

PART THREE
DERWENT VALLEY AND
NORTHERN SUBURBS



BLACK
TUESDAY

50TH ANNIVERSARY

MERCURY

Black Tuesday 1967

FEBRUARY 7, 1967, was a day of drama, heroism and tragedy that quickly came to be known as Black Tuesday.

The most deadly bushfires Tasmania has ever experienced blackened a swath of the island state, leaving 64 people dead, 900 people injured and more than 7000 people homeless.

Some 110 separate fire fronts burnt through 260,000 hectares of southern Tasmania within the space of five hours.

Nearly 1300 homes and more than 1700 other buildings were destroyed, and the damage bill amounted to \$40 million - nearly half a billion dollars today.

One of Australia's worst natural disasters, Black Tuesday became the yardstick for every other Tasmanian bushfire, as well as the standard by which threatening bushfire seasons are judged.

To mark the 50th anniversary of the tragedy, the *Mercury* presents this five-part magazine series, with archival images, retrospective articles and interviews with people who lived through the disaster.

Special thanks to Roger McNeice, the Tasmanian Archive and Heritage Office, Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, Tasmania Fire Service, Geoff Harrison, Rex Maddock, Jim Marwood, the late Marjory and Colin Woolford, and the family of the late Don Stephens for their assistance.

Some of the images are being published for the first time, and we welcome your assistance in adding names and details to the unidentified images featured in these booklets.

You can email nie@themercury.com.au, phone Damian Bester on 6230 0736 or write to us via Mercury Pictures of our Past, Level 1, 2 Salamanca Square, Hobart 7000.

Damian Bester
SERIES EDITOR

LET'S HEAR FROM YOU

Over five days we will be presenting a selection of photos from the Mercury Historical Archive Collection, as well as contributed photos illustrating the Black Tuesday bushfire disaster.

During this time we invite you to send in your own photos from the day, for possible inclusion in the *Sunday Tasmanian* at the end of this series.

Please send your high-resolution scans to nie@themercury.com.au or visit the Mercury office in Hobart to have your photos scanned while you wait. Please include your contact details and a description of the contents of each photo.

Brighton, Bridgewater and Granton

Roger McNeice

"TRAGEDY struck Bridgewater yesterday ... tragedy in tears, swearing and good humour," reported the *Mercury* on February 8, the day after the fire.

Six houses, a bookmaker's premises, a barn and several sheds, along with railway stock and cars, were destroyed.

The Derwent Hotel was scorched by the searing northerly winds, but volunteer firefighters saved it from destruction.

The fire, fanned by strong winds, swept down from Dromedary, struck the Midland Hwy, raced through pastures and into the original Bridgewater township.

Bridgewater was surrounded and radio calls were made for volunteers. At the same time nearby Rogerville was struck, losing a sawmill, petrol station and a house. Two houses went up in flames at Cobb Hill and stock and pasture were lost.

Bridgewater soon lost communications, even though the local postmistress worked hard to keep the lines open. Power and telephone lines were brought down and all contact was lost.

Cyril Steward was recorded as having spent all morning fighting the fire, having his arms severely blistered. Mrs Charles Wilmott saw her home burn down. Only her car was saved.

A Mr Hanlon told his story to the *Mercury*: "The 60-foot flames raced across paddocks, swept through the house and destroyed it."

Volunteer firemen with leaky hoses, wet bags and buckets of water saved most of the town.

Anthea Wallhead was aged 14 at the time of the fires and was staying with friends who owned property just north of Ten Mile Hill near Granton.

"Their house was one of only two close to the Derwent River, over the road and railway line from Gould's Lagoon," she said.

"The northerly wind was very strong and the air was full of thick smoke. I remember watching the long line of fire burning down slopes of the dried grass, spreading closer and closer to the road and the

lagoon. I remember the roar of the wind and the bleating of sheep unable to escape the flames.

"We hoped the road and railway line would stop the fire reaching the house and fortunately, together with the change of wind, this occurred.

"While I was waiting anxiously at Granton, my brother was helping to beat out fires at New Norfolk, where he was a high school teacher."

Further north, as the fire raced towards Brighton, the headmaster of the area school made rushed preparations, running out the school fire hose and assembling the children in the main hall.

Although it was extremely hot, staff managed to keep the children fully occupied and no child was permitted to leave until collected by their parents.

Heading to Granton, police constable K. Spaulding found badly burnt poles were falling

I remember the roar of the wind and the bleating of sheep unable to escape

across the road. To enable ambulances and fire brigades to get through, he arranged for several fences to be cut to enable the vehicles to bypass the dangerous spots.

Near the Lime Kilns, Constable Spaulding found a man who had suffered burns to 98 per cent of his body while fighting the fire. "I put a clean sheet over this man and kept him warm and the air off his burns as much as possible. The ambulance arrived and he was conveyed to the Royal Hobart Hospital, where he later died," he said.

Read more in *Flames of Fear*, by Roger McNeice, published by Wellington Bridge Press



Flames shot high into the air as a stockpile of sawn timber went up in a spectacular blaze at the Rogerville Mill, between Bridgewater and Brighton.

Farm buildings in flames near Bridgewater after the surrounding paddocks had burned.



The Rogerville service station on fire, right, and in ruins afterwards, far right. Picture: Don Stephens



Volunteers trying to save houses at Bridgewater used a wheelchair to evacuate Mrs L. Barwick from her home before it was destroyed.



A Bridgewater house and outbuildings fully engulfed by flames.

Battle against the elements

Patrick Gee

TOM Klug was the junior member on duty at the Moonah Fire Station on Black Tuesday. He'd joined the service five years earlier at about 29 years of age.

Mr Klug was the driver of the almost 2000-litre fire engine that day, working alongside a senior firefighter and two station officers.

It was a hot and windy day, but aside from that it was a seemingly normal and quiet day for the brigade. That was until about 11am.

"We were standing out the front and we'd see a ball of smoke every now and then up the top of Tolosa," Mr Klug said. "We got called to a fire behind Ogilvie High School."

By the time they got there, the fire was out of control, heading down the hills towards Lenah Valley.

"The fire was going completely out of control," he said. "We tried to cut it off, but by the time we got there, the wind had turned and it was going up the hill."

It was chaos. Fires burned all over Hobart and the brigade couldn't respond quickly enough to the reports that came in of the fast-moving flames.

A call was received to help evacuate Rosetta Primary School, and Mr Klug was dropped off with a few things at a house fire on the way to the school.

"The fire was going down the bank at Marys Hope Rd. The house still stands today I'm proud to say. It was a battle, but I saved it," Mr Klug said.

Meanwhile, the fire had crossed the road. Mr Klug saw houses burn and explode.

"Every now and then you'd hear a pop and a house would go up. I saw a ball of flame fly across the road," he said.

His crew picked him up and they moved on to battle the next blaze: "We went to Austins Ferry and then Tolosa St. There was nothing we could do."

Mr Klug said communications were a problem throughout the afternoon.

"We didn't even know our chief and deputy chief had been up to fight a fire at Fern Tree the night before and they couldn't get out. They had to hide in a deep gutter. Communications were bad," Mr Klug said.

"A chap said 'Cascade Brewery is gone'. We chastised him about it but he said 'I've got my pay packet in my pocket, I bet you what I'm saying is true'," Mr Klug said.

Sure enough, the brewery had been partly destroyed.

Unprepared, under-resourced and without effective means of communication, the men charged with protecting Hobart from fires were no match for the flames that burned unlike anything they'd seen before.

"By about 5.30 in the afternoon it was all gone. It had burnt itself out," Mr Klug said.

"I saved one house, but there was nothing we could do, it just went so fast. It was going so fast you just couldn't do anything. It was just impossible."

Mr Klug, 83, is the last surviving member of the four men from No. 2 platoon on duty that day.

Otto Darko, of Collinsvale, raised a faint smile at the survival of a fire insurance agency sign from his big shed, destroyed alongside a new dinghy and valuable equipment.

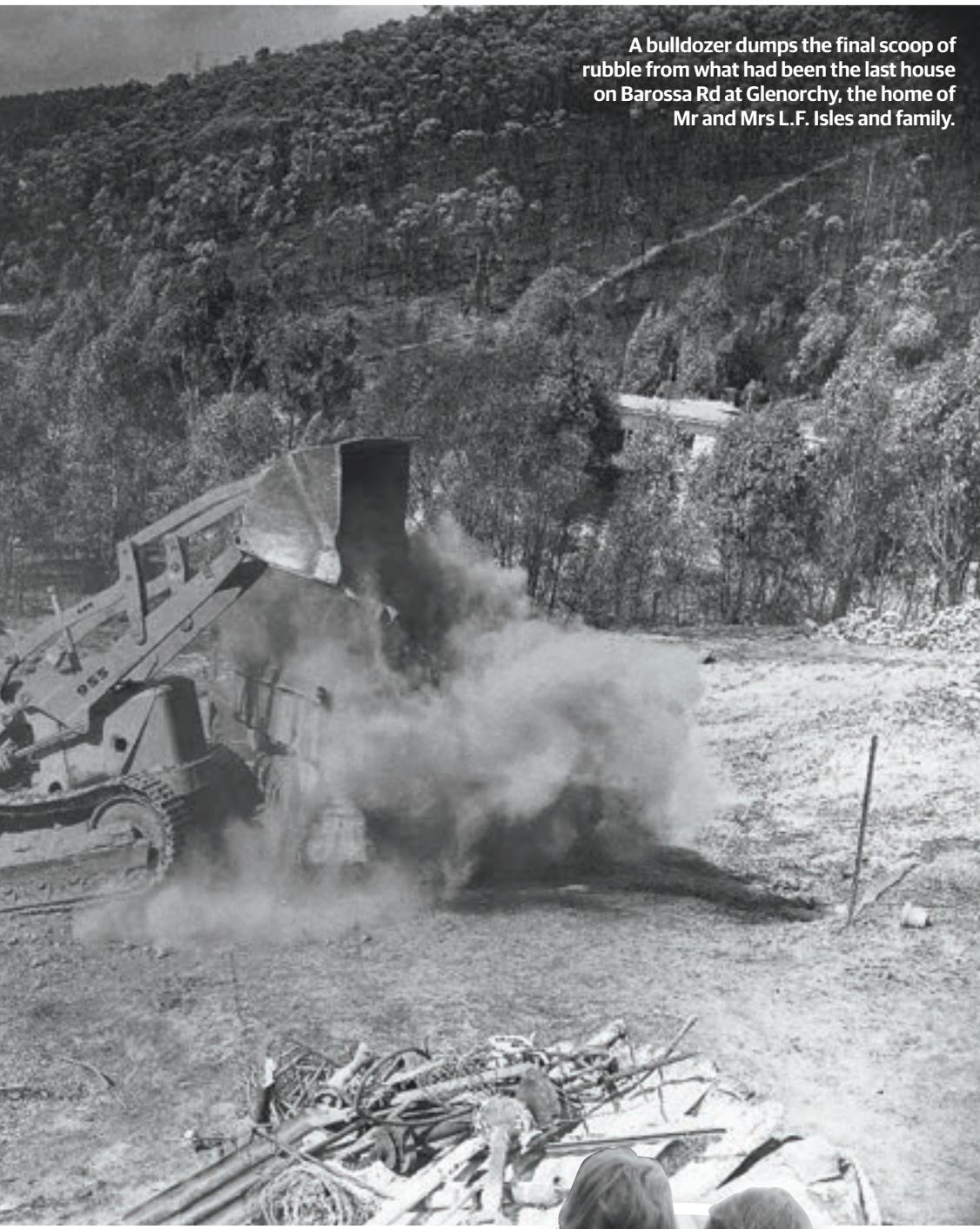


A house and car destroyed in Riverview Parade, Rosetta.



Memories linger

A bulldozer dumps the final scoop of rubble from what had been the last house on Barossa Rd at Glenorchy, the home of Mr and Mrs L.F. Isles and family.



Fifty years on, it's the smell that stays with you, writes IAN COLE



ONE OF Australia's most identifiable smells is that of a bushfire. No matter where or when that unique smell of gum trees burning pervades the air, Australians immediately become apprehensive, look in all directions for smoke and then voice that definitive yet vague Australian understatement: "There's a bushfire somewhere!"

Smells seem to have that ability to recapture a past memory, to revive an ancient incident and to trigger our brain to pleasant and unpleasant recollections.

Any smell of a bushfire today can readily remind myself and many Tasmanians of February 1967.

Let me be honest. I was in no danger that day, nor was my family, nor was the family house. My memories of that day, therefore, are not those of people who faced life-threatening moments and life-changing decisions.

On that day in February, I was simply a teenage student-teacher fulfilling day one of an Education Department studentship obligation.

In the 1960s, those on a teacher studentship at university had to spend the first few weeks of the school year in a school of their choice, to gain classroom experience and to be mentored in the skills of teaching.

My choice was my old school, Moonah Primary, and day one due to the bushfires was a memorable one.

The teacher who was in charge of me lost his house in the fires and, of course, needed to leave to be with his family. Suddenly I had a class to look after!

I guess it was sink or swim, and my memory of that day, therefore, is a selfish one. Here I was wondering about my survival as a teacher while others were worried about their very survival, the survival of their family and of their house.

Only later, when I got home, did the enormity of the day hit me. When I realised what was happening, my classroom worries were dwarfed to the carnage of what was occurring around the state.

Sixty-four people killed and 1400 houses destroyed! It was unbelievable. Having grown up in the peace and security of the 1950s and '60s, I was a teenager who had not experienced any catastrophes in life.

The Great Depression was history and the war something films were made about.

Tasmania, I felt, was immune from disasters. They were something that occurred elsewhere in the world.

For me, although personally unscathed by the fires, it was a huge awakening from my comfortable life to suddenly realise a sense of community was required in adversity.

People needed help. My self-centred classroom worries were pathetic compared with the trauma people were facing due the fires.

I remember the dark sky, the 39 degree temperatures and the 110km/h winds, but it was the smell pervading Hobart on that day that remains.

There are many who have nightmarish memories of that day, but for me, safely removed from the fires in Moonah and selfishly wondering about surviving as a teacher, the smell over Hobart is the memory.

That smell can still evoke alarm 50 years on.



Rosetta Primary School students Lorraine Dennison, 7, and Lisa Bacon, 6, offering a prayer of thanks for saving their lives, homes and school. Right: When school resumed a week after the fires, the Rosetta Primary School community held an assembly on its front lawn to give thanks that they and their school had been spared. Fifty metres away, two brick homes had been destroyed, while fire in an adjoining paddock had burned down the school fence.



New Norfolk and Derwent Valley

Roger McNeice

PROPERTIES were razed at Lachlan, Magra, New Norfolk, Bushy Park, Dromedary (two homes and a church), Molesworth (five homes) and Sorell Creek (four homes and two sawmills) as the Black Tuesday inferno tore through the Derwent Valley. Considerably more damage may have occurred if it had not been for the efforts of New Norfolk Fire Brigade first officer Bill Purkiss.

Just before 11am he sounded the huge bell that served as New Norfolk's fire alarm, and had men standing by with as much equipment as he could muster. As soon as the fires struck he sent out his men to tackle the flames. It was a huge task and soon the strong winds made the task impossible and it turned into a hit-and-run operation.

At Magra, eight homes were quickly turned into charred ruins. Chief Purkiss – one of Tasmania's most respected volunteer fire officers – described the scene as a firestorm. Ringed by fire, New Norfolk disappeared under a cloud of thick smoke.

Future fire chief Barry Lathey was an electrician at the time, working with apprentice Nigel Hansson at a house at nearby Mt Lloyd. "During the morning I noticed how hot it had become. It seemed very unusual and the winds were starting to become very strong," Mr Lathey recalled recently.

"About a mile from the residence we noticed smoke from a small fire burning down in a valley. The radio in the house was on and an announcement came over there was a serious fire burning in the Mt Lloyd district. "We decided to leave and drove about a mile to find the fire had come up from the steep valley and a sheet of flames was across the road.

"I knew there were two houses at the top of the hill and that we had passed the turn-off to them. The road was too narrow to turn quickly, so we had to back down the road for about 200m to find a suitable turn-off and then drive up the hill to the houses.

"We found the first house unlocked. Inside we found it all set up for someone's dinner. There was no sign of life. An old metal bath full of water stood outside the front door, along with some kerosene tins also full of water. I told Nigel we would have to block the doors and windows and wait for the fire to pass. This we did with towels and anything we could find.

"We did not have long to wait (two or three minutes) and then came a roar like a train passing and the rooms filled with smoke. Soon after we went outside – you could hardly stand, due to the wind. There were pieces of burning bark, leaves and twigs flying by. Our clothes kept catching fire; we doused each other with water but it dried out quickly.

"We saw that the vertical boards of the house in the front were on fire in two or three places. We put them out with water from the kerosene tins and bath."

The pair's next move was to the other house about 200m further on, also burning in two or three places.

"We went into a shed, found an axe and bucket, punctured the water tank, and put the fires out. Nigel let some fowls out of a nearby pen," Mr Lathey said.

"We returned to the first house, which had caught alight again, and extinguished it again. After everything seemed okay, we decided we would like to get out.



New Norfolk was ringed by fires that contributed to a massive smoke cloud over the town. The actions of local fire chief Bill Purkiss are said to have saved the town on Black Tuesday. Picture: Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery

"We could not get out the way we came in, but found a track and drove along it to find a cleared paddock where about 30 people had taken refuge. I remember talking to a police officer who could not believe we had saved the two houses as the police had evacuated the two houses a few minutes before we arrived at them."

Returning to New Norfolk, it was bedlam, with fires everywhere. "The brigade did not have enough men or equipment to fight the fires," he said.

"The men were doing the best they could and dropping standpipes, hoses and any equipment which could be used for firefighting in every direction."

Mr Hansson recalls turning on the radio and being shocked to learn how widespread the fires were.

"If it wasn't for Barry's firefighting knowledge, we would not be here today. His calm approach to the fire was fantastic and the way he tackled the two house fires and looking after me was just amazing," he said.

The sheer ferocity of the fire and the feeling of hopelessness in fighting it remains with Mr Lathey 50 years on. "The wind was just too high and it was so hot and dry, that the fire spotted hundreds of metres ahead and sped out of control," he said. "The prisoners of the Hayes Gaol Farm helped to fight the fires in the area and they performed extremely well."

Fires burning to the west and south of New Norfolk before February 7 became uncontrollable because of strong northwesterly winds, and ultimately caused a conflagration, which spread in the general direction of Collinsvale and then the back of Mt Wellington.

Another front burnt in the direction of Magra and the northern outskirts of the town. The fire jumped the Derwent in several places and, at one stage, New Norfolk was surrounded by a fire storm. The wind carried sparks wide and far, causing spot fires which were quickly controlled by the volunteer fire brigade.

At Sorell Creek, six houses and a timber mill, two trucks and massive timber stocks were destroyed.

In Boyer Rd, a house, timber yard and tonnes of imported stock belonging to the Australian Newsprint Mills were lost.

Elsie Boyer, 75, died when the historic Boyer Rd house known as Kilburn Grange caught fire.

Magra suffered the most, with eight homes lost, while at Lachlan, three homes, a sawmill, three hop kilns and several farm buildings were burnt, along with large stock losses. Firefighters had to find their way through dense smoke and flames to reach the Gleeson family. The family was rescued, but their home and outbuildings were lost. Hops were singed throughout the Lachlan Valley and all that remained were the tall chimneys where the large hop kilns once stood.

The golf clubhouse was the only building lost in central New Norfolk, and a single house was destroyed at Bushy Park. Five homes were destroyed at Molesworth. In all, 42 homes, eight cottages or shacks, two farm buildings and three factories were burnt in the New Norfolk municipality.

Read the full story in *Flames of Fear*, by Roger McNeice, published by Wellington Bridge Press



Mr R. Flack's property near New Norfolk.

Caught by surprise

Magra resident **KEN O'BRIEN** has lived on Black Hills Rd for nearly 60 years

I REMEMBER the morning of the 1967 bushfires as being very hot very early, hot and humid. It was the first day of school and our four children all went to St Brigid's Catholic School at New Norfolk. My wife took them to school and I went to work as normal.

I was at work in our shop at New Norfolk when a customer came in and said there was a huge amount of smoke coming out over the Black Hills.

I got in my car and went out there, but couldn't get as far as home at Magra as the fire was coming down very strongly at that stage. I parked as closely as I could and ran home.

A burning stump from an earlier fire had broken off and rolled down a hill, igniting the grassland as it went.

The wind got up around noon and was blowing the fire in the direction of Lawitta, not towards our house or the main houses in Magra.

By that time some volunteers had arrived from the Hayes jail farm and a couple of them were at our place.

As the fire came towards the house it was burning against the wind and we had no trouble containing it.

So as it passed on down towards Lawitta, we thought the main part had gone away from us, but then all hell broke loose, because probably half a mile up Black Hills Rd the fire suddenly crossed to the eastern side of the road and came in the path of the very strong winds, which had got up by then and were blowing a gale.

It came straight down towards us at a horrific pace. Before we knew it there was smoke and flames everywhere.

There was a house between us and the river a couple of hundred yards away, and that was soon engulfed in flames.



The scene near Lachlan in the Derwent Valley. Picture: Rex Maddock

The house that was directly opposite us was saved, but further towards New Norfolk there were old hay sheds and they were soon very much alight.

The fire then started heading up towards Saddle Rd and, within a few minutes, all the houses up on the hill were in danger. In fact there were two of them we could see were burning.

The fire then spread right up over Magra and over the hill and then headed down in the direction of the newsprint mills at Boyer. We didn't know until later that it caused terrific damage down at the newsprint mills.

Right when the fire was at its worst, Walter Harris came down over the bridge near our house and he had about 30 sheep with him. He couldn't get anywhere near his home on Back River Rd, so I told him to put his sheep into our property. In actual fact, doing that could really have saved our house.

The fire was coming at our side wall



facing Black Hills Rd and we were concentrating there.

We had water from a tank and were throwing buckets of water up against that side of the house so it wouldn't catch on fire.

One of the garden beds at the front of the house had caught fire, unbeknown to us, and Walter was there and he had put the fire out. We could easily have lost our house because by the time we had discovered it, it probably would have been too late.

I was talking later to Dr Hamilton, who lived in New Norfolk and had been told by the police not to leave his home. He sat on the roof of his garage and watched the fire come over the Saddle and it was burning furiously.

He, like most people, said to himself that the fire would stop by the time it reached the River Derwent, which you would think would be a good fire barrier. But he said it didn't stop. It was just as though the river wasn't there. Embers were flying hundreds of yards ahead of the fire, and before the main fire even reached the river it was burning on the other side. It then passed on down towards Granton and became a major fire.

All together in Magra there were seven houses burned within close proximity to our home and everything was pretty devastated.

It caught everybody by surprise, was devastating while it was there, and the fire brigade and volunteers did a

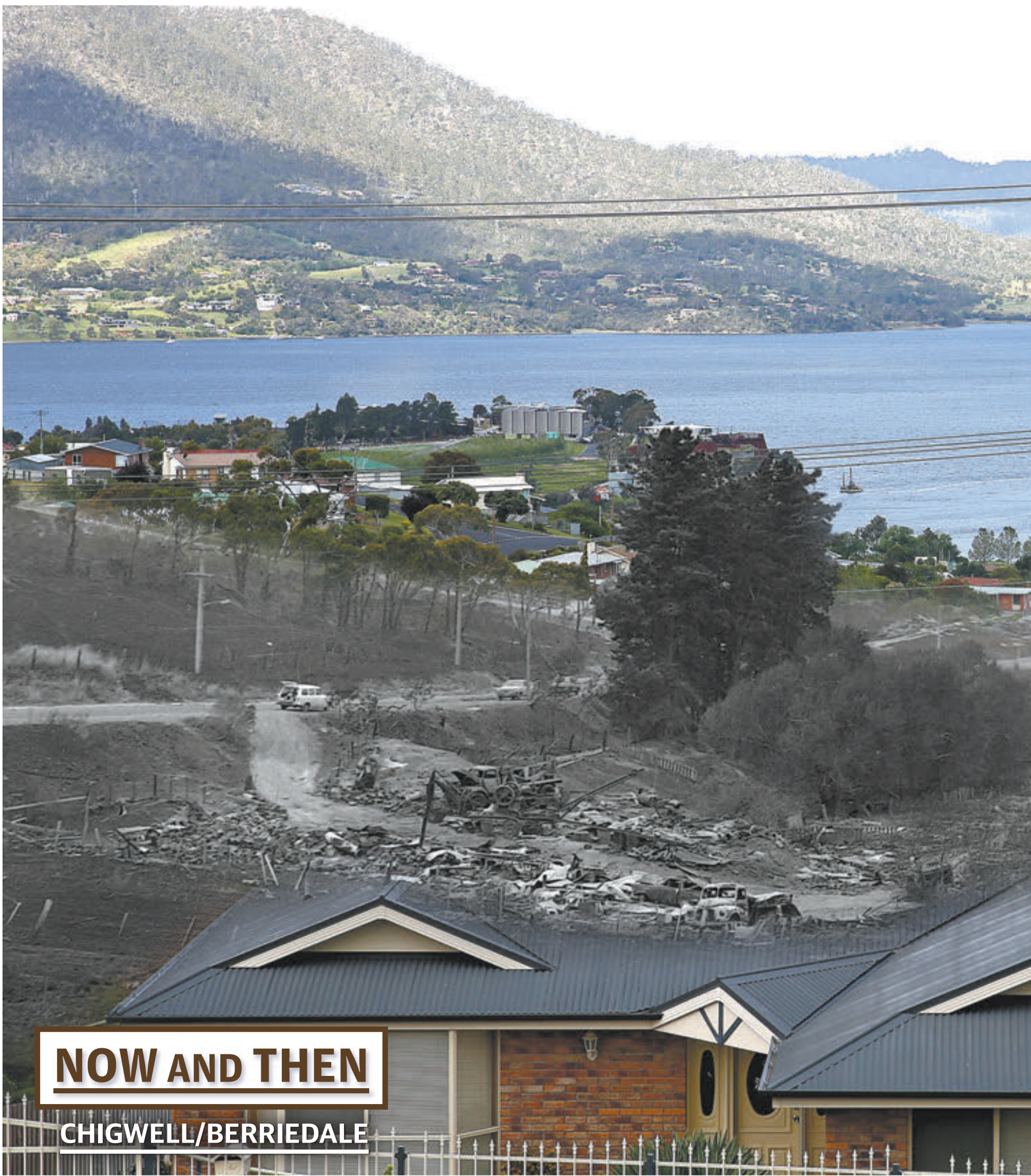
wonderful job under Bill Purkiss, who knew more about firefighting than anybody else.

After the fire had gone along the Saddle Rd, it had also spread to the New Norfolk Golf Club and down towards Southview Crescent, where Bill Purkiss did a marvellous job to stop it.

They set up a unit there and were able to start back burning in the lee of the hill there and they saved the houses in Southview Crescent.

There is no doubt if the fire had got into there, virtually the whole of that side of New Norfolk would have gone. There is no doubt about that. There would have been a huge amount of loss to the newsprint mill subdivision there.





NOW AND THEN

CHIGWELL/BERRIEDALE



Digital composite image of Berriedale Rd from Marys Hope Rd.
Created by Matt Thompson and Sam Rosewarne from an original
1967 image from the Mercury Historical Archive Collection.

Stories of survival underscore the pain

Lachlan Fire Brigade did not exist when the fire that leapt Mt Wellington to devastate Hobart burned through the Derwent Valley township, writes Patrick Gee

THE Lachlan Fire Brigade's motto is "Protecting Hobart's backside since 1983", because the volunteer members know that if they lose control of a bushfire in Lachlan, the next stop is Hobart.

Fourth Officer Peter Felmingham experienced first-hand the 1967 fire that passed through Lachlan and over Mt Wellington.

As an eight-year-old student, he didn't know the extent of what was happening, but remembers brushing off the ash that settled on his school books.

Glenorchy Primary School was evacuated, and Mr Felmingham made his way home alone on foot. Although his memories are vague, he remembers bits and pieces of the day.

"I remember walking up Chapel St and looking at the sun and just being amazed by the colour of it," Mr Felmingham said.

"There was just so much smoke you could hardly see anything. I was taken into a neighbour's place. We were pretty safe there, quite sheltered.

"My father was fighting fires in Brent St with some other men (when) the fire turned and came at them. They had to run for their lives."

The men ran down a hill and through a gap in a fence onto a property and were able to find safety.

But in the smoke, one of their number had come to a fence and stopped to climb over it. He was badly burned and died in hospital three days later due to his injuries.

"It wasn't until later that we saw the devastation of the whole thing," Mr Felmingham said. "I remember everyone being kind of flat and walking around dazed.

"There were dead horse carcasses and all that sort of thing, people searching through things, and just the chimneys left standing."

Mr Felmingham joined the Lachlan Fire Brigade five years ago and said it was partly due to his experience of the 1967 bushfire. Knowing the potential for destruction from bushfires, he now has a heightened respect for them.

"It's a funny sort of respect, fire doesn't leave much. Floods and that sort of thing leave a bit behind, but fires don't leave much at all," he said.

Former Lachlan brigade chief David Gleeson can attest to the barrenness of what is left in the wake of a bushfire.

A 19-year-old living in Lachlan with his family in 1967, Mr Gleeson said there wasn't much of Lachlan that wasn't burnt by the fire.

He remembers the day as being hectic and shocking. He saw the fire coming down the hill from Mt Lloyd into Lachlan, so he and his father took his

"It burnt all around the house," he said. "We were very lucky."

Mr Gleeson's brother had tried to get back into Lachlan at the time, but was told he could not go any further and that no one was alive there.

He thought his family had died in the fires. "My brother was probably more traumatised than me," Mr Gleeson said.

After the fire at the house, he and his family endured another traumatic experience.

"The neighbour that we brought down from White Timber Rd with us, I don't know if it was the shock from the



Lachlan Fire Brigade members Peter Felmingham, left, Les Horsey, David Gleeson and Phil Pyke.

mother, sister and a neighbour to a clearing where the fire station now stands. He and his father then returned to protect the house.

"Just as we got back to the house, two men turned up," Mr Gleeson said.

"We didn't know their names but they helped us fight the fires."

There were fires burning all around, and the flames licked up against the wall of their house.

The wind changed and blew the flames away from the house enough for Mr Gleeson and his father to get in and put them out using wet bags and buckets of water.

During the battle, Mr Gleeson was forced to lay on the road to avoid smoke inhalation while the fires burned around him.

fire or seeing us alive, but she had a heart attack," he said.

"She died right in front of us."

The woman's death was not added to the official bushfire death toll as it was not seen as directly linked to the fire.

Sixteen years later, the Lachlan Fire Brigade was formed, and Mr Gleeson signed up, saying the 1967 fire was probably one of the reasons.

With the population of Lachlan now about three times what it was in 1967, Mr Gleeson said it would be a different story if a fire like that were to occur again.

He believes even if the Lachlan Fire Brigade had existed back then, there would have been nothing it could have done to stop the fire reaching Hobart.

"There were too many fires going, there was no way that it could have been

prevented," Mr Gleeson said. "The way the wind was blowing, you couldn't even fly helicopters if they'd had them back then.

"The fire was spotting probably about 5km away."

Mr Gleeson believes that if similar weather conditions occurred again today, there was less chance of a similar outcome as technology and precautions have improved significantly.

"If weather like that was coming up, there would be no fires going, we hope," he said.

Lachlan Fire Brigade Second Officer Phil Pyke was only two-and-a-half at the time of the 1967 fires, living with his family on a block on his grandfather's farm in Kingston.

"I remember it being as dark as night and flames leaping up where the apple sheds were, where Clennett's Mitre 10 is now," he said.

Mr Pyke was at home with his mother and four-year-old sister. His father was away training with the Army Reserves at Buckland.

"For Mum, the chance of the house going up as the fire came through was a very high probability," Mr Pyke said.

His mother's only plan for survival if worst came to worst was to run with the two young children to a nearby dam.

But Mr Pyke said with the speed the fire was moving, they would never have survived the 400m dash to the dam.

"We were very lucky to have survived that fire. A house across the road was destroyed, as were many of the houses in the area," he said.

"My mother is definitely still emotional to this day."

His father didn't return home for several days as the Army Reserves were put to work on the recovery effort.

Unable to make contact with his father, the family worried for his safety.

Mr Pyke's grandparents were burnt out of their Snug home, with his grandmother sustaining burns as they fled.

On his family's farm, losses included livestock, the orchard and packhouses.

The farmhouse and shed infrastructure survived, but the farm suffered greatly, as the destruction from the blaze coincided with a downturn in the European fruit market.

Mr Pyke has been a volunteer firefighter across different fire brigades since 1983.

Despite having attended many bushfires, he said he had never encountered anything like the 1967 fires.

"The direction of the fire came from



From humble beginnings

Patrick Gee

RETIRED chief officer at the Magra fire station, Kevin Hardwick, distinctly remembers the fires of February 7, 1967.

"I was working in New Norfolk. My boss at the time lived in the same area of Magra as me," Mr Hardwick said.

"We looked out the window and said 'look at that smoke over there, that doesn't look good.'"

The pair took an early lunch to investigate the situation. Houses were on fire as they drove through Magra and the smoke was so thick they could barely see.

"We got to my home and my father came out and my neighbour was there," Mr Hardwick said.

They went out into a paddock to bash out the flames with bags, but the wind changed and the flames took off towards his home.

"We did what we could to prevent the house burning. It was a tragic day that day," he said.

Police officers arrived with Mr Hardwick's wife and two young children, but when the police tried to leave, their car wouldn't start.

"Communication was very bad back then - all we had was a radio. We thought the whole state was burning," he said.

Two days prior, a fire had been burning around a hill in Magra.

"It was commonplace in those days. As you were travelling at night you'd see a bushfire," Mr Hardwick said.

"At 11.30 or 12-ish, a log rolled out of the fire and into grass. That's how the fire started in the Magra district. Because of the weather conditions and temperature that day, all the fires just took off."

New Norfolk's town fire brigade was the only station in the area at that point in time.

"It was run very efficiently, but they had limited equipment," Mr Hardwick said.

In late 1967, after the ash had

settled, the New Norfolk Fire Brigade lent an old Land Rover fire unit to Magra, thereby starting the Magra fire station.

Largely in response to the terrible fires, Mr Hardwick joined the Magra Fire Brigade as a volunteer, along with a group of other local residents.

Their headquarters were a big pine tree under which the Land Rover was parked.

Two years later the group was officially recognised by the then Rural Fires Board, but it was seven or eight years until they actually received a fire truck and about 10 years before they got their own station.

Magra Fire Brigade volunteer Andrew Pegg was just 11 when he "watched the fires as they encircled New Norfolk".

"It was horrendous," Mr Pegg said. "It wouldn't happen nowadays, but the schools just shut down and sent everyone home."

After moving to the Magra area in 1978, Mr Pegg was invited by a neighbour to "come and have a look" at the station.

He joined the brigade in 1981 and, at 60 years of age, is still a member. "I'm planning on staying around for a bit longer," he said.

"The equipment we have now is far and beyond what we had back in the '80s."

Back then they would use whatever they could find to put the fires out. "Sometimes we had a bit of canvas on the end of a mop handle," he recalled.

But the small volunteer station has come a long way since its humble origins as the community's response to the disastrous Black Tuesday bushfires.

It now has two vehicles - a light tanker and a heavy tanker - and operates as an immediate back-up for the New Norfolk station.

"Anything they go to, we go to," Brigade Chief Randall Garwood said.

Kevin Hardwick served the brigade for some 44 years, including 38 years as the volunteer brigade chief.

He also worked as a fire permit officer and group officer and was presented with the Australian Fire Service Medal prior to his retirement.

"I thought after 44 years I'd done enough," Mr Hardwick said, "I was about 74 at the time."

Above: Magra fire station today.

Main picture: Retired Brigade Chief Kevin Hardwick.

Lachlan. We know if we lose a fire in that valley the next stop is Hobart," Mr Pyke said.

"So even though we're a small brigade with two vehicles, we're aware of the responsibility that we have.

"To me, I look up at Mt Wellington, at the tall dead trees (and) it serves as a reminder of what can happen when people aren't prepared."

Les Horsey, a five-year member of the Lachlan Fire Brigade, was living at Wayatinah in 1967.

The 10-year-old was at home sick with his mother and two younger sisters. His oldest sister was at school and his father worked for the Hydro.

It was about 10am that Mr Horsey first became aware of the fire.

"It was fairly black and grey and very smoky," he said. "The Hydro went around and put all the fire hoses out. Then they made fire breaks around the village with dozers.

"My biggest sister was at school. She got sent home from Ouse. She got to school in the morning and basically had to turn around and come back again."

Wayatinah was surrounded by fire as spot fires sparked right across southern Tasmania.

The Hydro workers rounded up the townspeople and took them to the local recreation ground.

"We weren't in any immediate danger, but we copped a bit of heat," Mr Horsey said.

He remembers being scared as a child,

but now knows they were quite safe compared with other close-by townships.

"Tarraleah, Black Bobs, Ouse, Hamilton and Bothwell, they all copped it," Mr Horsey said. "Strickland was more or less burnt."

After the fire the Hydro workers, including Mr Horsey's father, were put to work.

"About 300 of them went around Hobart putting the hydro poles and lines back in," he said.

Mr Horsey has lived in the New Norfolk area his entire life - aside from his time spent at Wayatinah while his father worked on the Hydro - and has lived in Lachlan for the past 10 years.

"When the bushfires came up around

Molesworth a few years ago, I had a broken leg at the time and was spending a bit of time down at the station," he said.

"I said to David Gleeson, who was the captain at the time, that I'd join when my leg gets better."

The Lachlan Fire Brigade's experience is strengthened by these four men, who experienced and lived through Tasmania's worst fire in living memory.

Between them they have fought fires for more than three quarters of a century and, with the rest of their brigade colleagues, continue to "protect Hobart's backside", hoping to never again see flames as destructive as those of Black Tuesday.



A road near Hamilton blocked by fallen trees. Picture: Jim Marwood

Upper Derwent

Roger McNeice

FOR farmer Geoff Parsons, of “Bloomfield” at Gretna, Black Tuesday started out as a very hot morning, with 2600 ewes in the yard for classing.

“Geoff Scott and I were there; 40 degrees celsius and 120km/h wind – very unpleasant in the yards and the dust cutting our eyes,” he said.

“We stopped for lunch, 12 noon, and looked around and just saw a very narrow strip of smoke towards Hamilton, not much.”

There was a fire on top of the Clyde Hill and on Thousand Acre Lane, moving fast.

“I rang for help around, (but) there wasn’t much about as there were fires everywhere and ours was one of the last to start, thought to be coals from a fire from the Hollow Tree Rd on the Saturday before.

“Dave Binny got two men to help him from Gretna

and came in through the Bluff paddocks and saw about three fires coming at them. He said they were about a mile between each other just leapfrogging.

“They got the cattle into a bit of green grass and one mob of wethers onto the same patch, then cut fences where sheep were up against them and got onto burnt ground to make themselves safe.

Mr Binny had an irrigated property at Macquarie Plains and thought that was safe, but lost a house there when the fire ran up the grass in the middle of the gravel road.

“The fire took less than half an hour to come from the top of the Clyde Hill to us. The main part of Bloomfield was burnt out by 1pm,” Mr Parsons said.

“We saved the woolshed and the top cottage, which had a small smoulder under one of the doors. The rest saved themselves.

“We did have the main yard eaten out, which saved a lot of buildings, but still lost a double concrete garage at

about 4pm; must have been a spark under the eaves.”

The main house had all its spouting melt on the western side, but Geoff’s wife Raylee had shut all the doors. Most of the windows were cracked but the house was saved.

The Gretna fires burned out an area of about 1800 hectares.

Further west at Ouse, Lindley Chopping on the family property “Blackwood” could see up towards Strickland, to where his father Reg was driving and apparently the school bus was turned back.

“From Blackwood we could also see the fire at Bothwell and smoke from the Gretna fire,” Mr Chopping remembered.

Fires continued to burn for weeks near Pelham Tier and Hamilton after the main fires on February 7. Milder weather conditions helped the situation.

Read more in *Flames of Fear*, by Roger McNeice, published by Wellington Bridge Press

No ordinary family

Patrick Gee

THE inferno that ravaged the Derwent Valley could have torn the Wilton family apart, but 50 years on, Nora and her 10 children are alive and well despite the loss of their home at Magra on Black Tuesday.

On the morning of February 7, Nora sent her children off to school and travelled to Lachlan to visit a friend. Before long, she began to get an eerie feeling and decided to head for home.

"It was so hot and the ground was really hot and I said 'I think I'll go home,'" Nora said.

But as she made her way home, she came to a roadblock and was told she could not pass.

Her now late husband, Dick (Clarence David) Wilton, was on Mt Lloyd when smoke filled the valley.

He made his way down the hill and saw all of Magra in a cloud of smoke. He met Nora at the roadblock and parked his log truck.

Someone agreed to take him through the smoke to check on the house. While he was gone, some bark caught alight on the log truck. "I had to move that over the train line," Nora said.

She waited anxiously for Dick's return until he eventually emerged through the grey and said "It's gone."

The home they had moved into three months earlier had been reduced to rubble and ash, and their animals along with it.

"I was very distressed. I thought 'where are we going to go?'" Nora said.

"A friend took us in down Boyer Rd, but some of the children went up to Mrs Dazeley."

Local teachers by the name of Mr and Mrs Dazeley took in some of the older children, making them clothes and sending them off to school each morning.

Kerry Wilton, the family's only son, said of Mrs Dazeley: "She was a teacher, so you toed the line with her, but she was very nice."

Kerry remembers the day his family lost everything. "The teachers came in and said all those that live in the outskirts of New Norfolk you've got to go."

"I remember going around and grabbing Lexie and one of the other ones and saying we've got to go, there's a chance the house is going to burn down."

They tried to make their way home, but didn't get far before they couldn't go any further and had to wait until the late afternoon to be reunited with their parents.

The children were distressed not knowing where their parents were, in particular the older ones, as the younger ones didn't really know what was happening around them.

"But once you find your parents and they're all still alive, and I suppose 50 years later and we're all still alive, it's pretty amazing," Kerry said.

Eldest daughter Colleen remembers trying to cope with the situation as a young girl.

"They came and got us out of the classroom and took us to the principal's office, who said that we'd lost our home and we had to wait there," she said.

Colleen said the older children were the most distraught about events as they were more aware of what was going on.

"We pretty much knew what was happening because all the kids were talking, and because of all of the smoke. We remember that, the smoke," she said.

Colleen said her parents were clearly distressed, which was a shock for the children to see.

"You just couldn't think straight. To lose everything..." Nora said. "All they had left were the clothes they had at school."



The family received a lot of support and donations from the community, including offers of accommodation, but the size of the family made it difficult to find a place to stay and they had to move a number of times while their house was rebuilt.

The family made a temporary home out of a fruit picker's hut, which was one big room with holes in the walls the size of cricket balls.

With the family's size, even a three-bedroom home was tight for space. Mum and Dad had one room, four sisters top-and-tailed in one bed, and the rest top-and-tailed in another.

The family also lived in a two-bedroom house, where Kerry slept in the bath. "I got the first shower," he said.

Eventually the family members were able to move into their new home, where they stayed for a number of years.

Fifty years on, and the family gets along famously,

and is still living in the Derwent Valley and greater Hobart area.

Although the devastating fires of Black Tuesday are a distant memory now, Colleen said it could happen again this year with the amount of growth Tasmania experienced leading up to bushfire season and with increasing temperatures.

Above: Nora Wilton, centre, with her children: front from left, Wendy Butterworth, Lexie County and Sue Adams; middle row from left, Kerry Wilton, Vicki Triffitt and Cheryl Browning; and back row from left, Carlene Triffett, Donna Gallagher, Debbie Shade and Colleen Triffett.

Picture: Nikki Davis-Jones

Left: The family appeared in the *Mercury* after losing its home.

Amazing survival tale



Six of the Pace children were photographed by the *Mercury* while the family settled in to the Brighton Army Camp, but the published photo was cropped tightly with only Michael, Robyn and Leigh appearing in the paper. The trio recently posed for us again outside the Clydesdale Ave house that became the family home after the bushfire disaster.

Patrick Gee

MICHAEL Pace didn't know if his family had made it out alive the day he watched his family home burn from South Chigwell Primary School about 800m away.

It was the first day back at school for Michael who was starting Grade 4, and his sister Margaret (Grade 6), but it will always be remembered as the day their family lost everything.

Eight of Michael's siblings were home when the fire came down from behind the 6ha farm.

Merril, the oldest daughter, was looking after the younger children who were home sick, and some who were too young to attend school.

Parents Peter and Fay Pace were in Hobart town to buy a new refrigerator as the drama unfolded at home.

Some unknown men put the fire out as it made its way towards the home, and then left, but in the hot conditions it soon restarted and reached the house.

"It was very hot and very windy," Michael said. "I could see the top of the house burning."

Merril got the children out of the bath where she was trying to keep them cool, and called a taxi.

The eight children and their dog Tony piled in and were taken to the safety of their grandmother's house in Moonah.

"Just as they got in the cab the shed exploded," Michael said. Had they been near the shed containing chemicals and gas bottles they could have been killed.

"We had half a dozen cows, a horse and chooks. My



brother and I used to milk the cows and we would sell the milk in billycans to our neighbours," he said.

"We lost everything, but the cat survived – that was in the attic."

One man lost his life fighting the fires on the Pace property.

As Mr and Mrs Pace made their way back from Hobart they were stopped by a police roadblock, but

desperate to find their children Mr Pace drove straight on through.

Michael and Margaret waited at the school for 3-4 hours until they were finally able to be picked up by their parents.

As their father drove, the wind blew so hard the bonnet flew open and bent over backwards.

The day after the fire, Tony the dog ran away from their grandmother's house and didn't return.

With nothing left, and no home to go back to, the family were taken in at Brighton Army Camp, along with many other families displaced by the fires.

"We met a lot of people we're still friends with today – heaps of bushfire-affected families," Michael said.

The family stayed in one big room for about four months after the fires, until they bought a new home in the centre of Glenorchy.

As they moved into their new home, they discovered Tony at the dog's home nearby and were reunited with their much-loved pet.

"He was a good dog. He lived to be about 12 years old," Michael said.

The Pace family were not defeated by the dramatic day of destruction and death.

The entire family, including the cat and the dog, were able to escape the blaze without injury.

Several photos of the Pace family appeared in the *Mercury* in the days after the drama, including one of Mr and Mrs Pace meeting the Governor-General and his wife, and another of three of the Pace children playing at the Brighton Army Camp.

In camp at Brighton



Above: Mrs D.E. Curtis, of Strickland Ave, and her son Paul, 2, appeared in the *Mercury* several times after losing their home. Ten days after the fire, Mrs Curtis was featured using a sewing machine at the Brighton Army Camp, and at the end of April they were among the last families moving out of the camp and into new homes. Top right: Along with Mrs B. Myers, they were farewelled by the camp commandant, Major Ben Russell, as they left for Risdon Vale.



This image of four-week-old Mark Honeyman and his mum Pauline made its way around the world after appearing in the *Mercury*. Dad Ian was fighting fires at Midway Point while his own home at Fern Tree burned.

Scottish migrants Mr and Mrs R.H. Torrance had been in Tasmania for only six months when their home and business were wiped out at Electrona.



One of the many families that found shelter in the emergency accommodation at the Brighton Army Camp.



A youngster asks for another helping from the camp cooks.



Lenate Kasch, Evelyn Kruger, Virginia Kasch and Mrs G. Kruger arriving at the Brighton Army Camp after being burnt out at The Springs, Mt Wellington.



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