

The Brighton Cyclone

From information compiled by Faye Coates

The recent cyclones in and around Australia have prompted many a question and a number of discussions, causing us to delve into our files and compile an article based on information on what has gone down in history as *The Brighton Cyclone*.

Early one Saturday afternoon, on 2nd February, 1918 and nine months before the end of the first World War, two strong wind gusts, one from Williamstown in the north-west and the other from Brighton Beach in the south-west, crossed paths, resulting in a cyclone (or hurricane) which caused tremendous destruction in Brighton.

The Williamstown squall hit Brighton near Wellington Street and continued east towards Bentleigh and McKinnon. The Brighton Beach squall continued north-east through Landcox Park and seemed to stop at the Brighton Cemetery.

The whole sky became overcast, and the sultry heat of the morning gave place to a strong squall from the north or the north-west accompanied by driving sheets of rain, which caused the abandonment of many outdoor sports. The wind was strong enough to break large branches off trees, and to uproot a few of the more exposed, but it did no more damage than many previous storms.

At about half-past four, however, residents of Brighton noticed heavy blue-black cloud gathering in the south-west and growing more menacing. A quarter of an hour later, with scarcely a warning sound, a gale of unprecedented violence struck the foreshore.... The moment it struck the mainland, air became thick with flying tiles, sheets of galvanised iron, branches of trees and large sections of wood. The wonder of it is that more people were not injured.

Sheets of iron were flying through the air like birds, and there are authenticated cases of heavy beams being carried more than 100 yards before they fell to the earth. Every house that was unroofed was also flooded, causing serious damage to carpets, pictures and furniture. The three or four minutes the storm (hurricane) lasted was a period of terror..... Argus 04/02/1918

Amazingly only two deaths occurred. Probably the severe wind gusts in the afternoon deterred people from venturing outside.

Young Frank Green, 14, of Chetwynd Street, North Melbourne was killed as a result of the storm. He was with the 'Sower's Band Picnic' at Brighton Beach and left with a friend to go for a swim in the baths. They reached a fruit stall on the return journey at the height of the storm and the stall fell on the boy, severing the top of his head. The other boy aged 10, was blown along the Esplanade until rescued, dazed and bleeding, by two Hawaiian sailors, who put him on a train to Balaclava where the police took charge of him and he was able to certify that the body found was that of his little comrade. Southern Cross 09/02/1918

A Mr G. McLeod from Sydney was at sea when the cyclone struck and he sadly drowned.

The Southern Cross had numerous accounts of lucky escapes, injured people, overturned boats and cabs with lots of damage caused by flying debris. Colonel Kendall's little daughter, Winnie, received a lot of sympathy when the cyclone hit her

family's home.

The two storey house on the corner of Albert and Wellington Streets was occupied by Colonel E. A. Kendall C.M.G. on active service. His six year old daughter, Winnie, was in her bedroom at the front of the house when the cyclone blew away the walls and most of the flooring and caused the roof to fall in. Despite the fury of the gale and the danger attending entry into the room, the maid, Miss Barbara Phillips of Albury, who was the only other occupant of the house, went to the little girl's assistance in response to her screams and courageously extracted her from the debris. The little girl sustained a broken leg and she was taken by Mr J Kilgour in his motor to St Vincent Hospital. Southern Cross 09/02/1918

Landcox Park was devastated. Amazingly, Adam Lindsay Gordon's headstone was the only one demolished by the cyclone at Brighton Cemetery. There was a lot of destruction in the grounds of Billilla and the surrounding houses. The damage surrounding Billilla was evident in these news items:

From Mrs Weatherly's the Brighton Beach hurricane continued on its track striking Mr Frank Smith's house in Hampton Street. Mr and Mrs Smith were packing comforts for the Brighton men at the front and when the first signs of the storm became noticeable. They moved out to the vestibule, away from the dining room chimney front in accordance with the usual custom during heavy weather. They have reason to regard the custom as more than directed by superstition as the chimney came through the roof soon afterwards on the spot they had previously occupied. The Argus 04/02/1918

The Brighton Beach railway station received a hard battering and had slates torn from its roof at the sea end of the platform. The tiled roof from the signal box plus galvanised sheets of iron strewn over the railway line blocked the Sandringham trains. An electric light pole that snapped off near the ground looked like it had been chopped with an axe. The Argus reported that a breakdown gang had the Sandringham line operating by Sunday morning. The Brighton telephone exchange was not operating; however some Brighton residents could ring other exchanges. The Electric Light Co. turned off its main until Sunday morning as there were wires left dangling on the ground. Many people volunteered to help the emergency workers hand out roof tarpaulins and assisted the clean-up operations ensuring people were safe to return to their homes. The Brighton Beach Baths were partially destroyed as were the Rotunda tearooms and the bandstand.

Today's Commonwealth Bureau of Meteorology site informs us that the 1918 Brighton Cyclone, which they called a hurricane, had wind speeds estimated at 320km/h (Fujita rating F3) making this possibly the most extreme tornado to hit a major Australian city. Fortunately the cyclone followed a narrow pathway and only travelled inland for about two kilometres. By comparison, the maximum wind speed for Darwin's Cyclone Tracey in 1974 was recorded at 217km/h before the wind recording instruments were destroyed and gusts up to 285km/h were recorded recently in Queensland for Cyclone Yasi.

From Journal No.156, Winter, 2011



Rotunda Tearooms and Bandstand,
Brighton Beach



Billilla in Halifax Street after the 1918
cyclone



Mr J. A. Grant's Hay and Corn Store,
Well Street



Damaged residence in Wellington
Street