

# Brisbane flood of 1893 left much of metropolis in ruins

**S**OME bizarre things happened during the disastrous Brisbane flood of 1893. There was, for instance, the strange incident that saw three vessels ripped from their moorings in the river and dumped high and dry in the Botanical Gardens.

The gardens were no place for ships, flood or not, so an urgent call was sent to a well-known contractor to return the ships to their natural environment.

The contractor sized up the situation, licked his pencil and, after some calculations, quoted a figure that sent the authorities rocking on their heels. But the job had to be done and in quick time the man got the go-ahead.

That was when a second flood hit Brisbane. It rose to within 25cm of the previous level, again inundated the Botanical Gardens — and refloated the three ships.

The contractor hastily towed them out and tied them up to buildings by the side of the river. His work had been done for him but he had to take legal action to collect his money.

This strange dual flood in Brisbane in 1893 was one of Australia's most devastating with the unofficial death toll put at 35. The actual number of dead, however, was not known because many bodies were never recovered. They were either washed out to sea or buried in a flood-made grave of silt.

More accurate was the figure of 500 houses swept down the Brisbane River in one day. When it was all over it was said that of the city's population of 90,000 some 8000 were homeless.

It all started in January 1893 when a series of cyclones soaked the ground and turned streams into torrents all along the Queensland coastal area from Bundaberg to the NSW border.

But the rainfall was heaviest and most continuous along the valley of the Brisbane River and its tributaries.

## WATER WALL

At Ipswich the Bremer stood 24m above normal. At Crohamhurst near the headwaters of another tributary, the Stanley, 193cm of rain fell in four days.

And all the water had to flow down the Brisbane River.

Citizens of the capital realised what was coming when a Stanley River grazier telegraphed that he had seen a 15m wall of water roaring down the river gorge.

The Brisbane River began rising rapidly on February 1. Rain pelted down and by Friday February 3 water was pouring down the river in yellow foaming fury, causing it to rise 10m in the three hours between 9 am and noon.

The level of the previous highest flood in 1890 was passed and still the river continued to rise. Before the day was out it was overflowing its banks and whole sections of Brisbane were under water.

People in the riverside suburb of Milton left their flooded homes and made for higher ground where they huddled together in pouring rain as rising water lapped nearer and nearer.

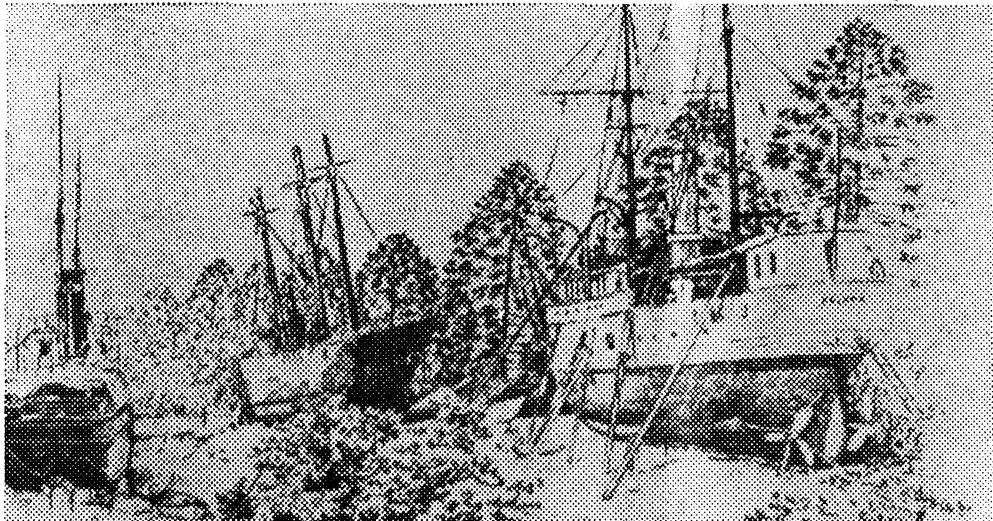
## HISTORICAL FEATURE

Before long most of the 600 who were crowded on a small hillock were standing in water. They stayed there for days and it was estimated that if the level had risen another two metres all would have been washed away.

Still the rain came down. By Saturday the river was rushing straight across large areas of the city with the water level rising by as much as 30cm an hour in many places.

Similarly onlookers were powerless to do anything when another house went racing towards the sea on the torrent while three women and two children clung to the roof crying for help.

Also during Saturday the Queensland Navy gunboat Paluma, the steamer Elamang and the coal hulk Mary Evans broke away from the wharves where they had been moored in the river.



The three ships that were washed into Brisbane's Botanical Gardens by floodwaters. A contractor was wondering how to get them back into the river when another flood did the job for him.

Brisbane city streets were like canals. There was 12m of water in the Courier Mail building in Queen Street.

Men in boats went from building to building rescuing office workers marooned on third or even higher floors.

Late on Friday police in skiffs rowed among the brothels and opium dens saving terrified prostitutes and befuddled opium smokers from drowning.

By now the river had swallowed up wharves and buildings all along its south bank.

An immense brown torrent, it rolled along at 15km/h carrying with it to the Pacific Ocean the bodies of drowned animals, sheds, haystacks, uprooted trees and other debris.

By Saturday morning the surge of water began to rip weatherboard houses from their foundations.

Caught in the water's powerful grip they were swept down the river in a long procession to smash like matchboxes against the piers of the Victoria Bridge or pile up in confused heaps farther downstream.

One of the 500 washed away that day was a large house with verandahs all round which came sailing downstream, swirling round and round in the current.

When it struck the bridge it simply disintegrated and disappeared.

constant battering by wreckage.

At midnight the train was hastily shunted back off the bridge. Just six hours later one of the 30m spans of the bridge broke away and disappeared into the surging flood.

From high ground nearby engineer Stanley watched helplessly as water, rushing through the gap, ripped away the adjoining spans one by one.

Sunday morning dawned in pouring rain on a scene of utter desolation. There was no sign of the flood abating and by then practically the whole of Brisbane was under water.

Everywhere was the wreckage of houses together with household furniture, timber and general merchandise. Scavengers moved about in boats or on improvised rafts picking over the debris for anything worth plundering.

Police, harbor authorities and volunteers were hard at work in boats rescuing

Creek St in Brisbane during the 1893 flood. In the distance are the roofs of river wharves.

bridge it rolled over and they were not seen again.

As night fell on Sunday rain pelted down in torrents and drowned out even the noise of the roaring river.

And all the time more people were arriving at the bridge to watch its battle against the seething mass of water and the gigantic welter of wreckage pressing against it.

Something had to give and the end of the bridge came suddenly at 3.50 am on Monday. With a convulsive heave two of its centre spans gave way and crashed into the river.

Other spans quickly followed and seven distinct crashes were counted by the spectators as the rest of the structure collapsed into the muddy torrent.

The horror continued throughout Monday. With the loss of the Victoria Bridge, gas, water and electricity were cut off to large areas of the city and that day too a brewery was completely wrecked by the swirling waters.

But then late on Monday the clouds broke and the rain stopped. By Tuesday, February 7, the river began to fall and the task of cleaning up began.

At Fernvale on the outskirts of Brisbane a man named Vernor, his wife and six children were found clinging to the topmost branches of a large tree.

They had been there 36 hours and had been lucky to scramble into the branches after the boat in which they were escaping from their flooded farmhouse hit the tree and overturned.

All the way down to Moreton Bay hundreds of looters were out picking over the wreckage of smashed houses, breaking open furniture to get at the contents, carting away anything they considered of value.

## Death cascaded from skies

Punts, barges, riverboats and dredge tenders careered madly towards the sea. A large coal boat was swept down the river and crashed like a battering ram into the steamer Buninyong.

All through the day vast piles of debris banked up against the almost submerged spans of the railway bridge at Indooroopilly.

## BATTERING

The Chief Engineer of the Queensland Railways, J. C. Stanley, ordered that a loaded train be run on to the bridge to help hold it in position.

By Saturday night, however, it was obvious that nothing could save the bridge from the rush of water and

marooned householders and supplying food to others.

Some refused to be taken from their homes and eventually had to save themselves by breaking out through the roofs.

Reports of loss of life came through all the time, even from 40km up the river at Ipswich where seven men were drowned in a flooded coal mine.

In Brisbane four children of one family drowned on Sunday morning when a boat in which they were escaping from their flooded house capsized.

All through Sunday water was lapping over the Victoria Bridge spanning the river between north and south Brisbane. Crowds expecting drama gathered on high ground at the northern end.

At least 50 times on Sunday the cry rang out "Here comes another" as what had been someone's home crashed and disintegrated against the bridge's iron girders.

Once one of the spectators shouted that there was a man and woman in one of the houses. Seconds before it was smashed against the

One reporter wrote that the railway refreshment room at one centre of Brisbane was "in a pitiable plight."

Cemeteries about the city looked as if body-snatchers had been at work. Tombstones had been rolled over, coffins had been washed out of the ground and their occupants lay about everywhere in confused heaps.

Then as Brisbane began to look almost normal the city was hit by two more cyclones. Down came the rain again in renewed fury.

By Thursday, February 16, Brisbane had again been brought to a standstill. Water, gas and electricity services failed and the population began to flee to high ground as the river rose.

On Saturday February 18 the water was almost up to the flood level of a fortnight earlier.

Police were out again in boats rescuing people who swore it could not happen again and had refused to leave their homes.

Two children were drowned as they played in the floodwaters. Regulars moored boats to the first floor balcony of the Gresham Hotel in the heart of the city and had their drinks handed to them.

The 20m steam cutter Harriet was caught in the current as it sailed up Main Street, Kangaroo Point, and was carried like a cork straight in to the public bar of the local hotel.

By Sunday morning the water stopped rising. At 2 pm it began to fall and the second flood was soon over with losses comparatively light because hardly anything was left that could be washed away.

As well as the estimated death toll of 35 in the two floods 190 people had been admitted to hospital. Property damage exceeded \$4 million in Brisbane alone.

The Brisbane River had been left so badly silted by the flood that large vessels could no longer use it. For the next year until the river was dredged they had to anchor in Moreton Bay while cargoes were brought ashore by lighters.

Summing up the flood a Brisbane newspaper called it "the worst inundation since the biblical deluge."

In some sections of Brisbane up to 75 per cent of houses and business buildings had disappeared. One real estate developer who had completed 28 houses for sale was left with four.

The railways had been hard hit too. Station building were wrecked, lines washed away and rolling stock put out of action.