**Neville Lewis Jeffery Panton Hill 1983**

One of the great tragedies of the Ash Wednesday fires is the number of young people who lost their lives – those with whole futures ahead of them.

Neville Jeffery was just such a young man – 18-and-a-half years old as he mounted the Panton Hill truck with his mates to contain what was becoming a raging inferno. Alas, he perished before the night was done.

Neville was born and bred in Panton Hill, the youngest of three children to the Jeffery family. Brother Wayne was five years older than him, his sister Ronda 7 years older. Mind you, that didn’t stop Neville from wanting to keep up with his siblings - a very determined Neville was not one to be left behind if he could possibly help it! Neville went to Panton Hill state school but unlike his siblings, he wasn’t much interested in continuing his studies. He loved living and working on the land, helping his mother and father in their orchard, spending time with his long-term girlfriend or playing sport. He enjoyed tennis, cricket and football but his all-time favourite - by a country mile - was fishing. The family property had several dams which Neville’s father fed with fish. And Neville took every opportunity to fish them out. Sister Ronda recalls a young lad of four or five, down at the dam one day and catching an impressively large fish. But oh no, he couldn’t get it off the hook. And there he was, howling up the hill, big fish flapping across his face. Another aspect to Neville, his mother Mary remembers, was his strong sense of justice. He loathed unfairness and would always speak out if he felt someone had been treated unfairly. “He was a lovely, good kid” she said, “but he wouldn’t stand for any rubbish!”

On that disastrous day – 16th February 1983 – everything conspired against the brave firefighters who tried to contain the Ash Wednesday fires. Extreme temperatures, tinder-dry country and unpredictable winds meant high danger. But still the firefighters fought on. The Panton Hill truck was called to Upper Beaconsfield which, by nightfall, was under serious threat. Disaster struck when a mighty wind changed the direction of the fire and it swung towards them. There was no time to escape before the truck was engulfed in flames. Five men died, all of them mates, and Neville Jeffery was among them.

Neville’s shocking death was devastating for his family, who mourned his death alongside so many other families facing similar grief. But Neville has not been forgotten. From that cheeky young lad with a fishing rod to a fine young man loving the land with family and friends, he will always been remembered.