



Rimstone News

Official correspondence of Rimstone Cooperative Ltd

Established 1974

ABN: 91 969 795 268

No. 31 — April 2020

Rimstone Cooperative Ltd.
Rimstone Cooperative Ltd.
A Community Advancement Society

Contact Rimstone:

Mail: PO Box 2543, Mt.Waverley, Vic, 3149

Treasurer & enquiries: info@rimstone.org.au

Homeleigh Bookings: accomm@rimstone.org.au

Directors: directors@rimstone.org.au

Registered Address:

15 Gelantipy Road, Buchan, Vic, 3885

Homeleigh Phone: 03 5155 9520

Website: www.rimstone.org.au

Editorial

Welcome to this special edition of the Rimstone (occasional) Newsletter.

This edition has been prompted by the catastrophic bushfires that hit Victoria and other Australian states in late December 2019, and into January 2020. The resulting impact on many communities was horrific. The loss of life was absolutely terrible, and the destruction of property was enormous and life-changing for the many people directly affected by the fires.

This newsletter is focused particularly on the Buchan (East Gippsland) locality and the local caving community. This is important because the Rimstone Co-operative accommodation facility, Homeleigh, was directly threatened by fire, and one of the other two nearby Rimstone properties (Scrubby Creek Station) was severely damaged.



Aerial photo of Homeleigh very soon after the fires had passed. (See a larger version on Facebook)

Ack: Paul Brooker

The accompanying photograph shows how close the fires came to the Homeleigh building (the large building centre-right) and the tool shed (partly obscured at top left edge of the Homeleigh building).

The landscape of the Buchan valley, including the Potholes Reserve, was badly scorched. Read more, and see some photos, on the following pages.

There are some photos included herein, with more than 100 photos in 5 albums on our

Table of Contents

Editorial.....	1
Rimstone's presence in Buchan.....	2
Buchan locality and karst status.....	2
Seasonal preparations.....	3
30th Dec 2019 — The fires approached.....	3
Homeleigh fire attack.....	3
Sunny Point and Slippery Pinch.....	4
Scrubby Creek Stn — new fencing gone.....	4
Buchan Caves Reserve — damaged.....	5
Potholes Reserve — decimated.....	5
Shades of Death (M3) property.....	5
Fire was close to Homeleigh.....	6
New cave search opportunities.....	6
Helping out — financially?.....	6
Booking accommodation at Homeleigh.....	6

Facebook pages, so make sure to follow the links to view those photos along with useful captions.

Acknowledgements: Thank you kindly to a number of text and photo contributors including: Tom Maggs, Nicholas White, Daryl Carr, Roy Furness, Peter Robertson, Paul Brooker and Nigel Cooke.

Rob Brain, Newsletter editor

Feedback to: directors@rimstone.org.au.

*** STOP PRESS *** 30 March 2020

Please be advised that the Rimstone Co-operative directors have determined that due to the coronavirus and imposed travel restrictions, our Homeleigh accommodation facility is now closed until further notice.

We thank you all for your understanding.

Any change to this situation will be announced in due course. Any concern or comments can be directed to the Rimstone directors (see page 2 for contact details).

Rimstone Directors

Rimstone's presence in Buchan

Rimstone Co-operative Limited was formed in 1974 with the primary purpose to provide opportunities for participation in speleological activities for Rimstone Members, their families and friends. Rimstone Co-op took their pooled funds and purchased the Homeleigh property in the same year.

Homeleigh was built in the 1880s, and over the years has been a guest house cum hotel cum boarding house and shop. It now has 12 bedrooms and two bungalows with sleeping accommodation for more than 30 people, plus a large communal dining room, large lounge room and very well-kitted kitchen.

Since our purchase in 1974, Homeleigh has been used for the accommodation of Rimstone members, guests of members, cavers, university students undergoing research work, and by emergency services personnel.

Homeleigh has been used on many occasions by large groups in recent years, and on several occasions in times of need by fire and disaster management personnel.

In 2012 Rimstone bought the 105 acre property around the Scrubby Creek Cave (about 8km north of Buchan), and then in 2017 initiated the purchase of the small property just beyond Murrindal that contains the Shades of Death Cave (15km north of Buchan).

The Rimstone Co-operative has vested interests in the well-being of the town and townsfolk in and around Buchan.

Buchan locality and karst status

The savage bushfires which started from ember attack on Monday 30th December 2019 severely burnt numerous properties around Buchan. The community has struggled to recover over the several months since, and there is a lot of rebuilding and fencing to do.



The devastated scene at The Potholes Reserve

Many of the dispersed Karst Reserves were burnt such as the Potholes, the Basin, Wilson's Cave, and the main Buchan Cave Reserve. The latter had severe infrastructure damage as well as to the Fairy Cave entrance infrastructure.



The Wilson's Cave car park (on Orbost Road)

A total of 24 local homes were reported to have been destroyed in and around the Buchan valley (Herald Sun, 3rd January 2020).

Fortunately the Buchan town itself survived, including the newly rebuilt (2016) Buchan Hotel which served as a base for meals for disaster crews for many days — and using gas lights in the kitchen at night with the electricity out for days (even though The Basin home of pub owners Greg and Marg Brick was burnt down in the fires).

Electricity and telecommunications into Buchan were knocked out on the night of Monday 30th, and not restored for many days. This meant it was impossible to talk with anyone on the ground to understand the situation and the extent of the damage.

One of our Rimstone members was at Homeleigh for several days, but unable to advise anyone of the situation and whether Homeleigh itself had been destroyed. Continued attempts to phone in to the Homeleigh landline phone were fruitless whilst the lines were down.

Rhonda Coates, local town historian and known to many, was speaking to ABC Gippsland in the early morning of Tuesday 31st after the fire front had hit and was quoted as saying that the fires burned through the town destroying several houses. *"We were basically surrounded by fire. It lit up everywhere. There were grass fires happening running uphill and downhill. Thank goodness we had a few CFA strike teams here, they were flat out."*

Rimstone Co-op directors

Nigel Cooke, Gary Coleman, Darryl Pierce,
Nicholas White, Neil Wilson.

Contact by email: directors@rimstone.org.au

Seasonal preparations

In anticipation of a threatening summer fire season each year, our Rimstone members carry out essential cleaning, tidy-up and fire preparation in and around Homeleigh. This includes testing the fire sprinkler system that was installed around Homeleigh in recent years, as well as preparation of the fire tanker trailer.

With these preparations each season, Homeleigh is usually somewhat prepared for most possible fire situations in the hot summer months. Fortunately, we do not often have an opportunity to test the preparedness in a real life fire situation. But this season was different, and there are lessons learned.

30th Dec 2019 — The fires approached

On Monday 30th the bushfires were well entrenched in the distance (around Ensay) and out of control. This situation persisted for many days, and the fires could have progressed in any direction. [Ensay is only 35km north-west of Buchan as the crow flies, but about 100km by road via Bruthen, or 72km via Timbarra.] Fortunately, one of our members, Tom Maggs, was already at Homeleigh and trained and experienced at these situations.

By about 4pm on Monday the approaching bushfires were apparent from a vantage point at Homeleigh.



The fire is approaching from the NW (4:40pm)

Several more photos of this situation are included in the [Facebook "Fire Attack" Photo Album](#).

Tom activated the fire sprinkler system, and used the garden hose to damp down key areas around Homeleigh. This was a valuable, even if real, exercise as it identified a few improvements for the sprinkler system and the documentation that describes exactly what to do in such times of need. Also tested by this scenario was the existing supply of Homeleigh's emergency fire equipment (protective face mask, gloves, torches, spare batteries, etc.).

Homeleigh fire attack

On the late afternoon of Monday 30th the bushfire had crept roughly south eastward from the hills beyond Moon's Hill and The Bluff, running across the back paddocks.



The fire running across the back paddocks, viewed from the Homeleigh rear "car park".

The fire ran across the paddocks that we can see from the back porch at Homeleigh — Lou Woodgate's paddock directly behind Homeleigh and Roger Mackieson's paddock to the north of that which abuts the Homeleigh property boundary up beyond the bungalows and the old garage/woodshed.

This fire burnt right up to the Homeleigh property back fence within a few metres of the building and the toolshed, and down the Gelantipy Road at the top of our property. Thankfully, three CFA appliances had been dispatched to protect Homeleigh and surrounds, which thankfully they did with success.



Three CFA appliances defended Homeleigh

One interesting observation on the ground was the effectiveness of the tall, green privet hedge along the driveway on the northern side of Homeleigh. It was very effective at mitigating ember attack as it did not ignite when attacked. The converse was found to be the case with the planted Lomandra grass clumps on the western bank below the tool shed, which continually reignited, even after being doused.

The fire trailer was used but the hose was too short. There are lots of things to do to make

Homeleigh more resilient. The Rimstone directors have reported that the insurance cover on the property has been increased to more properly represent replacement value.

Sunny Point and Slippery Pinch

Some of our members might be familiar with the Sunny Point location (just north of the town), the Sunny Point Road, and the Slippery Pinch Road. This includes the farmhouse on the knoll in the valley which can be seen as we drive out of Buchan toward Murrindal.



A view from the Buchan-Murrindal Road in the direction of Sunny Point

The Slippery Pinch Road is further along that valley, and after crossing the river rises up past our Scrubby Creek property and rejoins the Buchan-Murrindal Road just past the Potholes Reserve.



New typical roadside scene

The bushfires at Buchan severely burnt properties along the Sunny Point Road and Slippery Pinch Rd. Mick Roberts at Sunny Point lost his life in the fires. Both Doug Reidy and Peter Lye at the Canyons property lost their houses and a lot of infrastructure.

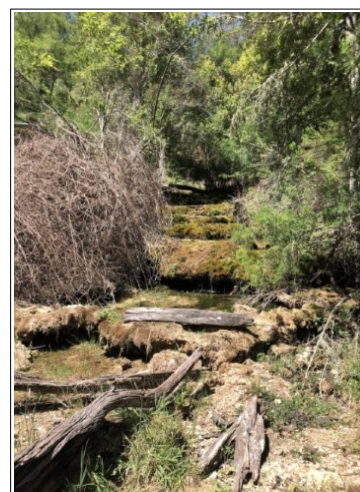
See more photos of the damage around the Buchan valley in the [Facebook "Fire... next days" Photo Album](#).

Scrubby Creek Stn — new fencing gone

Our Scrubby Creek property is managed through a grazing lease with the neighbour Doug Reidy. The tufa terraces there were fenced in 2019 to protect the tufa from future stock access.

On 30th December 2019 the property and surrounding area were severely burnt. This destroyed the property boundary fences, and damaged the Tufa Terrace area and the fences around the tufa.

The upper part of the tufa terrace had been cleared of blackberry, leaving several rain forest trees shading the tufa terraces. These were muttonwood (*Rapanea variabilis*) and tree violet (*Melicytus dentatus*).



*An earlier view of the tufa terrace with dead blackberry (left) and muttonwood (right)
[Ack: J Morgan]*

The trees shaded the tufa terrace pools and the diversity of the water plants (bryophytes) was much richer than the pools in open sunlight. This shade will need to be replaced. Reduced water flow during the drought has meant most pools on the terrace were empty.

The tufa fencing repair / replacement has now been completed. This was at the initiative of Paul Brooker who obtained materials and organised a support team of members and friends. Brendan Brooker came with son Todd and a Bob Cat, Archie Brooker, Don Brooker, Steve Wood, and friend Peter Lack. We also had Kent Warby and his son who have not been seen in Buchan for many years. Nicholas White also assisted and spent time planning the boundary fencing.

Initial work was to drop two dangerous trees to prevent fence damage and destruction of Doug Reidy's trailer and pump. These were moved and the trees dropped carefully by Paul Brooker and then cut into blocks. It was the timber corner posts which had burnt. These were removed and new steel posts were concreted in with new or fixed stays. There was further cleaning up,

cleaning the track approach with the Bob Cat and re-tensioning all the fence wire. This was an incredibly effective Saturday and Sunday effort by everyone involved.

Now that the tufa terrace fencing has been repaired we will need to foster appropriate shade trees at the edge of the tufa. The Rimstone Co-operative works in conjunction with the Latrobe University Department of Ecology, Environment and Evolution in studying the biology of the tufa ponds, its growth rate and the East Gippsland rainforest trees down Scrubby Creek. These tufa terraces will recover once more normal rainfall occurs. We will take advice about replacement of shade trees for the tufa terraces. Fortunately, the water trough outside the fenced area was full of water and survived the fire.

We will have to control local blackberry and thistle before they get out of control.

The Co-operative had insurance cover for the boundary fences. The Slippery Pinch Road fences have now been nearly replaced by Doug Reidy with some assistance from BlazeAid volunteers.

See more photos from the damaged Scrubby Creek Station property in the [Facebook "Fires... Scrubby Creek" Photo Album](#). Also, [pre-fires](#).

Buchan Caves Reserve — damaged

The Caves Reserve suffered significant bushfire damage on Monday 30th including: two cabins destroyed; Wilderness Retreat kitchen tent and 3 accommodation tents destroyed; the last two timber road bridges which provide vehicular (and pedestrian) access to the tourist caves were destroyed; the Guide Room and the old workshop "Green Shed" destroyed; Fairy Cave entrance structure severely damaged; some light and power pole infrastructure damaged; some walking tracks impacted (eg. tree hazards).

One of the destroyed bridges was reinstated in one day on 13th February by the Army Reserve — you can [see a short video of this installation on Facebook](#).



The Parks Vic press release on 11 February announced the pending reopening of the reserve on 14 February to coincide with the annual Canni Creek races at Buchan South. That press release went on to say: *"...Given the fire impacts throughout the park, walking tracks and other areas within the Reserve will remain closed to visitors for safety reasons. For the time being cave tours are not being offered pending assessment of cave air quality and safety checks of cave infrastructure."*



Fire ran along the back of the Caves Reserve swimming pool (Dukes Cave)

See more photos of the damage around the Caves Reserve and the Buchan valley in the [Facebook "Buchan and karst" Photo Album](#).

Potholes Reserve — decimated

A quick inspection from the road in the first days after the fires showed widespread damage to vegetation throughout the Potholes Reserve and surrounds.



One view of Potholes Reserve

Shades of Death (M3) property

Rimstone Co-operative purchased this property (and the Shades of Death cave) in 2017.

This property was not touched by fire except that Shane Price and Jake Costigan stopped the paddock fire near Lee and Monica's house just north of Shades.

Fire was close to Homeleigh

It is rather frightening — the proximity of the fires to Homeleigh's back door. As mentioned above, and seen in the photo on page 1, the fire came across the back paddock and right up to the rear fence. Another perspective of this is shown in the next photo below.



The burnt out back paddock over the Homeleigh back fence.

See more photos around Homeleigh, including the Hawthorn Football Club members who stayed whilst volunteering, in the [Facebook "Fires... Homeleigh" Photo Album](#).

New cave search opportunities

One observation by cavers / speleologists in the days after the fires is that with a lot of vegetation now gone, it will be much easier to re-discover caves in the area. In short, almost everywhere you look there are dolines awaiting a visit.

A few field trips have been done already, and it has been surprising at the amount of grass and vegetation regrowth in the fields. Wyatt's Reserve (an area established as a reserve in 1887 and located across from the Potholes Reserve), shows a lot of promise and has already been visited by some of our members.

Some large dolines north of our Scrubby Creek property (on Doug Reidy's property) that were previously hidden by masses of blackberries have been found. These could have good prospects.

Please note: That due to the coronavirus travel restrictions, the VSA has cancelled all trips and expeditions for the foreseeable future.

One of the questions at this time is whether the small cave tags that identify the geographic features survived the fires. If not, then it might be challenging to determine whether a new cave might actually be a known one. However, VSA club records should give valuable information on many of these sites.

One thing for sure is that there are still many trees in the burnt out areas that could be dangerous and susceptible to falling at a

moments notice. Another possible danger in the cave environments is that of gas levels — either too much carbon dioxide from the recent fires, or too much oxygen. So there are some good reasons to take care.



Part of the damage at Scrubby Creek Stn



Our undamaged Scrubby Creek water trough

Helping out — financially?

For anyone wanting to help, but who is tight for time, there are some ways to assist financially — either the caving environment directly, or the local people. You might still be able to find opportunities to assist financially via a GoFundMe fund raiser, or other source.

The Blaze Aid teams have been in Buchan for a few weeks, and as of today, a local Blaze Aid camp is still operational — [see details here](#).

Booking accommodation at Homeleigh

Please remember that Homeleigh is currently closed due to current travel restrictions.

Once it is re-opened, to book accommodation please make sure to use the proper email address so that your request is received promptly. Then our on-duty accommodation officer can reply promptly. (Else your request might get lost.)

Homeleigh Booking Officer

email to: accomm@rimstone.org.au