

2023

Ash Wednesday Remembered **40 years on**

Surf Coast Shire Council invites community members to come together in memory and tribute 40 years on from the devastating bushfire.

Image: Regrowth, Keith Cecil family collection

Today we reflect, 40 years on from the Ash Wednesday bushfire which savaged our region.

We pause to remember the three lives tragically lost.

We consider the impact of 729 homes reduced to ruins in the silent desolation of 41,000 torched hectares.

We consider lifetimes of work gone up in flames, the selfless bravery of those who defended our communities, those who evacuated families, cared for others, helped out strangers.

And we remember the community spirit which shone from the first moments of recovery.

Ash Wednesday's horror extended across vast parts of Victoria and South Australia.

We will never be able to fully measure its social, emotional, economic and environmental impact on our region, but we do know that the way people responded in many ways shaped and defined our Surf Coast and hinterland communities.

Today, 40 years on, more than 200 people gathered in Aireys Inlet for an Ash Wednesday commemorative event, remembering what was experienced and lost on epic scale, and acknowledging all that was learnt, and the power and purpose in recovery.



Panel leads Ash Wednesday reflection



Pictured from left, moderator Jamie Mackenzie, panellists Pat Hutchinson, Sharon Rawlings, Dr Rob Gordon, Bill Bubb.

Moderator Jamie Mackenzie - Jamie has a long and recognised background in bushfire, emergency response and leadership.

Pat Hutchinson - Pat was the Aireys Inlet publican on Ash Wednesday. The pub burnt down and one of his staff lost his life after having defended his home.

Though ruined, the Aireys Pub became a focal point in community recovery. Pat's story demonstrates the importance of community connection - creating a safe space to meet, share stories and support.

Brigade captain on Ash Wednesday and has deep insight into events of the day and the regional operational response.

Sharon Rawlings - Sharon lives at Fairhaven but grew up at Pennyroyal and reflects on her Ash Wednesday experiences alongside those of her mother and sister in Deans Marsh, and the often unseen role women can play in emergencies.

Dr Rob Gordon - Disaster recovery psychologist Dr Rob helps put stories into contexts which may help people to process events or experiences.



“Then there was the clean-up, and people came from everywhere. It was like an ant heap.

“All of a sudden what had been shacks and cabins had a tap out the front, a burnt-out block and an insurance cheque and there was a massive change in the way people thought about the town.

“Lots of people did reasonably well out of the fire to some degrees. It gave them opportunities they wouldn’t have had.

“We had just been puttering along as a little town. It was just a massive defining moment.”

Tim Carroll, Aireys Inlet

Ash Wednesday Remembered **40 years on**

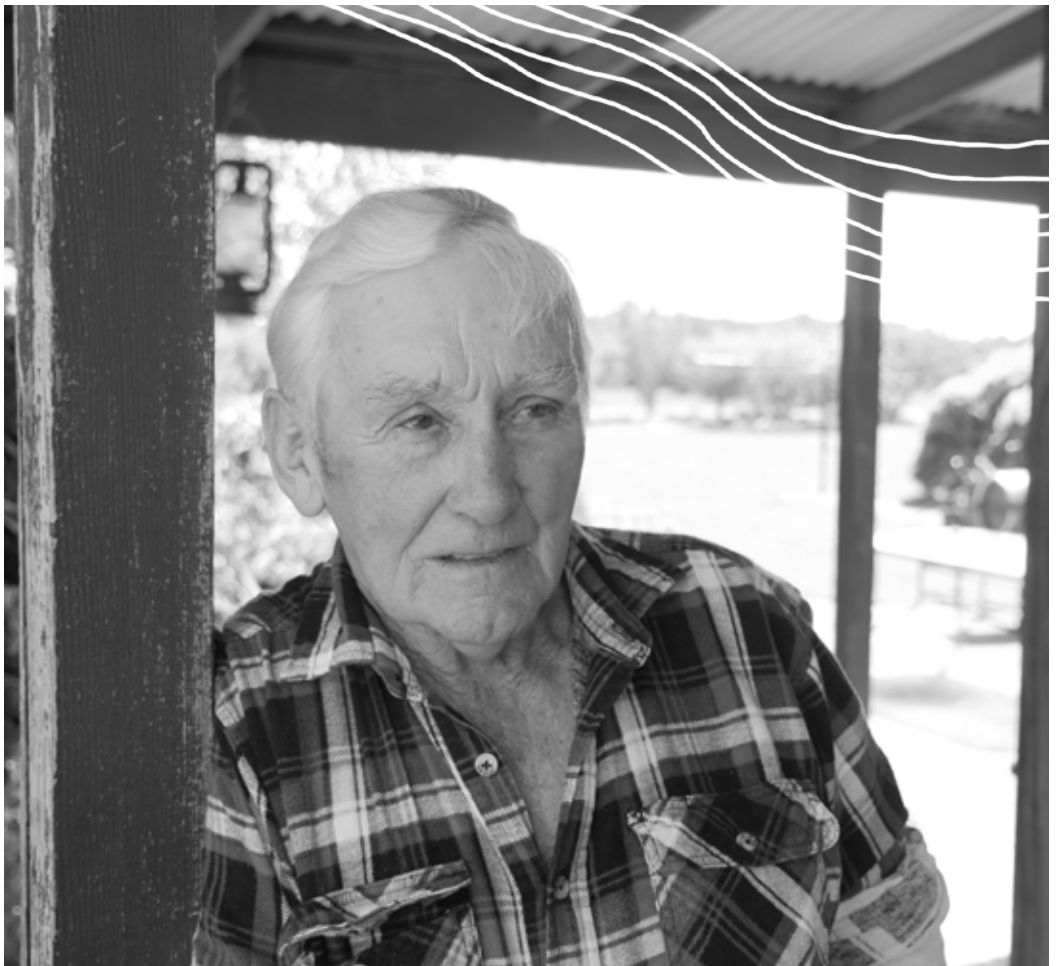


“When it came, it came that hard you were running for your life and salvaging what you could.

“The smoke started to blow, you could hear it like tanks coming up the hill and it was like a war zone with gas cyclinders going off.

“I’m telling ya, entire house roofs were flying around.”

Howard Hughes, Aireys Inlet CFA.



"I went to the double garage and just opened the sliding door and stuck my head in and as I did I saw from way back in the back of the room at least 20 feet away or more, a tongue of flame came out of the ceiling and just came straight at me at the door.

"I hope I never see anything like that again.

"I just slammed the door shut and went out to the fire trucks to tell them it was in the ceiling of the house and there was no hope."

Stan Armistead, who with wife Cheryl lost their new family home at Boonah.



“Yes you suddenly realise when there are all the little things that you’ve got to buy and there’s no money for. It changes a lot of things.

“But that money came in, and very quickly – from the church , from the Salvos, from St Laurence – all those people helped us, just helping a big family with seven young kids.

“It just took me breath away some of the things people did to help. Just amazing.”

Stan Armistead, who with wife Cheryl lost their new family home at Boonah.



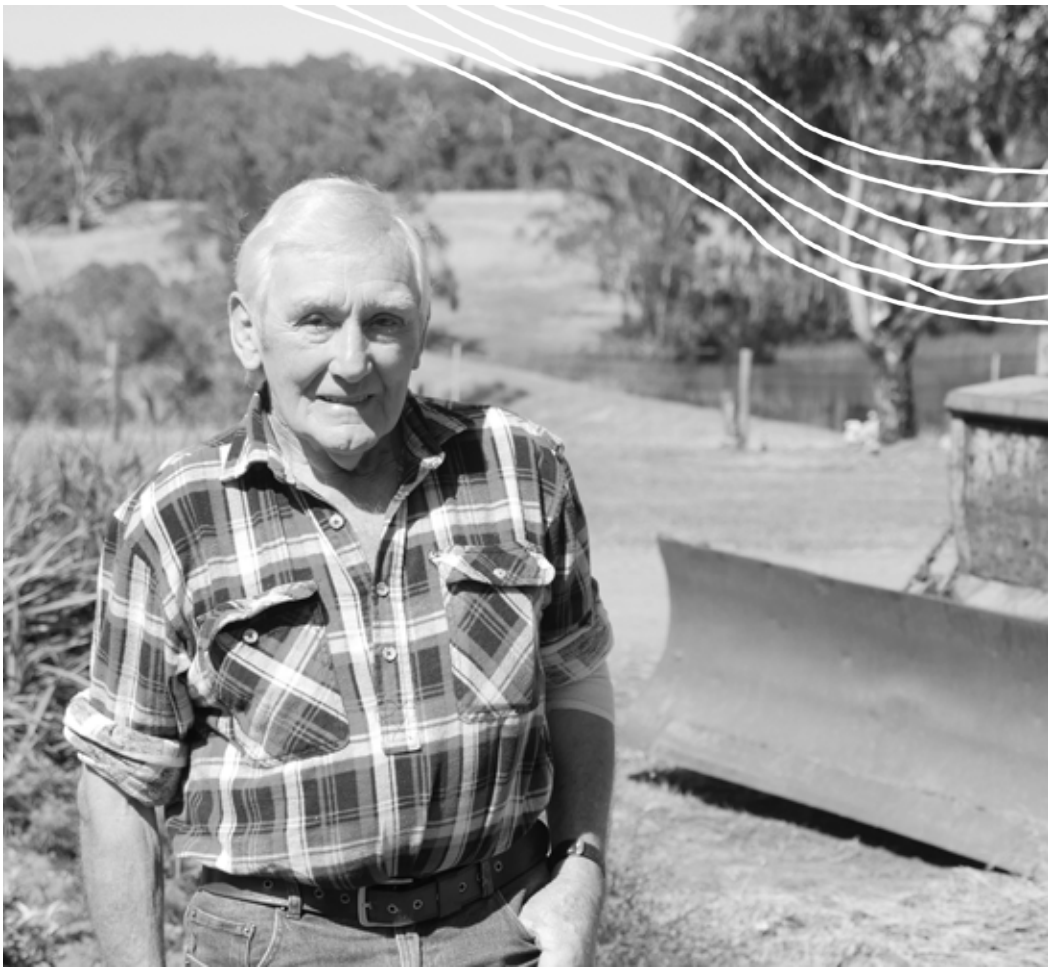
“How do I look back on it?

“I wouldn’t like to go back there.

“I reckon I aged 10 years – bang. Just like it sucked the life out of you a bit, in my health and my whole body because you had to work as well as rebuild and needed money to come in.

“Even though I was well insured, you’ve got to look after the family and live and survive.”

Howard Hughes, Aireys Inlet CFA.



“My wife Cheryl she had the big struggle because she was looking after the seven kids and I was never home. I was away working and it threw an extreme amount of pressure on her.”

Stan Armistead, who with wife Cheryl lost their new family home at Boonah.



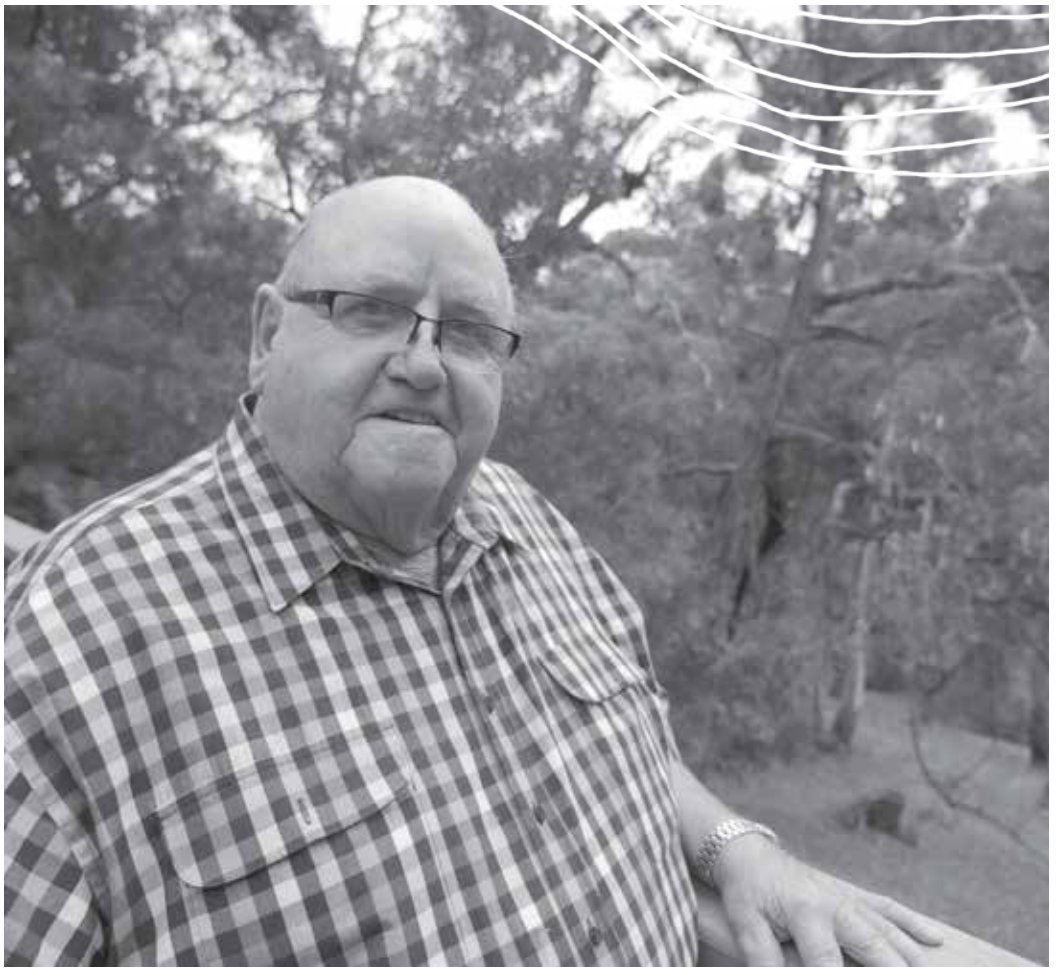
“It was like an express train. It just took everything in its path.

“There was no stopping it.

“All the tankers in the world couldn’t have stopped it.”

The late Jack Richardson, then Aireys Inlet Fire Captain speaking on Channel Seven News.

Image: Keith Cecil family collection



“I get another three or four mile up the track and I came around a corner and there’s these two great big – I’ll never forget it in my life, ever – these two great big white gum trees, and the track went between them and all I saw was this red wall and two white gum trees. It was like a painting.

“I’d driven from the sea to the fire. We didn’t really know what the story was, anything really, and this wall of fire is coming at me. A complete wall of fire.”

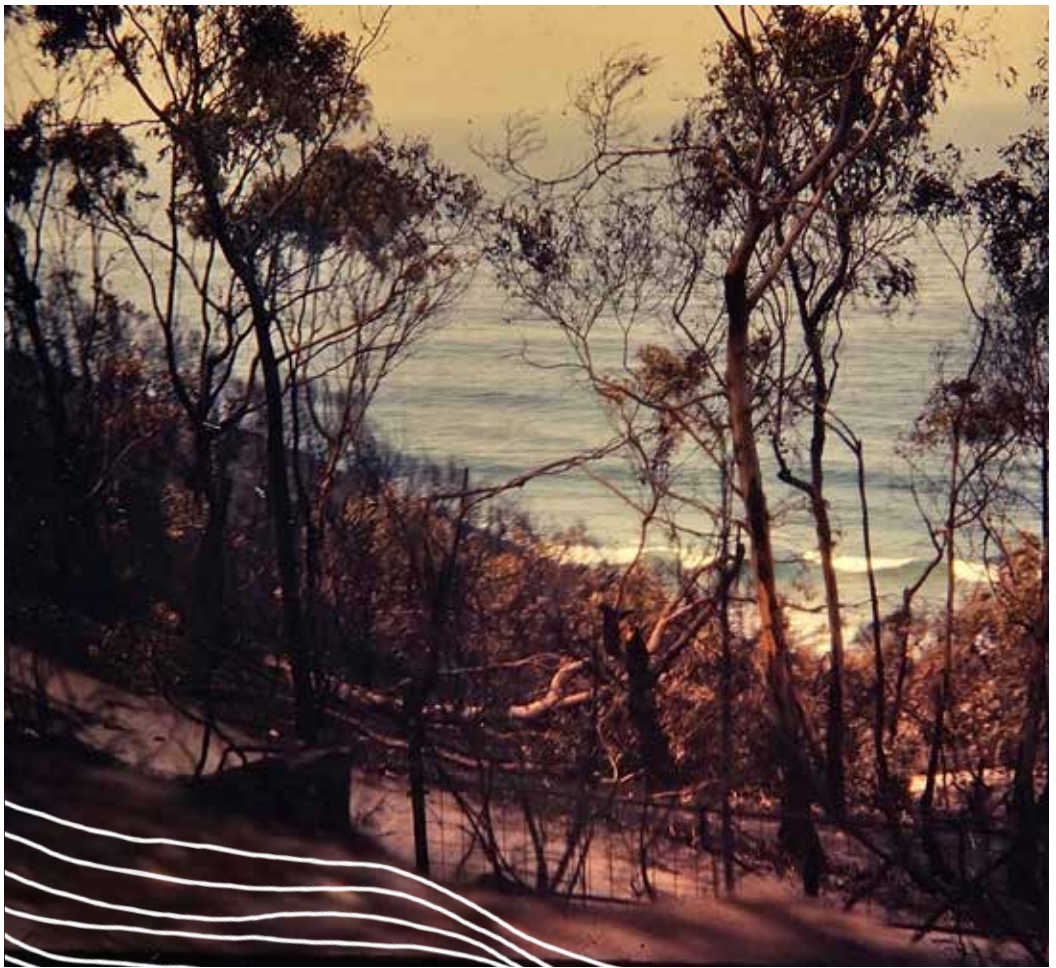
Leon ‘Tank’ Armistead, Lorne Fire Brigade, on Big Hill Track investigating early reports of a fire heading for Lorne.



“We were told by a very high-ranking CSIRO professor that we were hallucinating, that it couldn’t happen and we didn’t see roofs coming off houses. “When we looked at it later we found houses in the gullies it ripped the roofs off them, four in a row.

“Then we went down to Moggs Creek and it had pulled the ironbarks out. “Up the Painkalac on the dam there it snapped the tops off them like carrots it was that fierce a wind.”

Bill Bubbs, then Anglesea CFA captain.



“It was just red, absolutely red, raw red sky and we thought ‘oh gosh is there anything left in there?’”

The late Jenny Hughes, Aireys Inlet, in the Geelong Advertiser 2013, telling of looking back towards the Surf Coast while evacuating to Geelong.

Image: Supplied by Bernadette Lipson



“There is a reason Ash Wednesday wasn’t a human catastrophe. It was on 16 February.

If it had been on 16 January – with no mobile phones – it would have been catastrophic.”

Tim Carroll, Aireys Inlet

Image: Airey Pub, Keith Cecil family collection



“I went up to look at Noble Street and I looked over the hill at the top of my place at the back street there.

“The fire had been through and I said to myself if that’s hell I’ve seen it. It was just smouldering bits and pieces, black as ink with these bits of fire.”

John Hickford, Anglesea.



“I’m driving along and the firestorm was unbelievable, the cyclone strength it was, and Geoffrey’s in the back and says ‘Tank, a whole roof of a house just passed us!’

“The firestorm was that strong it was blowing houses apart then coming along and burning them.”

Leon ‘Tank’ Armistead, Lorne Fire Brigade.



“When daylight came it was mind-boggling to see.

“I went back into Aireys in daylight and between Aireys and Anglesea was just white. There was nothing, no leaves, no birds.

“I took my wife Robyn on a drive up to Peter’s Hill and got out of the car and stood there.

“You could feel the wind but you couldn’t hear it. No noise. Dead quiet.”

Bill Bubbs, then Anglesea CFA captain.

Image: Peters Hill fire tower, Keith Cecil family collection



No person, nothing ever in the world, could do anything to stop it when it's like that.

"You're at its mercy."

Leon 'Tank' Armistead, Lorne Fire Brigade.

Image: Keith Cecil family collection



“All of our trucks, Anglesea and Aireys, had to be resprayed. The fire picked up the road gravel and peppered them like bullets. That’s how hard the wind was going,”

Bill Bubbs, then Anglesea CFA captain.



“We’d be looking up and you could see houses exploding all over the place, and you kept thinking to yourself ‘I wonder whether that was ours, I wonder whether that was ours?’ You couldn’t quite tell because of the smoke and whatever.”

Pat Hickford, then Barrabool Shire Mayor, tells of watching the fire from Anglesea beach.



“It was just ferocious. It took quarter of an hour or 20 minutes to go to Lorne.

“You can’t believe that can you, but if you were here to see it you would believe it.

“You never forget it, and when you get a bad day that thought comes back. You just think oh my God, not again.

“I don’t like it coming from the north on a hot day.”

Sandra Dempsey, Deans Marsh.



"I got a phone call about 10 to three telling me there was a fire heading towards our place and I said yes I can see that. I just had our three year-old son with me.

"I was outside trying to get the hose to work but being the drought the house dam had dried up and there was no water.

"So he and I headed down the back to a big dam and hopped in and I sort of played games with him.

"There were trees all along the creek close to this dam and once the fire got into the trees it just took off.

"Then it hit the bush and just exploded and I thought, that's it."

Heather Smith, formerly of Deans Marsh



“Then we had the joy six months later or so when the grasstrees started flowering. Some of them had 11 spikes, they were extraordinary, and they have 360-degree flowering so that meant the insects were there night and day, and then the birds came back.”

“The bush coming back saved us I think because we could measure it and record it and rejoice in it, and when the birds gradually came back we couldn’t believe it – great survivors.”

Rachel Faggetter, Aireys Inlet

Image: Regrowth, Keith Cecil family collection



“It was an interesting and very long night of Mum sitting in the car re-drawing plans for a new house because she was convinced our house was gone – being surrounded by fire.

“We stayed there all night and then in the early hours of the morning my father convinced a friend to drive him up around the block to see if the house was still there.

“He came back and said to Mum – which I don’t know if she was happy or sad about – that the house is still there.

“But the majority of the street and the neighbours their houses were gone, so that was sad and a mixed feeling for Mum and Dad.”

Kylee Hattwell, spent the night with her family beside Anglesea River



“I can remember going out surfing with mates at Hunters down below Cinema Point and coming across like full trees just floating in the water. There was charcoal and bits of timber and things everywhere.

“That Hunters break had been good for years before the fire, but since the fire it has never worked properly.”

Mark Bean, Aireys Inlet

Image: Supplied by Bernadette Lipson



“As we came up the hill to go down into Moggs Creek I looked up across the Otways and saw the two biggest devil horns of flames.

“Never seen anything like it ... just reaching up into the sky.

“I don’t know, they might have been 100-200 metres – flames, not smoke – I knew straight away it was a big fire then.”

Chris Tutungi, returning home to Lorne from Geelong on the Great Ocean Road.



“And then you had to start the planning process. Righto, we know we want to live here, and the council and the State Government were very good at rapidly getting that happening.

“I think they pushed aside the red tape and bureaucracy a bit.

“February 16 was the day of the fire and in March the following year we were in our new home. It wasn’t quite finished but we moved in. We had no carpets or blinds and we had our first son Troy.

“We were in that house almost 13 months later.”

Chris Tutungi, returning home to Lorne from Geelong on the Great Ocean Road.

Image: Keith Cecil family collection



“The cattle lost part of their ears and the switch of their tails and they went from cherry red to a yellowy horrible colour, but they lived.

“We sold them in Colac a week or two later and when they went in to be sold, they topped the market. Not because they were the best there, but they gave us a really good price because they saw they had been through the fire.

“I thought gee that’s decent.”

Max Smith, formerly of Deans Marsh, on 14 cattle which survived in a yard while a nearby hayshed went up in flames.



“The thing it probably taught me is to make sure you’ve got a fire plan. I’m with the CFA and worked for Parks Victoria for years and you’d be amazed at how many people say they haven’t got a fire plan. Why?! That’s what I’ve drummed into my family: ‘It’s more than likely that I’m going to be on a truck and you guys are going to have to do something, so what are you going to do?’ Have a good fire plan and make sure your whole family knows what they have got to do.”

Mark Bean, Aireys Inlet

Image: Pole house, Keith Cecil family collection



“You could see the flames and the glow along the whole ridge – really frightening because you knew the power behind the inferno – and then you could see one house after another catching alight and flames coming up all over the place.

“You’d hear the crackling of one house going up after another, and then there’d be a house missed, and then another few gone.”

Doug Stirling, now 100, recalls Ash Wednesday fury at Lorne.



“It changed our lives forever. I still date everything in my life from Ash Wednesday.”

Rachel Faggetter, Aireys Inlet

Image: Keith Cecil family collection



“There were a couple of little miracles. We had a couple two doors up who had a young child and they were teachers and were in Geelong working.

“I remember watching this woman collapse in grief that they had lost everything.

“We were helping fossick through the ruins and we found a jewellery box and contents that had been saved by the waterbed bursting.”

Kylee Hattwell, Anglesea



“The smoke was so terrible that you couldn’t breathe. Two inches above the grass was fresh air so we would lay down on the lawn and breathe this fresh air just above the grass and then we’d get up and fight.

“We did that until we saved the whole thing. It was really touch and go.”

Doug Stirling, now 100, recalls having helped save his friend’s house from the flames at Lorne.

Image: Lorne, Keith Cecil family collection



“Deans Marsh Road was closed and I got a mate who had a motorbike and jumped on the back with him.

“We rode up through the bush and managed to get around a few burning trees and logs ... and we managed to get to the house – or where the house was – and that was just a pile of ash and smouldering ruins.”

Chris Tutungi, returning home to Lorne from Geelong on the Great Ocean Road.

Image: Keith Cecil family collection

AIDA – Recording memories of Ash Wednesday



Image: Keith Cecil Family Collection.

Aireys Inlet and District Association, AIDA, has launched a project to record memories of Ash Wednesday.

The bushfire destroyed much of the area from Urquhart Bluff to Eastern View, AIDA's area of activity, but there is no oral history of the experiences of people from the district who lived through the disaster. Visual imagery is scattered between households.

AIDA has been successful in securing a grant from Surf Coast Shire Council to employ a project officer to compile an oral and visual record of the environmental and social impact of the fires. A generous AIDA member has matched the grant. Project officer Alex Watkins has been appointed to interview people who lived through the

fires, either as a witness to Ash Wednesday itself, or in the lead-up or aftermath. He will also scan photographs and compile background information.

This will be accessible through AIDA's website and will be an oral and visual resource that can be added to in future years.

People who would like to participate in the project, through an interview, by providing photographs, or in some other way can contact alex@alexanderwatkins.com, phone **0408 322 459** or talk to him at today's commemorative event.

Quote from Kathleen Tierny after years of studying disasters:

"It has made me far more interested in people's own capacity for self-organising and for improvising. You come to realise that people often do best when they are not following a script or a score but when they're improvising and coming up with new riffs, and I see this tremendous creativity in disaster responses both on the part of community residents and on the part of good emergency personnel-seeing them become more flexible, seeing them break rules, seeing them use their ingenuity in the moment to help restore the community and to protect life, human life, and care for victims."

"A Paradise Built in Hell -The extraordinary communities that arise in disaster" by Rebecca Solint.

The Ash Wednesday fires occurred on the Traditional Lands of the Wadawurrung, Gulidjan and Gadubanud Peoples.

We Acknowledge them as the Traditional Owners and Protectors of this place.



Scan the QR code for more information and to view the 2013 video produced by the CFA and Council to mark 30 years since the fires.