

**Presentation to the Planning Assessment Commission Hearing  
Watermark Coal Project, Gunnedah LGA  
Mr Brett Clift [REDACTED]  
Thursday, 26 June 2014**

My name is Brett Clift; I am a husband, a father and a farmer. I own a grain operation with my wife Virginia , on the Liverpool Plains at Mullaley ,about fifty kilometres west of Gunnedah.

Thank you for the opportunity to present to you today on the impacts of the Watermark Coal mining project owned by the Chinese conglomerate, Shenhua, on our precious Liverpool Plains.

During your time here you will hear from many speakers about the risks and potential damage the Shenhua Watermark Coal project will have on our food production, soil quality, water resources, and to our precious and world renowned landscape – the rich black soils of the Liverpool Plains – a phrase that is synonymous with fertility, productivity, invention and survival.

Rather than address all these issues, which people much more qualified than I will do, I would like to focus on the Liverpool Plain's rich pastoral history and heritage ,and my family's own personal history and connection with the land which dates back to the second fleet. I acknowledge that Indigenous settlement commenced many thousands of years earlier and I pay tribute to the Kamilaroi people.

I am a direct descendant of Samuel Clift and Ann Duff ,who as early as 1832 were here laying plans to take up squatting runs on the Liverpool Plains ,and set down our farming roots. Samuel Clift was an ex convict who was transported for "having in his possession forged banknotes". He was granted his "Ticket of Leave" in 1822 and his "Certificate of Freedom" in 1831 which freed him from all convict constraints. He also received his first

land grants “by the virtue of being married to a respectable female”<sup>i</sup>, Ann was the daughter of a crown surveyor.

The history books record Samuel as a “Pioneer Pastoralist” and I am very proud to part of his clan and the farming and grazing dynasty for which the Liverpool Plains is famous.

Their first run was at Doona, then the Breeza Station Run was founded later, my father grew up at “Cynisca” on Breeza Station, other branches of the family still farm land in area, still here since those early days of the colony, still part of the vision of a smarter than average convict with a vision; and a woman of guts and the determination to stick it out; to build something to be proud of; to stand up for themselves - for they knew what it was to go without.

My predecessors founded families, they developed the lands, they prospered, they acquired more land for family members, and they built homes for individuals, all based on fertile soils, farming productivity and opportunities offered by land ownership of the rich black soils of the Liverpool Plains.

They rose to many challenges:

- Closer Settlement under the Robertson Land Act (1861)
- Anthrax in cattle,
- Scab and foot rot in sheep,
- Two World wars,
- The Depression,
- Floods, fire, droughts and pestilence

But always the Mooki Valley was the family’s common thread – their lifeline.

The 19<sup>th</sup> Century saw significant cattle and sheep production, with heavy cutting merinos and prime beef being the primary source of industry and bringing prosperity to the region.

During this time Breeza village was host to no less than 27 hotels and being the site of a very early stony crossing in the Mooki River ,was heavily utilised by Messrs Cobb and Co.<sup>ii</sup>

One of Australia's famous bushrangers, Ben Hall, was born at Breeza<sup>iii</sup> his family were employed by my ancestors, he is reputed to have "borrowed" horses from Breeza Station many times under the cover of darkness during his illustrious career.

By 1900, at the beginning of the new century a drought occurred, Breeza station was shearing 110,000 sheep and running 5000 cattle, by the time the drought broke in late 1904 and after suffering dramatic losses- there were some 38000 sheep left alive, the fine wool ones having perished first<sup>iv</sup>.

In 1905 the swagman H.P. Tritton wrote:

*"Breeza on the Mooki was reached at Noon the next day. It was beautiful country, flat for miles with the Mooki River running through it like a silver streak. Fat cattle, sheep and horses were belly deep in green grass. Breeza Homestead, the home of the Clift family, was one of the show places of the interior, and I would always give it first place. Everything about it was attractive; it stood on a low hill, overlooking the famous Breeza Plains, its fences painted, its paths gravelled, gardens (both vegetable and flower) well kept and all the buildings seemed to be in their right places."*<sup>v</sup>

It is easy to chart the rise and fall of the economy of N.S.W. with a quick run down of the Liverpool Plains and the Breeza region in particular.

**Cattle**, when the early herds had been found to have survived and prospered on the pastures ,came north to Warrah as early as 1826 with William Nowland .

**Sheep**, when MacArthur established his flocks ,the likes of the Loder Brothers brought them to Quirindi in 1827. <sup>vi</sup>

Thomas Eather with his cattle and horses also arrived in about 1827 . The horses from this area were famous as:

- remounts for India,
- light horse for the First World War,
- stock horses,
- racing and racehorses were popular and successful - culminating in the birth of the great Champion Australian Thoroughbred Gunsynd at **The Dip Thoroughbred Stud** now in the southern side of the area of affectation. "Gunsynd was a winner of 29 races and was inducted into the Australian Racing Hall of Fame in 1972."<sup>vii</sup>

**Wool**, the quality and quantity of the 1950 's and 1960's from these grassed plains had to be seen to be believed, George Lamberts famous painting, "Across the black soil plains" showing the horses straining against all odds to drag the wagons across the plains in the wet ,shows what one had to contend with!



**Wheat**, of international quality and quantity, the silos scattered at every rail siding showed how bountiful the harvests were.

**Sunflowers**, and **Canola** with oil content of the highest level.

**Sorghum**, saw the birth of the poultry industry and the egg market.

**Lot feeding of cattle**, 27000 head in a local feedlot at its peak, beef is now exported to all parts of the world with an enviable

reputation from the JB Swift operations at Carroona and Elders Killara Feedlot

**Irrigation**, with our amazing water resources, “Bourkes” at Breeza being home to the largest bore in the Southern Hemisphere ,was named in the Guinness Book of records, following development by my uncle, Ross Duddy in the mid 1960’s

**Cotton, Pulses** and all sorts of cropping opportunities never once considered possible, are now all produced on the rich soils of the Liverpool Plains – with not one but two crops a year.

The direction of our agricultural industries has been driven by necessity, opportunity and innovation. By a mature community reacting to change, creating new markets, new ventures. Fundamental to this change and underwriting it all, is the longevity of memory, knowing a place, the land, our environment, our water resources and working with nature’s checks and balances to make things work. To prosper and to grow.

This is a collective European community memory since the 1820's, and in my case the 1830's. We have an aboriginal population here too, providing station workforces, shearers and farmers ,with a history and memory time frame well beyond our comprehension at Breeza, Carroona and Gunnedah.

Respectfully, this is not a history lesson. This is a personal account of our proud agricultural history and heritage that defines who we are, why we are here and how integral this land is to our past and our future.

The black soils of the Liverpool Plains, the Mooki River, towns from Mount Parry to Boggabri, and in between such as Quirindi, Caroona, Breeza, Werris Creek, Curlewis and Gunnedah, they all provide a pastoral sense of belonging for the many communities and families ,doing what they know best ,in a unique environment that has enabled prosperous farming and grazing plans to be shaped and developed.

The Liverpool Plains is an area of world-class agricultural significance. Its unique black soils and water systems have drought proofed and underwritten successful farming practices since the second Fleet, for our European settlers, and long before that for our indigenous population.

The area from Jacks Creek to Watermark, Breeza to Premer is untouched by mining. It is pristine. It is prime farming and agricultural land ,that once is destroyed can never be recovered. It is an area that provides sustainable farming opportunities for some 2,500 agricultural families and businesses many of whom have histories of this land like mine. It is an area that is well recognised as being fundamental to Australia's food production.

To us it is our home. Our sense of belonging. Our history and heritage. It is what defines us and what we wish to bequeath to our children and our grandchildren. It is our proud history and also our legacy.

If mining is **prevented** from developing here, the Liverpool Plains will continue to provide opportunities for agricultural production for thousands of years to come.

If mining is **permitted** this land will never recover and our proud pastoral history, including that which was contributed by my Pioneering Pastoralist Predecessor **Samuel Clift**, will be lost for ever.

The decision on whether to allow mining in this untouched area of the Liverpool Plains is an historic one. It will either protect our precious agricultural resources or initiate our demise and the beginning of land use conflicts in this area.

Mine developments in other regions have irreparably altered the landscape and sense of community. They have highlighted affectation, risks to land, water, soil, air and peace - all using the catch phrase "**co-existence.**" A phrase that does not translate into reality on our prime agricultural lands.

I humbly ask **that you reject the Watermark Coal project** and allow the Liverpool Plains to continue its proud agricultural heritage and to grow our nations food into the next Millennium.

- <sup>i</sup> A million wild acres, Eric Rolls
- <sup>ii</sup> Historical Notes Breeza, Journal of Quirindi and District Historical Society (1973)
- <sup>iii</sup> The Australian Encyclopedia, Collins (1960)
- <sup>iv</sup> Memoirs of Bill Clift, Historical Notes Breeza (1973)
- <sup>v</sup> Time means Tucker, H.P. Tritton (1957)
- <sup>vi</sup> The Upper Mooki, H.R.Carter (1974)
- <sup>vii</sup> The Racing Game- a tribute to Australian Horse Racing Industry (1985)