



Above: Fierce fire swept through Cobargo's town centre destroying heritage buildings and businesses. Right: Volunteer firefighter and nursery owner Graham Parr visits his bushfire damaged house and nursery in Cobargo, *Photo: Jonathan Ng/Newspix*. Inset, from top: The remains of a destroyed house in Cobargo; Cobargo resident Nathan goes through the remains of his destroyed home; Gary Hinton amongst the debris of his home in Cobargo, *Photo: Stuart McEvoy*.



cobargo

under fire

words JANE SANDILANDS

I KNOW THE SMALL TOWN OF COBARGO QUITE WELL. I'VE LIVED IN NEARBY BERMAGUI FOR MORE THAN 20 YEARS AND COBARGO, JUST 15 MINUTES' DRIVE AWAY, IS A CLOSE NEIGHBOUR. MY PAST STORIES FOR SOUTH COAST STYLE ABOUT THIS SMALL HISTORIC VILLAGE HAVE BEEN ABOUT IT IN THE BEST OF TIMES: ABOUT ITS COMMUNITY SPIRIT, ITS VOLUNTEERS, ITS GNOMES, ITS GALLERIES, ITS ARTISANS, ITS FRESH PRODUCE.

But this is the worst of times. Twelve days after the New Year's Eve fires, the air is thick with smoke and there are pockets of deep grief. Houses and businesses are gone, the landscape is charred and crumbled. In the main street there are unaccustomed spaces, shielded by neat green fences. And the signs "Asbestos" are there too. A few kilometres before Cobargo, a dark and ghostly forest flanks the highway. Occasionally there is a paddock untouched but fences are down and cattle are roaming. There are few cars heading south, but a fleet of emergency vehicles is going north: small fire trucks, road workers, an occasional ambulance and a police car or two. And what is becoming

a common sight: the camouflage colours of military vehicles, some carrying fodder for stock.

It's just after 9am and, outside the well-loved Op Shop, there's a pile of neatly folded woollen blankets and rugs, some hand-knitted, and an invitation. The sign reads, "If you need help, please come in and ask: clothes, linen, blankets – free hugs!" Shaun, the Op Shop's vice-president, talks to me. "The hardest thing is hearing the stories: so many, every day. Tales of hardship, of layers of tragedy from here to nearby Wandella and Yowrie. This is a small place. We all know each other."

The Cobargo Showgrounds, best known

for the show and the annual February Folk Festival – postponed for now – became the Relief Centre.

There is a Coffee Caravan parked in the main street offering free coffee to locals and a bit further on, the burnt, disintegrating but recognisable shape of The Train Cafe.

A few days later, I meet Andrew Haydon on the veranda of the Kitchen Boys Cafe: he calls it his "second office". Andrew is the president of the Cobargo Business Association and owned The Train – all up, he lost seven properties in this fire, but he wants to talk about "needing lights at the end of the tunnel". With no telephone, no

water, no electricity, no communication and no fuel for days on end, he says the simple things bring joy. "You get excited about that first milkshake, turning on a tap, making a 'phone call."

The infrastructure needs to come back: practical things, like where the asbestos disposal can safely happen, the fences repaired and the countless ways the Shire Council can help get things moving. There are 300 army people here, emergency relief services have moved in and they all have plenty to do. And events, to bring people back, are already being planned. The best thing, Andrew says, is "the town is united". And from Shaun: "We'll pick up the pieces. This is our home – we're coming back."