

### 13. The 1967 bush fires

Before 1967 there had been plenty of bush fires in Clarence – Lindisfarne people often had to put them out on Natone Hill – but no large-scale danger. Still, fire generally was a worry, and by the 1960s there were arrangements for protection against both bush fires and house fires. The suburbs came under the Hobart Fire Brigade, and there were rural volunteer brigades at Lauderdale and Seven Mile Beach. Other districts had fire wardens who had some equipment. But like the rest of the south-east, overall Clarence was ‘hopelessly ill-prepared’.<sup>1</sup>

By the end of 1966 the fire season ahead looked dangerous, since winter and spring had seen good rain and lush growth, but it had been very dry since. In December the Commission issued about 400 notices asking people to remove fire hazards, but they could not check that this had been done. There were many small fires that summer – 44 between 7 January and 7 February – which local brigades attended.<sup>2</sup>

From Monday 6 February, extreme fire danger was forecast, with high temperatures and wind. But no one was prepared for the holocaust of Black Tuesday, 7 February 1967, when fire ravaged southern Tasmania, from Rokeby to the Derwent Valley and south to the Huon. In total, 62 people died, 1085 homes and 361 other buildings were destroyed and \$40 million worth of damage was done. There were 110 fires altogether, 88 deliberately lit.<sup>3</sup>

Most publicity went to fires in other areas, but Clarence suffered too. The day saw a dreadful progression of fire, heat, wind, death and loss, but also magnificent courage and selflessness from many, as houses were saved by people ranging from occupants, neighbours and friends to complete strangers. For some days before 7 February, a fire was burning in Flagstaff Gully at the eastern end of Warrane, caused either by burning-off or children playing with matches. On the evening of 6 February this fire was burning slowly up the hill from the gully. Around midnight a breeze assisted it, and the next morning it was out of control. On this very hot and windy day the fire travelled south on two fronts which crossed the Tasman Highway about 1 pm, one near the Pass Road west of Tunnel Hill, and the other on Tunnel Hill. The first burnt along the Pass Road to Rokeby, then turned east to Lauderdale. The other burnt through timbered country on the ridge east of Rokeby towards Roches Beach, and started spot-fires at Lauderdale. Beyond Lauderdale, the fire moved

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<sup>1</sup> Information from Diana Swanton; Solicitor-General... pp 15-6; Wettenhall p xiii

<sup>2</sup> Solicitor-General... pp 15, 50; Wettenhall p 70

<sup>3</sup> *Mercury* 6.2.67, 7.2.67, 8.2.67; Wettenhall p xiii, 70, 75, 78

towards Cremorne and Seven Mile Beach. Many people turned out to fight the fires, and the prisoners from the gaol were allowed out to join them. They worked hard, none abusing their freedom.<sup>4</sup>

Norah Reid's husband fought fires behind Geilston Bay, and further south, that day was Ted Richardson's first as vice-principal at Warrane High School. 'The whole day – I can only liken it to being by a stove in the kitchen with the oven door open. The fire came into the school grounds above the main buildings, but luckily on that side it was mainly ovals and green grass, and that prevented it coming further, made a good buffer. We were afraid of the fire, and we organised the buses to come at 1.30, so the youngsters could get home.'<sup>5</sup>

Fred Murfet was a fire warden at Flagstaff Gully, and in the early morning took his equipment in his car to fight a fire at the northern end of the Rosny golf course. More fires broke out in the area, including the one at Warrane High, and some houses were burnt though many were saved. Fred had to rush back home, where his wife, surrounded by smoke, was hosing down the house and planning to put her mother in the swimming pool for safety. Luckily the fire was put out before it obtained a hold.<sup>6</sup>

Fire came down the hills at the back of Bellerive and Howrah, threatening houses. On the hill behind his Bellerive house, Basil de la Bere helped other volunteers beat out fires, but some houses were burnt. Howrah was threatened too, and as in other schools, from midday the principal encouraged parents to come and collect children. The fire came to the back of homes, but was beaten back by householders, who had mains water, though by this stage only a trickle.<sup>7</sup>

At about 1 pm Dr Bill Young in Bellerive was called to Tunnel Hill, where an old lady had had a heart attack. When he arrived, the fire was about 200 metres away. Bill helped the woman's son-in-law to back-burn around the house, so that when the fire came, the house was safe. The patient was fine too – it was a false alarm. Bill drove home through fire on both sides of the road, reaching a police block and a queue of cars at the bottom of the hill. 'If the doctor can get through I can', said Mrs Archie Calvert of Rokeby, and drove through – to find her poultry farm gone and 1800 chickens dead. Bill Ryan also had a poultry farm and horse stud on the Pass Road, his horses including Lanesborough, the sire of famous racehorses like Piping Lane. 'It all happened so quickly

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<sup>4</sup> Solicitor-General... p 50; Yearbook of Tasmania 1968; Wettenhall, map p 68

<sup>5</sup> Wettenhall p 91; Adnum p 143; information from Ted Richardson

<sup>6</sup> Murfet pp 129-131

<sup>7</sup> Information from Basil de la Bere; Adnum p 143, 145

– it was such a hot, shocking day’, he said. ‘It was like a blowtorch. I said to my wife, “We’d better go”, so we grabbed our little daughter and went to the edge of the dam while the fire passed through. We lost the house, every shed, every stick. All I was left with was an old pair of Air Force trousers with the knee out of them, and my wife had a cotton dress, and our daughter had a pair of pants.’ Many sheep died, but the mares, which had been grazing in the paddocks, survived. Mrs Ryan had opened the stable door, and Lanesborough disappeared into the smoke and flames. Later he reappeared, with his mane and tail burnt but alive. He sired several more racehorses.

Of all places in Clarence Rokeby suffered the worst that day, especially since there was no reticulated water, no fire brigade, no fire fighters except local volunteers – though later firefighters and an army unit did arrive – and no fire equipment except what people had in their houses. Mavis Webb told the story of her experience. At midday she was at home, when her husband arrived.

He tore into the house and said, “Close all the windows and doors and go and get thick slacks and a heavy jumper on”. I asked, “Whatever for?” and he replied, “Things are going to happen”. It was so hot and the wind was coming up. I raced and got into these heavy clothes on this hot day, and we closed the windows and the doors, and the next minute, down the valley from Mt Rumney was this absolutely roaring fire coming down. We raced and put some water in the washing machine, because we were on tanks and we really didn’t have much water in the tanks. We put some bath towels there and then tore about and bashed away at the grass... We tore around the house and kept the sparks off the house and went like dogs there for a while, until the fire had actually passed through.

We then got a bucket of water and my husband got a mop and he said, “I’d better go and check on everybody else,” because we were absolutely surrounded by flames in the distance but not close to the house fortunately. So I was given the bucket of water and the mop and I went around the house and wet all the eaves, as it looked as if sparks were going to settle there, and my husband went off.

Geoff Webb checked on the neighbours and helped other firefighters, while Mavis guarded the house with her mop and bucket. Sadly she watched the local hall burning, as well as neighbouring houses and the Congregational church, but with no water ‘there was absolutely nothing I could do...it really was a dreadful time for everyone... It really was a disaster and you could just not believe it was happening to Rokeby’.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Adnum pp 6-7

Wenna Massie was also at home in Rokeby, and saw the fire 'racing down the hill'. She panicked, rushed into her husband's workshop, emptied a sack of potatoes and wet the sack, then steadied down and got her mother and daughter out of the house. She organised her mother – who had just come from England for a visit – to fill buckets with water from the tank, and she and her daughter 'were running up and down' putting out the fence as it caught alight, and managed to save the house. Across the road, houses were on fire – at one, people were dragging furniture out the front as the back burnt. With the fire and the heat, chickens were exploding all around, the fields were alight, and sheep and cattle were burning in them. Wenna's mother kept saying that her back was burning, and Wenna told her that yes it was hot, but to keep on working. Later they found that the back of her dress and vest were perforated with holes where sparks had caught. As for Wenna, after the fire and the smoke she was 'black from head to foot. Even my teeth were black'.<sup>9</sup>

Snowy Calvert was playing cricket at South Hobart when he heard on the radio that Rokeby was in danger. 'I said, "I'm going", and I got in the car just as I was, in my cricket clothes, and drove home. When I got to the big quarries [between Howrah and Rokeby] they said I couldn't go any further, but I said, "I live there, I'm going". When I got to the [Rokeby] post office the Army was there, and there were flames everywhere. They said, "You can't go any further", but I said, "I live there and I'm going". When I drove up the drive the house was still standing, but when I went to the back door they were just coming out. The fire was in the eaves and they couldn't put it out, there was no water. It was a terrible day.'

His wife Phyllis, their son Lindsay and three boys from South Arm who were passing had tried to put the house out with buckets of water, but fire took hold and they had to go. On the way the boys took out the television to the yard, and Phyllis grabbed some of Snowy's cricket trophies, an ice bucket, a silver tray and a toaster. Snowy drove them in the car to a ploughed paddock over the road, where they were safe while the house burnt. All they had left were the car, Phyllis' scavengings, Snowy's cricket gear and the television, 'a bit scorched up one side, but it went'. Their sheep died, but their cattle were safe as they went to the beach – Lindsay had opened gates so they could escape.<sup>10</sup>

The Hutchins family at Seaview also lost their house. Esther Hutchins was visiting friends at Cambridge when her mother rang, saying the fire was at the fence. She tore home but was stopped by an army unit in Rokeby, and joined a bucket brigade which was trying to save a house. Her

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<sup>9</sup> Adnum pp 73-77

husband Richard ran home and thought it was safe until he opened the back door and saw the inside alight, with Esther's mother still inside. She was rescued, but otherwise everything burnt. All that was left were some turkeys which sat on a bare patch and a car at the front gate, which the fire passed over. Otherwise there was 'not a blade of grass or a tree or a scrap of anything'. Later that day a neighbour, Mick Norris, went to see how Esther was coping. 'She was a bit unhappy, and she said, "I'm really upset because I've lost my rings". I said, "Where were they?" "On the mantelpiece". And she took a stick and stirred around where the mantelpiece would have stood, and there was her engagement ring among the ashes.'<sup>11</sup>

The Essens of Rokeby spent the morning filling drums and buckets with water and putting them round the house. Then Jeff Essen went to help his sister-in-law, telling her to take the cars to the main road, where they ended up only scorched. He helped her put out the tankstand which had caught, so saved the house. Meanwhile Marjorie Essen was going around their house with wet bags, putting out fires as they caught, while the baby was screaming inside. 'It was rather harrowing because each time I went out to put out some more [fires] round the house, I didn't know whether it would catch on fire or not and I would go back in for the baby.' The fire came right to the walls of the house, but she managed to save it. It was all very fast, she said – the fire came and went in a few minutes. Some time later a stranger rang up and said she had taken their children from Lauderdale school to the beach.<sup>12</sup>

Jack Van Dongen was working in Hobart and decided to come home. He was stopped at the roadblock in Howrah, but when he heard the reason – that Rokeby was on fire – he drove through. He arrived home to find his wife and the house safe, but as the fire came closer they decided to leave. Then it came so close they had to stay, so tried and save their house and Mrs Foot's next door. This caught alight, and Jack realised it was a doormat which had caught, so he pulled it away and threw it in the fish pond. Suddenly then the fire blew away from them, but other houses burnt. At the Clarks' cottage over the road fire caught the eaves, but one of the Clark boys jumped on the roof and poured a bucket of water over it, saving the house.<sup>13</sup>

Meanwhile, at about 2 pm Mrs Foot had realised that the fire was coming near. A Hydro man burst into the house saying, 'Get out of here love, go', and a neighbour rushed over panicking – 'it

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<sup>10</sup> Information from Snowy and Phyllis Calvert; Adnum pp 93-4

<sup>11</sup> Adnum pp 52-5; information from Mick Norris

<sup>12</sup> Adnum pp 124-5, 126-28

<sup>13</sup> Adnum pp 208-11

was just all chaos'. She and the neighbour got into the car with a dog, a cat and a bird in a cage, and as they drove away in the smoke and heat they could hear dreadful screams from a neighbouring house, The Pines. 'There was all screaming and yelling and noise and the roaring sound of the flames, but we couldn't see it because of the smoke.' Some men bundled an injured woman into the car and Mrs Foot, though shaking herself, drove her to hospital in Hobart – she, Mrs Foot, had lost her shoes and was covered in soot, and still had the neighbour, a hurt lamb they had rescued, the dog, the cat and the bird. They returned to Rokeby, picking up people on the way – they were travelling slowly in the traffic, and people were yelling out 'Rokeby', 'Cremorne' or 'Seven Mile Beach'. When they got home, to Mrs Foot's surprise her home was still standing as was the neighbour's, though everything outside had gone. Mrs Foot started driving to Lauderdale to find her children at the school there, and saw them on about the third run. 'You were frantic all the time not knowing who would be there and who wouldn't.' She didn't realise until the next day that sometime during that Tuesday she had broken her toe.<sup>14</sup>

Len Stanfield was a volunteer firefighter who was sent to Rokeby to fight fires, with a drum of water and two spray kits in his ute. He picked up another man, and they arrived to see the post office just a heap of red-hot coals, and the house next door alight. About a dozen people were dragging furniture out, but were not trying to put out the fire, probably because they had no equipment. Les and his companion started to fight it, and saved the house. Others were fighting fires too, and Len saw men standing along the road with every possible sort of fire-fighting equipment, from wet bags, spray pumps and branches to wet mops. Any vehicle was pressed into service, and concrete trucks were backed up to burning houses to spray water from their tanks on to the flames. In one house, enough empty shot-gun cartridges and bullets were going off to sound like a small war. Len went to save the first house he saw in the path of the fire. 'Several youths standing around were about to depart, but after our remarks about "having a go", interspersed with names which reflected rather pointedly on their parents, to their credit they stayed and the house was saved.'<sup>15</sup>

The toll at Rokeby was high, with two dead. Mrs Marjorie Britten was burnt to death in The Pines – it was presumably her screams that Mrs Foot heard. Elderly Mrs Freeman tried to escape but was found dead in a gutter. Many of Rokeby's historic buildings were destroyed: George Stokell's Rokeby House; The Pines, the old rectory; Bayview, John McArdell's school; the Congregational church; Clarendon, the Stanfield home; the post office and other houses, as well as Vern Reid's

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<sup>14</sup> Adnum pp 222-5

planes and hangar. Fortunately, St Matthew's church and the historic homes of Clarence House and Clarendon Vale were saved, though St Matthew's lost its picket fence.<sup>16</sup>

There was danger at Lauderdale as well. The fire raced towards the built up area, where the school was the nearest building. The principal decided to evacuate it and parents with lorries took children to the beach, where they were looked after by staff and parents. Some staff members stayed to fight the fire, which surrounded the school, and managed to save it. Lauderdale had an informal fire brigade with a vintage Ford engine, and the crew did the best they could to fight the fires.<sup>17</sup>

Many residents joined the children on the beach. Norah Reid's parents lived at Lauderdale, and decided to evacuate their home. Her father loaded the car with valuables and drove off, and at the beach realised that he had forgotten his wife, so went back for her. Some houses at Lauderdale burned down, and others had the fire come right up to them. Val Johnson was at home with her baby, and put him in the sink to keep cool. Some women and children went to the beach, she said, 'but it was so smoky they had to lie on the sand'. The fire came to within twenty yards of her house, but no further.<sup>18</sup>

The fire came down the peninsula towards Cremorne, burning the old homestead of Woodlands. Maureen Morrisby was in her house on the South Arm Road, while her husband Terry was at their farm at Oyster Cove, trying to get home through the fires. 'At lunch time, Terry was doing a recorded agricultural talk on the radio, and I was wondering if he still had a voice', remembered Maureen. 'The smoke was so thick and the light so bad that you couldn't see the fence outside. The school bus driver, Lola Lazenby, came to stand by in case they had to evacuate the school. They didn't, and no one was hurt here. I could see the flickers of flames all around, but I couldn't see through the smoke. I sat up all night. When the men came back they were sizzled and covered with ash, and their hair was singed.' At Sandford Mrs Fehre changed into woollen clothes, filled buckets with water, and wondered what was the safest place if the fire came. She decided it would be behind one of the gravestones in the churchyard, where the soil was barren. But the westerly wind saved Sandford itself.<sup>19</sup>

Earlier that day Mrs Foot rang her father at Cremorne. He said, 'I'm in the garden and I've got my heart pills in my pocket and a hose in my hand. I'm very concerned'. He was right – thirteen

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<sup>15</sup> Adnum pp 273-4

<sup>16</sup> *Mercury* 8.2.67; Adnum pp 20-2, 129

<sup>17</sup> Gillam p 10

<sup>18</sup> Adnum p 143; information from Val Johnson

<sup>19</sup> Information from Maureen Morrisby; Adnum p 106

houses and shacks were lost there, and the total would have been higher but for volunteer helpers and prisoners, commented the *Mercury*. Charles Fehre, the rector at Sandford, went to Cremorne to help, but could only get about half way in before the road was blocked. 'There wasn't much we could do, but some people and I helped putting out fires on the HEC poles with buckets of water, and that was about all we could do. The fire was so fierce, we just saved a few poles and that was about it.'<sup>20</sup>

At Seven Mile Beach the progress association had organised a fire brigade, and bought an old 1937 Chevrolet truck second-hand from the airport. Greg Parssey, the fire captain, was a firefighter at the airport, and trained up a dozen teenage boys and twenty or so local men and women as the crew (he encouraged women as they were more likely to be home than men). On the day of the fires most people were away at work or school, but Greg had the day off. From midday, as fire started to threaten, he went out by himself in the fire truck towards Acton, putting out spot fires. Next day he realised this was a waste of time, as fires had come to the areas anyway.

Ian Blom, aged fifteen, was one of the boys in the fire crew. On Black Tuesday he was at Clarence High school as usual, and saw houses exploding in the fire on the hills of Bellerive. After school the authorities heard that Seven Mile Beach was safe, so the bus took those children home. At Rokeby the fire had already gone through, and they stopped so some children could alight – many getting off to see their houses in flames. There was fire on both sides of Acton Road, but police waved them on. They found Seven Mile Beach untouched, and Ian and a couple of other boys got out the fire engine – they knew how to drive it as on Saturday afternoons they used to take it out, polish it and fill it with water – and headed towards Acton. The fire was coming across a paddock, so 'we tackled it and stopped it before it got to Seven Mile Beach'. For the rest of the night, the fire crew was on the lookout to put out spot fires, and Ian and his friends spent the next day shooting badly injured sheep. 'Someone had to do it.' Seven Mile Beach and Cambridge were safe from the fire. So was South Arm, thanks to rapid work when a spot fire was quickly put out at Opossum Bay. But it was pitch black that afternoon, 'frightening'.<sup>21</sup>

The fire's toll was huge. Five people died: the two women in Rokeby, and three men from Bellerive, who died fighting fires in Lenah Valley. Many houses were destroyed, and also many sheds and other outbuildings, as well as a church and a post office. Cattle, sheep, chickens and birds died in thousands, and much pasture and bush was burnt.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> *Eastside* 5.10.67; Adnum pp 78, 105-6, 211, 222, 237

<sup>21</sup> Information from Ian Blom, Greg Parssey, James Alexander and Maurice Potter

<sup>22</sup> Solicitor-General...Appendix A, CBE 24, AOT, and see Adnum, passim

By evening danger had lessened, though some posts and poles were still burning. In Rokeby, those with houses helped those who had been burned out – the Van Dongens took in Pat Connor and gave him a stiff brandy after his house went. Theirs was the only house with water, so they filled the bath and neighbours came in and out to fill buckets, making a dreadful mess of the floor – but that did not matter. They also had the only telephone still working, and a queue formed in the passage as people tried to ring their families. Even those who had not lost their houses had no power, and over everything was the smell of burning, which hung around for months. Residents lit camping stoves and fires to cook, and helped each other, turning up with soup and pillows for the Massies, for example. Many men stayed up through the night to check for more fires. Jack Van Dongen remembered standing at his window and looking out. Everything was black, though there were fence posts still burning and gate-posts alight. That night he saw a fire in the hills and went with a group of men to put it out, and also the gum trees burning in the churchyard. They all laughed when Ray Barclay suddenly disappeared – he had trodden on an old grave which collapsed, and fell up to his shoulders in it.<sup>23</sup>

It took some time for life to return to normal. The Hydro were marvellous, recalled Mavis Webb, with men ‘working like mad’ to restore power. Mrs Foot was praised for her work, providing food and drinks and organising Red Cross handouts. ‘She worked day and night.’ Lesley Dunstone was a member of a ‘hit and giggle tennis club’ which played at Sandford, and they volunteered to help sort clothes and assist those who came for handouts. Many people had only what they stood up in. ‘You heard heart-rending stories’ – one family lost nine houses belonging to various members, so there could be no helping each other as would usually happen, because everyone had lost everything. People were not used to asking for help, and it was hard to persuade some to take enough goods. There was aid from the government, from neighbours, from strangers, and low interest loans for farmers, and gradually people built new houses or bought others. Some were lent shacks at beaches like Cremorne until their new house was ready. People rallied and re-established themselves; few moved away at this time. Vern Reid established himself at the Cambridge aerodrome.<sup>24</sup>

The next Sunday an ecumenical service was held at St Matthew’s, with Anglican, Catholic, Presbyterians and Methodists all together. The church was packed – ‘it was wonderful, a wonderful feeling in the district’. People at Rokeby formed a volunteer fire brigade, joined the progress association and lobbied to have water connected, which soon arrived ‘and was a big help’. The

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<sup>23</sup> Adnum pp 76, 129, 210-213

association rebuilt the Rokeby hall and bus shelters. Everyone praised the Cuthbertsons, who had lost the historic home Rokeby House. With the aid of old photographs, an architect who was interested in this type of challenge, and of Adrian Collins, a Stokell descendant, they stabilised the walls, all that was left of the old house, and reconstructed it exactly as it had been.<sup>25</sup>

The fire had a few good results. ‘There was this atmosphere of everybody wanting to help and doing anything that was needed... The district definitely came together. We forgot old wounds and people who didn’t get on terribly well with others became friends. Of course it doesn’t last, human nature being what it is.’<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Adnum pp 8, 22, 43-4, 214; *Eastside* 5.10.67

<sup>25</sup> Adnum pp 15, 17-9, 62, 213-4

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