

WORST BUSHFIRE IN CANBERRA'S HISTORY

OBSERVATORY WORKSHOP, EQUIPMENT DESTROYED

CANBERRA, February 5. — A devastating bushfire today destroyed the workshop and equipment at the Government observatory at Mount Stromlo worth approximately £100,000.

The fire, which was the worst in Canberra's history, also destroyed two prefabricated houses and 500 acres of pine forest surrounding the observatory, about seven miles from the city area.

At one stage the threat to the city itself was so great that the Minister for the Interior (Mr Kent Hughes) ordered the fire fighters to fall back from the main centre of the fire and take up positions to protect the city area.

The fire began shortly after midday after a dry electrical storm and within an hour had a strong hold.

Throughout the afternoon the national radio station repeated calls for volunteers to fight the fires and more than 1000 fighters went to the scene.

To add to the danger another fire broke out near Hall, a small ACT township, about 11 miles from Canberra, on the other side of Stromlo, but this was brought under control after threatening several valuable wool grazing properties.

The workshop destroyed at Mount Stromlo was one

of the most modern of its kind in the world and contained many valuable precision instruments.

Only back breaking efforts

Only back breaking efforts by fire fighters and a sudden change in the wind saved the main section of the observatory, which contained sky sweeping telescopes and time-measuring and other equipment valued at more than £1,000,000.

When the fire was approaching the observatory officials evacuated the houses in the area and residents took their furniture out into the open, but the fire stopped before it reached them.

Police sent special buses to a small settlement not far from Mount Stromlo, where they evacuated 30 children and 15 women, but the settlement escaped the blaze.

The fire threat hung over Canberra, since early this morning, when the weather was very hot, with a strong north-easterly wind — conditions similar to those on black Friday a fortnight ago, when a big fire threatened the Legation homes.

From early afternoon a heavy smoke pall hung over Canberra, with a strong odour of burning pine cones.

TIME SERVICE

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As the result of the destruction of the power plant by bushfire Mt Stromlo observatory's time service supplied throughout Australia and to ships at sea is now out of action. This means that radio listeners in Australia will be unable to receive time signals until the power has been restored. Ships on the run between England and Australia also will be without signals until they reach the Equator and are able to receive signals from Greenwich observatory. The destruction of the observatory's workshop by today's fire will render the observatory almost useless until the machinery and equipment have been replaced.