

“As the fire was coming over the house ... I was lying there and I could hear the glass going 'tink, tink, tink'.”

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70 per cent prepared and 30 per cent luck: how David survived the inferno

Jonathan Dart
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David Twentyman at home in Steels Creek. Photo: Dean Sewell

David Twentyman had only a few moments' notice before the fire hit Steels Creek.

His neighbours just 30 metres up the hill, Lee and Charm Ahern, called out desperately: "The fire is here."

When it hit, the fire was double the height of the trees, moving a front 100 metres wide and racing about 160kmh.

Mr Twentyman had long ago decided he was going to stay and fight and lived to tell his story of survival; the Aherns didn't.

When the Steels Creek community met on Saturday, the main question they grappled with was whether to rebuild now or to wait for the recommendations from the upcoming royal commission on how to fireproof their house.

Nobody knows better how to answer that question than Mr Twentyman. An electrician by trade, he has spent the past four years building his house and planning how to survive a fire.

He spent thousands on aluminium insulation and concrete-rendered walls. He bought sealant by the carton, rather than by the tube, to make sure that embers could never penetrate a nook of his place.

His two large water tanks were placed outside, in between his house and where the fire approached. He installed a sprinkler system on his house, which was only days off being completed but managed to water the exterior of the property with an industrial pump he had bought.

He cleared trees in his immediate vicinity - much to the dismay of his neighbours, who objected.

And the last measure, ever the tradesman, was to install eight-millimetre thick glass windows that he believes saved his life.

"As the fire was coming over the house, I couldn't stand up and I was lying there and I could hear the glass going 'tink, tink, tink'," he said.

"As the fire got worse it was getting louder, and I thought I was stuffed. But after a while the noise got better. I was lying there with my dogs [Stella and Bart] thinking 'I've got through.' "

The scene up the hill was much different. The glass windows, closer to three millimetres thick, smashed inwards as the fire raged through and the surrounding shrub adjoining the house had fallen through the roof.

As the Victorian cabinet considers rushing through new fire planning measures - including retro-fitting existing houses in fire-prone areas - the Steels Creek community is still coming to grips with how - or even if - they should rebuild.

Mr Twentyman is convinced that people in fire-prone areas should have to do everything they can to their houses to protect them

"I'm 53 [years old] and I don't think I'll ever have to worry about another serious bushfire in these parts for a very long time," he said.

"But I just know that when I built this place I just had to be so careful with everything. As I say to everyone now, I was 70 per cent prepared and the other 30 per cent was just luck."