

# 29 DECEMBER 2009 TOODYAY BUSHFIRE PROJECT REPORT

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2009 Toodyay Bushfire Projects Group  
Toodyay Historical Society Inc, Western Australia**



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*Cover photo by Alison Cromb. Bushland regeneration at Lloyds Hill, 2011.*

## Foreword

The devastating fire of 29 December 2009 impacted severely on the entire community of Toodyay and aroused awareness throughout the state and beyond. The extent to which organisations, individuals and communities responded with compassion and practical assistance was astonishing. Emergency measures sprang into action with commendable speed testifying to preparedness of which many in the community only became aware of when demonstrated.

The immediacy of the event left little time for reflection, but later it became apparent that this event, one of the most significant in Toodyay's history, should not be forgotten. It should not become the subject of folklore with little regard to the accuracy of what occurred, who was affected and who coordinated and provided the massive relief effort.

However it was not only for the accuracy of records, but also because a thorough report of Toodyay's experience was seen to be a useful tool for future planning of disaster management and relief effort. It was considered particularly valuable as bushfires have become more frequent and severe recently, and communities everywhere are giving increased attention to the effects of climate change.

The Toodyay Bushfire Projects Group, representative of interested individuals and community organisations, working under the auspices of the Toodyay Historical Society (Inc.), took some time to determine just what initiatives commemorating the fire could be of most lasting benefit. Community consultation via public meetings resulted in this project being seen as a high priority and a sound foundation for any further initiatives. Opportunities to share the experience of the fire, to learn from it, and to work to manage our changing environment should be on-going and could take the form, for example, of public art, performance, interpretive displays or an exhibition.

Historian, Toodyay resident and active community volunteer Dr Robyn Taylor is to be congratulated on the quality of this report. It has been made possible through her extensive community network and finely honed skills in historical investigation and writing. She has been able to recognise and draw into the report the contributions of many individuals and organizations. These individuals range from those coordinating the response to those affected and includes many individuals who contributed to the relief effort.

All involved in the Toodyay Bushfire Projects thank Lotterywest and Grant Woodhams MLA for their interest and financial support making this report possible.

Dr Brian Shepherd  
2009 Toodyay Bushfire Projects Group  
January 2014

## **Acknowledgements**

**Lotterywest** for its support and funding that enabled this project to be undertaken.

**Toodyay Historical Society Inc** for providing the necessary organisational support that enabled the Toodyay Bushfire Projects Group to apply for funding.

**Grant Woodhams MLA**, former member for Moore and advocate for the Mid West and Wheatbelt communities, for his participation and generous donation towards the work of the Toodyay Bushfire Projects Group.

**Hon Judi Moylan MP**, former member for Pearce who worked behind the scenes to assist those in need during the recovery process. She is also fondly remembered for her involvement as a volunteer.

**Shire of Toodyay** has been supportive of this project from the beginning and allowed access to non-confidential records relating to the bushfire and recovery process.

**Doug Ayres and Mary Mcfarlan**, History Development Pty Ltd for undertaking the transcriptions of the oral history interviews and their final production onto archival CDs. Doug and Mary were most generous with their time, and as someone with limited experience of oral history recording, I am indebted to Doug for his wisdom and advice. This was a large undertaking and Doug and Mary's dedication and goodwill towards the project is gratefully acknowledged.

**Special thanks** to all those who supported this project and generously donated copies of their records.

## Introduction

This project encompasses an extraordinary collection of records about the 29 December 2009 Toodyay bushfire and the months of recovery that followed. Advancements in technology, especially social media such as Facebook, and digital photography, enabled many people to record what they saw and experienced on the day and over the following weeks and months as Toodyay recovered. Photographic images have been generously donated, and together with the extensive media coverage and other documents, a treasure trove of material is now available as a resource for future initiatives.<sup>1</sup>

This resource of records includes photography, media coverage, official reports, photos of mementoes from fire-affected properties and art works. Some records are in hard copy while others have been downloaded onto thumb-drives or burnt onto CDs or DVDs. Oral histories were an important part of the project,<sup>2</sup> and while these were undertaken well after the event, it was indeed fortunate that only a short time after the fire a professional film-maker took the initiative to record several people who had been affected. Copies of his production, a long and short version, are part of this record.<sup>3</sup>

It was agreed two copies of the material would be made, one to be lodged with the Toodyay Historical Society and the other with the Shire of Toodyay's Old Gaol Museum. This would enable greater accessibility to the material by researchers and the public. It was suggested a copy of this report could be added to 'Our Page In History' website, and additional copies of the oral histories and transcripts lodged with the J.S. Battye Library of West Australian History. Other administrative records resulting from the project, such as copyright permission forms, will be lodged with the Toodyay Historical Society.

The response to the bushfire in Toodyay was massive and overwhelming. It took everyone in the community by surprise.<sup>4</sup> The infrastructure support during the fire fighting was huge and the media coverage was world-wide. Donations of money and gifts came from across Australia, while WA businesses donated truck-loads of food and goods. In WA there were many fund-raising events ranging from the Lord Mayor's Disaster Relief Fund, to rock concerts and dedicated sports events. All these aspects of the bushfire and recovery process had to be managed. Information about the fire and recovery can be found in the extensive media coverage that has been collated into several large format display books. Of particular value is the special insert 'Out of the Ashes' produced for the February 2010 edition of the *Toodyay*

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<sup>1</sup> An electronic record of the 'Toodyay December Bushfire' Facebook site is held by Sam Connor.

<sup>2</sup> Eleven oral histories were undertaken. Because of the nature of this project the interviews were conducted as conversations about people's experiences of the bushfire and recovery.

<sup>3</sup> 'Out of the Ashes: A collection of stories'. Dedicated to the people of Toodyay. Produced by Gerald Ashcroft. Copyright Stories to be told 2010. With selecting interviewees Gerald was assisted by Sam Connor, editor of the *Toodyay Herald* at the time.

<sup>4</sup> In hindsight, it could be surmised the horrific bushfires that took place in Victoria earlier in the year created a sense of horror with people feeling compelled to help in any way they could.

*Herald*. These media volumes provide a wealth of contextual information for the oral histories and other collected materials.

The bushfire destroyed 38 homes. Seventy or more were severely damaged, and another 100 homes suffered some degree of damage.<sup>5</sup> Sheds and other structures were also lost or affected by the fire that burnt nearly 3000 hectares of land. At the time it was viewed as the most damaging fire in the state's history. Unfortunately this claim was soon eclipsed by subsequent bushfires at Roleystone-Kelmscott in February 2011 when 64 houses were lost, and Margaret River in November of that same year with the loss of 39 properties. While this report was being finalised, a bushfire swept through the Perth Hills suburbs of Parkerville, Stoneville and Mt Helena on Sunday 12 January 2014. By the following day 46 houses and two sheds had been confirmed as lost while 30% of the area had still to be assessed. The total number of lost homes now numbers 55.<sup>6</sup> Since the Black Saturday Victorian bushfire in February 2009 'Catastrophic' level weather alerts are now given in Australia when extreme temperatures and winds are forecasted. With each catastrophic bushfire where whole communities are affected lessons are being learnt, issues raised and improvements made in the management of the disaster.



Poster for the 'Hope from Ashes' concert, Saturday 30 January 2010.  
Organised by Toodyay resident Heather Ham.

## About Toodyay

Toodyay is a small rural community within the Shire of Toodyay with an estimated population of around 4,600. Situated 85 km northeast of Perth, the town is nestled within the Avon River Valley and surrounded by considerable natural beauty with hills, woodlands, nature reserves, hobby farms and farming properties. Wildflowers abound during late winter and spring.

<sup>5</sup> 'Recovery', power-point presentation to FESA by Charlie Wroth, Local Recovery Coordinator (undated. August 2010).

<sup>6</sup> Perth Hills bushfire, updated information Friday 17 January 2014.

Historically the district was opened up for farming in the mid-1830s making it one of the first inland settlements in the state. Old farming properties and homesteads can be seen along the country roads including the historic 1870s Coorinja winery on the Toodyay Road, which fortunately was just outside the fire zone. In 1980 the National Trust bestowed the status of Historic Town on Toodyay because of its large number of well-preserved historic buildings. These assets, and its easy access and proximity to metropolitan Perth has made it a popular tourist destination, especially during the cooler months. In summer Toodyay can experience many days with temperatures exceeding 40 degrees Celsius. The land quickly becomes tinder dry and fire restrictions are enforced.

Toodyay has attracted a number of 'tree-changers' and retirees seeking a quieter life in a rural setting, and 'fly-in and fly-out' workers and their families. This has resulted in subdivisions being established in the more rugged hilly areas within the Shire such as Majestic Heights, which enjoys stunning views. This area is situated behind the town and was the site of a significant loss of property during the bushfire.

### **The bushfire and recovery process**

The story of the 2009 bushfire is not just about the fire, the heartbreaking losses of property, businesses, pets and stock,<sup>7</sup> and the massive fire-fighting effort to control the fire, but also the recovery process that followed. Toodyay was overwhelmed by the support that flowed into the town. There was the fantastic work of organisations such as the Salvation Army, the Red Cross, the Department of Child Protection and many others. The Salvation Army co-ordinated the distribution of funds from the official WA relief appeal that had been launched early in January 2010 by Channel 7 and the *West Australian*.<sup>8</sup> The internet also played a large part, and the quick setting up of a Facebook page, 'Toodyay December Bushfires', based in Memorial Hall, assisted with communications between evacuees, their families and friends. It also became a conduit for offers of support that were relayed to the Department of Child Protection.<sup>9</sup> These offers ranged from places where stock and horses could be agisted, emergency accommodation, to free showers at the three local hotels.<sup>10</sup>

Significantly for the recovery process, there was an army of local volunteers and community groups who gave their time and skills for as long as it took. This time was anywhere between

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<sup>7</sup> Oral history with Margaret and Mick McKeown whose commercial olive grove at 'Place of Plenty' on the Northam-Toodyay Road was devastated by the fire. With the assistance of Professor Stan Kailis from the University of WA, they were able to save the grove. Stories about this and other losses appear in the *Toodyay Herald*. The DVD 'Out of the Ashes: a collection of stories', relates the tragic loss of the Thompson family's dairy cows.

<sup>8</sup> See 'From the Ashes', special edition insert, *Toodyay Herald*, February 2010.

<sup>9</sup> *Toodyay Herald* editor and Rover Sam Connor and members of the Rover Crew (Julia Robinson, Crew Leader at the time) initiated this service. The laptop computer was provided by the Robinson family, who worked as volunteers in Memorial Hall. An internet connection was provided by Telstra.

<sup>10</sup> See *The Toodyay Herald* information sheet, undated but believed to have been issued the following day, 30 December 2009. A 'Special' one-page edition of the *Toodyay Herald* produced during the time of the fire by editor Sam Connor, provided 'Information for Affected Landholders' and 'Latest Information from FESA', dated 29 December 2009.

a day to three months when the relief centres were closed, to twelve months for some members of the Shire's Toodyay Bushfire Recovery Team. The Recovery Team's development of the 'The One Stop Shop' could well be a blueprint for other communities about how to manage the aftermath of a disaster.

Only those who were intimately involved with the recovery process know the extent of the contribution volunteers made, what worked and what could have been done better. Many of their stories are recorded in the oral histories.<sup>11</sup>



*'Thank you for saving our house', by Callie Beets, aged 6.*

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<sup>11</sup> For example the oral history interview with members of the Toodyay Bushfire Recovery Team.



## PART 1

### ‘ 29/12: Toodyay’s Bushfire Project’ – a community initiative

In September 2010 the Shire’s Museum Advisory Committee (MAC) discussed the possibility of the Museum taking an active role in the collecting and conserving of evidence of the December 2009 bushfire in Toodyay. Committee member Dr Brian Shepherd, who works professionally in the museum sector, was requested to gauge community interest and report back to the December meeting. In the interim he attended the national Museums Australia Conference in Melbourne where papers were read about the role Victorian museums had taken after the devastating February 2009 Black Saturday bushfires. Apart from participating in the recovery process, they gathered objects, stories and photographs for their collections. Brian felt something similar could be undertaken for Toodyay.

At the same time local artist Margot Watkins came to a similar conclusion while attending the National Regional Arts Conference in Tasmania where the role of community art was discussed in relation to the recovery process in Victoria. Margot brought back a copy of a documentary titled ‘At the Coalface: the Art of Community Recovery’ from the conference,<sup>12</sup> and, together with the Toodyay Arts group, hoped to show this at a public meeting to see if similar initiatives could be undertaken for Toodyay. Brian and Margot then organised a meeting of interested people to see what could be done.

The first meeting was held on 20 October 2010 at Margot’s home. Apart from Margot and Brian, the others who attended were Shire councillors Bob Jackson and Bob Somers (also members of the Museum Advisory Committee), Dr Robyn Taylor (historian), and Greg Warburton (member of the Coondle-Nunile Volunteer Bushfire Brigade). Charlie Wroth (Shire Councillor) and Jenny Edgecombe (both MAC members) were apologies. Brian, Robyn, Greg and Jenny are members of the Toodyay Historical Society, while Charlie Wroth and Bob Jackson (farmers and members of volunteer bushfire brigades), were on the Shire’s Toodyay Bushfire Recovery Team. Toodyay being a small country town, most of these people were also members of other groups so it was felt those attending were to an extent representative of a good percentage of the Toodyay community. A working title *29/12: Toodyay’s Bushfire Projects* was adopted, the intention being there could be more than one project about the bushfire.

The agenda of the meeting was to discuss:

... a possible community project collecting, documenting and conserving evidence of the Toodyay bushfire of December 2009 and developing or facilitating a suitable arts project or event so that it becomes a significant part of the community’s collective memory. (Minutes of first meeting held 20 October 2010)

This resulted in the planning of a public meeting where ‘At the Coalface’ could be screened and community support for a commemorative project gauged through a questionnaire with potential

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<sup>12</sup> The documentary was produced by Verity Higgins and David Brown. It followed the work of Arts Recovery Project Officer Marilyn Gourley who worked with fire-affected communities and follows the stages of her work over three seasons. The project was funded by Regional Arts Victoria.

projects listed. (See Appendix A)<sup>13</sup> The well-attended meeting took place on 21 November 2010 in Memorial Hall (the town hall) with the Shire President Kevin Hogg undertaking the official welcome.

The following month, on Tuesday 28 December 2010, the Group initiated the first anniversary of the bushfire to take place in Memorial Hall. (See Appendix B)<sup>14</sup> Those affected by the bushfire were invited to bring fire-affected objects for display, photographs and artworks. By this time Peter Robinson (an active volunteer during the recovery process and member of the Toodyay Historical Society) had joined the group and used his contacts to line up speakers and take on the role of Master of Ceremonies. Nationals Grant Woodhams MLA, former member for Moore and advocate for the Mid West and Wheatbelt communities, made a donation of \$1,000 to help with whatever project was initiated.



News about the anniversary event grew. It was advertised in the press and appeared as a news item on television.<sup>15</sup> The anniversary started with a Memorial Service held at the Racecourse within the fire zone.<sup>16</sup> The service was conducted by Salvation Army officer Bill Maunder who played a major role in the recovery process. After morning tea in Memorial Hall, there were formal speeches and recounted memories by some of the survivors. A special message from Lyn Gunter, former Mayor of Murrindindi in Victoria who had come to Toodyay to assist with the recovery was read out. A number of objects of sentimental value that had been retrieved from fire-affected properties were brought in and put on display together with photographs and artworks. A power-point presentation about the bushfire and recovery was produced by Alan Knapp, the Shire's Junior Ranger and Deputy Chief Bush Fire Controller and Incident Controller for the bushfire.

<sup>13</sup> '29/12 Toodyay's Bushfire Projects' questionnaire and results. Form 'Collecting and Documenting the Fire'. (Appendix A)

<sup>14</sup> '29/12 – One Year On – Sharing our Memories Community Gathering', advertisement in Toodyay Herald December 2010, p. 6. (Appendix A)

<sup>15</sup> For example there was good coverage the previous night on Ten News (27 December 2010). See list of audio-visual documentation collected for the Project.

<sup>16</sup> Initially this was advertised to be on the corner of Sessells Street and Racecourse (Stirlingia) Road, but anticipated numbers meant a bigger venue was needed. See television footage and photographs collected as part of this project.

Photographs taken by Alan were supplemented with ones taken by Toodyay residents.<sup>17</sup> This was followed by a bbq lunch organised by the Men's Shed.<sup>18</sup>

On Sunday 22 May 2011 a 'Conservators' Workshop' was set up in Memorial Hall. This was a special offer for bushfire survivors to bring along their fire-affected objects for assessment by a team of professional conservators. The workshop was also made available to others in the region that had suffered from a recent wild storm that wreaked considerable damage to homes and properties. This event was initiated by the Group through its member Brian Shepherd.

Time elapsed before the 2009 Toodyay Bushfire Projects Group was in a position to apply for funding. The plan to become a sub-committee of the Shire's Museum Advisory Committee, a recommendation by the Shire's CEO at the time didn't eventuate and in 2011 the Group sought endorsement to be a sub-committee of the Toodyay Historical Society Inc. An application was made to Lotterywest for funds to engage a consultant to undertake the documentation of the bushfire. Following the success of the grant application professional historian Dr Robyn Taylor was engaged.<sup>19</sup>



*Left: '30/12, 2am'. Painting and display in Memorial Hall by volunteer fire fighter Greg Warburton.*

*(Photo: Greg Warburton, 28/12/2010)*

*Right: Michael (right) and Genevieve Shepherd, and Wayne Clarke look at the remains of Michael's Vespa. (Photo: Beth Frayne, 28/12/2010)*

<sup>17</sup> 'The Devastating Toodyay Bushfire, Tuesday 29 December 2009. Tuesday 28 December 2010.' Alan Knapp had taken a large number of these photographs for the Shire as part of his official duties and as a record of the damage to properties for insurance purposes. A copy of the power-point is part of the documentation.

<sup>18</sup> The Project committee are particularly grateful to members of the Men's Shed and their partners who made a major contribution to the event by assisting with the catering and cooking.

<sup>19</sup> Dr Robyn Taylor is a member of the Professional Historians Association (WA). She witnessed the bushfire from her home and for a short time participated in the recovery process in Memorial Hall. Having local knowledge and living in Toodyay was seen as advantageous for the project.

## PART 2 THE BUSHFIRE

The 29 December 2009 bushfire occurred in the middle of the Christmas/New Year holiday period when a number of Toodyay residents were away and the Shire Council office was closed. Hot dry weather is typical at this time of year and previous days had high temperatures. However this day was becoming exceptionally hot with the morning temperature rising rapidly accompanied by hot dry west-north-westerly winds that would reach in excess of 40 kph. Volunteer fire-fighters in the community were understandably 'on edge' as conditions worsened. During the day the temperature would rise in excess of 45°C.

The Bureau of Meteorology issued a Catastrophic fire danger rating for a number of areas in the state.<sup>20</sup> This was the first time the rating was used in Western Australia, however the forecast for the Toodyay area was rated as 'Severe', until the time of the fire when it was upgraded to 'Catastrophic'.<sup>21</sup> At 12.57pm, a number of '000' emergency calls were received by FESA when smoke was detected in the region of Folewood and River Roads.<sup>22</sup> Local bush fire brigades were sent to the area to deal with the fire. 'It took firefighters more than 8 hours to bring the fire under control and several days to patrol and totally extinguish the fire'.<sup>23</sup> According to the August 2010 Major Incident Review Final Report:

The Toodyay bushfire of 29 December 2009 was one of the most damaging bushfires in Western Australia's history. It destroyed 38 homes, burned nearly 3000 hectares of land, and caused more than \$50 million in damage.<sup>24</sup>

Fortunately no human life was lost. But stock and native fauna suffered and there would be considerable stress and grief for those who witnessed or had to deal with dead and injured animals. Handling with firmness and sympathy the overwhelming need of owners to return home to check on pets, horses and stock, was one of the hardest jobs for those in authority. During the first couple of days the fire zone was too dangerous to enter. When conditions permitted volunteers organised the delivery of donated food and water to both stock and wildlife.

The cause of the fire was determined to be accidental and electrical. 'Suspected cause is power pole failure and energised conductors dropping onto the ground causing arcing to occur and igniting vegetation'.<sup>25</sup> The Final Electrical Incident Report prepared by EnergySafety WA concluded:

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<sup>20</sup> 'ABC Online, 29 December 2009. Retrieved 30 December 2009.

<sup>21</sup> FESA. Bush Fire Investigation Report. Produced by Gary Baxter, FESA Fire Investigation Officer, 30 August 2010, p. 3.

<sup>22</sup> Pam Barwood, whose house is situated on high ground in Folewood Road, was one of the people who reported seeing smoke in that locality. She used her mobile phone to call '000' and take photographs, which are included as part of this project. She was subsequently urged to immediately evacuate with her children by Central Brigade volunteer Wayne Clarke. Pam's husband Dave was working on a mine site at the time. See OH transcript for Desrae and Wayne Clarke for an account of the evacuation of Folewood Road.

<sup>23</sup> FESA. Bush Fire Investigation Report, p. 3.

<sup>24</sup> Fire & Emergency Services Authority, Major Incident Review of Toodyay Fire December 2009, Final Report, Noetic Solutions Pty Ltd., August 2010, Introduction, p. 1.

<sup>25</sup> FESA Bush Fire Investigation Report, p. 1.

From the available evidence, EnergySafety is of the opinion that Pole T303-43 fell southward to the ground, bringing the active conductor into contact with the ground on each side of Pole T303-43, causing arc flashes which ignited barley stubble. The most prominent arc marks found were at a point approximately 14 metres east of Pole T303-43. This was within the area of fire origin identified by FESA and WAPOL fire investigators.<sup>26</sup>

Whether Western Power was to blame for the accident, or the degree to which it was culpable, would be an ongoing issue for those who lost property and livestock in the bushfire. Media coverage about this issue would be extensive and ongoing. It also gave rise to individual citizens who lost property being involved in a class action against Western Power.<sup>27</sup> This was the second time Western Power's infrastructure was linked to a blaze in Toodyay. In February 2007 clashing power lines were determined as the cause of the Chatcup fire (north of Toodyay), which tragically resulted in the death of a young teacher who taught at the local Toodyay District High School.



'Cheers Col ... we coulda got really burnt'. *Sunday Times*, 17 October 2010. Reproduced with the kind permission of cartoonist Greg Smith. (Cartoon drawn 13/10/2010)

A number of issues became apparent from the experience of the 2009 bushfire. Because of the heat and high winds, a number of people were indoors with air conditioners on and blinds drawn. Many reported being unaware there was a bushfire until they were contacted by concerned family or friends, or alerted by neighbours or volunteer fire fighters. Alerting people

<sup>26</sup> Final Electrical Incident Report. Bushfire near River and Folewood Roads, Toodyay, Western Australia, 29 December 2009. Dated 10 August 2010, p. 36. Report prepared by EnergySafety WA. This report was based on new evidence.

<sup>27</sup> Extensive documentation regarding Western Power and the class action is held by Laurie Biggs who lost his property on Sandplain Road (within Sector Alpha). In April 2011 the Supreme Court travelled to Toodyay to hold a 'strategic conference' in the town's Memorial Hall. The media were also allowed to attend. This meeting and the media's access to the Court's proceedings were unprecedented.

about evacuating and what roads were safe to use became problematic when official broadcasted information didn't keep pace with events on the ground.

The fire fighting effort was massive in terms of the numbers of brigades, equipment and ancillary support provided, including farmers who came with their own fire-fighting trucks. The following is an estimate compiled by Shire Ranger Alan Knapp for a power-point presentation screened for the first anniversary of the fire in December 2010.

Day 1:

- 240+ fire fighters
- 30+ auxiliary fire fighters
- 40+ private units
- 80+ brigade appliances
- DEC fire crews and machinery
- Graders, loaders and dozers, water trucks and other plant
- 4 helitacks
- 2 Type 1 Heli-Bombers ('the big ones')
- 2 fixed wing water bombers
- 1 Air Recon helicopter
- 2 SES teams
- 25+ WA Police
- Water Corp Fire Support Unit
- Salvation Army Support Teams
- FESA staff
- Shire staff

Fire-fighting operations were based at the Central Brigade in Stirling Terrace in town and the Toodyay sports oval/showgrounds. When the Salvation Army was able to get through Toodyay Road, which had been closed to all traffic, they set up their mobile kitchens in the showgrounds to feed the fire-fighters and others involved. The Salvation Army continued to be a supporting presence well after the fire and during the recovery process.



Aerial photo taken by Shire Ranger Alan Knapp on the day following the fire, 30 December 2009.

## **PART 3 RECOVERY**

### **(a) Evacuation, relief centres and recovery**

While the brigades and helitacs fought the fire, evacuees were coming into town or to the Recreation Centre in Northam that had been offered as an alternative evacuation centre. With the assistance of Bob Jackson, a Shire councillor, the Toodyay's Memorial Hall was opened and volunteers immediately set about operating the kitchen and providing support for the evacuees. The volunteers soon came under the umbrella of the Northam based Department of Child Protection (DCP) which coordinated the early stages of the relief effort including organising food and emergency accommodation for evacuees. This was done with assistance from the Shire President Chris Firms.<sup>28</sup>

The Op Shop, which had closed for the Christmas break, reopened to provide clothing and other items for those who had to leave their homes, often with only the clothes they were wearing. As donations flooded in, the women from the Op Shop moved to the CWA Hall and this became a relief centre, as did St Stephen's Anglican Church Hall. However with the volume of donated goods coming into town, including fresh food, the town hall and sporting pavilions in the showgrounds had to be opened and the goods sorted into categories. Food, fresh and packaged, kitchen, bathroom and laundry items were dealt with at the stage end of Memorial Hall, dubbed 'Hallmart', while household furniture, whitegoods, hardware, clothing, toys and other items were organised in the showground pavilion that was given names such as the 'Hardly Normal' and the 'Weight-Loss Shed' – the latter reflecting the sweltering conditions inside the unlined tin sheds. Adjoining sheds were used as donated goods came in. These recovery centres remained open for three months. There was an understanding by the volunteers that some survivors were not ready or able to come for immediate assistance. As many survivors didn't have a home for these donated goods, storage facilities were set up in and around town until such time the goods could be collected. There are many anecdotes and stories from these times. Many are captured in the interviews.<sup>29</sup>

With the distribution of donated goods to the survivors it was realised a system needed to be put in place to establish the degree of need. With the assistance of DCP, a database was established in 'Hallmart' to record the names of survivors, their location in the fire zone, the extent of their loss, if they had missing pets, and where they could be contacted. It had been noticed that some people, unaffected by the fire, were taking advantage of the situation to restock their own homes. A system of coloured cards was put into place, based on the matrix, so the survivors could simply present their card at the various recovery centres. This matrix was separate to the one developed by the Bushfire Recovery Team which dealt with financial

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<sup>28</sup> Oral history interview with Rosemary Madacsi. Julie Brown was the Emergency Welfare Officer from the DCP who came to Toodyay to start the coordination of the relief effort. She approached the Shire President Chris Firms who co-opted Rosemary to help organise the delivery of supplies. After this initial stage, DCP handed the relief effort over to the Shire and its Toodyay Bushfire Recovery Committee.

<sup>29</sup> Oral history interview with Melanie Pree and John Mitchinson.

and practical aspects of the recovery process including the management and provision of water and power to properties, land clearing, and a host of other jobs that needed to be done.

Of value to the recovery process was the help and advice from two women who had first hand experience of the devastating Victorian bushfires earlier in the year. Trudie Gouge from Flowerdale had been impressed by the support given to her town by Toodyay's Coondle-Nunile Volunteer Bushfire Brigade. She decided to come to Toodyay to see what she could do in return. Trudie was joined by Lyn Gunter who was Mayor of Murrindindi at the time of the Victorian fires who also lived in Flowerdale.<sup>30</sup> One of the results of their input was the Survivors' Dinners that were held on a regular basis in Memorial Hall. Stories about the Survivors Dinners can be heard in the recorded interviews.<sup>31</sup>

### **(b) Toodyay Bushfire Recovery Team and the 'One stop shop'**

A Bushfire Recovery Committee was established made up of representatives of local and state government departments and services, the Salvation Army and Red Cross, and others such as the Principal of the Toodyay District High School. As part of this the Toodyay Bushfire Recovery Team was established and co-ordinated by Councillor Charlie Wroth.<sup>32</sup> The core members of this team comprised Toodyay Shire councillors Charlie Wroth and Bob Jackson, Mark D'Alton and Robbie Devlin (both had worked with the WA Police force), and Nuala Ennis. Others who assisted were Alison Wroth, Marilyn D'Alton, Bob and Jenny Somers.

The Team operated in Memorial Hall and established what became known as the 'One Stop Shop' offering help and advice to evacuees and others affected by the fire. They organised the clearing of burnt out properties, provided arborists to deal with remaining trees, water supplies for tanks that had to be emptied because of contamination through fire retardants, and generators to provide power to those who could still live in the fire zone. A wide range of personal assistance was organised including providing advisors to help with banking, and deal with difficult insurance companies.

### **(c) Natural environment, gardens and olive groves**

The Shire of Toodyay is rich in native flora and fauna with a number of areas, particular those with gravelly soils, producing spectacular displays of wildflowers during late winter and spring. The return of native vegetation was a sign of recovery with the zamia palm being the first to produce green within the blackened landscape. A photograph of this quick recovery by the zamia features on the front page of the special bushfire edition insert in the February edition of the *Toodyay Herald*.

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<sup>30</sup> Lyn Gunter subsequently researched and collated a 127 page document, 'Along the Road to Recovery – the Journey: The Communities' perspective', (undated), which covers a number of communities that suffered a catastrophic event including Toodyay.

<sup>31</sup> Oral history interviews with Peter and Kathy Robinson, and Glenys Clabaugh. Peter helped organise the dinners, and Glenys, as a member of the CWA, was involved with catering and serving.

<sup>32</sup> Oral history interview with members of the Bushfire Recovery Team.



There was considerable interest in taking photographs of the recovery of the bushland, and while this recovery was slow in many parts, in more recent years there have been some magnificent displays of wildflowers. Unfortunately, the fire has also encouraged the spectacular regrowth of the indigenous 'prickly moses' (*Acacia pulchella*), which makes the bush almost impenetrable. Hard hit was the wildlife. Volunteers, Chris Maroni, Jo Broderick and others made regular trips to the fire zone to provide food and water. Much welcomed donations of food suitable for native fauna were a valuable part of the recovery effort.

There were a number of projects to help regenerate the bush and gardens, and advice about fire-retardant plants.

The Daisy Chain Project was set up by a group of property owners living in the fire-zone. Funding was successfully sought to buy large quantities of seeds of the pink and white everlasting daisy that were scattered along the roadways and in the bush. The daisy, *Helipterum roseum*, is native to this region.<sup>33</sup>

Mavis Jefferys Nature Reserve project centred on the Mavis Jefferys Nature Reserve that was half burnt in the bushfire. In conjunction with the Toodyay Naturalists Club, the Department of Environment and Conservation undertook a macroinvertebrate and herpetofauna survey that was continued by Club members at set periods during the year from June 2010 to October 2012. Club members and residents also separately recorded vegetation regrowth and fauna sightings. A copy of the DEC report is held by the Toodyay Naturalists Club.



*Mavis Jefferys Survey, 12 December 2010. Photograph courtesy Desrae Clarke.*

Great Gardens, Heavenly Hectares Mega Workshop: Fire Recovery Special was about rebuilding fire-damaged properties with eco-friendly gardens, designing for energy efficiency,

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<sup>33</sup> Copies of documents relating to this project are included in the project.

and other helpful advice. It was presented by Chris Ferraira and Gary Heady, and supported by Toodyay Naturalist Club, LCDC (Land Conservation District Committee) and the Toodyay Friends of the River.<sup>34</sup>

Olive groves Three groves were severely damaged by the fire, 'Amberfield' in Folewood Road, 'Place of Plenty' and 'Eidran', both on the Northam-Toodyay Road.<sup>35</sup> The owners of 'Place of Plenty' were assisted in the restoration of their grove by plant biologist Professor Stan Kaillis from the University of Western Australia. Digital photographs record the grove before and after the fire.

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<sup>34</sup> See *Toodyay Herald*, March 2010, p. 34.

<sup>35</sup> See article 'Toodyay Olive Growers' by Margaret McKeown in the March 2010 edition of the *Toodyay Herald*, p. 25.

## **PART 4        RECORDS**

### **Introduction**

During the bushfire and for the next year or so the bushfire and recovery process was recorded through the mediums of television and newsprint. There were official reports, especially regarding the cause of the fire, recovery committee records, and countless digital photographs. Some people kept their own records including survivors who made scrapbooks and salvaged mementoes from the fire. Others wrote poems and produced artworks.

Documents relating to the management of the project, including Copyright Permission forms, are lodged with the Toodyay Historical Society Inc.

During the course of this project other records of poignant and powerful impact were discovered. 'Out of the Ashes', a series of video biographies was privately produced by professional filmmaker Gerald Ashcroft from interviews with families who had lost property. The interviews were undertaken in January 2010 giving them an immediacy that could not be captured today, or at the time this project commenced in 2011. The Coondle-Nunile Volunteer Bushfire Brigade had its own personal record, a CD produced by member Allan Henshaw using a slide show of photographs set to music. The result captures what would have been the shared experiences of the Shire's various volunteer bush fire brigades. Copies of these productions are included in the package of materials.

The number of documents about this major event in Toodyay's history is huge. This project comprises examples of these documents, and a record of where others can be found.<sup>36</sup>

The following lists the records collected for this project. There are records held by the Shire of Toodyay dealing with financial matters, and as these contain private and confidential material, copies were not sought for this report. Their existence is simply noted here.

A spreadsheet listing names and contact details of people connected with the gathering of records for this project, and a record of copyright approvals, is a separate document that will be lodged with the Toodyay Historical Society and the Shire's Old Gaol Museum.

#### **(a)        Official reports and investigations**

1. FESA – Bushfire Investigation Report (undated) downloaded from website, 33 pages.
2. FESA – Major Incident Review of Toodyay Fire December 2009, Noetic Solutions Pty Ltd., August 2010, 57 pages.
3. EnergySafety WA, 'Final Electrical Incident Report. Bushfire near River and Folewood Roads, Toodyay, Western Australia, 29 December 2009. 10 August 2010.

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<sup>36</sup> A spreadsheet listing available documents (paper, photographic, oral history, video etc), listed alphabetically under name of the owner, their contact details and copyright status, is being lodged as a separate document for administrative purposes.

4. FESA/The University of Western Australia. 'An investigation into Fire-Related Perceptions and Behaviour in the Community of Toodyay, WA', combined research approach between the Fire and Emergency Services Authority of Western Australia (FESA), and The University of Western Australia (UWA) Department of Psychology. Authors: Natalene Galea and Laura McNally, 2010.

**(b) Natural environment**

'Mavis Jefferys Nature Reserve. Macroinvertebrate and Herpetofauna Survey', prepared and published for Department of Environment and Conservation, Perth Hills District Nature Conservation Program, November 2011. Copy of report held by the Toodyay Naturalists Club Inc., PO Box 328, Toodyay.

[There are photographs taken by members of the Toodyay Naturalists Club of the Reserve recording some of the surveys.]

**(c) Print media coverage – display books**

*The Toodyay Herald* (monthly publication beginning in February 2010)

Vol 1 – February 2010 – June 2010 (including single page Dec 2009/Jan 2010 information sheets, and aerial map of fire zone)

Vol 2 – July 2010 – 2013

There is an index for the Toodyay Herald covering early news sheets (December 2009), the first issue in February 2010 to February 2012.<sup>37</sup>

*The West Australian, Sunday Times, Avon Valley Gazette* and other publications

Vol 1 – 30 December 2009 – January 2010

Vol 2 – January 2010 – August 2010

Vol 3 – August 2010 – October/November 2011

**(d) Television and internet coverage**

DVD – selection of four television news stories compiled by NewsTen.

Toodyay December Bushfire Facebook – Toodyay and Kalamunda Rovers<sup>38</sup>

Google Toodyay bushfire 2009 for internet coverage.

**(e) Information sheets and assistance for evacuees**

One-page information sheets produced on the day of the fire and subsequent days by Sam Connor, Editor of The Toodyay Herald.

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<sup>37</sup> Beth Frayne, member of the Toodyay Historical Society and former state library cataloguer, was sub-contracted to undertake the indexing.

<sup>38</sup> Sam Connor set up the first Facebook bushfire alert page. A separate Toodyay Bushfire Facebook was established to deal with the ongoing situation. Kalamunda Rover Daniel Smith organised collection points for the Facebook that included all Perth Rovers. Sam Connor holds an electronic record of the Facebook exchanges.

Information newsletter – take-away documents compiled during community meetings held in Memorial Hall. Produced by Kathy and Julia Robinson. (Jan, Feb, March 2010).

**(f) Records – Recovery committee, Hallmart, others**

**Toodyay Bushfire Recovery Committee.**

Charlie Wroth, Coordinator of the Recovery Committee holds extensive records at his property 'Warragenny', Lot 58 Marri Road, Toodyay.

1. Copy of his power point presentation to FESA (one hardcopy on file)
2. Copy of his power point presentation to Shire of Toodyay (electronic)
3. Photographic coverage of properties affected by the bushfire (electronic, downloaded). Also see under 'Photographic documents'.

Robbie Devlin provided the following:

[Document marked 1] Priority List – property owners affected by the bushfire requesting assistance.

[Document marked 2]. Requests for Assistance. Sunday 2 January 2010' – list of property owners and details regarding property and their request.

[Doc. 3] Offers of Assistance. Sunday 2 January 2010 – list of names, contact details, and what is being offered.

(No document marked 4)

(Inmates from Wooroloo Prison Farm assisted with the clean-up. This was organised by Robbie Devlin)

[Doc. 5]. Inmates (Assisting Clean-up) List of property owners and what assistance is needed on their properties.

[Doc. 6]. Tree List, Inspection ASAP – names and addresses of property owners and comment regarding if trees need removing, lopped etc

[Doc. 7] Inmate List – names and contact details of property owners and requirements of work needed to be done on properties.

[Doc.7] Copy letter dated 7 August 2010, to Hon Christian Porter MLA, Minister for Corrective Services, under signature of Charlie Wroth acknowledging outstanding contribution of prison officers and inmates of Wooroloo Prison Farm to recovery and clean-up.

[Doc. 8] Copy letter dated 26 January 2010, to Graham Merrick, CEO, Shire of Toodyay, from Robbie Devlin, indicating Dept of Corrective Services had been contacted and has expressed willingness to provide labour. Contact names provided.

Mark D'Alton – provided electronic copies of the following:

'Donations to Toodyay Bush Fire Relief Account (Shire)' – spreadsheet 6pp

'Generator and Extension Cord Records' – spreadsheet 1page

'Car Removal Request' – spreadsheet 1 page

'Round Hay Bale Requests' – 2 pp

'Survey Peg Requests' – spreadsheet 1 page  
 'Water Order Book' – spreadsheet 4 pp  
 Apex pack: Pages 1, 2, 3 (tiffs – couldn't open)

**Hallmart (town hall recovery centre)**

Electronic records of volunteer work and management of donated goods in Memorial Hall – aka 'Hallmart' – provided by co-ordinator Rosemary Madacsi.

**Buy-a-Bucket'**. Documents relating to this project: 3 x buckets each filled with items – kitchen, laundry, and bathroom for distribution to fire affected families.

**(g) CD/DVD/Power Point presentations**

**'Out of the Ashes: A collection of stories'. Gerald Ashcroft**

Two DVD video biographies titled 'Out of the Ashes: A collection of stories'. Dedicated to the people of Toodyay. Produced by Gerald Ashcroft. Copyright Stories to be told 2010.

[www.storiestobetold.com.au](http://www.storiestobetold.com.au)

1 x duration 30 minutes. 'Individual accounts from some of the people who were affected by the devastating bushfire on the 29<sup>th</sup> December 2009'.

1 x duration 10.30 minutes. 'A film about a group of people who were affected by the devastating bushfire on the 29<sup>th</sup> December 2009'. (A compilation of the longer version)

People interviewed:

Lisa Thompson (husband Darren) owners of a dairy property.

John Erickson

Caroline Coate

Rex Reynolds

Claire and Bruce McGowan

Tracey and Rowan Hunter

**'The Toodyay Fire, 29<sup>th</sup> December 2009. Coondle-Nunile Volunteer Bushfire Brigade'**. CD produced by Allan Henshaw, Coondle-Nunile Volunteer Bushfire Brigade (a slide show set to music)

**'Recovery'**. Power point presentation by Charlie Wroth, Coordinator of Toodyay Bushfire Recovery Committee. Two presentations to the Shire of Toodyay, and FESA. (August 2010)

**'The Devastating Toodyay Bushfire, Tuesday 29 December 2009. Tuesday 28 December 2010.'** Power point produced by Shire of Toodyay Ranger Alan Knapp\* based on photographs taken as part of the Shire's record, and digital photos provided by residents and others. Compiled for the occasion of the first anniversary of the bushfire held in Memorial Hall, Tuesday 28 December 2010.

[\*Alan Knapp, Shire of Toodyay Junior Ranger and Deputy Chief Bush Fire Controller and initial Incident Controller for Toodyay bushfire.]

#### **(h) Artworks**

Poems x 3 by Jes, 'From Sue', 'The Call', 'Toodyay Fire', written 2 January 2010, (See *Toodyay Herald*, February 2010 issue, p. 20.

'Town Hall Meeting: Minutes', prose poem by John Kinsella. Reproduced in the *West Australian*, 9 January 2010, p. 36.

'Thank you for saving our home', drawing by Callie Beets aged 6 years.

Paintings by local artist Margot Watkins.

'30/12, 2am', night scene showing glowing embers on the hillside with fire trucks in distance, by volunteer fire fighter Greg Warburton, now in the Shire of Toodyay collection.

#### **(i) Community collections – photographs, scrapbooks, memorabilia etc**

##### Anne Barr

Documents relating to the Daisy Train Project undertaken in the Majestic Heights fire zone.

##### Dave and Pam Barwood,

Photographs taken by Pam on mobile phone when smoke first sighted at 'point of origin'.

##### Wayne & Desrae Clarke

Photographs of bushland recovery.

##### Alison & Andy Cromb

Majestic Heights. Photos of bushland recovery and wildflowers.

##### Beth Frayne

Album of photographs with captions taken around town and showground pavilion during the recovery period. Copy held by the Toodyay Historical Society.

##### Pat French

Video of house and surrounds in Sessilis Road, Toodyay, taken some time before the fire.

Digital photos of house after the fire.

Document: 'A personal comment'.

##### Susan Griffin (Clarson-Griffin)

CD of photographs taken during and after the fire. A selection on thumbdrive. CD with all images lodged with Toodyay Historical Society.

##### Allan Henshaw

CD - 'The Toodyay Fire, 29<sup>th</sup> December 2009. Coondle-Nunile Bushfire Brigade'. Collection of photographs taken of the Brigade during and after the fire, slide show set to music.

##### Tracey & Rowan Hunter

1. Two A3 display books of newspaper clippings (articles published in the West Australian, Sunday Times, Toodyay Herald etc)
2. One photograph album showing destruction of outbuildings, vehicles and objects.

Alan Knapp – Shire of Toodyay Junior Ranger and Deputy Chief Bush Fire Controller and Incident Controller for Toodyay bushfire.

1. 4 ½ hours of audio radio traffic on the day – begins 13.28 hrs.
2. Substantial collection of digital photographs on the ground (before and after) and aerial photographs. Stored in Shire computer.

Murray McBride – Shire Fire Control Officer

Poem about a squashed hard hat and photograph. (Held by Murray McBride).

Margaret and Mick McKeown – CD Place of Plenty 'Nardi'. Digital photographs (23) of their olive grove before and after the fire, Professor Stan Kaillis assisting, cuttings and regrowth.

John Mitchinson & Melanie Pree

Volunteers at recovery centre 'Hardly Normal' pavilion, showgrounds.

Photographs (downloaded from thumbdrive), and photograph album compiled for them by Beth Frayne.

Naomi Millett

Friend of Carolyn Coate who lost her property in the fire. Collection of fire damaged objects and photographs used in a display for the first anniversary of the fire.

Tim and Beryl Officer

Mosaic table made for them by their daughters using pieces of crockery retrieved from their burnt out property. Photographs of table taken by Robyn Taylor.

Patching family

DVD story Ten News; CD 'One year anniversary photos at racecourse by Amanda Patching. (Copies held by Toodyay Historical Society)

Viv Street

Member of the CWA. Photographs of CWA Hall during its function as a recovery centre.

Robyn Taylor

Photos of bushfire taken from front verandah of home at Mt Anderson Street, Toodyay.

Digital photos from first anniversary exhibition in Memorial Hall, 28 December 2010; Conservation Workshop in Memorial Hall, 22 May 2011; Regrowth and wildflowers at Michael and Genevieve Shepherd's property, 12 September 2012; Mavis Jeffrey Reserve recovery survey, 25 October 2012.

Kay Vincenti

Photographs of bushfire taken from Mt Anderson Street, Toodyay.

Greg Warburton

Photographs from anniversary event 2010.

Margot Watkins

Photographs of artworks based on the bushfire affected landscape.

Photographs taken in Memorial Hall during first anniversary event, including photos of three paintings by Colin Moore (Alexander) donated for a raffle. Only survivors eligible to put their names in a hat. First winner: Dr Richard Walkey



## **PART 5        ORAL HISTORIES**

Eleven oral history interviews were undertaken by Robyn Taylor. CDs and transcripts were prepared and produced by Doug Ayres and Mary Mcfarlan, History Development Pty Ltd. The date of the interview is shown in brackets.

1. **Marlene Andrijich** ran the kitchen in Memorial Hall (16 June 2013).
2. **Desrae and Wayne Clarke** have property in the firezone. Wayne is a volunteer with Central Brigade. Both Wayne and Desrae conducted recovery surveys in the Mavis Jefferys Reserve. (25 February 2013)
3. **Glenys Clabaugh**, CWA member and volunteer during the recovery (22 March 2013).
4. **Rosemary Madacsi**, volunteer who supervised Hallmart (in Memorial Hall)
5. **Murray McBride**, Shire Fire Control Officer (27 March 2013)
6. **Margaret and Mick McKeown**, owners 'Place of Plenty' commercial olive grove burnt by the bushfire (5 February 2013)
7. **John Mitchinson and Melanie Pree**, volunteers, supervised the recovery centre in the showgrounds (15 March 2013)
8. **Beryl and Tim Officer**, bushfire survivors who lost their home, Sessilis Road, Toodyay (16 March 2013)
9. **Kathy and Peter Robinson**, volunteers during the recovery process (28 Jan and 6 March 2013)
10. **Richard Taylor**, Clinical Psychologist, working in Toodyay (23 June 2013)
11. **Toodyay Bushfire Recovery Committee**. Those present included Charlie Wroth (co-ordinator) and Alison Wroth, Robbie Devlin, Mark and Marilyn D'Alton. (23 March 2013)

## CONCLUSION

The scars of the 2009 bushfire are still visible in the landscape despite the regrowth and rebuilding that has taken place. They are constant reminders of the forces of nature than can impact on a community when conditions become volatile and dangerous. With climate change and the forecast of hotter drier summers, the threat of a catastrophic fire happening again is almost a certainty and since 2009 there have been several fires of lesser intensity in the Shire. The fire on Sunday 15 December 2013, just over 4 km north-east of the town resulted in evacuation from a number of properties in the path of the fire. Fortunately no lives or homes were lost due to the quick action of the fire-fighters and the support of aerial water bombing. It was unnerving to hear the sirens and see the helitacs and planes once again flying over the town towards billowing smoke. However it was reassuring to know the fire was being dealt with by experienced fire-fighters and volunteer brigades trained for these emergencies. Toodyay could appreciate how seasoned its volunteers were after the experience of the 2009 fire.

In the process of collecting records and talking to people, it became apparent how much we depend on the goodwill of others to defend, protect and assist us. Can we continue to expect this goodwill? When the sirens ring out, we know there are volunteers on roster who have been called to help as ambulance officers or fire fighters. Many are not getting any younger and attracting young volunteers is a constant issue, not only in Toodyay. The question of payment was raised with those interviewed, especially those who put their working lives on hold. Payment was out of the question. As one volunteer said, 'you either get paid what you are worth, or not at all. We choose to be volunteers, and we do it for the good of our community.'

This has been a remarkable project and it is hoped the records that have been collected will be used for other projects, and be an invaluable resource for researchers, students and scholars studying the impact of natural disasters on communities and how those communities work towards recovery.

## APPENDICES

A. 29/12 Toodyay's Bushfire Projects: 21 November 2010 public meeting questionnaire regarding a lasting record of the bushfire, and results.

B. 29/12 Posters for Bushfire Anniversary event 28 December 2010.



Noticeboard outside Toodyay's Memorial Hall evacuation centre, December 2009.

Photograph by Beth Frayne