

## Adelaide Fire Brigade 1839

The South Australian Company is mentioned being mentioned at the Fire which destroyed a number of buildings their large fire engine

***Southern Australian (Adelaide, SA : 1838 - 1844), Wednesday 23 January 1839, page 2***

### DESTRUCTIVE FIRE,

IT is our painful duty to record this week one of the most distressing events that has happened in our infant settlement since its establishment, —the total destruction by fire, yesterday afternoon, of the Land Office, the private residence and buildings belonging to J. H. Fisher, Esq., our late Colonial Commissioner, with the other buildings attached, and also that of the Survey Office, with the residence of Colonel Light, our late Surveyor-General.

The fire commenced at Mr. Fisher's about two o'clock in the afternoon of yesterday the 22nd inst, and an alarm was given by the servants immediately; but the premises being composed entirely of thatch, in a few minutes the whole was in one mass of flame. A strong wind from the S.W. added to the fury of the devouring element, and in less than ten minutes it was a heap of ruins. The Land Office, which was attached to the western end of the building, caught fire almost immediately, and being built of wood soon shared the same fate. While the conflagration was at its height, a stream of fire from the burning mass was carried by the wind towards the Survey Office, which was situated exactly in the direction of the wind, and the thatched roof of Colonel Light's residence took fire instantaneously. With almost equal rapidity the whole range of his buildings were one mass of flame, and the Survey Office was speedily included in the work of destruction. Within twenty minutes from the commencement of the fire both these extensive ranges of buildings were heaps of ruins. The destruction of property has been very considerable, but we have the satisfaction to state that not many valuable official papers have been destroyed. In the Land Office, a large iron safe, built into substantial masonry, contained nearly every important document relative to the grants of land, and every effort was used by the assembled colonists to pre-serve this important repository from injury, and at a late hour in the evening it was opened in the pre-sense of His Excellency the Governor, and altho' the fire had slightly affected some of the documents, no essential damage appears to have been sustained. Mr. Brown, the Emigration Agent, who has temporarily occupied part of the Land Office for the business of his department, saved all the papers belonging to it ; the original map of the Preliminary Sections, and of the Town, was also rescued, although partly damaged ; but all the furniture, stationary, and fittings up, were destroyed; At the Survey Office the loss was less extensive. Fortunately some of the Assistant Surveyors and Draftsmen were in the office, and by their exertions, assisted by the ready help of the assembled colonists, nearly all the maps and moat of the furniture were rescued with such injury only as they sustained through so hasty a removal. The horses also which occupied the range of stables at the back of the Land Office were got out, we believe, without any accident. Mr. Fisher and Col. Light have thus had to witness the total destruction of their houses, furniture books, a considerable quantity of livestock consisting of pigs, poultry, &c, and, what is beyond all the rest, being irremediable, their private accounts and papers. Scarcely an article of any value has been saved by either party from the devouring element. At Mr. Fisher's also were destroyed nearly all the books and papers belonging to Messrs. Fisher, brothers ; and amongst in Colonel Light's losses we must include several of his instruments, the whole of his valuable portfolios of drawings executed during his residence in Egypt and in the Peninsula, and what as colonists we yet more regret, the private journal he has diligently kept for the last 30 years. So rapid was the progress of the flames that the in-mates in either residence had scarcely time to escape.

Too great praise cannot be given to the colonists assembled on this occasion, for the zeal and promptitude evinced by one and all to do what they could. There was, however, no opportunity for them effectually to exert themselves, but it must, hereafter be a gratifying reflection to both Mr. Fisher and Col. Light, notwithstanding their losses, to see how cordially

the assembled hundreds sympathized with them. The Police were on the spot at a very early period, and every exertion was made to recover from the ruins some thing of value ; we noticed also His Excellency the Governor, Mr. Hall, and others, anxiously encouraging by their presence those who were exerting themselves. It seems almost to serve as an addition to the regret generally felt at this calamity, that Col. Light was engaged packing up for the purpose of removing to his country section, and had this even therefore, happened only two or three days later, he would have had nearly everything removed. Mr. Fisher also was preparing to quit at an early period, and in a short time all his papers, if not the rest of his property, would have been preserved. These buildings were two of the earliest erected in the Colony, and their extreme dryness after two summers, no doubt assisted the work of destruction, but happily there is but one more house in town composed entirely of dried reeds.

We are sorry to add that we, hear that some of the labourers in the employ of Colonel Light have lost a great portion of their savings by imprudently keeping them in bank notes in the buildings they occupied. The South Australian Company promptly offered their large fire engine, as soon as the alarm was given, but it was evident from the first moment that no effort could save any part of either building. We have not yet heard an accurate account of the origin of the fire, but appeared to those earliest on the spot that it commenced in or near the chimney at the eastern end of Mr. Fisher's house, and it is supposed that by some flaw in the chimney a spark was communicated to the thatch above ; but this is at present mere conjecture. If anything can alleviate the feelings of our esteemed and respected friends who are the losers on the present occasion, it will be the general and deep feeling of gloom which this event has spread over the whole Colony. The loss to our friends is without remedy ; but stripped as they have been of everything about them, they retain, and ever will retain, that evidence of respect and esteem on the part of the whole Colony which we venture to say, great as their losses are they yet more highly value.

***South Australian Gazette and Colonial Register (Adelaide, SA : 1836 - 1839), Saturday 26 January 1839, page 3***

Disastrous Fire. — On Tuesday afternoon about two o'clock, a fire broke out in the private residence of Mr. Fisher, which, being composed of reeds, was in a very few moments entirely consumed. The flames communicating to the Land Office and other wooden buildings attached, they speedily shared the same fate. A strong south-westerly wind carrying a stream of flame towards the Survey Office, the work of devastation did not cease until that and the private residence of Colonel Light were also reduced to ruins. The whole of this awful and distressing scene did not occupy the space of more than half an hour. The loss of private property has been great; but we are happy to say that few official papers or documents of public importance have been destroyed; and in the Survey Office, owing to the presence of some of the assistant surveyors and draftsmen, most of the maps and furniture were saved. The losses sustained by both families are considerable; but among those of Colonel Light, which may be regarded as irreparable, were his portfolios of drawings made during his residence in the Peninsula and in Egypt, and a private journal of the last thirty years of his life. The immediate cause of the fire does not appear to be known, as it had already made considerable progress in the thatch before it was perceived.

***Southern Australian (Adelaide, SA : 1838 - 1844), Wednesday 30 January 1839, page 4***

SOUTH AUSTRALIAN GAZETTE

TENDERS.

COLONIAL SECRETARY'S OFFICE.

Adelaide, January 25. 1839.

IN consequence of the recent destruction of the Public Offices by fire-Notice is hereby given that Tenders will be received from parties desirous of contracting for the erection of Public

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19 April 2026

Offices on the land reserved for such purposes in Victoria Square, on or before Monday the February 11, at 12 o'clock.

Plans and specifications may be seen at the office of G. S. Kingston, Esq. Civil Engineer, on and after Monday the 4th February.

The contractors will be required to give security to the extent of one-third of the contract taken by them. Parties are therefore requested to name in their tenders a responsible person as surety.

By His Excellency's command,

GEO. M. STEPHEN,

Colonial Secretary.

***Southern Australian (Adelaide, SA : 1838 - 1844), Wednesday 20 February 1839, page 2***

FIRE - Another distressing accident from Fire occurred on Saturday last, ending in the total destruction of the dwellings of Messrs Ewings and Cook in Morphett street, (the property of Mr. A. Best of Launceston) and at one time the houses in the surrounding neighbourhood were in very imminent danger, the activity of the numerous workmen and others collected on the spot, however, confined the damage to the two dwellings above mentioned. It is high time that some steps were taken by the government as to the employment of thatch for roofing houses in the town, and the general construction of the dwellings of the poorer colonists. We fully expect that some day we shall have the pain to record some most destructive and distressing accident arising from the imperfect and dangerous construction of many of the dwellings in Hindley and the neighbouring streets. No thatch should be used in the town, and the Government ought immediately to introduce some regulation as to the construction of the chimneys and party walls of the numerous smaller dwellings. The Company's fine new Fire Engine, though late in its arrival, did most effective service upon the occasion, and we hope it will at all times be placed at the disposal of the government when its services are so much needed.

(Ed - Fire occurred on the 16th February)

***South Australian Gazette and Colonial Register (Adelaide, SA : 1836 - 1839), Saturday 11 May 1839, page 3***

FIRE—CONDUCT OF THE NATIVES.

To the Editor of the South Australian Gazette.

SIR - Finding that the Southern Australian of this day has not reported the conduct of some of our friendly natives at a fire which unfortunately broke out on Monday last, in the thatch of the Sydney Hotel, North-terrace, and supposing the case may escape your notice also, I feel myself bound, as one of the many eyewitnesses of the fire, to remove that possibility by reporting the following particulars:— On the day mentioned an alarm of fire was given. I ran immediately to the place, and found the flames spreading rapidly around a chimney at the back of the Sydney Hotel. The most fearful apprehensions were for some time entertained, as may be imagined by those who know the premises. They and some of the adjoining houses are among the first that were built in the colony, all of which are covered with an immense body of dry thatch. Great praise is due to the colonists assembled, who vied with each other in their exertions to stay the threatened ruin. But to the abused and misrepresented blacks is mainly to be attributed the salvation of the whole range of buildings. Their noble and manly efforts to save the property from destruction could not have been more efficiently or more willingly used had they been offered thousands of sheep and bullocks to do so. The well-known, civil, and intelligent Bob, Captain Jack, and Old William were the most conspicuous. They mounted the roof and ripped off the thatch. Bob was seen through a cloud of smoke beating down the flames with his broad brimmed straw hat, until water could be handed up,

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and thus were the premises saved. Some native women were all the time most actively employed in carrying to a distance the thatch thrown from the roof. I could not but admire the heartfelt satisfaction that beamed on their dark countenances when they saw the fire a conquered foe. They waited till the fire was extinct, then moved off to a distance, looking not for the reward they merited. The applauding colonists, however, distributed a few sixpences among them, and my friend Bob soon afterwards showed me some bread and a few fishes he had bought, and he felt himself rich with three sixpences remaining. I leave these facts in the hands of your readers and trust they will have due weight. I am, Sir Your obedient servant H. CALTON Hindley-st., May 8, 1839.

***South Australian Record (London, England : 1837 - 1840), Wednesday 12 June 1839, page 5***

#### DESTRUCTIVE FIRE.

IT is our painful duty to record this week one of the most distressing events that has happened in our infant settlement since its establishment,—the total destruction by fire, on the afternoon of the 21st January, of the Land Office, the private residence and buildings belonging to J. H. Fisher, Esq., our late Colonial Commissioner, with the other buildings attached, and also that of the Survey Office, with the residence of Colonel Light, our late Surveyor-General. The fire commenced at Mr Fisher's about two o'clock, and an alarm was given by the servants immediately ; but the premises being composed entirely of thatch, in a few minutes the whole was in one mass of flame. A strong wind from the S.W. added to the fury of the devouring element, and in less than ten minutes it was a heap of ruins. The Land Office, which was attached to the western end of the building, caught fire almost immediately, and being built of wood soon shared the same fate. While the conflagration was at its height, a stream of fire from the burning mass was carried by the wind towards the Survey Office, which was situated exactly in the direction of the wind, and the thatched roof of Colonel Light's residence took fire instantaneously. With almost equal rapidity the whole range of his buildings were one mass of flame, and the Survey Office was speedily included in the work of destruction. Within twenty minutes from the commencement of the fire both these extensive ranges of buildings were heaps of ruins. The destruction of property has been very considerable, but we have the satisfaction to state that not many valuable official papers have been destroyed. In the Land Office, a large iron safe, built into substantial masonry, contained nearly every important document relative to the grants of land, and every effort was used by the assembled colonists to preserve this important repository from injury, and at a late hour in the evening it was opened in the presence of his Excellency the Governor, and although the fire had slightly affected some of the documents, no essential damage appears to have been sustained. Mr Brown, the Emigration Agent, who has temporarily occupied part of the Land Office for the business of his department, saved all the papers belonging to it; the original map of the Preliminary Sections, and of the Town, was also rescued, although partly damaged; but all the furniture, stationery, and fittings up, were destroyed. At the Survey Office the loss was less extensive. Fortunately some of the Assistant Surveyors and Draftsmen were in the office, and by their exertions, assisted by the ready help of the assembled colonists, nearly all the maps and most of the furniture were rescued, with such injury only as they sustained through so hasty a removal. The horses also which occupied the range of stables at the back of the Land Office were got out, we believe, without any accident. "Mr Fisher and Col. Light have thus had to witness the total destruction of their houses, furniture, books, a considerable quantity of live stock consisting of pigs, poultry, &c., and, what is beyond all the rest, being irremediable, their private accounts and papers. Scarcely an article of any value has been saved by either party from the devouring element.

At Mr Fisher's also were destroyed nearly all the books and papers belonging to Messrs Fisher, brothers; and amongst Colonel Light's losses we must include several of his instruments, the whole of his valuable portfolios of drawings executed during his residence in Egypt and the Peninsula, and what as colonists we yet more regret, the private journal he has diligently kept for the last 30 years. So rapid was the progress of the flames that the inmates in either residence had scarcely time to escape. Too great praise cannot be given to the

colonists assembled on this occasion for the zeal and promptitude evinced by one and all to do what they could. There was, however, no opportunity for them effectually to exert themselves, but it must hereafter be a gratifying reflection to both Mr Fisher and Col. Light, notwithstanding their losses, to see how cordially the assembled hundreds sympathized with them. The police were on the spot at a very early period, and every exertion was made to recover from the ruins some things of value; we noticed also his Excellency the Governor, Mr Hall, and others, anxiously encouraging by their presence those who were exerting themselves. It seems almost to serve as an addition to the regret generally felt at this calamity, that Col. Light was engaged packing up for the purpose of removing to his country section, and had this event therefore, happened only two or three days later, he would have had nearly every thing removed. Mr Fisher also was preparing to quit at an early period, and in a short time all his papers, if not the rest of his property, would have been preserved. These buildings were two of the earliest erected in the Colony, and their extreme dryness after two summers, no doubt assisted the work of destruction, but happily there is but one more house in town composed entirely of dried reeds. We are sorry to add that we hear that some of the labourers in the employ of Colonel Light have lost a great portion of their savings by imprudently keeping them in bank notes in the buildings they occupied. The South Australian Company promptly offered their large fire engine, as soon as the alarm was given, but it was evident from the first moment, that no effort could save any part of either building. We have not yet heard an accurate account of the origin of the fire, but it appeared to those earliest on the spot that it commenced in or near the chimney at the eastern end of Mr Fisher's house, and it is supposed that by some flaw in the chimney a spark was communicated to the thatch above but this is at present mere conjecture. If anything can alleviate the feelings of our esteemed and respected friends who are the losers on the present occasion, it will be the general and deep feeling of gloom which this event has spread over the whole Colony. The loss to our friends is without remedy; but stripped as they have been of everything about them, they retain, and ever will retain, that evidence of respect and esteem on the part of the whole Colony which we venture to say, great as their losses are, they yet more highly value.

***South Australian Record (SA : 1837 - 1840), Wednesday 10 July 1839, page 2***

We regret to state that another distressing accident from fire occurred on the 16th February, ending in the total destruction of the houses of Messrs Ewings and Cook, in Morphett street. The damage was confined, however, to the above-mentioned dwellings by the effective service of the South Australian Company's new fire-engine, aided by the activity of the numerous workmen and others collected on the spot.

***Southern Australian (Adelaide, SA : 1838 - 1844), Wednesday 4 December 1839, page 3***

FIRE.—We very deeply regret to state that a fire broke out last Saturday afternoon in the house of JOHN BROWN, Esq., on the East Terrace, and that in a quarter of an hour, or little more, the buildings were entirely destroyed, with almost the whole of the moveable property. Mr. BROWN'S journal, papers, &c, have been nearly all consumed, with the whole of the furniture, plate, wearing apparel, &c.. which was in the house. Mr. B. was not on the premises at the time. We have been informed that the damage cannot be estimated at less than £1000.

We would suggest that it is high time an Insurance Association should be formed, now that buildings of a more substantial description, of brick or stone now rising in all directions. It is a fearful thing that property should be exposed to such a risk as at present

***Jude Elton, History Trust of South Australia, 'Colonel Light Survey Marker', SA History Hub, History Trust of South Australia, <https://sahistoryhub.history.sa.gov.au/things/colonel-light-survey-marker>***

Colonel Light's Survey Marker Monument

Colonel Light Survey Marker

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19 April 2026

This monument marks the location where Colonel William Light began his survey for the City of Adelaide in 1837. The first public offices were also built here, as were the huts of Light and Resident Commissioner James Hurtle Fisher.

#### Light's Plan

Surveyor-General Colonel William Light commenced surveying the site on which the City of Adelaide was to be situated on 11 January 1837. The survey of 1042 'town acres' was completed in just two months, despite the vegetation and a shortage of staff and resources. He was instructed to lay the city out with streets of 'ample width' arranged for the convenience of residents and 'the beauty and healthfulness of the town', and he was also required to provide for reserves 'for squares and public walks' (Advertiser, 17 July 1929, p10). These instructions were famously met in Light's Plan, which set out Light's design for the city. His grids of streets, the six squares and the surrounding parklands determine the layout of Adelaide today: it is a 'city in a park'.

In March 1837 town acres were allocated by lot to people who had bought land before leaving England. The acres remaining were then sold by auction. No treaty was entered into with the Kurna people, who had lived on the Adelaide Plains for generations, nor was the land purchased from them or any compensation paid to them for the loss of their land and livelihood. Revenue generated went into the colony's coffers.

#### Destroyed by fire

Offices of the Lands Department, headed by Resident Commissioner James Hurtle Fisher, and the Survey Department headed by Light, were also constructed on this site. Adjoining these temporary wooden structures were the primitive huts of Fisher and Light. All of these buildings were destroyed by fire in the afternoon of 22 January 1839. Tragically, Light and Fisher lost most of their papers and worldly possessions.

#### The memorial

In 1926 the Adelaide City Council considered purchasing a run-down cottage at Thebarton where Light had then lived and died in 1839 (Morton, pix). While that opportunity was not taken, one consequence was that in 1927 the South Australian geographer and educator Dr Charles AE Fenner (1884–1955) initiated the formation by the council of a Historical Memorials Committee 'to stimulate interest in the work of famous men and our fathers who begat us'. The committee was chaired by Alfred Allen Simpson (1875–1939), the chairman of directors of A Simpson & Son Ltd, president of the Royal Geographical Society of Australasia (SA Branch) and Adelaide's mayor from 1913 to 1915.

A year later, at a meeting in the rooms of the Royal Geographical Society on North Terrace, the committee recommended placing memorials across the state, including one 'memorialising the place where the survey of Adelaide had begun'. The Adelaide City Council agreed and the work was commissioned.

The memorial took the form of an obelisk and base of pink granite from around Palmer in the Mount Lofty Ranges. It was erected on the parklands opposite the Newmarket Hotel on the corner of North Terrace and West Terrace.

#### Unveiling

The monument was unveiled on 16 July 1929 at a small ceremony attended by members of the Adelaide City Council, the Historical Memorials Committee and a few citizens. Alfred Simpson opened proceedings. Lord Mayor John Lavington Bonython unveiled the memorial by pulling away the flags that covered it. All praised Light's placement and plan of the city.

A plaque on the obelisk records that the survey of Adelaide began in the vicinity in January 1837, the colony's first public offices were erected there in that year and the dwellings of James Hurtle Fisher and William Light there were destroyed by fire on 22 January 1839.

Indeed, Light's demise from tuberculosis may have been hastened by the loss of his lifetime's records and possessions that he sustained in the fire.

#### Integration into the new Royal Adelaide Hospital

In October 2011 the memorial survey marker was moved into storage while a new Royal Adelaide Hospital was being built on the site. Lord Mayor Stephen Yarwood said, 'The monument is to be restored before being placed among the new hospital landscape, bringing an important part of Adelaide's history into its future'.