

Black Thursday Fires

6th February 1851

Ref: A History of Braybrook, the district, the settlers, the school

Joseph Solomon's notes

In September, 1849, Mr. Solomon witnessed what the district has never known since. The plains were covered with snow a foot in depth and the hills and ranges shrouded in a mantle of white, which brought back vividly to him the winter scenes of the land of his birth. The rapid melting of the snow caused a heavy flood in the river. Two years later he had a very different experience. The summer had been very dry; fresh water for household purposes was scarce and had to be brought from a distance. This was not seldom the case and one occasion his son relates that milk, which was profitless but had to be taken from the cows, was used for the making of mortar. The time of cream separators and butter export had not yet come. The morning of the 6th February, 1851, afterwards called Black Thursday, was very hot with not a breath of wind. As the day advanced fires sprang up on the distant hills and clouds of smoke began to fill the air. Soon the fire reached the plains, and the flames wept over them but, as there was little else besides grass to feed them, the danger of his situation was not so great as that of the bush settlers. No attempt could be made to save the stock and they rushed madly about, plunging themselves in the tidal river and in the muddy water of the Maidstone swamp, where they were joined by the native animals as terror stricken as they. Many thus escaped the flames to find death by drowning. Birds were destroyed in vast numbers by the fire and suffocating smoke or were drowned in the river, where they fled to escape the fearful heat. Towards noon the landscape was hidden in darkness and the dull yellow glare of the sun above, as it struggled through the gloom, filled their minds with dismay, and the household thought the end of the world was at hand. In the heated stifling atmosphere they could hardly breathe. They were blinded by the thick vapor and the fierce hot wind which sprang up in the afternoon laden with showers of small cinders and fragment from the burning forests added to their sufferings and prostrated them completely. Night came and through occasional breaks in the smoky air the hills showed like walls of fire. It was a time of anxious dread but the next day brought a wind from the south, which cleared the air and gave them relief. All around was desolation. They hastened to learn the fate of the neighbouring settlers and of the Town of Melbourne which they believed must have been burnt to ashes. But Melbourne had escaped and their neighbours had suffered less than they had feared. Mr. Solomon himself was among the most fortunate.