

A Brief History of the first Establishment and Development of the Electric Telegraph in Western Australia.

(By Its Projector: EDMUND STIRLING.)



RESERVING that frequent references have lately (1897) been made in the Legislative Assembly to our telegraph lines, a brief history of its inauguration and establishment by myself, who was the first and sole projector, may prove of interest, and probably of some utility.

On the 8th of February, 1869, the first post of the telegraph between Perth and Fremantle (now standing) was, at my request, fixed by the Hon. F. F. Darke (the Colonial Secretary at that time) at the foot of the Perth jetty. I then engaged Mr. Fleming to superintend its construction, which was completed on the 21st of June, 1869, and the first message was transmitted as follows, by His Excellency the Administrator:—"To the Chairman of the Fremantle Town Trust. His Excellency Colonel Bruce heartily congratulates the inhabitants of Fremantle on the annihilation of distance between the Port and Capital, and he requests that this, the first message, may be publicly known.—Government House, June 21st, 1869."

The first operator at Perth was Mr. J. C. Fleming (the Superintendent), and the first operator at Fremantle was Mr. William Holman.

This line was seldom used for the first few months, but was soon afterwards appreciated, and made available for both business and social purposes (especially the latter), which had not always been the most friendly between the two centres of population.

This short line of telegraph becoming more utilised and appreciated, a company, consisting of about a dozen shareholders, among them being Major Crompton, Messrs. A. Cumming, E. Birch, B. Mason, E. Newman, G. Glyde and

myself, and two or three other inhabitants of Perth and Fremantle, was formed on the first of January, 1871, to extend the line to the Eastern Districts, and the first telegraph post was erected at York on the 14th of March, 1872, and at Northam the 18th of the same month.

In October proposals were made by the Government, and accepted by the Company, for the purchase of the telegraph lines, and tenders were at once issued for their further construction throughout the various parts of the Colony.

The line between Perth and King George's Sound (Albany) was opened on the 28th of December, 1872.

In August, 1874, at the suggestion of the Hon. F. P. Barlee, the Legislative Council passed a vote of £15,000 for the construction of a telegraph line from King George's Sound to Eucla, and the South Australian Government having agreed to extend its line of telegraph to the Eastern boundary of Western Australia, the construction work to that locality was at once undertaken by our Government.

On the 8th of December, 1877, the Eucla line was completed, and congratulatory messages sent by Governor Ord to the Governors of all the Australian Colonies, India, and England.

Thus far has been developed my humble and almost unaided effort to enable my brother colonists, by the aid of the electric flash, to hear from, and be heard in all parts of the civilized world, and at the same time advance the social and commercial prosperity of Western Australia.

Although the first message was sent by Governor Bruce, all preliminary arrangements were made, and a portion of the line of telegraph between the Port and Capital was erected, during Governor Hampton's administration, who feelingly expressed his regret to me of his inability, by the then form of Government, and the financial position of the Colony, to accord me some remuneration for what he termed my enterprise in "advancing the true interests of Western Australia."

I might be permitted to add that had this important line of telegraph been constructed at an earlier period, much inconvenience and hardship would have been avoided by Mr. Eyre, and afterwards by Mr. John Forrest (now Sir John Forrest) in their perilous expeditions between this Colony and South Australia.

Telegraph stations between Albany and Eucla were first opened by my son Horace, under many difficulties, and those at Victoria Plains, en route to Champion Bay, by my son Lewis, who is still in the post and telegraph service of the Colony (postmaster Fremantle).

So little interest was taken at the first establishment of the telegraph in the Colony that only five persons were present when the first post was erected at the Perth Jetty, viz., Hon. F. P. Barlee, Messrs. R. R. Jewell, J. C. Flinnig, Alex. Cumming, and Mr. E. W. Snook. Mr. Edmund Stirling is now dead, and Mr. E. W. Snook, who, as a boy of 16, watched the erection of the first telegraph post in W.A., is now Superintendent of Telegraphs, and one of the last two or three survivors of this historic group.—H.O.B.

Interesting Extracts from the W.A. Telegraph Department Log Books, etc.

1869. 21st June. First telegram.
1871. 1st April. Government took over lines (they evidently did not, in doing so, make "April Fools" of themselves. H.O.B.)
1873. December. Perth Operators, 7; total, 26. Eleven telegraph offices.
1874. December. Eighteen telegraph offices. Perth operators, 10; total, 41.
1875. Williams River. E. W. Snook in charge, *vice* Mrs. Hegarty sick—23rd March to 27th April, 1875. Relieved by Mr. Fred. H. Piessé (now the Hon. F. H. Piessé, Director of Public Works, H.O.B.), who took charge 23rd April, 1875, *vice* Mrs. Hegarty resigned. E. W. Snook left Williams 27th April.
- May 15th. The messengers Perth office for first time allowed the public to see they could sport uniform. One of them was taken for a "—————."
- September 1st. Miss Waters resigned Greenough office to become Mrs. Jas. M. Innes, then postmistress of Newcastle. *(Toady)*
- November 7th. Mr. Ernest Giles, of South Australian exploring party, telegraphs having arrived safely on 6th inst. at Clarke's station, Berkshire Valley; same party subsequently arrived at Newcastle November 15th, and at Perth 18th; 18 camels.
1876. March 8th. Brauer Bay. Eucla line opened by Mr. Fleming.
- May 17th. Horace Stirling (relieved by Lewis Stirling from Perth) goes with Mr. Fleming to Bunbury, thence to Esperance by "Mary Ann."
- June 2nd. Pinjarrah and Albany lines in contact; fault supposed to be near Narrogin.
- June 3rd. Sympathy between Perth and Albany lines continues; police authorities informed by P.M.O. (A queer phrase this "sympathy." I suppose police authorities were consulted as they ought to be very sympathetic. H.O.B.)
- September 8th. Esperance opened.
- September 22nd. E. W. Snook took mail cart for Guildford, to relieve postmistress.

October 10th. George Stevens, from Newcastle, left Perth by steamer for Esperance, where he is appointed telegraph assistant.

December 5th. Israelite Bay opened.

December 9th. Mr. W. Graham arrived at Perth by mail cart—first Eucla line station master—from Adelaide.

1877. July 17th. Eyre opened.

July 23rd. General order: Prefix XX. to be used for important messages.

August 26th. "Planet" sailed for Eucla with Messrs. Fleming, Carige, Scott, *gents, etc.*

December 8th. Saturday, 7 p.m. Eucla line opened. Hurrah!

1878. March 22nd. Signals exchanged and conversations held between Perth and Adelaide direct. Opening Port Augusta line.

April 5th. Northampton opened.

December 25th. Age Perth telegraph officers:—H. E. Clay, 34 years 4 months; F. A. Bailey, 27 years 2 months; E. W. Snook, 25 years, 3 months; L. J. Stirling, 21 years 3 months; J. W. Wood, 21 years 5 months; G. Strickland, 19 years 6 months; W. J. Birch; 19 years; O. Grundy, 15 years 5 months; D. Brown, 16 years 2 months.

1879. May 24th. L. Ogborne commenced duty as messenger.

October 21st. E. W. Snook married.

November 2nd. Mr. Helmich handed over charge of G.P.O. to Mr. W. A. Stone, and left by steamer "Rob Roy" for India on six months leave.

November 26th. Alex. Forrest and exploring party returned to Perth. General welcome on the 27th.

1880. February 12th. Jarrahdale opened.

May 13th. First monthly mail between Eucla and South Australia.

May 31st. Arrino opened.

October 12th. Mr. Fleming (whose leg was broken September 28th near Albany by mail coach capsizing) returned to Perth by "Rob Roy."

October 15th. Mr. Williams, station master Eucla, sailed for Adelaide on leave; relieved by Mr. Graham of Eyre; assistant Sutcliffe in charge latter station.

1881. March 1st. Fremantle-Guildford Railway opened.
 April 1st. First mail train Eastern Railway line.
 June. Perth Railway Telegraph Station opened, Mr. Chas. Annear in charge.
1882. March 1st. Sixpence rate introduced Perth-Fremantle line.
 April 15th. Mr. W. Williams, late station master Eucla, left for South Australia; succeeded by J. Farrant.
 November 21st. Governor Barlee returned to Perth, after seven years absence; welcomed by officers of the Department.
1883. June 2nd. Governor Broome arrived.
 June 22nd. E. A. Letch appointed as cadet.
1884. April 21st. Hanslin Pool opened.
 June 13th. J. Lloyd appointed S.M., "Gascoyne."
 August 20th. Carnarvon opened.
1885. June 21st. J. C. Fleming, Superintendent Telegraphs, died at the Manse, Perth, aged 49.
 July 6th. F. A. Bailey appointed Inspector Telegraphs. E. W. Snook chief operator.
 September 14th. D. Brown appointed fourth operator Perth office.
 September 19th. Mr. F. Wahlgren, instrument fitter, arrived Albany.
 September 26th. Mr. E. G. Carige, of Esperance, appointed S.M. Roebourne.
 October 1st. Line completed to Roebourne.
 December 1st. Mr. Duncan J. McGauran appointed Superintendent of Telegraphs.
 December 31st. 2288 miles of wire.
1886. February 3rd. Mr. J. McGauran, Superintendent, resigned.
 February 8th. Mr. Hancock appointed Superintendent of Telegraphs.
 February 16th. Noon time signalled on telegraph lines throughout Colony, introduced.
 March 5th. Mr. G. P. Stevens took charge Eucla station *vice* Mr. Farrant.

- May 31st. Perth-Fremantle line duplexed.
- July 28th. Brecksea line completed.
- October 20th. First sod Beverley-Albany railway turned. Public holiday.
- December 15th. Mr. Geo. Strickland's marriage with Miss Latimer, St. George's Cathedral.
1887. February 3rd. Mr. W. J. Piesse, married at Albany.
- April 4th. Mr. F. W. Millbank arrived at Albany from South Australia.
- June 17th. Mr. Chas. F. Gahan, the newly appointed P.M.G., arrived at Albany.
- June 25th. Perth-Albany duplicate telegraph line opened for traffic.
- June 30th. Mr. Helmich, retiring P.M.G., the recipient of address and presentation by officers of the Department.
- July 1st. Mr. G. F. Gahan took charge Post and Telegraph Department.
- November 23rd. F. A. Bailey appointed Superintendent of Telegraphs. E. W. Snook appointed Inspector of Telegraphs.
1888. February 3rd. Immense flood Greenough Flats—five lives lost.
- May 1st. Mr. A. R. Morris appointed Booking Clerk.
1889. February 13th. S.S. "Seine" arrived with cable at Roebuck Bay. Length of cable, 890 knots; deepest sounding, 2900 fathoms.
- April 9th. Roebuck Bay Government station formally opened.
- April 27th. Mr. C. F. Gahan, P.M.G., on sick leave, died at Melbourne; succeeded by Mr. R. A. Sholl.
- September 5th. Mr. R. A. Sholl, P.M.G., presented with address by officers of the Department.
- November 25th. Roebuck Bay cable connected with office by pipe line.
1890. August 27th. Opening ceremony new G.P.O., Perth.
- October 1st. Telegraph worked from new G.P.O.
- October 31st. Time successfully signalled between Roebuck Bay and Adelaide.
- December 29th. First Ministry under responsible Government sworn in; Sir John Forrest, Premier.

1891. January 7th. Mr. H. E. Clay's 20th Departmental anniversary.
1892. June 30th. Principal offices in Colony to open at 8 a.m. from this date.
1893. June 17th. Mr. F. A. Bailey, Superintendent Telegraphs, died.
- July 28th. Mr. W. J. Hancock, Superintendent Telegraphs, left for Europe on leave of absence.
1894. July 22nd. Coolgardie line opened for traffic; 400 messages passed through.

After which date, consequent upon the tremendous inrush of population, and increase of business, through the many new gold finds, events so crowd upon one another, as to take up too much room to record. New offices opened weekly, thousands of miles of wire erected, and an enormous traffic over the lines, were the general order of things up till a short while ago, when the Department, having its machinery adequate to cope with the business, matters became smooth and easy going once more.

