

THE GREAT FIRE OF WOLLONGONG – 1895.

The Great Fire of Wollongong happened on Sunday evening 25th. August, 1895. The Wollongong Argus, its own premises (now the Card Shop) threatened by the fire, published an Extraordinary one-page issue for Monday, 26th. August - the normal paper was four pages for Wednesday and Saturday of each week.

The situation of the fire was in the buildings at the corner of Crown and Keira Streets, that part of the town section then known as Upper Crown Street.

This is how the Argus described the fire:—

GREAT FIRE IN WOLLONGONG

A Block in Upper Crown Street Burnt. Other places in Danger.

“The expected has happened!

Probably every one who has given the thing a thought has prophesied that the block of buildings from Mr. C. Chad's to the Old Mill building occupied by Mr. G.J. Gray, would some day or night make a conflagration. Every aspect of the block was suggestive of it. As a matter of fact fires have broken out in it, but have always been smothered before spreading. The last recorded occurred a few years ago in a refreshment shop kept by a Mrs. Welsh. On Sunday evening, just before Church time, the fate commonly voted to be inevitable came upon the block. The fire was first observed in the back premises of Mr. Alex Osborne, baker. Mr. J.A. Walker, blacksmith, noticed the flames and started an alarm movement, Mr. W.

Hart going to the fire bell. The brigade was not long in arriving, but the fire had by this time got well into the house, from which a dense column of black smoke was ascending. The hose was connected with a well at the back, but there proved to be little water in it, and ere long it became so muddy that delay was occasioned. By this time the shop had been captured by the flames and the adjoining premises were also burning.

The block is the most populous part of the town and there were much belongings to be saved from the flames. At this work numbers, including many assistants, were soon busy carrying the articles across the road. A gusty wind from the west was blowing, which, together with a lack of an adequate water supply, was a circumstance greatly in favour of the fire.

The play of water in fact, was utterly unable to arrest it. The heat and the clouds of sparks were now causing anxiety as to the other blocks. Those on the opposite side, the Royal Alfred Hotel, the Argus Office, and Mr. L. Parsons' butchers' shop were obviously in imminent danger. The higher balconies of the hotel, particularly, were noticeably near to the point of ignition. The hose was turned that way, but the points in danger were far above the reach of the stream, and only the lower storeys were accessible.

At last these higher balconies broke out in fire, and also did the wooden front above the verandah of Mr. L. Parsons' shop. At this point it seemed as though the town was about to be involved in a fire disaster on a Chicagoan scale, and a message was sent to the Metropolitan Fire Brigade, but by strenuous efforts, the ignited timbers of the balconies of the hotel were knocked out, while Senior Constable Thorncroft and others managed to douch with water the incipient flames on the butchers' premises. It was a moment of anxiety, as had the heat engendered by the burning block been sustained for but a little longer all attempts to stop the outbreak in these buildings must have failed.

The fire was now making its way rapidly through the block. The brigade connected with an underground tank at Hewlett's store and put the hose on the premises adjoining the old mill. Here the brick wall proved a stop to the fire. The building itself escaped with a scorching, and the loss of the balcony in front of Mr. W. Himus' shop, just across the lane, looked to be in some danger, and the signboard was accordingly pulled down. The clouds of flying sparks lodged in various parts of the town and set fire to buildings, but in each instance an extinguisher was applied before the flames burst out. A shed at the back of Mr. J. Caldwell's butchers' shop in Lower Crown Street was kindled, also Mr. N. Woods' (Upper Crown Street) back premises and others. What the total damage amounts to is of course a matter of merely speculation, but it is unfortunately beyond doubt that the fire has been a disastrous one.

The Great Fire of Wollongong, 1895. (continued)

Eleven householders and business people have had their stock and furniture completely destroyed and some of them have no insurance to compensate them. The list of those burnt-out (and of their insurances) is as follows:—

J. Chad	Boot and Shoe Shop	Insurance, Building and Stock £300 (\$600)
Alex Osborne	Baker's Shop	Uninsured
W. Brown	Produce	Stock £70 (\$140)
F. Bevan	Auctioneer	Uninsured. Stock in auction room burnt, Valued at £200 (\$400)
Hobson	Chinese Grocery Shop	Insured £300 (\$600)
H. Makin	Barber's Shop) All Insured
J. Pembroke	Confectionery	
J. Budge	Fruit and Wine Shop	
G. Pritchard	Pastry Cook's Shop	
L.L. Earl	Fruit Shop	
G. Commens	Coach Factory	Insurance, Building and Stock £500 (\$1000)

On the buildings the insurances are:—

Graham Estate	Mill	£900 (\$1800)
Pembroke's	Shop	£550 (\$1100)
L.L. Earl	Shop	£300 (\$600)
G. Pritchard	Shop	£300 (\$600)
G.W. Commens	Three premises	- £300 (\$600) each.
Vogan Estate	Two Shops	- Uninsured so far is known.

Volunteers rendered good assistance in taking out articles from the burning houses etc., but it has also to be reported that in this moment of disaster there were those who did not scruple to steal from the little heaps of savings, which in some cases constituted nearly all that was left to people whose homes were burning.

Mr. J. Budge, for instance, put out a considerable quantity of wine, but it would have been more satisfactory for him to have left it to the flames, as it was almost all stolen. The Chinese shopman would not have his goods removed, saying "all insuree".

In the way of accidents the most serious befel Mr. M. Lahiff, who fell into a tank at the back of the block. He was rescued promptly, but in a semi-drowned condition. Mr. J. Clark of the railway service made good use of his ambulance instruction in restoring the sufferer, who was afterwards taken care of by Dr. Wade

The Mayor, Mr. J.A. Beatson, mindful of the sufferers by this disaster, this morning initiated a subscription movement. A public meeting in this movement will be held to-morrow (Tuesday, 27th. August) in the Council Chamber. The necessities of the case are pressing it should be understood.

(to be continued)

INQUEST

An inquiry into the fire was held in the Royal Alfred Hotel on Friday, 30 August, before Mr. C. Cameron, J.P., of Kiama, and a jury of 12. The main witnesses who gave evidence were —

Alexander McFarlane, Baker, Employed by Mr. A. Osborne.

Emanuel Benjamin, Assistant to McFarlane.

Angelina Osborne, Wife of Alex. Osborne.

Alex Osborne.

James Millen, Junior, Fire adjuster and valuator, representing several insurance companies gave evidence of insurance valuations

It was stated that the fire was first observed in the back premises, and then going well into the house, occupied by the Osbornes and in her evidence Mrs. Osborne describes the building — "The place was built of wood, there being four rooms upstairs and three downstairs, the walls and ceilings were lined with calico and papered the chimneys were of brick and one went through the room which caught fire first. There was a calico lining across the fireplace in this room. They had a big fire on in the kitchen on Sunday morning, but only a small one in the evening."

Alex Osborne, Baker, deposited that he left the house soon after 6 p.m. that evening, first going upstairs for his hat, at which time there was no sign of fire. He was standing under Gray's mill verandah when he heard the alarm and he rushed up to the house and tried to get in at the balcony door, but the flames and smoke were too dense.

The jury without hesitation returned an open verdict. (Apparently the buildings were shops and living quarters above — as some of the older brick ones are to-day — and with calico lining and paper tis no wonder they burnt to the ground once the fire got a hold).

The personal property of A. McFarlane was destroyed, a box of personal belongings was saved by E. Benjamin. The Osbornes were only able to save some valuables in a drawer, a few chairs and tables. Both McFarlane and Benjamin admitted to being smokers but did not smoke on that day.

FIRE RELIEF FUND

The Public Meeting held on Tuesday 27th August organised a collection movement. Mr. J. A. Beatson (Mayor) appointed secretary and treasurer. The net proceeds from a Concert in the Town Hall, Bank Recital in Market Square, Subscription Lists (from Bulli to Albion Park) and Donations amounted to £128.10.0 (\$257.00) and distributed to the fire victims in varying amounts of £32.0.0 (\$64.00) down to £2.0.0. (\$4.00). (The Census of 1891 gives the Wollongong Borough to be 1920 acres: 675 dwellings; population 3050. Value of municipal buildings £9000 (\$18.000).

FIRE BRIGADE AND EQUIPMENT

The Fire Station was a tin shed at the corner of Church and Market Streets. Equipment could be an appliance called a Manual Fire Engine, which would be a bucket and plunger type of pump, operated by long handles and mounted on a two or four wheel cart, probably hauled by men or horses. In charge was Captain Parsons (he had a lovely bushy beard), grandfather of Mr. H.A. Parsons, manufacturer of venetian blinds. Volunteer firemen. (The Australian Mutual Fire Office donated £10.0.0 (\$20.00) to the Fire Brigade men).

PHOTOS

Originals taken by C. Weber. Copies at the Wollongong Public Library (Reference Section). One photo shows the brick chimneys and fireplaces left standing in amongst the ashes, burnt and charred remains, brick rubble and galvanised iron; another shows Capt. Parsons, standing foremost in a group of three, looking at the ruins, and a third gives an excellent view of the opposite side of Crown Street from the Royal Alfred Hotel (with its wrought iron balconies) down to the old Presbyterian Church.

WATER SUPPLY 1895

After substantial rainfall in January and February, very poor falls were recorded until September. Relatively dry months before August produced a dangerous fire situation in the area for the month of August and after. Many bush and local fires occurred destroying bushland, scrub, farm and private property. The tragedy of Sherbrooke — and everywhere the lack of water. Prayers for rain at Special Church Services. Very light rains, snow (even at Forbes!) and westerly winds. Commencement of eight years drought conditions to 1903. Wollongong's water supply at that time was the lagoon at Lang Park (South Beach) tanks and wells and it was said "That in some of the streets the stench was fit to cause a fever and there was no way of stopping it without a water supply." (Alderman Cochrane).

JOAN ROWAN