

Fire lookouts and towers ...

Victoria once had well over one hundred fire lookouts and fire towers.

Fire lookouts, or observation posts, were often just a clearing on a hill or a vantage point, whereas fire towers were definite structures.

And the way I see it there are at least three categories of fire towers... tree perches, four-legged towers made of either wood or steel, as well as hilltop cabins and observatories.

Many were established by the Forests Commission Victoria (FCV) in the 1920s, but the network was expanded rapidly in response to recommendations of the Stretton Royal Commission after the 1939 Black Friday bushfires.

The wooden towers were often built by bush craftsmen like legendary FCV overseer Clem Heather from Orbost.

But advances in aerial reconnaissance and radio technology led to the gradual reduction in the number of fixed towers.

By my count, FFMV now operates 72 fire towers. The CFA, Melbourne Water, Hancock Victorian Plantations (HVP) also operate some, the Army has one at Puckapunyal overlooking the live-firing range and I'm even aware of a private tower in Gippsland.

In some cases, there have been at least four towers on the same spot.

There are also some surprising stories about fire towers. Not surprisingly it was kept "top-secret" at the time, but a Japanese submarine was spotted in February 1942 from the FCV fire tower at Mt Raymond near Orbost by the clandestine Volunteer Air Observer Corps.

The submarine was seen sitting off the coast of Marlo and was reported to the RAAF at Bairnsdale who sent up a reconnaissance flight but it slipped away. A few days later the sub launched an audacious spy flight over Melbourne looking for bombing targets.

By 1947/48 the FCV reported the total number in operation was: hilltop lookout stations – 30, fire towers – 65 and observatories – 5.

And thirty-two students and teachers were employed during the summer 1947/48 vacation on fire patrol and detection duties.

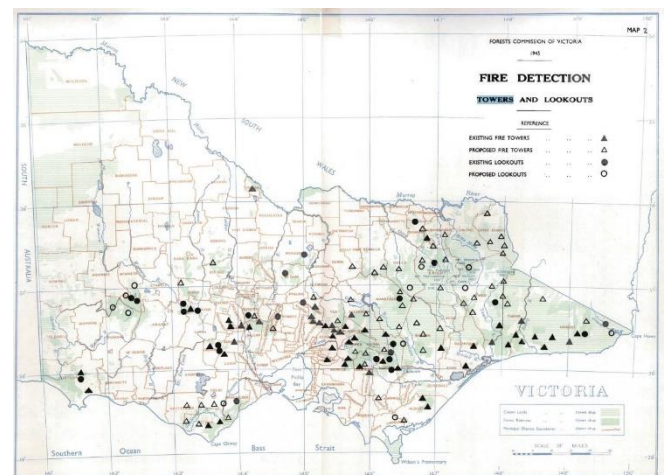
During the same fire season, 39 reconnaissance flights were made on thirteen days by RAAF aircraft from Point Cook and East Sale, and eighty-three bushfires were reported.

And for the first time, there was direct contact by radio telephone between RAAF air crew and Commission ground personnel. This had a major effect on the future of fire detection and response.

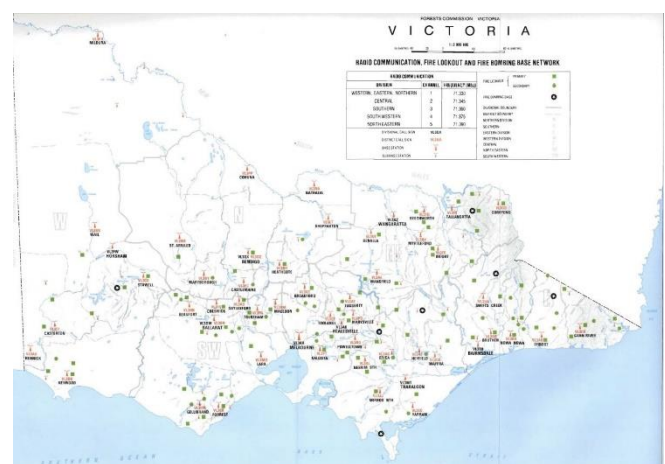
I also find it interesting how the title for those alert and vigilant souls, that spend long and lonely hours swaying up upon precarious perches, ever watchful for the threat of bushfires has evolved. Initially, they were known as fireguards, then towermen and now as Fire Lookout Officers (FLO).

So in this series of posts, I have unashamedly lifted a selection of photos from the fabulous "fire towers down under" webpage, FCV Annual Reports and the FCRPA collection to showcase some of the more eclectic fire towers from around the State.

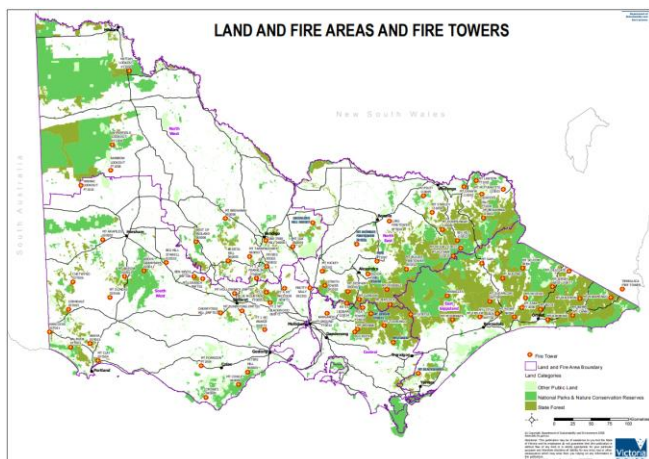
<http://www.firelookoutsdownunder.com/Victoria/victowers.html>



FCV Fire towers in 1945. Source: FCV Annual Report



FCV Fire towers in 1978. Source: State Library.



DELWP fire towers in 2009. Source: Black Saturday Royal Commission.

<http://royalcommission.vic.gov.au/getdoc/86a5e473-5f00-4e46-8f5b-c04e2dce973b/DOC.VGS.002.0001.pdf>

Type 1 – Hilltop Observation Posts



Hilltop lookouts were common and many DELWP districts still use known "vantage points" to supplement the coverage of towers and aerial reconnaissance flights. Bill ah Chow sat on a rock at Mt Nugong every summer for years before the tower was built in 1953. This photo is from the US Forest Service. Source: Forest History Society



Forest assessor John Fitzpatrick looking out over the Delatite Valley from Mt Stirling in summer 1948-49. Photo: Brian Williams



View from Mt Kent during the Moroka assessment - 1954-55. Vantage points were often used to supplement existing fire towers. Photo: Arthur Webb.



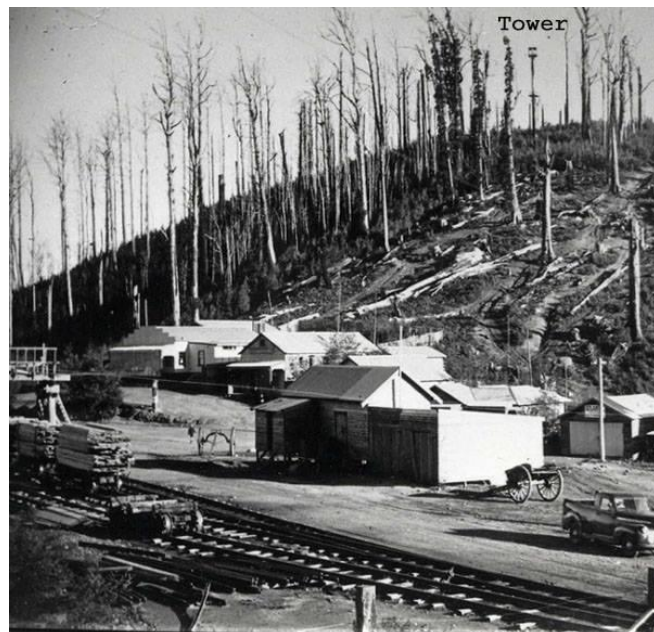
It wasn't uncommon for the junior forester to be stuck out on a rock on high fire danger days with a portable RC-16B radio phone and a pair of binoculars. But the RC-16B had fragile valves that failed if the unit was dropped or bumped.



Portable RC-16B radios required a long wire strung up between the trees as an antenna. Source: FCRPA collection.



District Forester Roly Park at Powelltown. New radios in offices enabled firefighters to communicate directly with RAAF fire reconnaissance aircraft. Source: National Archives.



View from the FCV office at Tanjil Bren – circa 1942. Fire tower No 1 sits on the hill above the settlement. Dead trees from 1939 bushfires still visible. Source: FCRPA collection

Type 2 - Treetop Perches ...



Tanjil Bren tower No 1.



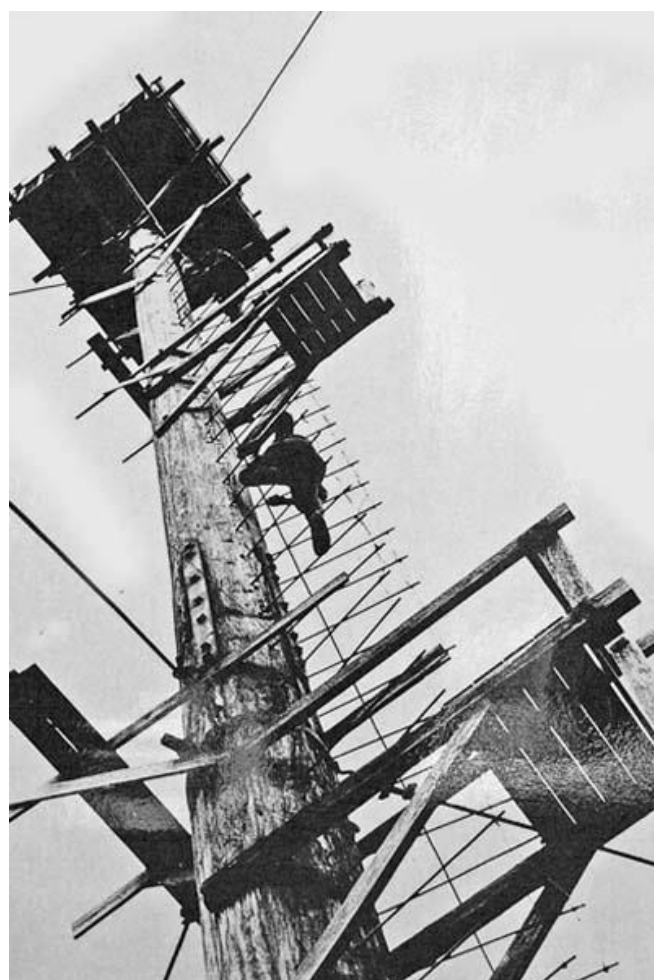
Mt Dom Dom. Board of Works. Circa 1940. Source: Fire Lookouts Down Under.



Andrews Hill near Kinglake was "built" in 1952. Photo: Circa 1956 - Melb Walking Club. Source: Fire Lookouts Down Under.



Stringer's knob tower near Orbost was built in 1941 at the suggestion of Herbert Duncan Galbraith, who was the Inspector of Forests in East Gippsland. The tower poles were 110ft long (100ft above the ground and 10ft below), with two trees - a yellow stringybark and a red ironbark bolted together. It had been listed on the Victorian Heritage Register but was sadly destroyed in the 2020 bushfires. Source: VHD



Stringers Knob. Source: FCRPA
https://www.victoriasforestryheritage.org.au/activities1/building/fire-towers/stringer-s-knob.html?fbclid=IwAR1pKD8iYeY8Q7RuiFsS3q8VLb5FTOt-flHdtk9-BP6wUqIQ_gS2_3eHck



Stringers Knob during construction in 1941. It and many other east Gippsland towers were built by Forest Overseer Clem Heather from Orbost and Charlie Wayne from Bruthen. It looks like the old tree perch is off to the left. Source: FCRPA

Type 3 - Four legged towers



Stringers Knob tower sadly burnt by fire January 2020



Typical FCV designed four-legged wooden fire tower.



Wallaby Creek in the Melbourne Water catchments. Photo: Leon Pederick. Circa 1950.



A Japanese submarine was spotted sitting off the coast of Marlo in February 1942 from the FCV fire tower at Mt Raymond. The submarine later launched a spy plane over Melbourne. This tower is another example built by Clem Heather from Orbost in the late 1930s. Source: FCRPA.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Volunteer_Air_Observers_Corps_\(Australia\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Volunteer_Air_Observers_Corps_(Australia))



Sisters, Beatrice and Hazel Stephenson were both Volunteer Air Observers at Mt Raymond near Orbost during WW2. Source: History of Orbost.



Mt Nowa Nowa tower was built in 1929/30. It's also thought the Bill ah Chow helped with its construction. Photo: Mal McKinty. Circa 1946.

EDDIE LAVELL, 52, was being hailed as the hero of fire-surrounded Orbost yesterday.

Armed with only a toilet can, Eddie fought to save expensive Telecom and ABC equipment on top of Mt. Raymond from destruction at the peak of the blaze.

As a part-time fire spotter with the Forests Commission, he was perched high in a wooden tower on top of the mountain.

Fire roared up the slopes, surrounding the fire tower and the television installation.

"I saw some grass starting to burn near the bottom of the tower and went to put it out," he said yesterday.

"When I got down I saw that one of the sheds

in the television yard was alight."

In the fierce heat, Eddie climbed a high chain-wire fence, and tried to put out the fire with the first receptacle he could find — a full toilet can.

After being beaten back by the flames, he doused himself with water from a tank and kept throwing water over the car he had driven to the mountain top.

"It was the wife's car, and there would have been hell to pay if it was burned," he said.

He then spent two hours huddled by the tank while all vegetation on the mountain was destroyed.

The tower became a blazing pillar.

Forests Commission officials said Eddie should be given a medal for his fight to save the equipment.

Eddie was forced to take the fire spotter's job when the long-running drought responsible for the Gippsland fire hit his small farm at Wombat Creek, about 20 km west of Orbost.

His farm escaped damage during the fire.

Eddie said yesterday he wanted to go back to the burnt-out tower. "I lost my glasses up there," he said.



• Mr Lavell

The old wooden tower at Mt Raymond burnt down during a fierce bushfire early in the fire season. Herald Sun, 4 October 1980.

Source: Mark Webster



Fire surrounds the old Mt Nowa Nowa wooden tower on 4 January 2020. The upper level horizontal braces are alight. Source: DELWP.



The end of the old Mt Nowa Nowa wooden tower on 4 January 2020. Source: DELWP.



The end of the old Mt Nowa Nowa wooden tower on 4 January 2020. Source: DELWP.



The ignominious end of the Mt Granya Tower near Tallangatta. Circa 1972. Source: Fire Lookouts Down Under.



Rainbow lookout. Photo: Barry Marsden. Source: Fire Lookouts Down Under.



This rather flimsy looking structure is at Mt Disappointment. There are several references in FCV annual reports about using temporary scaffolding to test the suitability of sites before committing funds to major tower construction. This may be an example. Photo: Circa 1947 supplied by the Melbourne Walking Club. Source: Fire Lookouts Down Under.



Mt Elliot near Corryong. Circa 1963. Source: Fire Lookouts Down Under.



Mt Donna Buang circa 1918. Source: State Library.



"Egg Rock" was a huge granite tor that was blown off its pedestal by some mischievous locals in the 1960s and now sits in the bush at the bottom of the hill. Source: Gembrook History.



Mt Donna Buang was built by the Public Works Dept, MMBW, Healesville tourism association and the FCV in 1927/28 – Photo 1942. Source: State Library.



The original Egg Rock tower near Gembrook was a single tree dating from 1940/41. Source: Fire Lookouts Down Under.



The tree at Egg Rock was originally built in 1940/41 and replaced by the new four legged tower in 1947/48. Photo: Melb bushwalking club, circa 1949. Source: Fire Lookouts Down Under.



The current Egg Rock number 4 tower was built in 2002. Source: Fire Lookouts Down Under.



Egg Rock number 3 built 1962. Source: Fire Lookouts Down Under.



Frank Angilino, in the old fire tower at Sheoak Rise, north of Heywood, before it was moved by the FCV to a new site at Mt Annya in 1976. Note the map board with compass centres to triangulate and pinpoint the location of new fires. Source: FCRPA collection.



The new metal Mt Annya tower at Heywood - December 1976 -
Photo David Gallacher.



Mt Nugong Tower in 1958. Source: FCRPA

<https://victoriasforestryheritage.org.au/activities1/building/fire-towers/mt-nugong.html>



Mt Nugong Tower under construction in 1953. The tower was scrounged from the RAAF base at Bairnsdale. The tower man was the legendary Bill Ah Chow from the late 1930s. Photo: A Hodgson.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_William_Ah_Chow



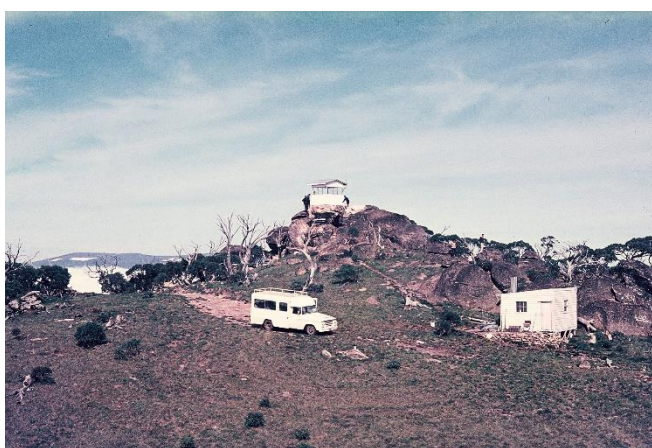
Inside the very well-equipped MMBW tower at Mt St Leonard overlooking Melbourne's water catchments in 1959. This is the second tower and was built in 1949. The current tower is the third one on the site and was built in the mid-1980s. The first tower was a precarious tree top perch from the 1930s. Source: Melbourne Water.

<https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/60676946>

Type 4 – Hilltop Cabins and Observatories



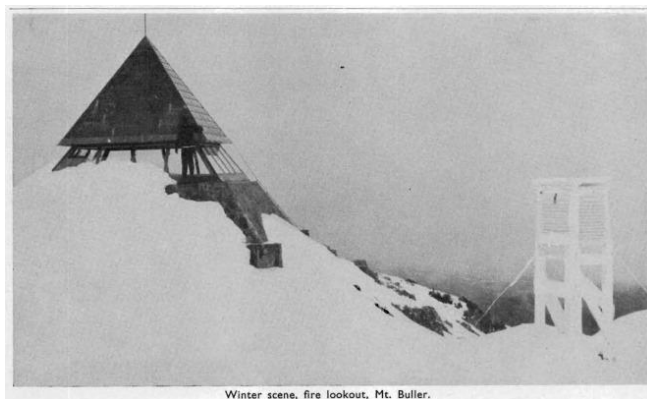
Mt Skene fire lookout on the Jamieson-Licola Road. Photo: Gregor Wallace – 1959.



Mt Wills cabin was built in 1962/63. Photo: Ian Hastings 1968/69



Mt Buller. Circa 1953. Source: Fire Lookouts Down Under.



Mt Buller was built by the Forests Commission in 1966/67. Photo: FCV Annual Report 1968/69.



The Mt Buller Observatory was built in 1966/67. Photo 2009. Note the addition of lightning rod protection and shutters. Source: Fire Lookouts Down Under



Mt McDonald (replaced by a tower at nearby Mt Toorongo in 1968/69). Photo: 1963. National Archives. Note the tepee shower rig for the tower man who lived there.



Wee Koon Peng, an Architecture student at the University of Melbourne, spent his summer vacation on lookout at Mt McDonald in 1963. Photo: National Archives.



The sad end of Mt McDonald. Source: Fire Lookouts Down Under.



Pinnacles Cabin north of Briagolong was built in 1961/62. Photo taken by Dave Gallacher in 1978/80 when the structure was looking a bit tired. The building was demolished and replaced in the mid -1980s.



Mt McDonald looking a bit worse for wear. Vanadalsm was reported as an ongoing problem. Circa 1969. Source: Fire Lookouts Down Under.



The replacement Pinnacles 1987.



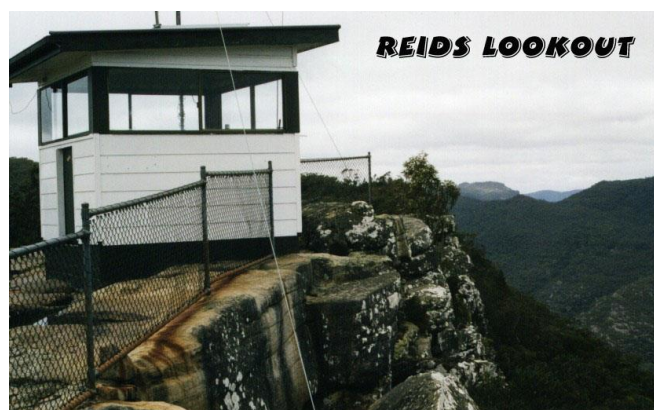
View from the old Pinnacles lookout. circa 1992. Photo: Peter McHugh



The new Pinnacles lookout. Source: Fire Lookouts Down Under.



The Pinnacles lookout was burnt December in 2006. Source: Fire Lookouts Down Under.



Reids lookout in the Grampians is probably one of the most visited in the State. It was built in 1962/63 and replaced in 2002. Source: Fire Lookouts Down Under.



Flying in replacement materials 2006 for the Pinnacles tower. Source: Fire Lookouts Down Under.



A very solid fortification at Kangaroo Ground. CFA. Source: Wikipedia.