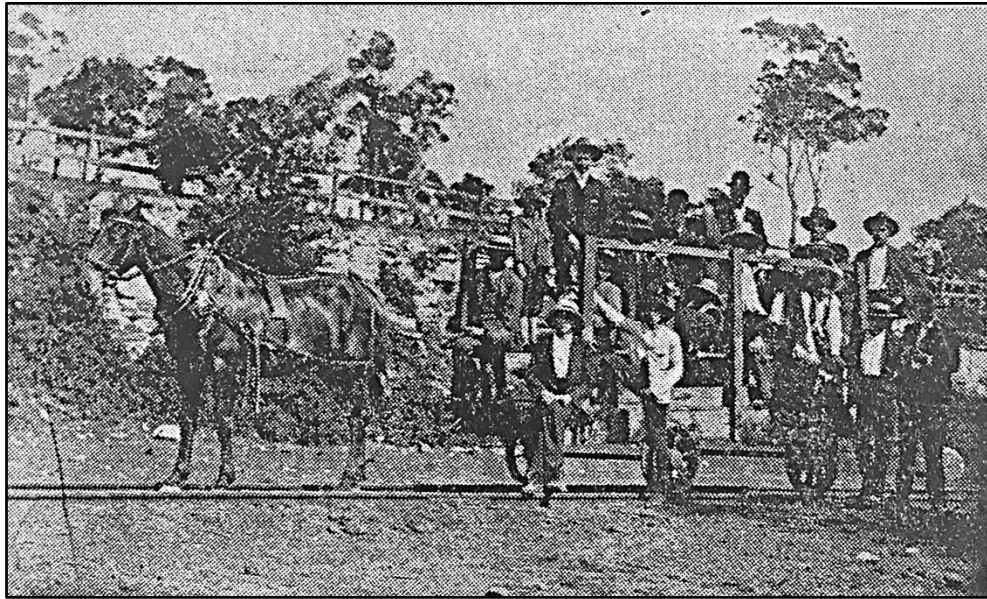
In 1862 the mine title was transferred from the Browns to Messrs Rolfe, Nuttall and DeLittle for £127,500 but the new owners failed at the enterprise and trade ceased in 1869. The Browns, always ready when an opportunity presented itself, repurchased the claims.

Between 1859 and 1863 Minmi developed into a magnificent village, from about 1865 to 1873 it more or less stagnated until redeveloped and yielding more coal making the Browns the leading coal producers by 1892. It is estimated the population of the town by then was about 7,000.

When John Brown was operating the mines at Minmi he had the rail over the swamp widened using out of work miners and, it is said, Chinese labourers. As testament to the workmanship of the times the five-kilometre earth wall can still be seen on Google Earth over 160 years later. The rail line to Hexham was designated a coal line but passenger trains were introduced on the line so that families could travel to Hexham and then further afield to Maitland or Newcastle. On Saturdays there were four passenger train services and on Sundays horses pulled a trolley over the lines for the 11 km journey.

The horse-drawn tram that travelled between Minmi and Hexham was introduced by Peter Ryan. The trolley was a platform 12 feet by 4 feet 6 inches with a canvas canopy for protection in hot or wet weather. It had neither springs nor axle boxes. The old horse's speed was estimated at five miles an hour and the timetable was practically non-existent, it depended on the number of passengers and the condition of the horse.





*In 1900 and 1901 the horse-drawn trolley plied between Minmi and Hexham on Sunday afternoon. This photograph was taken at Minmi. Found in an old scrap book.*

The first school at Minmi was built on land given by the Browns and opened in 1861 it stood on a rise out of town on what is now the road to West Wallsend. A second school was constructed in 1877 a little closer to the Village on two acres of land, again donated by the Brown family, with the foundation stone of the school being laid by James Brown. At the time of opening the school had approximately 300 students.

With much fanfare, a parade through the streets headed by the Minmi Brass Band and dignitaries of every persuasion the opening of the new Minmi Public School, which was situated not very far from the original school, took place on Saturday 19 May 1878. The building was described as “*an ornament to Minmi in its elevated position*”.



*Minmi School in 1895 with additions. University of Newcastle, Ralph Snowball Collection*

## MECHANICS INSTITUTE - 1878

And so we come to the first Minmi Mechanics Institute in 1878.

With the closure of the first school the Brown Brothers gave the building to the citizens of Minmi to be used as a School of Arts. The previous year in June the Thistle Kilwinning Lodge, a Masonic Lodge, was opened in Minmi. With so many miners being Scottish and wishing to continue their Masonic affiliations the lodge had good support and it was not until 1943 they moved to Wallsend. Each mine also had their own Lodge/Union. The Mechanics Institute would have been struggling for members.

The old school building was not particularly large but was accepted graciously by a committee set up to oversee the development of a Mechanics Institute. The only description available is:

*“it was constructed of brick in 1861 and measured 30 feet in length by 20 feet on a stone foundation with an ironbark shingle roof.”<sup>4</sup>*

Although in early reports the institution was referred to as a School of Arts it became The Minmi Mechanics' Institute. The committee held an inauguration concert and fund raiser at Strang's Assembly Rooms on Monday 21 October 1878, a large crowd attended and the *Herald* reporter of 23 October rather flamboyantly wrote that he:

*"thought it augured well for the success of the institution having for its object the moral and mental culture of the youth of this glorious sunny land of the south and if it is in the future to take a foremost place amongst the powerful nations of the earth, it can only be brought about by training the young minds of our sons and daughters in all useful knowledge."*

After two hours of entertainment the committee invited the visitors to a spread at host Burley's (Northumberland Hotel) – the president Mr Howieson, spoke about the use of such institutes and went on to thank Messrs Brown (mine owners) who had generously given the use of the old school house for an institution as well as donating books for the library. All looked promising for the institute to grow. Unfortunately the location and the bad roads did nothing to encourage members to attend.

*The committee of the Mechanics Institute are pushing matters ahead as much as possible. They have commenced making alterations in the late Public School, which place they intend making suitable for the purposes required. This is as it should be, and I am glad to see the committee moving in a matter of such importance to the welfare of the township.<sup>5</sup>*

A description of Minmi in 1879 appeared in *The Newcastle Directory and Almanac* of that year and we can assume that the Mechanics Institute was doing well.

*There are upwards of 500 miners and other workmen employed at and around the colliery. The Public School is a substantially built stone structure, with an infant department capable of holding 200 scholars. There are 332 scholars on the roll, with an average attendance of 233. There are three churches – Primitive, United Methodist and Welsh Independent. A Mechanics' Institute in a flourishing condition; a Masonic and Orange and three branch lodges of different friendly societies and a population of about 1700.*

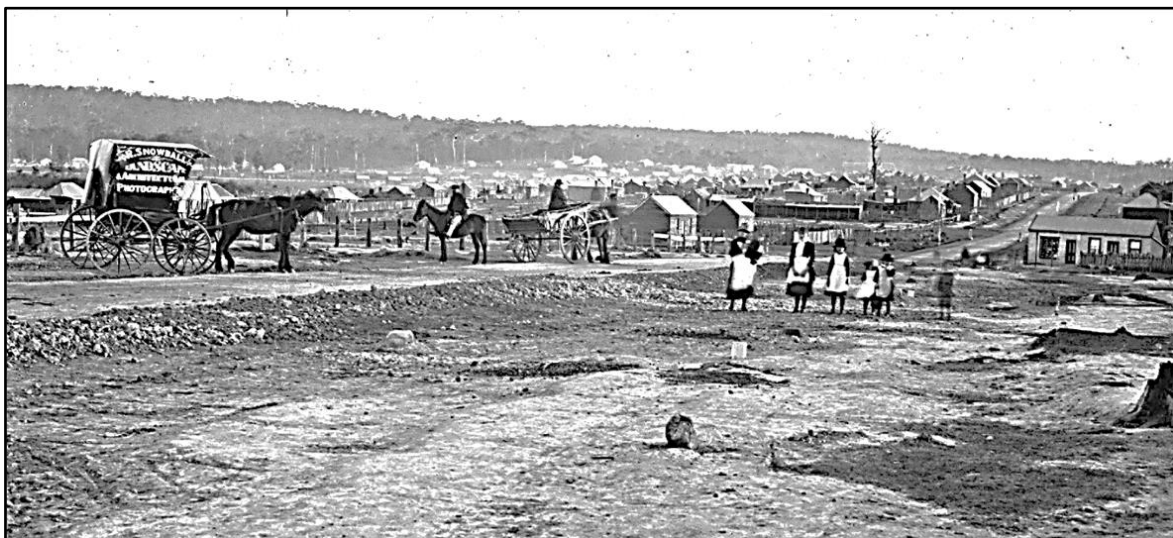
A letter appeared in the *Newcastle Herald* from the Undersecretary, Mr W E Plunkett, to advise that £500 will be placed on the additional estimates for 1879 in aid of the building fund of the institute in question. Conditions of the grant were £1 Government aid for every £1 of the private contribution.<sup>6</sup> The conditions were obviously met as the money was accepted and placed to the credit of the Australian Joint Stock Bank at Wallsend.

The NSW Government grants had been started in 1878 with a £2000 grant to the Sydney Mechanics School of Arts and was expanded following a Technological Conference the following year under the Chairmanship of Sir Henry Parkes. The conference also voted to support the educational work of country Mechanics' Institutes and Schools of Arts (then numbering about 100) by granting of a pound for pound subsidy.<sup>7</sup> The importance of Mechanics' Institutes and School of Arts and the early technical education movements is shown clearly in Inkster and Todd's *Support for Scientific Enterprise 1851-1900*.

Twelve months later it was reported the Mechanics Institute was progressing very satisfactorily and members were increasing fast. The committee had hoped to repair the road to the institute making it much better for travelling on dark nights. This in fact was never done.<sup>8</sup> Another fund raising grand concert was held on Friday 28 November 1879. A correspondent to the *Newcastle Herald* in December of that year expressed an opinion that the behaviour of the youth of Minmi had improved greatly since the opening of the Good Templar's Lodge and the Mechanics' Institute with its library and lectures.

The Mechanics Institute closed but no date is available possibly the mid-1880s. With the availability of £500 plus the money necessary to be raised to acquire the Government Grant one would think there was no holding back the institute but unfortunately this was not so. With so many Lodges competing for membership and enrolment fees, the location of the building out of town, over muddy roads, failure seemed inevitable.

Minmi was always known as a private town but it was not until the Government Gazette of March 20, 1885, page 1954, formally gazetted it as such. 1889 saw the miners delivered another blow when John Brown, now in charge of the Company, introduced seven day leases on their dwellings. This meant the tenants could be evicted immediately if Brown wished it.



*Minmi in 1890 - Ralph Snowball Collection University of Newcastle Cultural Collections*

## SCHOOL OF ARTS - 1891

It was in August 1891 that once again the citizens of Minmi were urged <sup>9</sup> to support the establishment of another School of Arts. The original institution was established thirteen years previous, in 1878, and from information garnered from the newspapers of the day it had not been a viable concern for many years. *“For many years it was felt that a School of Arts was an urgent and pressing want.”*

The first indication that Minmi was serious about once again establishing a School of Arts was a local news story which appeared in the *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners' Advocate* on 8 August, 1891:

*“For some time past, many of our townsmen have felt the want of a School of Arts in our midst, and with the view of endeavouring to establish such a desirable institution, it has been decided to convene a public meeting in Sharp's Hall on Thursday next. Every person who takes an interest in the advancement of the town should attend, and help to carry the movement to a successful issue”.*

This was followed by an advertisement and an article in the *Newcastle Morning Herald* of 22 August 1891 urging members of the old Institute to return books.

*“Persons having books in their possession belonging to the late Mechanics Institute are invited by the Secretary of the new School of Arts to return them to him without delay.”*

The public meeting was duly held with a large attendance of townsfolk. The old Mechanics Institute was referred to and it was believed the Institute owed its failure to the unsuitable site wheron the building was erected. *“They must study the public convenience and select a central location”*. There were a number of books from the old School of Arts to start. The subscription was set at 1 shilling per month and it was agreed to meet again in three months to elect a formal committee, in the mean time the gentlemen selected would look for a suitable venue. There was a place available for a temporary School of Arts in the main street if the Committee wished to seek it out. All reports fail to mention the exact location although a plan of Minmi drawn by a past resident features School of Arts in Woodford Street down from the Bonnie Doon Hotel.

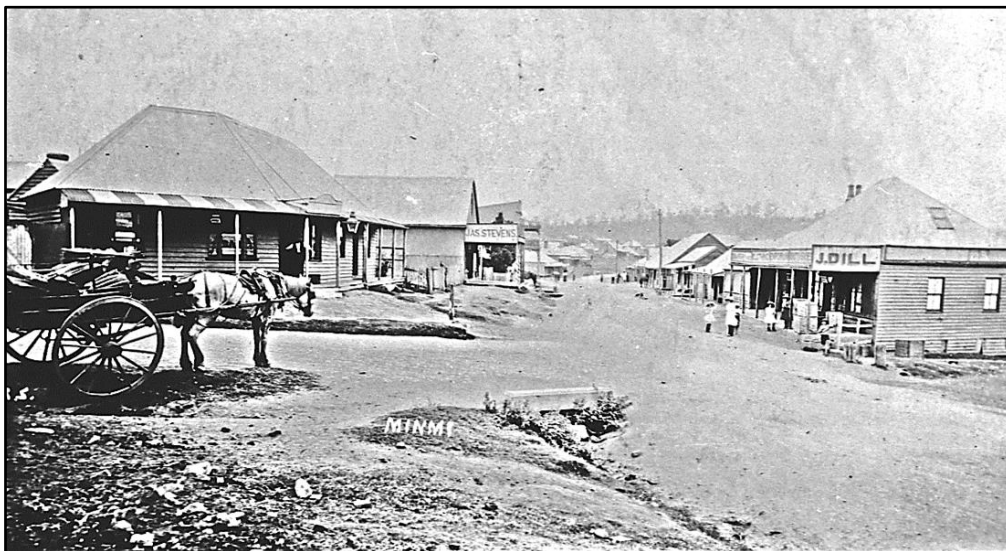
Although donations were being received in support of the new venture it does seem a strange time to try and establish a new School of Arts as it was in 1891 that the engineering works closed at Minmi and moved to Hexham resulting in many families leaving the town. There was a severe drought and what turned out to be a major depression with some banks already closing at that time. It wasn't until 1894 that an economic recovery slowly started.

Three months later the first annual meeting of subscribers was held in Sharp's Hall. When talking about the previous School of Arts the Secretary said it had been thought that any attempt to revive it would meet with failure but last month it was decided to make an attempt. The committee had leased a building for twelve months from Mr James Dill (a local shop keeper) at a weekly rent of 5 shillings and placed it in a fair state of repair according to their limited means. There were 120 members on the roll, although pleasing it was thought more would be added in the near future.



As with all School of Arts of that time the Reading Room was the most popular activity and was well stocked with over 150 books which should cater for all interests. The building was to have a classroom and a series of lectures for the winter months. It was hoped that Minmi in a few years might have an institute that would reflect the greatest credit on its townspeople. The Chairman spoke of the enthusiasm of the residents “*for the moral and intellectual advancement of the human race.*”

February 1892 once again saw the School of Arts featuring in the *Newcastle Morning Herald* and great expectations were held for the success of the institution. The library and the “amusement room” were well patronized and at 1/- per month membership which, the author thought, was within the reach of every young working man. The venture was off to a very promising start with debating groups competing and an excursion on a first class scale planned for a picnic day at Seaham. The picnic day started at 8am with a rail trip to Hexham and then a river cruise, to Seaham. The journey was to be broken at Raymond Terrace for two hours. A long and tiring day but at 2/6 a head, with any profits going to the School of Arts Library, it was quickly sold out.<sup>10</sup>



*This 1906 photograph shows one of Mr Dill's shops in the main street of Minmi  
Cultural Collections, University of Newcastle*

In September it was decided, as the coffers were getting low owing to expenditure on reading matter, that Mr Colin Christie would give a benefit entertainment for the School of Arts. Christie was at one time Mayor of Newcastle but he is possibly remembered more for his love of music and his never tiring efforts for the community.

The enthusiasm of the townsfolk had meant that the School of Arts was progressing well and “*far surpassed the expectations of its most ardent promoters*”. Mr James Brown of J & A Brown (the owners of Minmi) gifted some magnificent books and periodicals which, the report states, shows the warm interest Mr Brown takes in matters affecting the welfare of Minmi. With many benefits being held for the institution, including the children from the Superior School holding a concert. One function held at Wile's Hall was described as “*grand drawing-room entertainment for the benefit of the School of Arts*” was an outstanding success.<sup>11</sup>

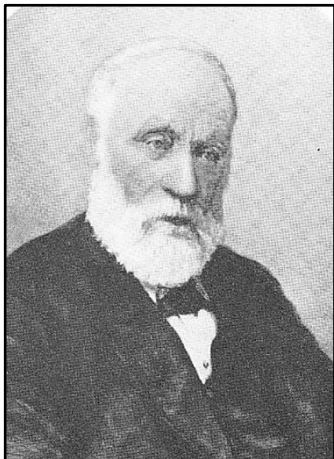
In June 1893 a journalist at the *Newcastle Morning Herald* wrote about the School of Arts and its positive progress. There was much discussion about making a move towards getting a

more central and desirable building site with the object of building a larger School of Arts. The present building was rented and rather out of the way. No decision was made.

Unfortunately the euphoria around the School of Arts was not to last. The fourth AGM in 1894 showed only 40 subscribers listed. The Secretary in his report to the meeting said:

*“the Committee regret to find that the purposes for which the School of Arts is established, namely, the mental and moral improvement, and rational recreation of its members, are availed of by the few only instead of the many.”*

Late February 1893 an illuminated address was presented to Mr James Brown, Patron of the institution, for his support. The illuminated address was procured from the printing department of the *Newcastle Herald* and presented to him at his residence Hunter Street West, Newcastle by the President and the Treasurer.<sup>12</sup>



James Brown<sup>13</sup>  
1816-1894

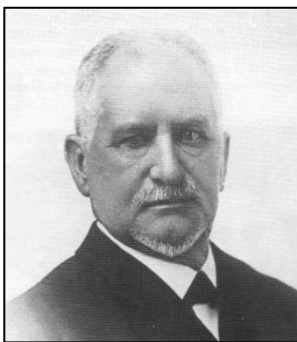
### JAMES BROWN Esq

Dear Sir - The officers and members of the Minmi School of Arts respectfully desire to express their deep obligation and gratitude for the interest you have always shown in the welfare of an institution calculated to promote the social and intellectual advancement of the district. Your untiring efforts on its behalf have inspired a commendable energy in others to persevere, and in addition to the moral support given the society has had the benefit of literary work as a practical proof of your interest in the intellectual recreation of members. To those engaged in laborious daily toil the advantages of this institute must be a great boon, consequently your zeal in its behalf must be keenly appreciated by all who love the light of knowledge and the educational development of the people. It is with pleasure we observe that your concern for the success of every movement affecting the welfare of the district is also shared by the members of your family who nobly do their part in upholding an honoured name. Trusting you may be long spared in health and strength, and wishing yourself and family every happiness, we remain, ours faithfully, Richard Thomas, George Durie, [Durle] J P Ryan, Alexander Gillon, James Dill, Thomas Wells, Peter Curran, William Dyet, Alexander Macleish, Watson Hodgson, James Hampson, Robert Brown, Robert Brownlie. Minmi NSW February 25<sup>th</sup>, 1893.

Once again work, or lack of work, at the mines resulted in dire times for the School of Arts. Coal prices had dropped and the only solution for the mine owners was to cut wages which the miners resisted strongly resulting in industrial action at one or all mines from December 1893 to June 1895. John Brown announced, through his manager R Thomas, that labour costs would be cut in an attempt to save the mines.<sup>14</sup> His solution was to abolish the extra payment per ton previously conceded to miners who, in the quarterly ballot system known as “cavilling” drew those working places in the mine where the coal seam was less than the recognised minimum height of five feet. Clause 4 of the 1893 General Agreement between the Associated Colliery Proprietors and the Miners’ Association provided that “*In cases where the coal to be*

*worked is less than five feet in height or thickness one penny per ton for every inch by which the height or thickness falls short of five feet shall be paid in addition to the standard hewing price:* The two mines at Minmi operated on a seam which varied in height from about two feet six inches to six feet. The operation of this clause was of great importance to the 520 miners who worked there.

Brown's proposal was to reduce the minimum height of the seam to four feet six inches. The miners claimed that this would affect all but 100 of them and some of the men would lose up to sixpence per ton. The usual daily output was between two to three tons less about sixpence for blasting powder and lamp tallow. Taking into consideration that the mines worked irregularly and that industrial disputes and mine closures for one reason or another reduced the total earnings of miners. Back Creek, for example, was closed for twenty five weeks in 1894 when trade was slack.



*John Brown*  
1850-1930

John Brown was the son of James Brown and a very controversial figure in Minmi and elsewhere. He had a great dislike for Unions and opposed them wherever he could and was very severe to his employees. By refusing to sell them the land their homes where on he could threaten them with eviction if they went on strike.

A very unpopular figure he was, however, an astute business man and could see that relying on other companies for support cut his profits immensely. He purchased ships, wharves, railway lines and collieries. Richmond Main became the largest coal mine in Australia. Pelaw Main was also one of his mines.

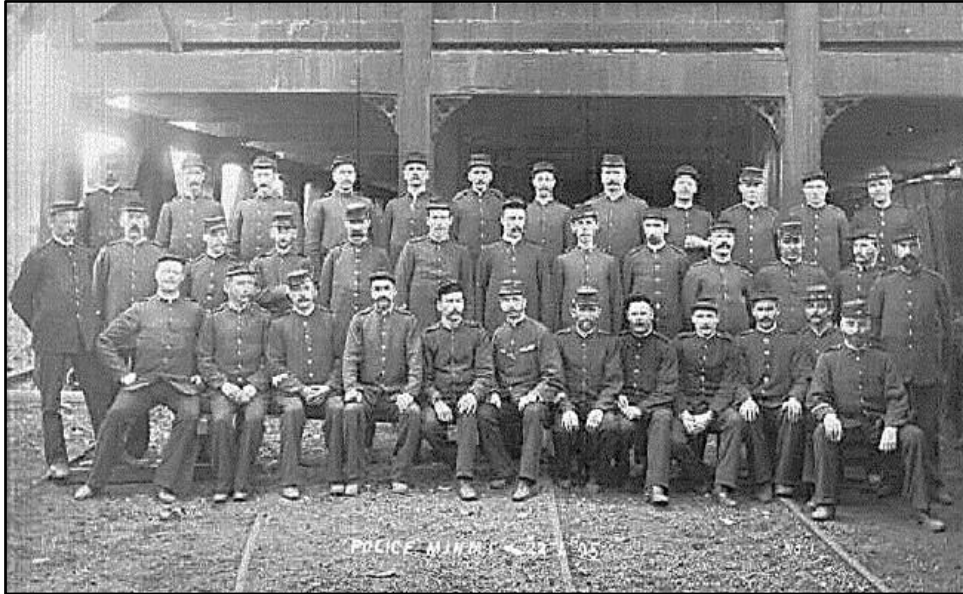
From an article in *The Town & Country Journal* of 30 September 1893:

*The firm of Messrs J and A Brown has closed two of their mines at Minmi, throwing 380 men and boys out of work. The miners have decided that as two lots of men form one lodge it is only fair that a cavil should be held. Those men who draw places in the cavil will give 20 per cent of their earnings in support of the unemployed section.*

The work situation at Minmi continued to deteriorate and despite protests and strikes the mine owners refused to give ground. With conditions getting beyond his control John Brown requested a larger police presence. Police started to arrive at Minmi on Sunday 3 March 1895 and by the following day there were 23 police instead of the normal one or two. Still the miners refused to work.<sup>15</sup> Public sympathy was with the miners and they received gifts of food and money from the general public to sustain them.

Six months after the termination of this dispute, on 11 October 1895 John Brown notified his miners that their wages would have to be reduced once more. The process had begun again. In 1895 when John Brown announced another reduction in wages for the miners the colliers struck again. Extra police were once again called in to keep order and one wrote the following:

*I am doing duty in one of the most miserable parts of Australia. Besides the police, the pigs do duty at night, rooting and grunting all over town. There are no streets formed, and during rainy weather we sink knee deep in muck. If it was not for meeting a pretty girl or two 'in the gloaming' time would hang heavy with the police.*



*Police at Minmi 1895*

*Ralph Snowball Collection -University of Newcastle Cultural Collections*

The miners refused to accept the new conditions - it is interesting to note that the Browns had established that their miners, alone in the district, were hired on a daily basis, not on terms requiring fourteen days notice as at other Northern mines. Browns advertised for non union labour and moved to evict the families from their homes. This was a threat by John Brown to hopefully get the men back to work.

Despite all the hardships around mining in the town in June 1897 the Brown's donated a block of land for the use of the School of Arts. See photograph page 1 - The block gifted to the School of Arts in 1897 is the vacant block situated between the Fire Station and the Post Office. Fire Station was opened March 1896. The Post Office is the brick building two doors down. The location in the centre of town would have been ideal for a School of Arts.

*At the School of Arts committee meeting a resolution was passed unanimously to accept the offer of Messrs J and A Brown of a site of land, situated between the fire station and the post office, for the erection of a school of arts. The firm's action in this respect is very favourably commented on, and when the anticipations of the committee and subscribers are realised, the useful institution will undoubtedly receive a great impetus. Lately their number has increased to 76. A special meeting of subscribers has been arranged for next Saturday, to appoint trustees and transact other preliminary business in connection with the erection of the proposed new building which, besides being on the main street, will be central, and in a most convenient part of the township.<sup>16</sup>*

At a general meeting of the School of Arts on Friday 24 June 1898 it was realised that something had to be done to make the institute more attractive. Several members thought that a better building in a more central part of town would save the problem and as the firm of J and A Brown had twelve months previous offered the institute a block of land in the centre of town they should get the work done as soon as possible. Unfortunately there were so few members at the meeting nothing progressed and it was decided to let the matter stand over until next January at the Annual General Meeting.



*Back Creek Pit Colliery, Minmi 17 June 1896  
Ralph Snowball Collection – University of Newcastle Cultural Collections*

It was not until 16 March 1899 that it was then decided at a special meeting of members that three gentlemen be appointed Trustees and it was expected that a new building will be erected on the block donated by the Brown brothers in the not too distant future. There seemed to be a general lack of enthusiasm among the townsfolk for a new building as almost two years had passed since the block of land was donated and they were just getting around to appointing a management committee.



*Minmi showing the town in 1900 - John Turner Collection University of Newcastle.*

On 27 March 1902 a lengthy article featuring Minmi appeared in the *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners' Advocate* which describes the School of Arts in none too flattering words.

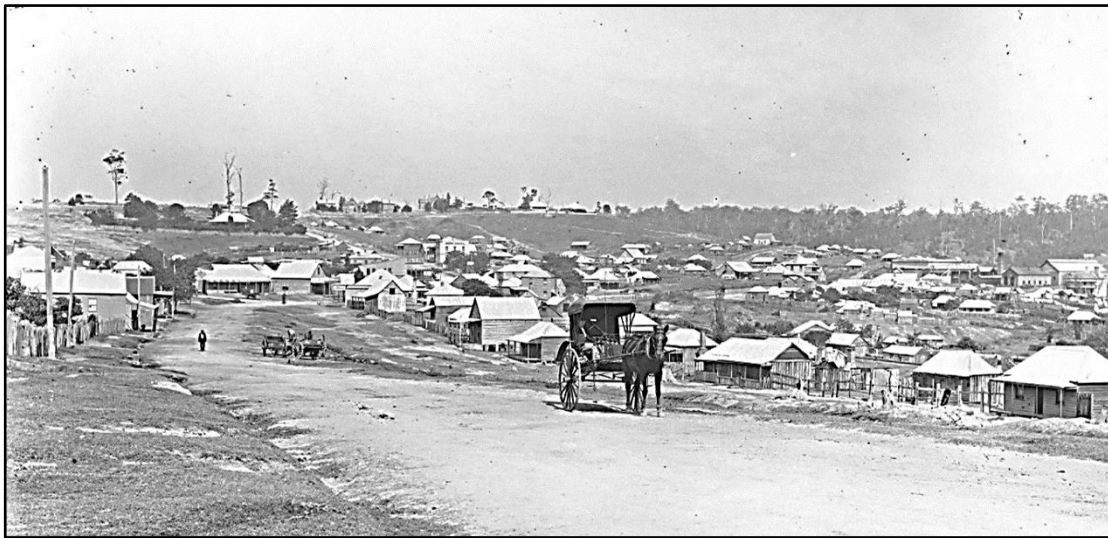
*“One would expect to find a flourishing School of Arts in a hemmed in place like Minmi but the very opposite condition exists. There is a temporary sort of building in an out of the way part of the town which is used as a School of Arts, but the institution is nearly a dead failure, the membership having dwindled away to a very small number. The site granted by Messrs J and A Brown next to the post office is still vacant land, but the funds in hand are inadequate to erect a suitable building. A government grant*



*would be very acceptable. It seems, however, that the purse strings cannot be successfully pulled. There may be reasons for this. All the same the amount of local effort has not been such as to influence the Government to stretch a point. Until there is a proper Mechanics Institute in which games can be comfortably played, the male portion of the inhabitants will not patronise the institution."*

At a meeting of the School of Arts on 16 October 1903 it was moved to write to George Durle, mine manager, requesting an interview with the object of securing a site for a School of Arts. Had the committee forgotten that in 1897 Brown Brothers had donated a block of land in the centre of town for a School of Arts and that this donation had been accepted?

At the time Minmi also had a branch of the Technical College, with lessons on mine surveying, mining, engineering, mechanical drawing, shorthand and dress cutting, these classes were reported as being well attended.

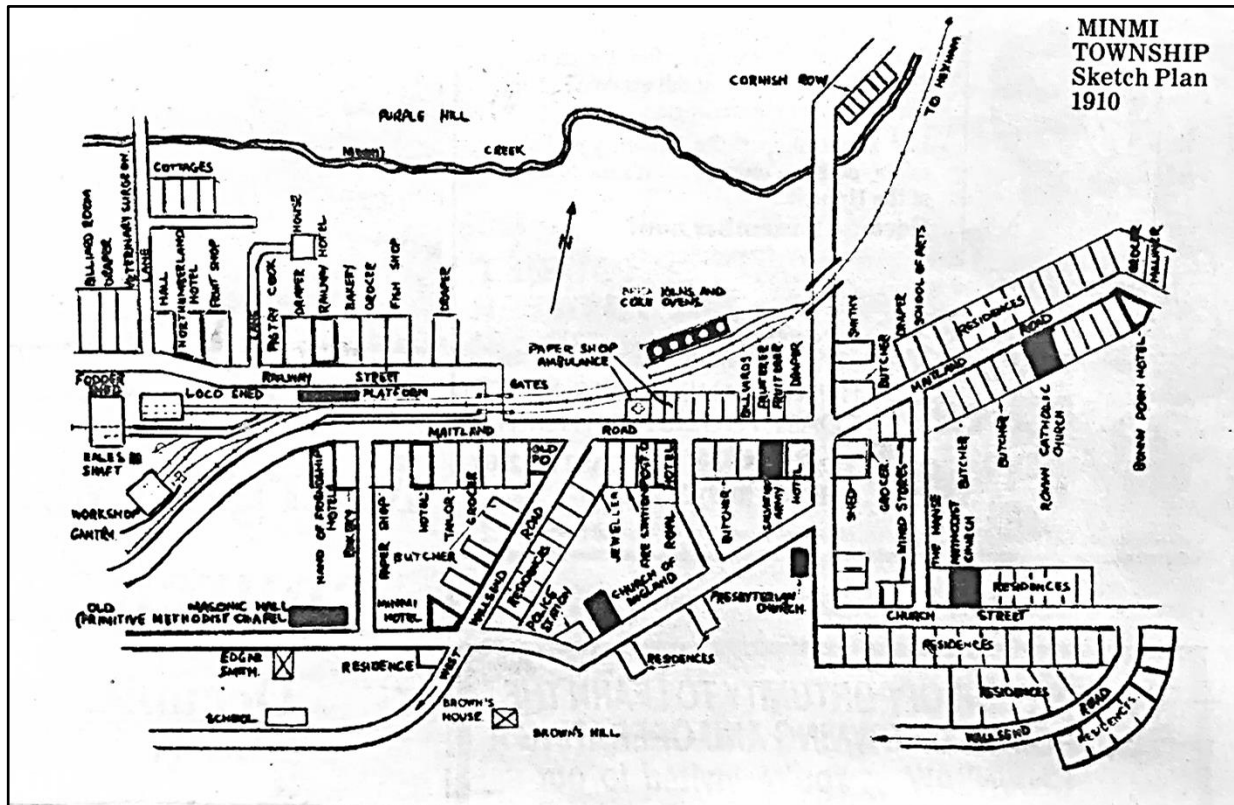


*View from Bonnie Doon Hotel, Minmi taken 17 April 1906  
The 1891 School of Arts was further down this road but unable to be identified.  
Ralph Snowball Collection - University of Newcastle Cultural Collections*

Census records clearly show the decline in population and possibly point to one of the major reasons for the unsuccessful School of Arts. The School of Arts closed once more - families could not afford the 1 shilling required per month to belong to the institution. With many men being out of work altogether, or on limited hours, many moved from Minmi to seek work elsewhere, in most cases with higher wages. Miners pulled down their houses, loaded them onto trucks and set out for other fields.

The map on the next page appeared in the *Gloucester Advocate* at the time of the 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the St Andrews' Presbyterian Church. It is not drawn to scale but is the best available at this time. There are some earlier sketches that appear in various diaries but are impossible to reproduce here. All three maps sited vary greatly in the location of various buildings in Minmi. The School of Arts is marked on Maitland Road but an earlier sketch shows the Mechanics Institute opposite the Presbyterian Church. The first Mechanics Institute was located on West Wallsend Road not far from the school marked on this map.





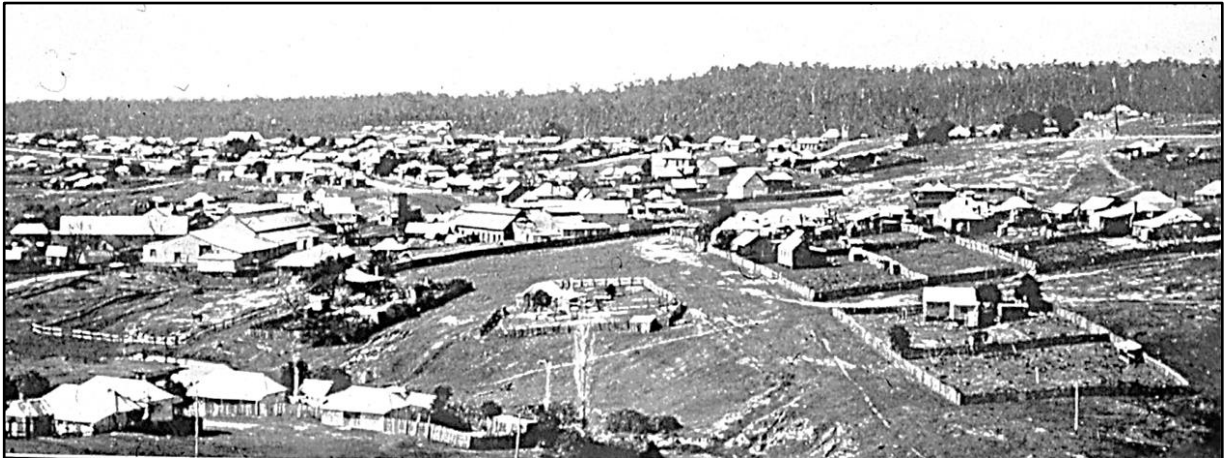
At the top of the map is a group of residences marked Cornish Row. The Cornish miners settled a little apart from the Welsh and Scottish miners and it is said this was because they were not considered “proper” miners as they gained their experience from mining tin not coal.

The steady decline in the population of Minmi affected not only the School of Arts but the Public School as well. It ceased to be a Superior Public School in 1913.

On 5 May 1909 an article appeared in the *Newcastle Morning Herald* which indicates that the School of Arts established in 1891 had been closed for some time. George Durle was manager of Back Creek and Duckenfield mines up to 1909 when he took up an appointment as manager of Pacific Colliery.

*In connection with the movement set on foot by the progress committee, for the establishment of a School of Arts in Minmi, the committee had received a letter from Mr George Durle stating that he was holding £14 in his name that when the school of arts which at one time existed in Minmi was closed there was banked in his name the sum of £14 to the credit of the building fund - he would be happy to hand it over to go towards the building fund.*

## SCHOOL OF ARTS – 1914



*Minmi c1914 – John Turner Collection University of Newcastle*

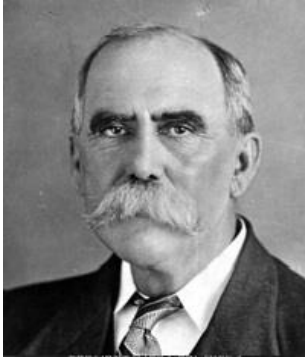
This photograph of Minmi taken in 1914, the same year as the third attempt was made to establish a School of Arts in the town, shows a substantial town with much improvement in the buildings. Miners and John Brown appeared to be working well together and a private agreement between the two was signed that read well as to the smooth working of the mines.<sup>17</sup> Plans were afoot for the opening of a new mine at the Stockrington Estate, situated just 2 miles from Minmi.

Not to be deterred by past failures the residents of Minmi held a meeting of the subscribers to the Minmi School of Arts in the Ambulance Hall on Thursday evening of June 4 1914. Mr W Laird presided. Correspondence was read from Mr J Bryce apologising for non-attendance and also stating that he had procured ten new subscribers. The Chairman and Mr W Burke submitted a report to the effect that a suitable building was at their disposal for a nominal rent. After discussion it was unanimously decided to accept the offer and that a sub-committee renovate the building and also be empowered to purchase any material required. Mr P K Buchanan submitted a report of an interview with Mr J Estell, Minister for Labour and Industry, who had promised to do what he could in the establishment of a School of Arts in the township. It was decided that the election of officers and also the draft of rules should stand in abeyance until next meeting.

At a further meeting of subscribers correspondence was received from Mr F Wells as to where the furniture, books etc belonging to the late School of Arts were stored when the institution ceased to exist some years ago. The chairman said that some of the furniture had been obtained, the remainder having been destroyed by fire in the building where it was stored.<sup>18</sup>

By July a meeting was held in the renovated institute and the president was enthusiastic about the prospects of the institute continuing. He hoped to have a building erected that would be a credit to the community as smaller localities than Minmi could boast of such and he would not be satisfied until he had accomplished the same in Minmi. Planning was in hand for an opening of the institute and Mr John Estell, Minister for Labour, had agreed to do the honours.<sup>19</sup>

The committee and residents worked exceedingly hard and just two months later the reopening of new Minmi School of Arts was duly done by Mr Estell on Saturday 1 August, 1914. The president, Mr Buchanan, said he regretted that there was need to perform a resurrection



John Estell<sup>21</sup>

ceremony. He was pleased that the local authorities placed at their disposal a building at a nominal rent and that the people of Minmi renovated the building much to their credit.<sup>20</sup> The previous institution some years ago was said to have been a credit to the township unfortunately it fell within the time of many strikes and the depression of the 1890s and a severe drought in 1892-95.

Eight months after the opening of the third Minmi School of Arts a plea was made for more members as there was only 34 shillings in "kitty" and it was thought that only by having a much larger membership could the institute prosper.

*The Minmi School of Arts, though an unpretentious building, is well equipped with the essential features of such an institution. The library contains 300 or more volumes chiefly of fiction but there are many works on travel, science, social questions and history. Owing to the local mines being closed the membership is expected to considerably fall off and the committee are endeavouring to keep it along a straight and financial road until matters improve and the membership is augmented.*<sup>22</sup>

The *March of the Wallabies*, which had started at Narrabri on 8 December 1915 as a recruitment drive, arrived at Minmi on the afternoon of 5 January 1916. The townsfolk exceeded themselves with their welcome to the marchers. The main town was festooned with streamers of flags and a floral archway was erected at the top of the hill. The road was lined with citizens as the marchers made their way to the Picture Palace where the ladies of the town had prepared a meal. Before they continued on their way to West Wallsend seven men from Minmi had enlisted.<sup>23</sup>

Only two years after Mr Estell had opened the new School of Arts the institution was once more in trouble. It must have been soul destroying for those who worked so hard to establish the School of Arts to find, once more, the life of the institution relied so heavily on the workings of the mines.

Agriculture was not lost to the area with John Brown setting up The Model Farm in the late 1800s. The number employed on the farm made little difference to the numbers of the unemployed in Minmi. The farm house, to the south of the town overlooking the present day Minmi Hotel, was constructed from the distinctive "Richmond Main Red" from the Richmond Vale Colliery brickyards. Produce from the farm was sent to Newcastle by rail to John Brown's town residence. In later years the beautiful bricks were covered with cement render. The house and farm buildings were demolished in 1982 leaving only remnants of this once wonderful farm and home.



*John Brown's home not long before demolition - University of Newcastle Cultural Collections*

The final mine closure came in 1924. Miners, who had stuck to Minmi, were preparing to return to work when one of them, who was ill, died at the pithead. In accordance with custom the men went home without working and to attend his funeral. John Brown threatened to close the mine if they did not return to work. This he did when they refused his demands effectively ending mining operations in Minmi. The mine never re-opened. The men sought employment elsewhere and many took their residences, such as they were, with them. The population dropped from 7,000 to a mere handful. By 1945 at the close of WW11 the population was at its lowest.

The town cemetery was a private burial ground established on the property of J & A Brown who made it available for public use. In 1990 the Newcastle City Council purchased the cemetery along with the land that now forms the Summerhill Waste Management Centre. The cemetery falls under the control of the Newcastle City Council and is considered one of Newcastle's most haunted places and is included in local ghost tours.

It is hard to visualize Minmi as being listed as the third largest town in the Hunter from 1880 to 1910 but it had become a ghost town by 1924 when the last of its great coal mines were closed. Minmi's degeneration to a mere ghost town was soon complete.

It can be seen from the information available that the success of a School of Arts in Minmi depended, almost solely, on the workings of the mines and the subsequent movement of the population to other areas. By writing about the mines and how people's lives were so completely governed by the mine owners I hope an appreciation of the struggles the folk of Minmi faced in establishing and maintaining a School of Arts for the village is understood.

**MECHANICS INSTITUTE** opened 1878 – Building was gifted to the town by the Brown Brothers, the former school building, was built in 1861 and opened in 1878 as a Mechanics Institute with much fanfare and hope. It should have been a success. The location, on the very southern outskirts of Minmi and the unmade roads both contributed to the lack of subscribers with men being unable to easily attend events. Definite date of closure unknown.

**SCHOOL OF ARTS** opened 1891 - This fell within a period of massive unrest within the coal industry, strikes and stand downs meant the men had no guaranteed wage and even 1/- per month would put a strain on their budget. There had been decades of economic depression and

drought. In June 1897 the Brown Brothers again came to the help of the town by giving a block of land in the centre of town, next to the Post Office, for a School of Arts but unfortunately there appeared never enough funds in the coffers to build. Somehow, for whatever reason, the various committees did not act on this generous offer and it wasn't until 1903 they questioned mine management about another block of land. Again the actual date of closure is unknown.

**SCHOOL OF ARTS** opened 1914 - with hindsight an unfortunate time to try and establish a new venture. In 1909-1910, when the Maitland coalfields opened with better pay than at the Minmi mines, there was an exodus of workers from the town. World War 1 was declared and the town's efforts went largely towards supporting our troops. The Minmi school ceased to be a Superior School in 1913 a fair indication of the state of the population of the town. Although, with the working agreement between John Brown and the miners seeming to have settled much of the angst between the owners and workers, townsfolk maybe had reason to be optimistic. Closure date unknown.

In 1937 we once again read about the Minmi School of Arts/Mechanics Institute. The following article appeared in the *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners Advocate* of Thursday 14 October 1937.

*Action to permit £47/12/8 standing to the credit of a fund formed 27 years ago to give Minmi a School of Arts to be paid to Wallsend Hospital, will be taken by Tarro Council.*

Two months later a full explanation appeared in the *Newcastle Sun* on 16 December, 1937.

*Out of £7/10/- collected long ago for the establishment of a School of Arts at Minmi the Wallsend Hospital has been given £48/0/6.  
Compound interest is the explanation of the apparent impossibility.  
More than 40 years ago the residents of Minmi thought it would be fitting to have a School of Arts in the town. They established a fund and collected £7/10/-.*

ADFAS in the community

*This money was placed in the bank in the name of two trustees, but apparently enthusiasm faded and nothing more seems to have been done.  
For many years the money lay in the bank. After 18 years Mr Jack Renfrew of Minmi was left the sole trustee of the fund.  
For the past two years Mr Renfrew has been trying to secure the money from the bank to pay it to the Wallsend Hospital.  
Recently he secured authority and last night he handed over a cheque for £48/0/6d to the board for the new hospital Furnishing Fund.  
The Vice-President of the board Mr W J Paterson congratulated Mr Renfrew for his persistence.*

The last we read of the Minmi School of Arts in the media is at the gala opening of the new wing of the Wallsend Hospital in July 1939 when it was noted that one ward was named the **Minmi School of Arts Ward**.<sup>24</sup>





Wallsend District Hospital – formerly Wallsend Mining District Hospital

It wasn't until 1938 that Minmi joined the Newcastle Local Government Area and was able to have paved roads and all the amenities taken for granted by other villages. Minmi, which started life as a thriving colliery town, is now an historic village with very few former dwellings still existing however it is undergoing a revival as part of Newcastle's residential area.

Open cut mining started in 1949 and ceased in 1954. Although it was promised that the site would be rehabilitated very little was done. Purple Hill and Back Creek bear the scars of open cut mining to this day. The bush has re-grown but the scars remain.



*Minmi 2020*

*Photo – Lesley Gent*



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