

# THE MOUNTS

Community newsletter of Mt Wilson and Mt Irvine  
2019-2020 Special Fire Edition Part One

## FROM THE EDITORS

Since the Gospers Mountain fire was ignited by lightning on 26 October 2019 the communities of the mounts have been at varying levels of standby and action. This was heightened as days of hot weather commenced in early December.

In the afternoon of October 26, an unseasonably warm Saturday following a run of hot days, the wind picked up over the Blue Mountains and lightning stabbed at the ranges. One bolt made ground near a disused airstrip at Gospers Mountain, a densely grown area of the Wollemi National Park, and prickled the kindling into life. It would become the epicentre of the biggest forest fire to have started from a single ignition point that Australia has ever known.

Harriet Alexander and Nick Moir  
Sydney Morning Herald 20 December 2019

accessed 26 January 2020, <https://www.smh.com.au/national/nsw/the-monster-a-short-history-of-australia-s-biggest-forest-fire-20191218-p53l4y.html>

As of 26 January 2020, the Gospers Mountain and Grose Valley fires have burnt a total of 532,547 hectares.

This special edition of The Mounts captures the experiences of a range of community members from Mt Wilson and Mt Irvine. Our thanks to all those who sent in photos and/or written recollections – Alex Halliday, Anne de Salis, Barbara Harry, Bruce Kerridge, David Howell, Deb Griffin, Elizabeth Montano, Graham Tribe, Helen Freeman, Joe Montano, Katherine Montano, Lesley Wilson, Matilda Halliday, Nancy Fox, Peter Raines, Rosemary Walsh, Sarah Howell, Stephen List, Steve Woolfenden, Susie Hope, Ted Griffin, Tom Greenwood and Tom Riddell.

Please note that there are **six parts** to this newsletter so that we could include as much as possible but not have the files be too large. The page numbers continue from one part to the next.

# **A JOURNEY WITH THE GOSPERS MOUNTAIN FIRE – NOVEMBER - DECEMBER 2019 TEXT AND IMAGES BRUCE KERRIDGE, IRVINEHOLME, MT IRVINE**

If there is any one thing that characterised the Gospers Mountain Fire, it is that the fire had a personality. It was correctly renamed 'Monster Fire' after being earlier branded a 'Megafire', and it played with us, teasing us in a war of attrition or a blinking game. It never tired but waited for us to lower our guard, encouraging or entrapping us to make a wrong decision upon which it was determined to strike hard. It hated us, and we hated it. It was a monster, causing continual change of reality over a lengthy and tortuous duration and reminded me of John Wyndham's novel, *The Day of the Triffids*.

We first heard about the fire on 1 November 2019, only a few days after its initial ignition by dry lightning on 26 October, and initially thought it was too far away to represent a threat, that it was surely going to be contained quickly, and wouldn't reach us. However, our confidence was sobered by three thoughts: first, the speed at which the 2013 State Mine Fire had travelled from Lithgow to strike Irvineholme in one afternoon; second the Gospers Mountain fire was already running very quickly and out of control; and third the many other very large fires in NSW were all competing for scarce resources in a season that Beth Raines had warned us over the past year could be a nasty one.

By early November the Gospers Mountain fire alone had already burnt a greater area than all the fires that had burnt in California in the past year, and the management of the Australian fires had already been discussed in a strong and critical commentary in the *New York Times*.

While we had felt that we already had our property 'fire ready', the changing reality created a sense of urgency and our preparation standards had to shift from 'reasonably acceptable' to 'uncompromising'. So we commenced making Irvineholme 'fully fire-ready for a full frontal attack' in the first week of November, on the guiding principle of hope for the best, but prepare for the worst. Preparation continued unabated throughout November and December and it was a heuristic process: whenever we thought we had everything in place, we would find something else that needed attention. We couldn't relax.

We were assisted throughout by advice from the Brigade, and the unswerving dedication by other residents, in particular Allen Hyde and his family. In early November Allen used his tractor to slash our grazing paddocks and create a defensive barrier after we moved the cattle out of the way. Allen worked every single day throughout November and December on tasks large and small, in particular guiding the upgrading of the fire trails around Mt Irvine and putting in additional trails around the northern end of the mountain. Allen and his entire family were unstoppable, operating as a team of guardians of the Mt Irvine community, checking every property, every vulnerability, and every resource.



New Trails at North End of Mount Irvine

Waiting for the fire to strike was a bit of a Sword of Damocles experience. After our last experience in 2013 it was almost as if we were waiting for Armageddon. That we were located right at the northern end of Mt Irvine, and closest to the fire, created a sense that we were the canary in the coal-mine.

The various briefings by the Brigade throughout process left no room for doubt: it was not a matter of if but when. The quality of organisation by the Brigade was extraordinary and demonstrated in the Brigade advice of 16 November, the Brigade meetings of 23 November, and the whole of community briefing meeting of 1 December. And despite our paddocks and garden having been thoroughly burnt in October 2013, we remained vulnerable as the weather had been so dry that there was no moisture in the ground and there remained a significant amount of potential fuel.

The fire, even at times when it was well away from us, was cruel and was subjecting us to slow torture, whether through the smoke in the day, the glow in the night, or the updates on the RFS map.



Smoke from Mount Irvine, 1 December 2019

Throughout early December as the fire crept slowly south we observed the backburn put into place between Mountain Lagoon and Bilpin and the commencement of the burn around Mt Tootie. How we looked forward to a 'moat' around Mt Irvine to help protect us!

The announcement on Friday 13 December (Black Friday) that the Brigade was commencing the burns around the Mounts gave us hope: but how tragic that weekend turned out, and it highlighted the gravity of the situation for the entire community. And it was not confined to Mt Wilson: on that same weekend of tragedy in Mt Wilson, the fires attacked the south end of Mt Irvine, with the Scrivener Pass and Touri areas taking a heck of a beating and fires lying in wait in Bowens Creek and in the Wollongambie. As the week wore on, fires to our south in the Tomah/Berambing region reminded us that it was circling our wagons waiting to attack after wearing us down.





Scrivener Pass



Fire at Berambing / Mt Tomah From Irvineholme, Midnight, 17 December



Despite the setbacks of the previous weekend, the Brigade remained committed.



Mount Wilson/Mount Irvine Crew Patrolling Danes Way



Mount Wilson/Mount Irvine Crew Backburning At Mount Irvine

We were concerned that we might be attacked from fires burning to our east, in Bowens Creek, and on 19 December it looked like our worst dreams might come true. We were relieved when a couple of trucks from other Brigades arrived in front paddock and laid out their lines ready for the impending onslaught. One of the crews,



from Freeman's Reach, told us they knew Irvineholme well: they had been part of the team which had saved the house in 2013 when our garden paddock was ablaze as the State Mine Fire passed through our property. We welcomed them back as frequent flyers. However, the fire was cruelly teasing us: after putting up a huge amount of smoke in our direction, it settled down and lay in wait.

The hot westerlies of Saturday 21 December meant our attention (and our pump and hoses) were redirected due to a vulnerability from the western side. And it happened. Shortly after midday on the Saturday, my cousin Geoff Naylor (Booralee) reported seeing fires along our western fence line between Irvineholme and Yurunga. My brother Ian and I, together with Peter Dougan (Bungleboorie) went up into our top (bush) paddock and attempted to smother the fires with loose soil but to no avail, and we retreated back to Irvineholme, Geoff having informed the Brigade. The smoke was growing and heading straight over our home, telling us we were facing a front, not a flank, and when we saw the number of large trees ablaze in our paddock I recall the prescient words of Geoff: 'Well this changes everything. Time to get moving and try anything'.

It wasn't just the sight of these flames appearing seemingly at random that had us on edge, but also the sound of large trees crashing to the ground.

Our hoses were charged and we prayed for the forecast southerly change to arrive to assist the Brigade crews who had by now arrived and stationed themselves in our grazing paddock between the house and the top paddock, and had entered the top paddock which by then was well and truly ablaze.

There was a light-hearted moment despite the traumatic situation: at one stage Geoff rolled out his vintage Studebaker fire truck branded Darwin Fire Brigade as a gesture similar to the raising of the kilts in the movie *Gladiator*. The levity created helped give us all great confidence.



Darwin Fire Brigade At Irvineholme

When the forecast southerly arrived at about 7pm on Saturday to our great relief, the crews put on an impressive display, driving the fire in a northerly direction assisted by the wind change so that it roared through our paddock but safely clear of both Irvineholme and Booralee, and north towards the already burnt fire ground of the Gaspers Mountain fire. It was a very long night: I recall that at about 3am the flames in the top paddock seemed to be reaching near to the top of 30 metre trees but only about 100 metres from the house. It was a somewhat surreal experience and it took until dawn before we could be confident the fire had moved through, and out of our way.







Top Paddock Irvineholme, 3am 22 December (Taken From The House) (This page and previous)

We spent that Sunday morning reflecting on our good fortune and for the efforts of the Brigade and the community, and I was able to call my family and reassure them that we were relatively safe from the monster and I should be able to return to Sydney for Christmas.

Irvineholme was built by my grandfather (Harold Morley) in 1897 as the very first house on Mt Irvine, and it has survived every fire of the last 122 years.





Top Paddock Irvineholme Before and After the Fire



From the point of view of my Street Coordination responsibilities, I was most impressed by the demeanour of the residents of Mt Irvine throughout, but in particular during the week commencing 17 December when there was significant activity on Mt Irvine involving both operational units and support services such as catering at Mt Irvine Hall. While we have only one road in and out and were under siege, the community displayed a great sense of unity, empathy and cooperation in a common purpose – and, at times, great humour.

And while driving around Mt Irvine to check the other properties on the morning of Christmas Eve I heard, on the car radio, the Cat Stephens version of the song 'Morning Has Broken'.

**7 NOVEMBER 2019**



Peter Raines

**16 NOVEMBER 2019**

It is now a matter of when, not if the fire reaches Mt Wilson and Mt Irvine and if it is the flank that is steadily moving towards us or if it takes a run from the back end at us. It has now crossed the Wolgan River downstream of Newnes and also the Colo near Wollemi Creek. It could be as soon as the later part of next week but most likely about 1 1/2 to 2 weeks away. We are likely to be fire fighting, pretty much till Christmas.

Peter Raines, Community Email

**21 NOVEMBER 2019**

Despite an increase in smoke in Mount Irvine and Mount Wilson, MWMIRFB Deputy Captain Peter Raines advises the current bushfire is not expected to affect our communities for one to two weeks.

On Sunday 1st December starting at 9.00am there will be a community briefing in the Village Hall for all residents who are able to attend.

Richard Beattie, Community Email



1 DECEMBER 2019



Ted Griffin (this page and following page)







**3-7 DECEMBER 2019**



Peter Raines (this page)





From Mt Tomah, Ted Griffin



Peter Raines





Peter Raines

Our mission over the coming weeks is to...prepare the local fire trail network so it is ready, should it be needed, to defend Mt Wilson and Mt Irvine or to back burn off it should the situation arise.

Peter Raines, Community Email, 27 November





Alex Halliday (this page)





Alex Halliday



Katherine Montano



**7 DECEMBER 2019**

The fire trail preparation works

A dozer, grader and excavator continue to work on fire trails at Mount Irvine

Peter Raines, Community Newsletter, 6 December



Peter Raines



8 DECEMBER 2019





We will see an increase in large, heavy road-making and other equipment operating near the start of fire trails and village halls.

Peter Raines, Community Email, 27 November



Peter Raines (this page and previous page)





At Mountain Lagoon, Ted Griffith (this page and following page)









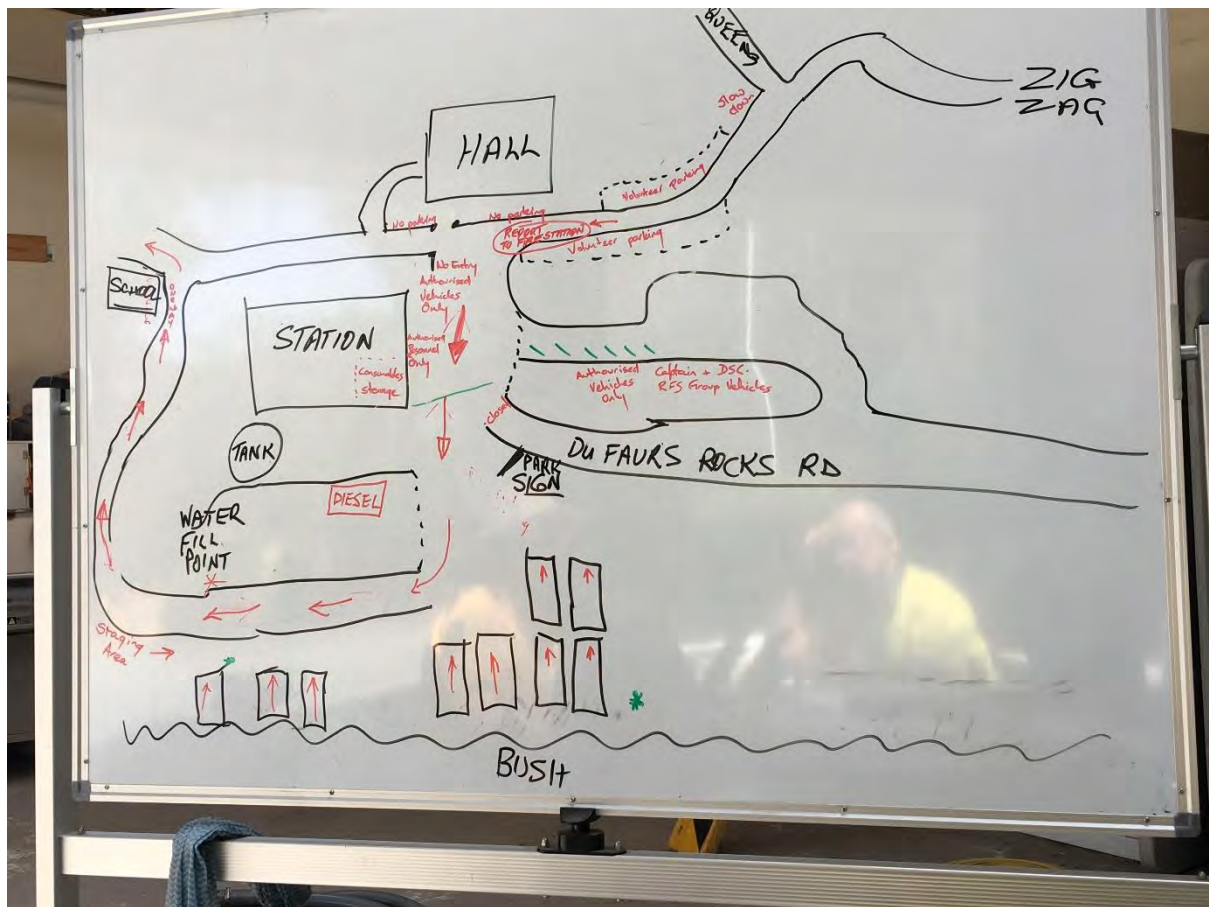
The Cat 1 crew (left to right – Stephen List, Julian Ludowici (hidden), Tom Riddell, Steve Woolfenden, Beth Raines, Peter Raines (Penny Ewing and Ted Griffin out of photo)) at a cliff edge on Bowens Creek Road on 12th December enjoying a laugh. The Cat 1 was tasked with setting up the buoy wall on Bowens Creek Road to supply water for the planned back-burn off a very steep hand tool line running from the road down to the creek. The main supply line from the buoy wall comprised eight lengths of 38mm hose. Within the line were four breaches supplying four 25mm lines (some with pressure reduction valves) and nozzles.

When we stopped at a cliff edge to survey the scene, Beth was asked if we were going to roll out the hoses over the cliff. 'Sure' said Beth who gave a quick dummy hose rollout with her arms. 'Really?' said the crew, Beth replied 'Just joking'.

Ted Griffin (text and image)



10-13 DECEMBER 2019



Planning stage, 10 December, Sarah Howell





On the Five Mile, 10 December, Peter Raines





Wynnes Rocks Road, 10 December, David Howell



Turn off to Farrer Road West, 11 December, Peter Raines, see post fire image on page 136 in part five





Planning trail preparation, 11 December, Sarah Howell



Steve Woolfenden, 11 December, Peter Raines





Bowen's Creek hand tool line and buoy wall, 12 December, Ted Griffin (above and below)  
 See also image on page 162 in part five showing the same buoy post fire







13 December, David Howell

**The 2019-2020 Special Fire Edition of The Mounts continues in Part Two.**