



James George Lewis certified to the Otago Provincial Council that his Clutha Coal Mine Railway was completed on 15 July 1861. A modest affair indeed, at just 1.5 kilometres long it was mainly worked

by horses on iron rails but also had a self-acting incline that lowered wagons towards the wharf on the north bank of the Clutha River and drew the empties up.

The story of the Lewis Coalmine and its railway is an object lesson in the toil and tribulation encountered by early entrepreneurs. Lewis was already a successful mine owner of late middle age when he emigrated from Shropshire in 1854, largely for the sake of the health of his son, James George junior. The teenager died a few months later. After an unsuccessful attempt at brick-making Lewis began mining coal near Wangaloa, with a view to shipping it to the embryonic city of Dunedin. Initially he had trouble convincing buyers of its quality. Then he became embroiled in disputes with the Otago Provincial Council, which was in some financial plight. When his long-awaited metal track and fittings arrived from the United Kingdom they did not meet specifications. Always there was the discomfort of a primitive, isolated, wind-swept dwelling – and also the unanticipated arrival of another child when Lewis was 60 and his wife 48.

Just when Lewis was getting coal production up to speed, and with his tramline almost complete, Gabriel Read struck paydirt at Tuapeka. Lewis's workmen wanted to head for the gold diggings immediately. He talked them into finishing the tramline first but they upped and left the very next day. It seems likely that Lewis's brainchild was little used over the next few months. Not only was there no labour to work it, with Dunedin deserted his market had also disappeared. Lewis effectively became a mine caretaker. When normality returned the Lewis Coal Mine worked with only intermittent success until about 1874. Transport was an ongoing problem. The fickle winds and currents at the mouth of the Clutha played havoc with sailing ships. A round trip to Dunedin could take six weeks. Once there the horse-drawn drays had to work in the harbour mud. When Dunedin really developed as a market for coal it was the nearby mines such as Green Island that benefitted. Later when the steam railway reached South Otago, the much more successful Kaitangata Mine was opened on the other side of the hill.

James George Lewis died aged 88 years on 22 February 1887, his last address being Clyde Street, Dunedin. He is buried with his wife in Dunedin's Northern Cemetery, and marked by a lovely red granite obelisk.

*Research taken from "Heritage of Industry – Discovering New Zealand's Industrial History" by Nigel Smith*