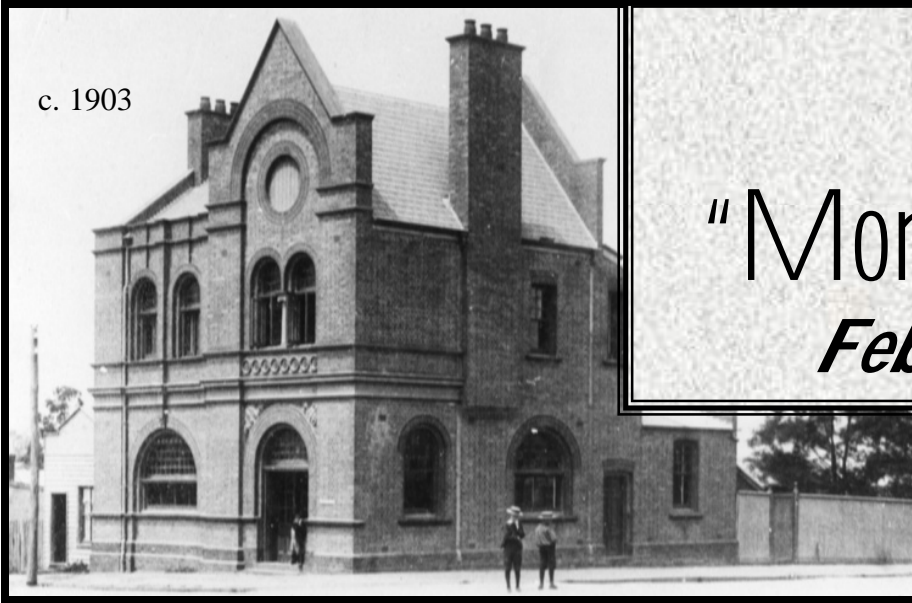


Morwell Historical Society Inc.

www.morwellhistoricalsociety.org.au

c. 1903



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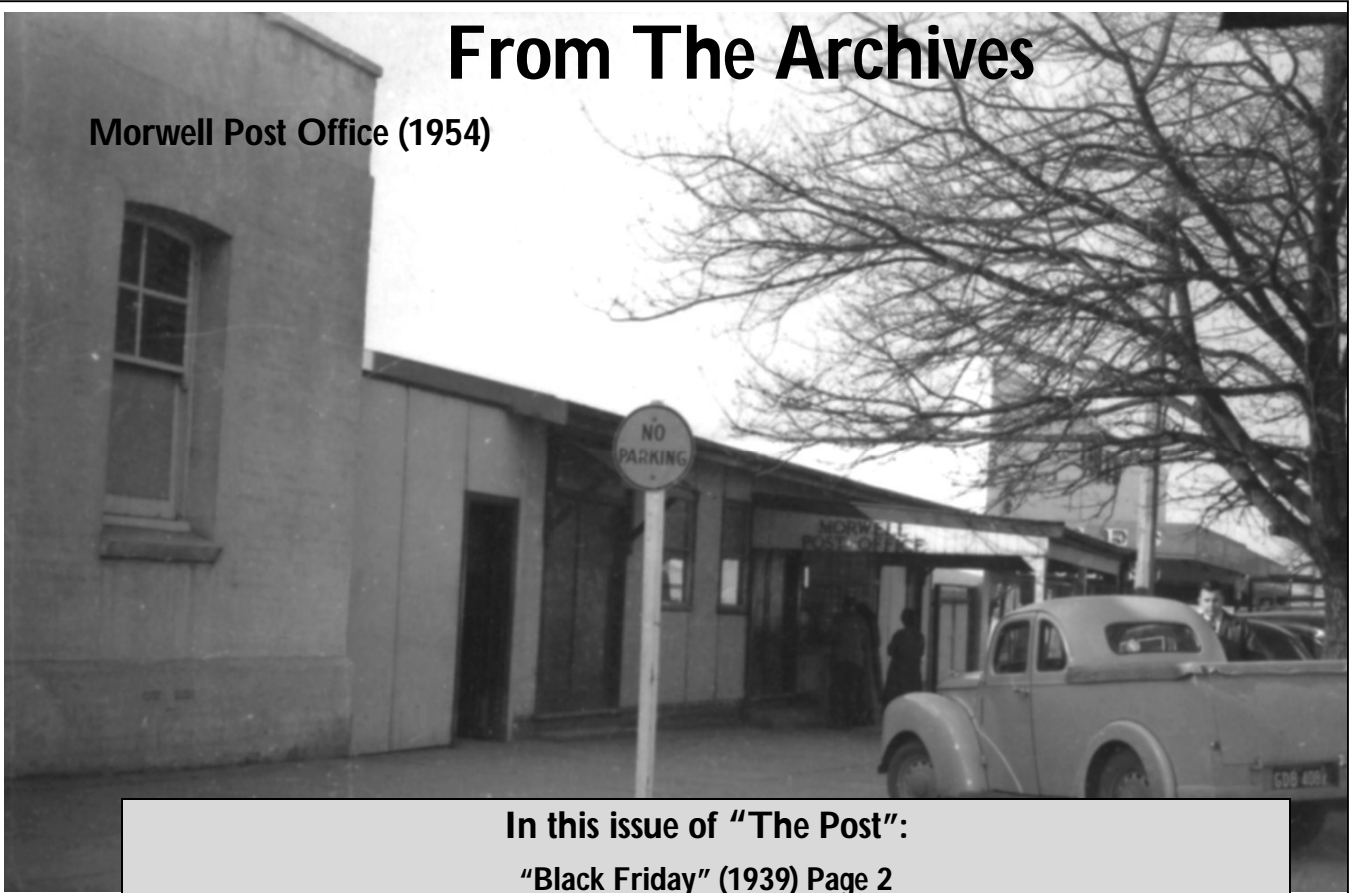
Compiled by: Stephen Hellings

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Items for publication in the "Post" are always welcome; please forward your contributions to either Elsie or myself. S. H.
(P.O. Box 1163 Morwell 3840)

From The Archives

Morwell Post Office (1954)



In this issue of "The Post":

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BLACK FRIDAY – 13th. January 1939

My 15th. BIRTHDAY

Written and compiled by
Gwenda Y. Booth (nee Jones)
Queensland (2005)

I am Gwenda Yvonne Booth (nee Jones), the eldest daughter of David Henry and Louisa Maud Jones (nee JacJung). On the day of my 15th. Birthday on the 13th. January 1939, although now well over 66 years and some of the events of that day are now a bit sketchy, I still haven't forgotten them. On that day I was home on the farm at "Marwan Vale" Jeeralang North just 19 miles out from Morwell. My mother Louisa Maud Watts, my Stepfather Percival Watts (who we called "Watty") and his nephew Leslie Wise age 12 who was up from Melbourne on school holidays, were home.

The morning of the 13th. started off quite warm with no clouds in the sky and I thought I was in for a quiet day for my Birthday, with the harvesting finished and my two sisters Moira and Selma had just left a few days earlier for Melbourne for a few days holiday down with my mother's sister Elma Turner, so my mother invited our next door neighbour's two children John Robinson age 12 and his sister Rita age 9 for afternoon tea.

The Robinson's farm was up on the hill adjoining our property, the hill we called the "Joy". My mother said it had been called that as long as she could remember. My great grandparents Lee Hang and Katherine Jacjung (nee Hornick) moved to the "Marwan Vale" Farm in 1884. The road up to the Robinson's house, started at our front gate and round it's way around the side of the "Joy". The Robinson's did have another road up to their house up the other side of the hill.

Just before lunch some clouds started to appear on the horizon, in the direction of the "Ladder" which is at the junction of the Jeeralang West and Walker's Road, (Jeeralang North road) and the Jeeralang West School and we thought "great" as it looked as though we were going to get some rain as we had not had any rain for some months and our water tank was nearly empty and we had not been able to have a bath or wash the dirty clothes, because we were so short of water, but when we saw the clouds in the distance, 'Watty' decided that he would empty what water that was left in the tank and then give it a good clean out as it hadn't been cleaned out for some years. While we were having lunch the tank was emptied, we only got two kerosene tins of drinkable water out of the tank, what was left was too dirty to drink so Watty used what water that was left to give the tank a good wash out.

Leslie and I did the lunch dishes, then we left home to walk up the "Joy" to the Robinson's house, as Mrs Robinson had invited me up to their place to collect a Birthday present that she had had sent out from England for me, and her two children were to come back with Leslie and I for afternoon tea. While we were away, my mother was to ice the fruit cake for my Birthday, but my mother started to get very concerned at the way the clouds were forming, they just didn't look like rain clouds as they were so "BLACK" and frightening and they were still moving across from the direction of the Jeeralang West school very fast.

We didn't stay too long up at the Robinson's as we wanted to get back home before it started to rain, but by the time the four of us reached our front gate there was not thunder or lightning, but it was very windy and the sky was so "BLACK and EERIE", but when we got to our front

gate my mother was there to meet us and she was very concerned and worried and very agitated and she ordered us 'Kids' down to the 'Springs' down in the gully just below our cow shed, and just as my mother started to tell us to get down to the 'Spring', all of a sudden all the bracken ferns that were around the Spring "exploded" into flames, then "ALL HELL" seemed to let loose, and the whole "SKY" appeared to be on fire and everything was "EXPLODING" into flames around us, the "FIRE" was coming out of the "SKY".

We all rushed up the laneway to the house – things one does in a panic – I grabbed a blanket and threw all our shoes into it, wrapped up my Birthday cake (un-iced) in a tea-towel and threw it in with the shoes, the two boys grabbed the basket of dirty washing from the wash room and we headed for the nearly dry 'Spring' just above the house on the side of the hill which rose just up from the house, Watty took the two kerosene tins of water that he had just taken out of the tank up to the 'Spring' for us.

Then my mother came up to the 'Spring' and told me I wasn't to panic and that I was to look after Leslie, John and Rita and that we were not to move from the 'Spring' at all. My mother also told me to keep a Brave Face and at all times, stay calm, so the three children wouldn't get frightened and panic. I will say they were very good the whole time. My mother must have known that we'd be safe sitting near that 'Spring' as the paddock that the 'Spring' was in, was clear of all growth as we had not had rain for a couple of months the grass in that paddock was very short. When the smoke became so thick that we couldn't breathe we took a few dirty towels out of the clothes basket and soaked them in one of our tins of precious drinking water, then we wrapped the wet towels around our head and face so we could breathe.

Our house was the only house in the area that escaped from being burnt down, but we lost everything else, the cow shed, stable and hay shed. The hay shed was packed to the roof with fresh hay that we had just harvested, the pig pens, the fowl house, even the hen sitting on a setting of eggs, she was burnt to a cinder, in the shed that was supposed to be 'Fire Proof', we had our Great Grandfather's large camphor chest stored in that shed, in the camphor chest was a lot of our Great Grandfather's papers of his early days, as well as all the bullets for the guns were stored there, and some horse saddles too, but when the shed went up in flames, we could hear the bullets exploding in the fire, it sounded just like "Guy Fawkes" night. We also lost ten acres of very good quality gum trees which were about 40 years old, the gum trees that were there before them were burnt down in the 1898 bushfire, the year my mother was born and over the years she had watched the 'New' gum trees grow, so it was heartbreaking to see them burnt down again. Later the paper pulp mill were able to use some of the trees for pulp.

Usually a bush fire came roaring along the ground, but this fire didn't, it just came roaring out of the sky which made it so scary as it engulfed everything in it's path – buildings, trees, bracken ferns, but very little grass was burnt. But the day before there was fires burning all around the State and the fires were burning out of control and the temperature was very high and the only explanation one can give is that the gasses from the eucalyptus gum trees and the heat from all those fires had built up in the atmosphere and formed this huge "FIRE BALL", because before this fireball hit us, there was no fire anywhere near us, the nearest fire was at least 80 miles away, yet what we thought were just thunderstorm clouds coming over us, when suddenly everything just "Exploded" into flames over us. No it wasn't a thunderstorm it was a fire ball storm instead.

Mr. Jack Robinson was in the Navy for many years before he retired and he and his wife Elsie and their young son John migrated out here from England in the early 1930's and they bought the farm next to us. In the short time that they had been on the farm, he had made many improvements. He had built a first class cow shed with a very large hay shed attached with the

walls covered in galvanized iron and a nice big dairy to separate the milk and store the cream. They had a new kitchen built on to the house with a sink and had water pumped to the sink (at the time very few kitchens in farm houses had a sink in them) one had to do the dishes in a dish. Just before the fire Mr. Robinson had built a large stable and machine shed and at one end, he had installed two large water tanks and I think on the day of the fire they were about half full.

In the mean time up on the "Joy" when Mr. and Mrs. Robinson realized the danger they were in, they grabbed all their clothes, bedding and other things of value and scattered them out in the paddock just out in front of their home as the grass in the paddock had just been cut or hay a week earlier and being worried about their son and daughter, they both then fled down to our place, Mr. Robinson came down by the road, but Mrs. Robinson fled across their paddock to our fence and down by the "Joy" through our paddocks. Thinking back to that day, I would say if both Mr. and Mrs. Robinson had stayed up on their farm, they would have lost their lives as there was no where that they could have sheltered from the 'fireball' up on the "Joy". Over the years my mother would often remark at how the Robinson's had ever got down off the "Joy" without losing their lives. I know when Mrs. Robinson arrived at our place she was very stressed out.

That night we all slept up at the 'Spring' on the side of the hill, they had bought a few blankets out of the house and we slept on them, they all thought it was much safer sleeping out in the open than in the house. I remember the one fault sleeping on the side of the hill was that we kept slipping off our blankets during the night, about mid-night Mum, Watty and Mr. Robinson went down into the house to listen to the news on the wireless, to see what damage had been done to the rest of Jeeralang, but the news report had mentioned every other place that had been burnt out, but there was no mention of Jeeralang, which had them worried that no one knew what had happened to us.

Next morning all was tired and feeling sick in the stomach and hungry as none of us had eaten for 20 hours or more. The men were green in the face from taking in so much smoke and had blood shot eyes and I would say all in a state of shock after going through such a traumatic time. We didn't have time to think about what had happened the day before as we had cows to round up and try and milk them tied up to a fence post, as they hadn't been milked for 24 hours, lucky our dairy was up near the house under the pine trees and apart from our house the dairy was the only building that wasn't burnt down so we still had our milk buckets to milk the cows in and we only had one kerosene tin of drinking water so we had to go and look for some drinking water, the water in the 'Spring' just below the cow shed was undrinkable as it had a very brackish taste, more about the water later on.

During the night word started to filter down into Morwell and Yinnar that Jeeralang had been wiped out, somebody went and told my mother's brother Lindsay Jacjung who was living in Boolarra at the time, that the Jeeralang hills had been burnt out and that his sister Louisa and her family might need help. At day break Uncle Lindsay headed for Jeeralang in his truck and the further he went up into the hills, the more distraught he became at the destruction the fire had caused to the hill country and he just could not see how we could have survived such a destructive fire. Luckily he met a friend about three miles from our place who was able to tell him that we were all safe. We were told later by this friend that if he hadn't met my uncle when he did he thought that my uncle would have collapsed before he got to our place, because he just couldn't see how we could have survived such a destructive fire. I think it was my mother's level head that saved us, she never panicked, and she was calm the whole time, so you can see it was a birthday I will never forget.

After we woke next morning after the fire and when we thought it was safe to move away from our place, Mr. and Mrs. Robinson went up to see what damage had been done to their place up on the "Joy". What a terrible shock they got, not one building was left standing, not even all their clothing, bedding and other personal things that they had put out in the paddock, had all exploded into flames from the fireball and had burnt to ashes, yet none of the grass had burnt in that paddock. There was a hedge of Lucerne trees around the house and every one of those trees were burnt to ashes. The two new large water tanks on the end of the new stables and machine shed were blown away, one was found a mile down in the gully on our farm, but the second tank was never found. The Robinson's lost everything, all they had left was the clothes they had on when the firestorm hit. They came and lived with us till they had their home rebuilt, but they did not rebuild up on the "Joy", they built their new home at the foot of the "Joy" near the road.

The Harris family who lived the Jeeralang West side of the Robinson's lost only their house in the fire. Mr. and Mrs. Frank Russell who lived nearly a mile up the road on the other side of us and their house and farm buildings were on top of a ridge. From their home was a wonderful view of the Baw Baws, Yallourn and the whole Latrobe Valley, even in 1939 it was a lovely sight at night to see all the lights of those small towns down in the Valley. The Russell's also lost everything when the fireball hit their farm, when they saw what was happening, they rushed down to the road just below their home and then ran for their lives all the way to the top of the Blowfly road which was about half a mile from their home, then they ran another quarter of a mile down the Blowfly road and there they sheltered in a cow shed on Mr. Walker's farm. Mr. Walker had built a two room hut and a small cow shed just off the Blowfly road, I think Mr. Walker had the hut and cow shed built so he could put a couple there to work on his farm, the fire burnt all around the cow shed but none of the buildings were burnt. The Russell's were very lucky because there were tall gum trees all around them and we all wondered just how they had the strength to run all that way, because they were an elderly couple. Mr. Walker let the Russell's live in the hut and used the cow shed till they got their home and cow shed rebuilt.

Although the Bush Fire Relief sent us plenty of food, specially bread, we could eat the bread, but we couldn't eat the other food for days, because we all felt quite sick in the stomach and about the only food we could eat was bread cut up in small squares and soaked in very hot milk with sugar sprinkled over it, it was filling and very nourishing and easy on our squeamish stomachs. My Birthday cake wasn't eaten till weeks later.

Now back to our water shortage – The day after the fire we took a walk around the old Jeeralang road that ran through our farm and past our home, the road then went on and then through Mr. Walker's farm, just past our farm boundary the road was very sheltered by tall gum trees and the road didn't get very much sun and it was always damp there and it was a beautiful wonderland of fern and fern tree and it was a wonderful sight to see, and there used to be Lyrebirds living up this road too, but what a sight we saw that day when we walked around to this section of the road, all the ferns and fern trees were all burnt, it was heartbreaking to see our beautiful wonderland gone, but we did find a spring with plenty of running water coming from it, it was in the bend of the road and the water was drinkable, but to be on the safe side we boiled all the water for drinking. A few days later Watty (my Stepfather) and Mr. Robinson loaded the copper and two large galvanized bath tubs onto the sled and they also took a long piece of guttering from the spring into the drum and they set up the copper so we could get some washing done, we used to wheel our dirty washing around to the spring in a wheelbarrow and did our washing around at the spring and we also had our baths around there.

One day Mr. Walker must have seen the smoke coming from that area so he came to investigate to see where the smoke was coming from, I don't know who got the biggest shock

when Mr. Walker rounded the bend of the road and there was Mr. Robinson who was a big man sitting in the bathtub with his feet hanging over the side of the bathtub having his weekly bath and singing on top of his voice. The smoke was coming from the chimney of the copper. It was over a month after the fire before we got any decent rain and it was a couple of months before we had enough water in the tank to use in doing the washing and having our baths at the house.

Early in March Mum decided to send me over to Boolarra to have at least a week's holiday with her brother Lindsay Jacjung, she thought it would do me some good to get away for a few days break from the farm, so Watty and I decided to bike it to Boolarra, but we only got as far as the Jeeralang Junction, a distance of about 12 miles when I got a flat tyre, a gravel (metal) road is not the best surface to ride a bike on, so I left my bike at the Jeeralang Junction Post Office and Watty dinked me on his bike the rest of the way to Yinnar (about 6 miles). When we got to Yinnar my uncle Dick Jones was just about to leave for his return trip back to Mirboo North with his cream truck, so Watty got Uncle Dick to drop me off in Boolarra as he passed through on his way back to Mirboo North. While there I was told that my Great Grandmother – Christene Tucker-Greenwood (nee McRae) had just died. I didn't realize till then that I had a Great Grandmother, I was told then that it was she who delivered me when I was born.

As we lost all our winter feed for our stock in the fire and as we had no money to buy fodder for our cattle, so when Autumn came my mother decided to go down to Melbourne and get a job for the Winter months and Watty was to do odd jobs around the district, but the trouble was as soon as Watty earned any money he went and got drunk, I was left in charge to do the cooking and the house work for my Granddad and my two sisters and Moira and Selma did the milking of the cows, while Granddad attended to the general running of the farm. My mother was able to get a good job as a kitchen maid in a well known Melbourne doctor's home, she was able to earn enough money to pay for the winter feed for the cattle and she was also able to buy a good second hand car. Before mum finished working at the doctor's home my mother sent for me to go down to Melbourne and she got board for me at Watty's half-sister's place and then she helped me to get a job at a dress shop who made all their own dresses to sell in the shop.

Four years later the Robinson's had another traumatic time, they lost their son John in the 1944 bushfire at the Hazelwood Flats. About nine weeks earlier John had spent a couple of weeks in hospital with a fever and it left his heart a bit weak. He was working on a farm in Hazelwood when the fire broke out and he went to help to put it out. I don't remember the full details, but John was burnt around the waist and his heart couldn't take the shock of the burns and he passed away at the young age of 15 years. His parents were so heart broken that they sold up their farm and moved to Melbourne and Jack Robinson joined the Air Force, but I don't think he went overseas as the war finished in 1945, but on a happier note Mrs. Robinson gave birth to a son after they left Jeeralang. I believe Mr. Robinson never got over the death of their son, it was bad enough to lose everything in the 1939 fire, but to lose their son in the 1944 fire was just too much for him to take. When Mr. Robinson left the Air Force, he and his family moved somewhere up around the Yackandandah area and went on a farm in that area and they lived there till he retired. When he retired, he and his wife Elsie went and retired into a retirement village 'Kirkbrae' Kilsyth, out near Mt. Dandenong. Mr. Jack Robinson died suddenly on the 31st December 1993 aged about 90 years. His wife Elsie died a few years later.

While typing this story out on the computer and after all those years ago I've just remembered what my mother gave me for my 15th birthday, with all the trauma of that day of the bushfire, I clearly forgot about what I got that day from my mother. I always had very straight hair, and so that mother could manage my hair, my mother let it grow long, and as long as I could remember I had plaits and oh how I used to hate those plaits! I used to envy my two sisters with

their curly hair and on the morning of my 15th birthday and as a birthday surprise my mother cut my plaits off, and to me that morning it was the best present anyone could give me, but when the fire hit us a few hours later, I forgot all about the excitement I had in having my plaits cut off till now.

We sold our farm late 1944, after the fire, trying to rebuild all the farm sheds and repair the fences with very little money and trying to cope with Watty's heavy drinking which was bad enough, but then he started to get very abusive and very violent and his violence was starting to take its toll on my mother's health and we told our mother that she didn't have to put up with that sort of life, so she decided to sell the farm and then leave Watty after the farm was sold and then start a new life in Melbourne. So she left Watty in January 1945 and two years later she divorced him and when the divorce became final in late 1947 she remarried to Frederick George Dyer, that marriage gave her 25 years of peace and happiness, something that Watty never ever gave her.

This story has been re-arranged and upgraded and corrected to the story that I wrote in 1995

Gwenda Y. BoothJanuary 2005.



This image was sourced from M.H.S. archives; it was not included in Gwenda's story

Our Recent Past



*Do You Remember This?
- Church Street March 1991*





MORWELL City Chief Executive Ron Waters shows Premier Joan Kirner the Church St blast area.

Morwell Advertiser

October 27th 1899

OUR SOLDIER BOYS

Prior to the council adjourning for lunch, Cr. Macmillan said they were aware a change had taken place since they had last met. War had broken out in South Africa and in response to a call to fight for the Queen, a number of young fellows had volunteered their services which had been accepted. There had been no local public demonstration prior to their departure from our midst in consequence of the short notice. He, however, was certain there were none more worthy of receiving some public recognition than the young men who went from Morwell.

He was proud of the heroic manner in which they responded to the call, and thought every encouragement should be extended to them. They were young men who were well conducted and had hardly been away from home during their lifetime. They were now going to a foreign country far from their relatives and friends to fight in cold blood, which required more nerve than to go to Melbourne to defend their home and colony - which, however, he hoped would never be the case.

He thought they as a public body as representatives of the ratepayers, could not do better than send a letter to those who went from Morwell, expressing council's appreciation of their heroic actions, and wishing them God's speed, and safe return, and stating it is council's opinion they will give a good account of themselves and prove worthy representatives.

Cr. Macmillan afterwards moved and Cr. Vary seconded – "That letters be forwarded to **J. Nadenbousch, J. Bolding, T. Holmes, T. Rose and J. Cook**, of the Morwell Detachment Victorian Rangers, forming a portion of the troops chosen for active service in South Africa, expressing the admiration of the council as a representative body, for their heroic conduct in giving their services to the Mother Land, thereby showing their devotion and loyalty to the flag, and this council wishes them a safe and speedy return and God speed on their journey and undertaking."

The following letter has accordingly been duly forwarded:-

SIR, - The council of the Shire of Morwell hereby express their admiration as a representative body, to you on your volunteering for active service in South Africa in the cause of the mother land, and thereby showing your devotion and loyalty to the British flag, and this council wishes you a safe and speedy return and God speed on your undertaking.

For and on behalf of the Shire of Morwell,
J. HALL, President.
THOS. SINCLAIR, Secretary.



John Hall Morwell Shire President

Information Page:

Please note that the next meeting will be on February 16th at 2.00 p.m.
44 Buckley Street

Next A.G.M. will be held on Wednesday 16th March 2.00 p.m.

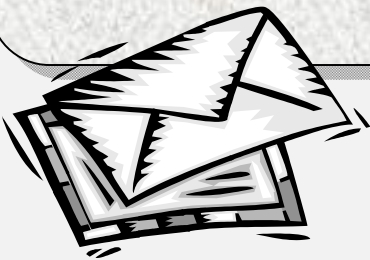
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Per Annum
Single \$17.00
Double/Family \$20.00
(Payable March each year)

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Please forward your items to:

*Stephen Hellings
Post Office Box 1163
Morwell 3840*