



At the COALFACE

**The West Coast mining town of Blackball
is experiencing a renaissance thanks to a
community-led programme with a strong heritage focus**

WORDS: ANNA DUNLOP / IMAGERY: MIKE HEYDON

The Workers Memorial Wheel commemorates those killed in West Coast mines since 1990.



Perched on a rocky outcrop, high above the dense bush of the South Island's rugged West Coast, Blackball's tallest coal mine chimney is an impressive reminder of the importance of mining in this remote part of New Zealand.

Built sometime between 1902 and 1909, the 18-metre chimney (one of four on the Blackball mine site with New Zealand Heritage List/Rārangī Kōrero Category 1 status) has recently undergone a long-awaited restoration – and that's just one part of an ambitious community-led programme that has received \$1.9 million in community development funding from Te Tari Taiwhenua Department of Internal Affairs.

Of the 20-plus other projects transforming this small yet resilient town, two-thirds have been completed, with many of them focusing on Blackball's mining past. They include the reinstallation of an aerial ropeway tower, heritage tracks and trails, town-wide interpretation panels, and the addition of five replica miners' huts to the Blackball Museum.

"I always knew that a great many projects would have a heritage focus," says Zane Smith, Community-Led Development Programme Partnership Manager. "However, once we looked at the final list, it turned out to be a massive 80 percent."



1

That's not surprising, considering the town's rich industrial and social history. It was founded in 1893 following the construction of the mine in the previous year, and was named after the Blackball Shipping Line, a transatlantic passenger service that had established the Blackball Coal Company to supply fuel for its fleet of steam clippers.

1. Programme Partnership Manager Zane Smith.

2. Blackball's main street.

3. The mine site's 18-metre chimney has been restored.



2

The early 1900s saw growing discontent among the miners, who were at the forefront of the development of New Zealand's trade union movement. This escalated in 1908, when a 'crib' strike was called after seven miners were fired for refusing to eat their lunch, or 'crib', in the 15 minutes they were allocated. Illegally at the time, the rest of the Blackball Miners Union went on strike for 11 weeks – an event seen as a defining moment in union history. It's also why Blackball is viewed by some as the birthplace of the Labour Party (some of the union leaders were involved in forming the party in 1916).

The coal mine was nationalised in 1941 and eventually closed in 1964. However, while other mining towns have faded into obscurity, Blackball has defied the odds, thanks to the drive and determination of its 300 or so residents.

"For a lot of the coal mining towns, such as Denniston and Brunnerton, once the mines shut, the towns disappeared almost overnight," says Mike Gillies, Conservation Advisor for Heritage New Zealand Pouhere Taonga, who worked closely with Zane and the community on the various projects.

"That hasn't happened with Blackball, and it's unique in that so much of the town's industrial heritage remains." (Blackball has four other sites on the List: Formerly The Blackball Hilton, a Category 2 historic place that had to change its name from The Blackball Hilton after the multinational Hilton Hotels and Resorts chain threatened legal action; the Blackball Community Centre and the Miners Bath House, both Category 2; and the mine's return air vent and fan chamber, Category 1.)

Mike adds: "There's a lot of civic pride, which is fantastic to see. Some of these projects are likely to have been on the community's wish list for decades, but they've never had the resources required. Now, with the funding, they've all come to fruition."

According to Zane, the catalyst for the programme was the development of the Paparoa Track, New Zealand's 10th Great Walk (the town has seen an influx of visitors since the track opened in 2020).

"In 2018 the community got together and asked themselves, 'How can we showcase who we are and where we've come from to all these new domestic and international visitors – and how can we get them to stay for longer?'"

Blackball resident Lynne McKenzie says that heritage quickly became the focus of the programme. "We came up with the idea of 'our future is in our past', and everything just branched out from there."



To see more of Blackball, view our video story here:
youtube.com/HeritageNewZealandPouhereTaonga





1

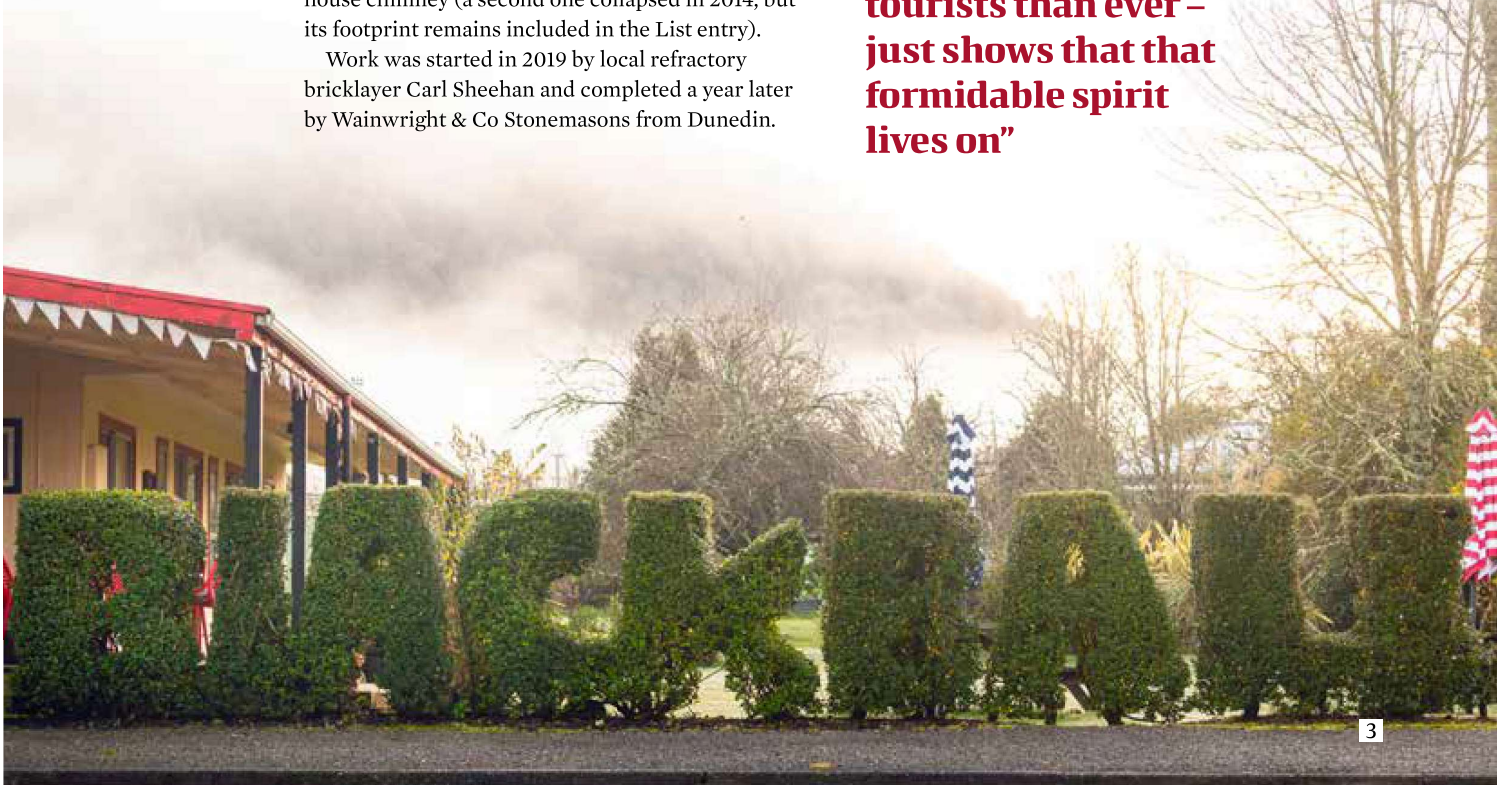
The Blackball mine site, which encompasses the chimneys, the former mine entrance, the return air vent and fan house structures, drainage tunnels and the remains of a dam, was a key priority. Particularly important was the repointing of the remaining boiler house chimney (a second one collapsed in 2014, but its footprint remains included in the List entry).

Work was started in 2019 by local refractory bricklayer Carl Sheehan and completed a year later by Wainwright & Co Stonemasons from Dunedin.



2

“There was a sense of endurance, and the fact that the town is still thriving now – in fact, it’s busier with tourists than ever – just shows that that formidable spirit lives on”



3

1. Formerly The Blackball Hilton, a Category 2 historic place.
2. Community members Pat Kennedy and Jane Wells in one of the replica miners' huts.
3. The Blackball hedge at Pat and Jane's café.
4. Frank (Tubby) McGuire was integral to the reinstatement of the aerial ropeway tower.
5. The Workers Memorial Wheel in front of the five replica miners' huts at Blackball Museum.



4



5

“Most of the chimney was solid, but it had been reinforced towards the top with a steel ring that had corroded, so the top five metres had to be pulled down and rebuilt,” says Marcus Wainwright.

“Our engineer used high-tension stainless-steel wires to replace the ring, and we reused as many of the original bricks as possible.”

Another project that has more recently finished is the reinstatement of the last intact tower of Blackball's 5.5-kilometre aerial ropeway, which opened in 1893 and transported coal across the Grey River to Ngahere before being shut down in 1909 when the railway line finally arrived. At its peak, the aerial ropeway had the capacity to transport 400 tons of coal in eight hours.

“The tower had been moved from its original location to the bottom of Blackball Hill and left to deteriorate,” says Frank (Tubby) McGuire, long-time Blackball resident and part of the community team that took on the aerial ropeway restoration project. “So we shipped it off to Greymouth to be restored.”

Lee Swinburn of E-Quip Engineering took charge of the restoration, and says the team focused on keeping the original components where possible.

“We viewed two of the few remaining aerial ropeway towers along the coast, and also studied historical photographs supplied by Tubby,” he says.

“While a lot of the main structure was in quite good condition, the pulley sets were missing. Someone found one set in a blackberry bush in a backyard in Blackball, but we needed two, so we made a replica. The buckets that carried the coal had not survived, so we also fabricated those out of steel. We've worked on similar heritage projects on the West Coast in the past, but this was our first coal tower, and we wanted to make sure it stood the test of time.”

Tubby is delighted with the result and hopes it provides visitors with a glimpse into Blackball's past.

“I want people to appreciate the hard work that the old fellows had to do to get the coal out of the ground and into the market.”

Lynne agrees. “A lot of blood, sweat and tears went into keeping Blackball going – they had a rough life,” she says.

“But there was a sense of endurance, and the fact that the town is still thriving now – in fact, it's busier with tourists than ever – just shows that that formidable spirit lives on.” ■