

# The Great

At midnight 24 March 1902 Childers faced a fire which destroyed half of the main street's business district. From the current Isis Pharmacy to the Grand Hotel, twenty-two businesses faced a fiery end. Thankfully, there was no loss of life.

In 1902 the Isis Scrub was in the grip of the worst drought the shire had seen to that time, and the town water tanks were not sufficient to help fight the fire effectively. Similar to many other towns throughout Queensland, Childers developed quickly and was a collection of hastily built timber buildings which were erected almost on top of each other. The only concession to good town planning was the wide main street. Unlike many other country towns, however, Childers was established along the top of a ridge and not along the slopes of a river. Therefore when fire started within the town there was little that could be done to save the businesses along the western side of the main street. Reports at the time suggest that if water and an organised response had been available many businesses would have been saved. However, despite these reports it was not until the 1940s that a fire brigade was eventually formed in Childers.

## The Businesses

There is some dispute as to whether the fire started in H. Newman's General Store or

Oakley's tailor shop, however within two hours the following businesses were lost:

S. Oakley, tailor  
F.D. Cooper, commission agent  
R. Graham, fruiterer  
M.E. Gosley, tailor  
Foley, hairdresser  
M. Redmond, Palace Hotel  
W.B. Jones, auctioneer  
W. Conzens, fruiterer  
W.J. Overell and Son, general merchants  
P. Christensen, cabinet maker  
W. Hood, stationer  
T. Gaydon, chemist  
W. Lloyd, hairdresser  
Mrs Dunne, fruiterer  
Federal Jewellery Company  
Dunn Bros, saddlers  
H. Wegner, bootmaker  
H. Newman, general storekeeper

On 31 March, in a letter to the Editor of the *Bundaberg Mail*, the newly elected Labor Member for Burrum, Mr G. Martin, expressed his gratitude to the townspeople and Kanakas who helped move stock and furniture out of threatened premises and then assisted with a bucket brigade. These actions helped to save Mr Martin's business and cottage. When the fire was finally extinguished the bucket brigade then returned the stock and furniture to the premises they had managed to save.



# Childers Fire

Refusing to give in, many businessmen rented new premises and had their signs up for business before the fire had ceased to smoulder. The licensee of the Palace Hotel, Malcolm Redmond, was reported to have erected a bar amongst the ruins and conducted business as usual on Saturday night. It could perhaps be assumed that Childers began its tourism industry at that time as the town attracted many visitors who came to see the destruction.

An article in the *Maryborough Chronicle* estimated the cost of the damage from the fire to be approximately £15,000 with £8,000 pounds covered by a number of insurance companies. Despair did not last long in the district for within a week an inch and a half of rain had fallen, insurance claims were paid and orders for 100,000 bricks were placed to start the rebuilding process.

## Rebuilding Childers

Insurance claims were settled quickly and architects began planning new brick buildings. The new buildings were designed with parapet walls which would minimise the risk of future fires spreading from building to building. Alfred Gorrie engaged Bundaberg architect F.W. (Herb) Faircloth to design five shops. The new shops included a bakery run by Mr Gorrie, a hardware store, a Chemist shop run by Thomas Gaydon, and a hairdresser store and barber shop run by

William Lloyd. All the shops included large glass shop fronts with elegant striped awnings supported by decorative cast iron posts.

The fire changed the face of the town forever. From buildings of timber and iron, Childers developed into a town with elegance and charm.

Today Childers is a country town with a rich architectural history and is listed on the Queensland Heritage Register. Its buildings give the town a unique identity and leave a lasting impression on people travelling along the Bruce Highway.

**Denise Rapkins**  
*Childers Library*

### References

*Bundaberg Mail*, 25 March, 1902

*Maryborough Chronicle*, 24 March, 1902

**Images L-R:** 1. Childers fire, 1902. 2. Childers looking east. 3. Macrossan Street from Grand Hotel, Childers. 4. Main Street Childers from McIwaraith Street. 5. Childers after the fire.

