

Update on Colebrook, Tasmania

Southern Tasmania has a much milder climate than we do, and their vegetation, at least in the low country and valleys tend to consist of very few trees and lots of grass. It looks like, and is, sheep country. In 1967 Tasmania was hit by a drought, which was accompanied by a series of wild fires that caused unbelievable damage and suffering. Wildfires nearly wiped Colebrook off the map, and what was saved took heroic efforts on the part of the inhabitants. Lynette Munnings sent us a news clipping from the Launceston, Tasmania newspaper (Launceston, in the north, is the island state's second largest city, after the capitol, Hobart) dated February 9, 1967, describing the situation.

“Colebrook’s Day of Terror by Michael Courtney.

I drove to and through Colebrook yesterday, a drive through a valley shockingly shadowed with death and destruction; a black valley with a black future.

Not only is the township destroyed as a viable community, but the district for miles around is black as if a giant had painted the district with pitch. And black is the future for the dozens of once-prosperous farmers.

An enormous area of Colebrook, Campania, Richmond and Orielson has been wiped off the economic map. To see it at first hand is heartbreaking.

Sheep and cattle by the thousands, maybe tens of thousands, perished in the galloping flames that bored in from so many fronts and so swiftly that man and beast were bewildered.

Believe me, there are farms there without a blade of grass, a sound fence, an unharmed beast, or a piece of usable equipment.

As we wound through the black hills of Colebrook, we saw clusters of dead and dying sheep. Even the live sheep that we saw were scorched as black as the paddocks. If the fires lie low again today, men with rifles will tour the paddocks putting them out of their agony.

Mr. R. Nutting of Campania told me wearily: ‘A frightening percentage of the farming community have lost everything but their homes. The hay reserves, the best we’ve had for years, are gone. The stock left alive may starve.’

Colebrook township was gutted and crushed by the fire that roared through on two fronts on Tuesday afternoon.

The two stores, the bakery, the post office, the railway station, the hotel, the school, the only service station, the school bus are no more. The town’s heart was ripped out in 30 awful minutes.

Colebrook is working on an ‘artificial heart’ – the community hall. There I found the women of the town feeding and clothing those in need. Food and clothing poured in on army trucks, Red Cross and Salvation Army vehicles and private trucks and cars from as far away as northwest Tasmania. Risdon gaol [jail] provided a ton of bread.

Railway man Mr. Bob Sweet, father of four, had to call on another railway man to help him rescue his three youngest children from his house. He was able to save only a few babies’ napkins and an armful of children’s clothes. His parents were burnt out of their home in Bridgewater the same day.

I talked to Terry Chilcott, a bulldozer contractor. Like so many of the men, he was wryly cheerful about the horror the day before. He picked up a tangle of wire and

said ‘look at my new \$240 lounge suite. Lovely! But I’m alive, mate, and I’ve got the ‘dozer.’

Constable D. Butcher said yesterday that all fires were under control, but another 50 mph wind, and century temperatures would carry the threat on to Tunnack, Rhyndaston, Orford and surrounding townships”. [He’s describing an area of at least 150 square miles.] I left Colebrook at 5pm. There were no men in town. They had gone to fight a fire on the Yarlington Road”.

Lynette adds: “I had left school 3 years previously and was working in Hobart. [About 35 miles due south of Colebrook.] I had enlisted with the Civilian Military Forces part time and was on a training camp in Brighton on the day of the fires that covered most of southern Tasmania. I obtained 2 extra weeks leave from work and stayed at the camp where we took in people who had lost their homes and also worked on donations of clothing, blankets, etc. to be sorted and distributed. I didn’t know too much about what was happening at home because the phone lines were down. My parents’ farm was 6 miles north of Colebrook and the fire actually stopped at our boundary fence. My husband’s family home was burnt down, but he was only a friend at the time”.

In another letter, Lynette was telling about the two churches in Colebrook, Saint Patrick’s Catholic and St. James Anglican, and mentions that on Black Tuesday, as she calls the day of the fires, many residents of Colebrook sought shelter alongside Saint Patrick’s in a plowed paddock that had hastily been created as a barrier to the advancing flames.

There is an interesting aside to the church issue. Lynette has given detailed histories of almost all of the important buildings in the town, which of course includes both churches. She mentions that a famous British architect, Augustus W. Pugin, designed the building, completed in 1854. That information, if you are into architecture, is all well and good, but normally I wouldn’t make it part of this series. However, there is an interesting twist to the story. Recently Dominick and Eleanor Russo paid a visit to England, and one of the places they visited was the town of Colnbrook, where they were received with open arms. One of the items they brought back was a small pamphlet about St. Thomas’ Church in Colnbrook, and on the back cover is information concerning the architect who designed it – Augustus Welby Pugin. The text reads: “During the 1840s Pugin worked in Australia designing churches, cathedrals and other important buildings. From photographs and plans of some of the churches Pugin designed in Australia, it is clear that St. Thomas’ Church is remarkably similar to three Tasmanian churches – St Michael’s, Campbell Town, St Michael’s, Oatlands, and St. Patrick’s, Colebrook. All these churches were built between 1842 and 1849”.

How’s that for a coincidence! What must the chances be for a connection between Colebrook, Connecticut, Colebrook, Tasmania and Colnbrook, England?