

## **OPENING OF THE SHOREHAM RURAL FIRE STATION – 20-12-2014**

This story has its beginning a long time ago, in the days when this was the District of Port Phillip.

In 1851, on Thursday the 6<sup>th</sup> of February, southern Australia suffered its biggest bushfires. 5 million hectares were burnt – 2 ½ times the size of Black Friday and 10 times more area than Black Saturday or Ash Wednesday – but not as catastrophic as those fires because southern Australia wasn't as developed then.

I picked this starting point because, from my understanding, this is the first big fire to have affected Shoreham. It is a part of the folklore of the Johnston family that Christy's grandmother took the children into the water at the beach as her place of last resort, while the men fought the fire.

I wondered why there hadn't been any significant impact recorded of those horrific days on Shoreham. In recent conversation, Christy supplied Roddrick and me with the answer. Back then, Christy recalled, farmers managed the land. We understood the bush and the native grasses. We understood the climate, the weather and the seasons. And farmers understood fire. Baynes Bush, and he pointed up there, you couldn't get through there now it's so thick. But we wanted to hunt in there. We burnt it so we could move around in it. Or at least Martin Higgins did. He would just go up there and drop a match in it. Back then there were no permits and no fire restrictions. Early December was the time to cool burn. We got in and did the work then.

We burnt a fire break along Tucks Road every year Christy recalled. Burn a bit and beat it out with a branch; just enough at a time that you could manage. We reckoned that we could stop any fire there. The Boyds were more sophisticated. They had leather beaters.

There wasn't a fire brigade as such then. If you saw smoke you would investigate. Your neighbour might need some help. If there was bigger smoke, a group of people would rally. This would mean stopping the fire at Tucks Road using branches and back burning. The lore of the land and the lore of fire were handed down from generation to generation, mainly through practical experience.

Rod mentioned to Christy how he had stared out his bedroom window at night as a youngster, transfixed by the glow on the Red Hill skyline. He asked if the locals had helped out at big fires in other districts. Christy replied that that was their business, we didn't get involved and they didn't get involved in our business. With transport and communications the way they were then, activity was focused much more on one's own community.

Two things we learnt from Christy. One was the importance of being in tune with the environment. The other was the importance of community and what community means – shared need, shared activity, being apart, but being together and sharing the identity - I'm from Shoreham.

In 1944 the CFA had begun largely as a result of the Streeton Royal Commission which had resulted from the Black Friday fires. The Dromana fire had come as close as what is now Ed Burston's farm. This event was still vivid in the memories of the Shoreham community when, in 1948, Jack Wright, Ted Horne (who was to become the first Captain), Clyde McKenzie (who only had to walk over the road to turn out),

Toner Hosking (the first President), Sid Hitchcock (who as postmaster was the comms officer and got everyone turned out) and others decided that a fire brigade was needed in Shoreham. The newly formed CFA would provide support and structure to help formalize the casual firefighting arrangements of the past into an official organisation – the Shoreham Rural Fire Brigade.

Living half way between Flinders and Shoreham, by Ted's reckoning Christy was equally a Shoreham resident and would be a good pick up to help get the Shoreham Brigade going. So Christy had the unusual honour of being a member of 2 brigades simultaneously.

An important point to note is that many of the original members were returned servicemen. Having served their country, they now turned to formally serving their community.

In 1953 Geoff Raws of Point Leo Farm became Captain. He had the distinction of being President of the Pt Leo Surf Life Saving Club at the same time. This had the effect of bringing the 2 organisations closer together. The brigade decided it needed a firefighting vehicle. In 1961, Geoff Raws and Glen Cornish recruited the whole of the Pt Leo Surf Life Saving Club to the Fire Brigade. They believed that the weight of numbers would pressure the CFA to provide a tanker. Alas, they were unsuccessful in their quest. Many members of the fire brigade assisted in the building of the Surf Lifesaving clubhouse, cementing the relationship between the 2 organisations.

Eventually a tanker trailer was purchased around 1964 during Jim West's Captaincy. This resembled the back of a fire truck, but was towed behind a vehicle. It was dangerous to tow as it was difficult to stop by all accounts. With no fire station, it was garaged initially at Glen Cornish's farm and then at Wright's saw mill where the crew who worked at the mill could quickly respond to a fire call. The support provided by the mill staff meant that Shoreham had exceptional response capacity to calls during the most difficult time of the week – 9-5 Monday to Friday when most people were at work.

In 1967 during Neale Wright's Captaincy, overtures were made to the CFA yet again to acquire a tanker. The Brigade had to raise £3000 for the Austin cab chassis with the CFA fitting a tank and pump. The funds were raised in a few short weeks due to a magnificent response from the community. The tanker was commissioned in 1968. This also resided at the mill, but it became obvious that a fire station was needed. Meetings up until then had been held at the hall.

In late 1968 a decision was made to build a fire station to replace the tin shed. The CFA indicated that they would fund a basic fire station estimated to cost \$760. The amount offered meant that the members would have to do all the building. The Shire donated the land, Jim Thomas drafted the plans and they were away. Pines were felled and cleared, Clarrie Jennings donated the use of a bulldozer, Peninsula Concrete donated the concrete, Jack Wright made the windows, Charlie Wright welded the roof trusses and the mill provided the purlins. The recently formed Ladies Auxiliary kept the workers going with tea and sandwiches. When demolishing the building recently, the contractor asked if the brigade was really wealthy due to the strength of the concrete. No, just volunteer firefighters doing their best was the reply.

With the advent of a suitable venue, Neale Wright initiated the first training session in November 1969. The brigade had survived the first 18 years without any formal training. Even as recently as the Ash Wednesday fires in 1983, a member of the public could volunteer, jump on the tanker and head off to a major fire. Since the Linton fire, recruits need to complete minimum skills training in firefighting before becoming operational. Ongoing training is a feature of the operation of brigades today. In 1974 a dinner dance was held at Buxton Lodge to raise funds to add the kitchen and toilets to the station.

The old Austin was a beast. It vapourised when the weather was too hot – not ideal for a fire truck. The gear box didn't have synchromesh. It is a testament to Mal Barry's patience and skill as a teacher that any of us learned to drive the Austin. He had the onerous responsibility of driver training. The old Austin wasn't exactly run off it's wheels. The original tyres were replaced because the rubber perished, not because they wore out.

Eventually it became obsolete and the CFA replaced it with the current Hino in 1991. No one had checked to see if the vehicle fitted in to the station. Another extension was built at the front solving the problem. Driving of the Hino was a new skill to be mastered. Ron McKillop was in the driver's seat attending a fire at Pt Leo Farm. He had left the park brake engaged and was starting fires from the burning brakes as quickly as the fires he was ferrying water too were being extinguished.

In 1983, Captain Bill Kleiss Had the inspiration to suggest that the brigade buy a 4 wheel drive vehicle to support firefighting activities. Shoreham was the first brigade in the Western Port group to purchase a 4 wheel drive. Once again the community was generous in their support of the project. With the victory of Let's Elope in the Melbourne Cup, a donation was made to buy a powerful quickfill pump which is still operating today.

An inventory of equipment taken before the fire season in 1967 showed 1 tanker trailer, 36 knapsacks, 22 beaters and 6 rakes. The equipment at our disposal has come a long way since then, with a common theme being the generous support of the community to assist with the acquisitions. The most recent is what is known as the Shoreham Bigfill. Designed for purpose by Mike Wilding, the Land Rover is better suited to carrying the pump and a range of other specialised gear than the previous vehicles.

## **The New Station**

And now we come to the point of today's celebrations. The new station. At least 10 years in gestation, it has been a long project. It was incredibly difficult to pin down ownership of the land. Leon Buynevic, our support officer at the time, was like a dog with a bone. He wouldn't let go and eventually the CFA was able to lease the expanded block from the Shire.

Mike Wilding came up with a scheme for extension and renovation of the old station. We believed we could probably achieve something quiet functional using our own resources.

About 2 years ago, our catchment officer, Arthur Haynes, asked us to hold back on those plans as he thought we might be eligible for a new station under the Rural Fire Stations Project, developed from the Bushfires Royal Commission. Arthur pushed really hard for our inclusion in the scheme and he never lost belief in the project and our ability to deliver on our commitments. The brigade investigated the type of station on offer from the CFA. The 1B wasn't very attractive architecturally, which would be a problem in such a prominent location in the town. Functionally the design didn't suit the strong community focus which is core to the business of the brigade.

Peter Kelly was successful in negotiating the removal of the pine forest and the subsequent indigenous planting which followed. This project, known as the Shoreham Triangle, has forged stronger links between the brigade, the community and the Shire through our shared interest in biodiversity. Generation of renewable energy, thanks to Scott Gibbins and storm water harvesting via the tanks are further demonstrations of our commitment to sustainability.

Recent recruit, Danielle Hulyer, introduced us to her partner, architect and now recruit Adrian Bonomi, who developed a great proposal, carefully crafted from discussions with the brigade. The 3D graphic presentation of the proposal was crucial in bringing the project to life for both the brigade and the community. Success is easy to measure. Not one objection and unqualified praise for the vision of the project by the community.

At this crucial point those in the CFA who controlled the project didn't seem overly excited about our proposal. Then Regional Director of District 8, Peter Schmidt, weighed in with his support. His understanding and intuition led him to have great faith in us and our proposal. We believe his influence was significant in the final approval. He stuck his neck out for us. We are extremely grateful for that and have worked very hard to honour that faith. Thanks Peter.

Then the real work of fund raising began. The mail out achieved tremendous support and demonstrated to the CFA that the community was solidly behind the project. Magnus Mansie, Russell Barrett and team organised the Shoreham Secrets open garden day. Tony Wain a wine raffle. The brigade sent the old station off in a torrent with the auction night. For every event there are those with the idea. But each idea demands an army of assistance and the participation of the community to make it successful. I would be here all night if I tried to acknowledge everyone.

Even so, some other acknowledgements must be made.

First, the community. We believe in this project and you have demonstrated in the most unequivocal fashion that you do as well. We can't ask for more than that and it is a powerful motivating force. On behalf of the brigade I thank you. Within the community there is one person and group I must thank. We all appreciate the importance of music in strengthening communities. I can't think of an event that Gary Jones and his band haven't supported with their great music. They are the heart and soul of almost every event in Shoreham.

Secondly the members of the Shoreham Rural Fire Brigade and the Auxillary who, without exception have committed to the project and put their shoulder to the wheel for the best part of 2 years. In 1970 the members built the station. That was a special effort and there was a degree of sadness as the old station was demolished. But this is 2014 and that is nigh on impossible. What the brigade did do, as well as the fund raising, was the magnificent landscaping, affording us a great deal of ownership of the project and saving around \$40,000. I thank you, and the overwhelming message I am getting from the community is that they thank you as well.

Just at the right moment, Rob Heath of Tucks Road stepped in, donating expert assistance and machinery to guide the landscaping efforts to the successful conclusion which is laid out before you today. It is a truly beautiful setting. Thanks Rob and Justin for your help.

TJ builders have done a wonderful job of executing the plans. Once contracts have been signed the process is usually a no go zone for everyone outside the builders team. Simon Mannix has broken all those rules. That might be because of his intimate connection with the area. He holidayed in the McKenzie house as a youngster. His interaction with the brigade, his tolerance and patience throughout this process has been exceptional and has meant we understood what was happening all the time. Thanks Simon. You are a great ambassador for the company.

Finally, another anecdote from the folk lore of the brigade. Some time ago we turned out to a fire on the Coles property. The tanker was motoring across the paddocks towards the fire and the crew leader asked over the radio – Shoreham support this is Shoreham tanker – where are you? The erudite Neil Bayton replied without introduction – we're right behind you good buddy, or for those who were there, words to that effect. It earned the brigade a slap over the wrist for inappropriate radio traffic, as this is monitored widely. I always wondered about that because it was a concise and accurate transmission, the hallmarks of a good message. This has become somewhat of a motto for the brigade.

But the message from that anecdote is that you, the Shoreham community, need to know that the Shoreham Rural Fire Brigade is right behind you, supporting you in whatever way we can, whether it is in emergency response or building community through this facility and the functions it will host from time to time. Our satisfaction has, and will continue to come from service to the Shoreham community and, when needed, representing Shoreham in the wider Victorian community.

Thank you.

