

1887 Fire

In early January 1887, a fire occurred that had the most serious economic and social consequences that the Head of the Lake has ever experienced. The Otago Daily Times of the 26th January takes up the story, dated the 12th January.

“Extensive bush fires, one of which has proved the most disastrous calamity which ever befell this district, happened here last week, when the extensive bush at the Head of Lake Wakatipu; on the Kinloch side of the lake, caught fire, and which has been raging ever since in all its fury. the bush is composed of noble birch and totara trees of very considerable girth, from which the timber supply of the district has for many years been exclusively obtained, both for mining and building purposes; so far down country as Clyde and Alexandra was the timber sent, both places as well as Cromwell depending upon the bush at the Head of the Lake for all timber except firewood. The timber trade, which by the destruction of the bush is almost completely ruined, employed between 80 and 100 men, and furnished the chief cargo for steamers trading between the Head of the Lake and Queenstown. The bush destroyed covered all the country lying at the foot of Mount Bon Planc (sic), extending from the Dart to the Greenstone river, and measuring it along the undulations of the ground it cannot be less than 10 miles in distance. Allowing the width of the timber from the lake to its upper boundary to be 2500ft, it may be accepted that, roughly speaking, not less than 4000 acres of valuable timber has been destroyed. The loss cannot be computed at a money value, as it has almost completely ruined an established industry upon which both the farmers and the miners depend for one of their chief supplies in the persecution of their respective callings; besides which the splendid forest with its orchids, lichens, and ferns, and which was the chief attraction of tourists to this quarter of the district, and the trees also formed a conspicuous and pleasing feature in the landscape, which will be positively disfigured. The black and bleak appearance of the charred giant skeletons of what only yesterday were stately trees, swayed by the breeze in graceful movement, sheltering countless native and acclimatized birds, and in the umbrageous shades of which lovely and rare ferns and other botanical specimens of interest and value grow in profusion – all this has given place to a scene of desolation and ruin, as hopeless and heartrending as only the fire fiend can make it.

The fire originated on Wednesday last about 7 o'clock, and has been raging with unabated fury ever since. There is now, however, some hope that the Greenstone river, which, with its beaches and sandy bed, is nearly a mile in width, will interpose a barrier sufficient to stop the

further progress of the conflagration, and that thus the bush of Mount Nicholas to the south of the Greenstone will be spared. Little is known of the origin of the fire, which commenced at Birrell's in the Dart Valley, and driven by a strong north-westerly breeze down the lake swept everything before it. The scene of the fire during the previous night is described as appalling in the extreme. A number of woodcutter's huts have been destroyed. The exact number is not known, but two families have been rendered homeless. Many of the woodcutters lost large quantities of firewood already cut, representing months of labour. It was only with the greatest difficulty that the sawmills and Bryant's Hotel at Kinloch were saved, the fire reaching to the very garden fence of the hotel. The furniture was removed in all haste, but a change of wind saved the buildings. The tourists staying at the hotel were taken by boat to Glenorchy as a point of safety.

Heavy rains which have fallen since then have quenched the fire."

This was a serious fire and if you go up the hill on the Kinloch side the charred stumps are still plentiful, even 127 years later. So, what happened? Fred Miller in "Golden Days of Lake County" says that the fire occurred because men from Glenorchy side of the river had come across and killed a cattle beast, and set fire to destroy the hide, which in turn set the grass on fire. According to Fred the culprits were ultimately arrested and sentenced. It was January, hot and there was no refrigeration. Quite how thieves could good keep the meat in good condition let alone get the quarters across the Dart River is not explained. In March, 1887, a couple of months later, two brothers, Walter and Arthur Birchall, found a young steer of Richard Bryant's in their herd of bullocks. When they got to Glacier Creek they shot it in the creek bed. The dead steer was noticed and Bryant was quickly on the scene and there was a Court case eventually. It would appear this story was incorporated into the fire story. One of the Birchall brothers had only one arm and the other only one arm. This explains why they do not feature in any of the Head of the Lake cricket teams. The brothers were woodcutters, today we would call them firewood merchants, and this was a common occupation. The firewood was sent to Queenstown as firewood was needed all year round for heating and as a cooking fuel.

The Southland Times published a letter from a woman living in Kinloch that suggests that the fire had been burning for some time and it is likely that a nor'wester blew up and it really took off. The ODT article has the fire beginning at the Birrell's place. The only record of a Birrell is a John Birrell, a bushman, of Kinloch in the 1881 Electoral Roll. We will never know but there is the suspicion that the bush fire occurred simply

because a small fire was not extinguished properly.

If you look at the Humboldts from the Glenorchy side, where there is no bush is where the fire raged. It entered the bush between the present Woodbine homestead and Kinloch. The photos of the area before and after the fire show this clearly. The present bush at the lake edge is probably regeneration

An industry that serviced a large area was made largely defunct, 80 to 100 men lost their livelihoods, homes were destroyed, the shipping on the lake must have suffered a major income decline and there was an enormous loss of native bush. There had to have been a immediate population decline – perhaps 30% or more. Imagine that today.