

PLOD ESSAY: Pommy Town Burns

On 17 August 1909, four months before the first shaft was sunk that marked the beginning of the State Coal Mine, Mary Gruber Hislop bought “one-hundred and twelve acres, one rood and twenty-seven perches more or less being Allotment thirty-five in the Parish of Wonthaggi County of Mornington”. [Nb. A *rood* is an Old English unit of area equal to one quarter of an acre; forty *perches* fit into one rood.]

This estate ran from just past Carney’s and Billson Streets intersection to Inverloch Road. In 1924 easement for Beach Road (later Cape Paterson Road) was formalised although it remained merely a track through thick tea-tree scrub for almost 25 years thereafter. The easement for Carney’s Road went right through to Inverloch Road. Other easements on the property were created for laneways that would be needed as parcels of land were sold off the original allotment and houses were built. Almost immediately, the Mains had bought a small parcel of this land from Mary on Beach Road. The first thing Bobby Main and his father, Bill, did was plant two cypress trees right in front of their new house and those trees still stand tall and beautiful today.

On 18 August 1931, Sarah McDonald bought a part of the allotment; on 22 May 1935 Mary sold the bulk of her land to Ruby May Davidson; she also sold a small portion of her land to Mary and Norm Woodford, who built the walk-through dairy with bricks that Norm made from mine tailings; the adjacent section of Mary’s land was partitioned into quarter acre blocks. Several mining families took up the prospect of living two-and-a-half miles out of town and actually built houses on the blocks they bought. They were the Fletchers, the Pattersons, the Perrys, and the Richmonds. All the houses were built on what are now the large blocks with the addresses 1, 7 and 9 Cape Paterson Road. Back then, the addresses were Beach Road, East Wonthaggi, but because Joe Richmond was called Pommy Joe by everyone who knew him, the area became known as Pommy Town.

The story I want to tell is the one about the fire that destroyed Pommy Town and left most of it vacant of houses from 1944 to the 2005. Back in the 1940s, Wonthaggi’s roads were mostly unsealed and the town was still thick with scrub

and tea-tree, and most houses were built of wood. This was perfect fire fodder.

It seems that every summer during WWII was a hot one that had people worried about fires. In 1941, the *Powlett Express* wrote about FIRE WIND AND HEAT! “Starting last Saturday, the heat wave which swept the state struck Wonthaggi district in all its unpleasantness throughout the week culminating in a fierce Northerly wind. Temperature mounted steadily, turning the century mark Tuesday Wednesday and Thursday. Fires, mainly grassfires, which the wind assisted in full measure, flared up all around the town and district destroying homes and property.”

There were reports like this every year, but usually Wonthaggi itself was spared until 14 February 1944, when, as the *Argus* reported, seven houses were destroyed and others damaged in the residential area of Wonthaggi. The fire started in scrub and grass on the Korumburra Road opposite the recreation reserve. Fanned by a strong northerly gale, it jumped the railway line and gutted 5 homes in Bent and Quarry Streets... Furniture was removed from all houses at the east end of Graham Street, but much of what was removed for safety was destroyed anyway. All of Mrs G. Allan’s clothes were burnt to ashes in her back yard where she had taken them for safety.

Sparks from burning buildings lit grass on Reservoir Hill and the fire raced on a 2-mile front towards Pommy Town where for two hours the police and volunteer helpers fought the flames. There, two houses were destroyed and four others were damaged. All the surface workers at the State Coal Mine were taken to lend a hand; so, in all, there were 700 voluntary fire fighters attending those fires.”

In the February 18, issue of The *Powlett Express* it was called ‘Wonthaggi’s Worst Fire’, but that declaration might have been uttered in the heat of the moment because the fire on Graham Street in 1912 may have been worse. The *Express* reckoned that eight homes were completely destroyed. Mrs Elsie Young, whose house on Bent Street was one of four houses burnt to the ground, said the roar of the scrub as it caught fire alerted her to the fact she was in great danger. “She snatched up her 12-month old child and dashed

from the house with the flames licking up the passage after her... she lost everything even the dress she was wearing was ruined.”

Over at Pommy Town, the *Express* reports that ‘the save of the day’ was made with the house of Mr William Main, a retired miner. “Although 68 years old, he fought the fire with members of the police force – Constables Longmire, Clarke and Stock. His only water supply was his three tanks which he punctured with an axe.” [Nb. William’s son, Bobby, reckons his father died when he was 63 so Mr Gannon at the *Express* might have got that wrong.]

Really, the luckiest save of the day, was the Perry’s place that had been shifted just weeks earlier so it was untouched. Perry’s house had been behind Bill Mains’ house so it might have escaped the fire anyway if it had been there. Fletcher’s and Patterson’s houses were on the road; both were burned to the ground.

The unluckiest people of the day were the Honeys, who had bought the Fletcher house – Mr Fletcher having died in the 20-Shaft disaster in 1937 – and who arrived with the furniture van just in time to watch their new house burn to the ground. They had a large property behind Pommy Town and later built a house on their farm. These two houses were insured, the one newly owned by Mrs J. Honey for £275.

The house owned by Woodfords was untouched even though it was close to the incinerated houses. The story is that one stormy night, it was struck by lightning, which cause the Woodfords to move away, and so they missed the fire and the fire missed the empty house.

The Davidson family who had bought most of Mary Hislop’s farm in 1937 did not escape the fire.. The grandson of Joseph Davidson, husband to Ruby whose name is on the title, is Ian Davidson. His grandfather had come to Wonthaggi with his new bride from Maryborough where he had been a tunnel sinker in the gold fields. He came here in 1913 and worked as a tunnel sinker here for 24 years before his wife bought the farm from Ms Hislop.

The Ian’s parents worked the farm with his grandparents. They fenced the place, built a house, erected a dairy, put up sheds, even built a racecourse. When the fire came though it burnt

everything, but they were able to save the house. Young Ian was only four years old at the time. His parents had to get him to safety so they could concentrate on saving what they could.

Ian will remember for all of his days the way his mother handed him up to Constable Longmire, who was on his horse, and how they took off across the paddock away from the course of the fire, past the airshaft that fed both number 18 Shaft and the Eastern



4-year-old Ian Davidson saved by Constible Longmire on his horse.

Area mine (now the State Coal Mine tourist village). Constable Longmire was holding tight onto his little charge, but Ian reckons he was holding onto Constable Longmire even tighter as they galloped along. The policeman dropped the brave little boy off at Joe Sainsbury’s place on the Inverloch Road just near where the old auction place was.

He then turned his horse and galloped back to be of further service to anyone in need. But, as he was riding back the wind changed direction blowing the fire back on itself and it burnt out almost as quickly as it started. What luck, because the track to the beach was so thick with tea-tree the fire would have got away and been a much worse disaster.

Constable Longmire wasn’t the only hero on the day. The women from the Adelyn Frock Factory were congratulated for “lending assistance to the firemen who so zealously fought the flames” in the town. The Police force asked Mr Gannon at the *Express* to draw special attention to the “young chap in the red beret, who would just not give in. He was in the thick of everything. I thought he

would collapse a couple of times, but he stuck it out,” said a leading member of the force.

According to the *Express*, “So severe was the drain on the reservoir that it fell a foot. 300,000 gallons of water were drawn from it during the period the fire lasted.”

After all was said and done, the Mains shifted their house to Broome Crescent; the Perry’s to Merrin Crescent. Only the Davidsons remained at Pommy Town and it was many years before the area became repopulated. Ian never left and still lives there at number 9 Cape Paterson Road.

He remembers it was a long walk home from school each day when he was a kid. He remembers the coal train from Eastern Area used to cross Billson Street and go along to the station at 3:30 everyday. He used to sprint from school so he would not have to wait for the long train full of coal to pass. But, if he had to wait, there would be other people there with him with their hessian bags at the ready waiting for the fellows at the back of the train to throw chunks of coal out to them.

- C. Landon