



 **VANTAGE POINT:** Forest Fire Management Victoria's Chris Arnold at the Mt Buninyong tower. Photo: Lachlan Bence

It has been a vital part of the firefighting effort for almost 100 years.

Even with the development of new technology and deployment of aircraft, the many sets of trained eyes at the 70 fire lookout towers across Victoria are as important as ever.

Last year fire lookout observers were at their posts for a record amount of time due to a very hot and extended summer in which 74 heat health alerts were issued.

Across the state more than 7000 grass, scrub and bushfires ignited and 67 total fire ban days declared, with aircraft dispatched to 2757 of those fires.

There were dozens of fires in the Ballarat region last season, with four major fires igniting at Buninyong, Hepburn, Bunkers Hill and in April, at Mount Clear.

A valuable part of the multi-pronged firefighting efforts of air and ground crews in the Midlands District is that of the trained observers perched atop Forest Fire Management Victoria's (FFMV) seven lookout towers - at Mt Buninyong, Mt Franklin, Mt Blackwood, Blue Mountain, Cherry Tree Hill, Mt Ben Nevis, and Mt Lonarch - with binoculars in hand, prepared to spot even the faintest of smoke.

Read more: [2019-20 fire season preparations well under way](#)

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Though some were established earlier, the majority of Victoria's first fire towers began operating in the early 1920s.

private operators. Many of these have since been given to the government.

With a view that overlooks Ballarat and its surrounds, the tower at Mt Buninyong was first established around 1930.



 **TOWER:** Handwritten notes are drawn around the tower to point to locations of various landmarks across the region.

Photo: Lachlan Bence

In ascending the stairs to reach the tiny confines of the office at the top of the tower, a decade's worth of impressive notes on the walls mark valuable, learned local knowledge such as where factories and smokestacks are situated that could be confused with a fire.

Forest Fire Management Victoria's Officer of Emergency Preparedness Chris Arnold manages the seven towers in the district, which are staffed by seven lookout observers and two roving officers.

Since their early days, the role of those stationed in the towers has continued to change, yet it remains just as valuable to the summer firefighting effort.

With the progression of technology such as mobile phones meaning community members can call in smoke sightings to emergency services and a better availability of aircraft to watch for and fight fires, the role of the lookout observers has evolved from being a prime source of alert to a fire to one of providing valuable information about fire behaviour.

Many with a career's worth of fire knowledge through work with the CFA or FFMV, the observers are able to narrow down ten calls of smoke sightings to being one column of smoke to assist dispatchers with how many resources need to be deployed.



 MAPPING: FFMV's Chris Arnold works out the bearings. Photo: Lachlan Bence

Working closely with a number of agencies, especially the CFA - which has another valuable vantage point of the region from its tower at Mt Anakie - they are also able to provide information as to fire behaviour - what a fire is doing and what it is likely to do, based on the smoke.

The observers have direct radio contact with firefighters which allows them to direct the CFA to fires on private land and assist FFMV firefighters with their firefighting efforts on public land. The two often work closely together, sharing information and resources - not just about bushfires but other types of fires such as car fires.

During the Bunkers Hill fire earlier this year, the observers were able to assist firefighters on the ground with knowledge about the weather.

Each tower has a weather station and so information about a wind change provided by the observers at the Mt Lonarch and Cherry Tree Hill towers was able to be communicated to those on the ground, while an incoming dust storm was spotted, which saw aircraft grounded for a short time.



 HIGH: The Mt Buninyong tower. Photo: Lachlan Bence

To be a fire observer requires self-motivation, diligence and to not be fazed by long hours of solitude, with eyes fixed on the landscape. With no cooling or heating and a requirement to descend the ladder and stairs to access a bathroom, the observers are also without creature comforts.

Mr Arnold worked in the role in 2004, at a fire tower near Beechworth.

Though he enjoyed a lot of reading time on some days, he said on others it was a difficult job that required long hours, many hours communicating on the radio and a lot of note taking - even on public holidays.

So when you're at home at Easter or Christmas time, think that there's at least seven people in the Ballarat area who are sitting in a little box like this, looking out for fires to keep everyone safe.

FFMV's Chris Arnold

Despite technological advances an accessibility to aircraft, Mr Arnold said the role of fire spotters would continue.

"The information they provide is vital and something that only someone who has the training and experience of fires can give us, especially from such a good vantage point," he said.

"They will remain as important as they currently are as there is no other real alternative to getting this kind of information to fire services."

Though 50 aircraft will be deployed for the 2019-20 fire season, calling them is costly and they can be grounded with extreme wind, lightning or dust storms, which are often a factor in a bad fire day.

The fire lookout observers are preparing to staff their towers as of this week, but may not be called for up to four weeks depending on the weather and when the fire danger period is announced.

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