The flock moves to fight fire

Brendan O'Malley

DINE intervention was sadly lacking in December, 1960, when a fire broke out at the Lourdes Hill Convent in Brisbane's eastern suburbs.

Neighbours and firefighters who raced to the scene were amazed to see nuns running in and out of the building like crazed magpies.

Locals, sensing God was not going to dispense a much-needed miracle on this particular occasion, soon joined in to help the nuns remove books, desks, furniture and other belongings.

They managed to save 150 desks alone before firefighters stopped them, fearing they would be injured as the blaze raged out of control.

Strong winds fanned the flames, which at one stage reached 13m into the air and sent up a huge column of smoke visible across most of inner Brisbane.

The blaze was so intense embers set a nearby jetty on fire.

Despite the best efforts of 20 firecrews from Wooloongabba, Balmoral and the City station, the landmark convent was soon reduced to a smoking pile of burnt wood, twisted iron and rubble.

The original chapel, built in 1916 but which had been converted into a library, was destroyed.

The one miracle of the day was that no one was badly hurt. Normally 400 school children, including 120 boarders, would have been inside when the fire broke out at noon, but luckily they were on holidays.

As it was, two nuns, Sister Mary de Lourdes and Sister Mary Laurea, were on the top floor of the convent where the inferno started. They managed to flee just in time before flames blocked the stairs.

And several students from another school who were watching the fire narrowly escaped electrocution when power lines fell across a tennis court where they had gathered.

The sole casualty of the incident was a carpenter, Stan Lawlor, who received burns to his back after unsuccessfully trying to save his tools.

He tried to fight the fire anyway, but intense heat evaporated water-in-a-garden hose and it was useless.

The cause of the blaze was not able to be immediately determined.

Saturday

These fine ladies might look like they had decided to take a stroll home from a daytime concert, but in fact, they were soon to find themselves at the centre of a bloody battle between striking unionists and police which was later dubbed "Black Friday."