

# MORSECODIANS MESSENGER

Volume 1 Issue No 6

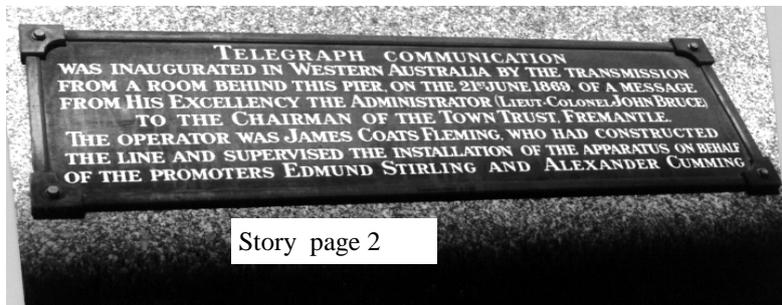
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MAY 1999

Morsecodians - Keeping Morsecode Alive

## 130th ANNIVERSARY

# MORSECODE TELEGRAPHY IN WESTERN AUSTRALIA



Story page 2

The Morsecodians Fraternity of Western Australia will be commemorating the 130th anniversary of this momentous achievement on Monday the 21st of June 1999. Usually such celebrations are undertaken on the 50 and 100 year anniversaries, but we were not active as a club earlier and are in some doubt for many years in the future due to our age level, so that this occasion is very important to us and to the organisations which performed this vital service for over 100 years, namely the previous Postmaster-General's Departments both Colonial and Commonwealth and which are now Australia Post and Telstra respectively.

Thanks to the willing and generous cooperation which we have received from Australia Post and Telstra we will be able to establish telegraph offices in public areas at the Perth GPO and Fremantle Post office between 8am and 5pm on the big day. This will enable us to provide a working exhibition of how the telegraph message system worked so successfully over such a long period. We will be inviting people to send a telegraph message which will be transmitted by morsecode telegraph between Perth and Fremantle and to other centres in the eastern states where Morsecodians of other fraternities will receive them. These messages will be posted to addressees from the office of receipt or they may be collected personally at either Perth and Fremantle.

To suitably commemorate the event historically, we will be conducting a short ceremony near to 11am. We have been most fortunate in receiving the support of His Excellency, Major-General Michael Jeffery AC, MC, Governor of Western Australia, in Perth and Richard Utting, Mayor, City of Fremantle, in Fremantle, who have both graciously agreed to be present at that time to re-enact a symbolic transmission of a telegraph message between the two centres, such as was done in 1869.

Morsecode telegraphy was discontinued in Australia in 1959 when it was replaced by a teleprinter switching system whereby telegrams went directly from the office of lodgement to delivery without the necessity to repeat them at various telegraph offices as was the case with morsecode. For instance, a telegram sent from Broome to Cairns had to be repeated at Perth, Sydney and Brisbane due to the limitations of distance and volume of traffic. With the cessation of morsecode, post offices lost a great deal of atmosphere. Those who attended a post office heard the familiar click/clack of morse instruments busily chattering away in the background. Today many have never experienced the sound of working morsecode telegraphy and there is a great deal of interest shown at our exhibitions by younger people and those who remember the nostalgic sounds. At one time many people learned morsecode while in the Armed Services and Scouts and Girl Guides and others to qualify for jobs such as telegraphist and radio operator on ships.

**NEXT MEETING 10 AM  
TUESDAY  
1ST JUNE 1999  
AT THE HYDE PARK  
HOTEL**

This is a most important meeting to finalise arrangements for our major event, the 130th anniversary of Morsecode telegraphy in WA.

We would urge all those who can be present as we will need to know who can provide assistance either operating or otherwise on the 21st of June and before in setting up etc. The success of the event will depend on these arrangements.

Members, partners and friends are all welcome. Please stay for lunch and enjoy the cuisine and a talk with mutual friends.

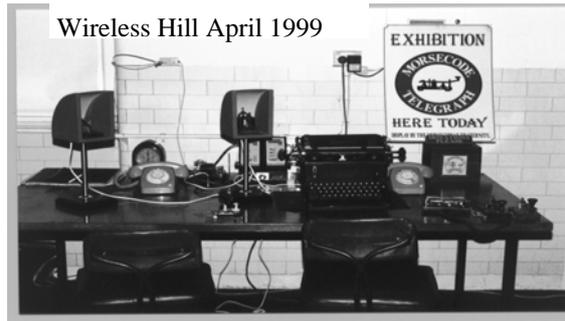
If you are not in a position to assist do not worry, but please come along to the Perth GPO or Fremantle PO on the 21st of June for a while and bring a friend or two for moral support.

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The page 1 photograph shows the commemorative plaque fixed to the Western (Barrack Street) wall of the Perth Town Hall.

OUTLINE: The first telegraph line was completed on 21st June 1869 by a private company. The Government took over the line on the 1st April, 1871. The first telegraph office in Perth was in a room in the Town Hall on the Barrack Street frontage.



## The History of the First Telegraph in Western Australia

Who better to refer to for the story than the man behind the project Mr Edmund Stirling. His words are quoted below:-

### FREMANTLE END:

Ketts Woodyard where Mr Wm Holman received the first telegram was on the corner of High and Pakenham Streets.

A Brief History of the First Establishment and Development of the Electric Telegraph in Western Australia (By Its Projector: Edmund Stirling)

Observing 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 9th of February, 1869, the first post of the telegraph between Perth and Fremantle (now standing) was, at my request, fixed by the Hon F P Barlee (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 21<sup>st</sup> 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 21<sup>st</sup>, 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 afterward appreciated more 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

Hampton, 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 14<sup>th</sup> of March, 1872, and at Northam on the 18<sup>th</sup> 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 28<sup>th</sup> 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 8<sup>th</sup> 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 civilised 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 remunerations for what he termed my enterprise in "advancing the true interest 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 Fleming, Alex Cumming, and Mr E W Snook. 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.



**TOM BASTIAN TELEGRAPHIST VICTORIA AND WESTERN AUSTRALIA** (by Col Smith)

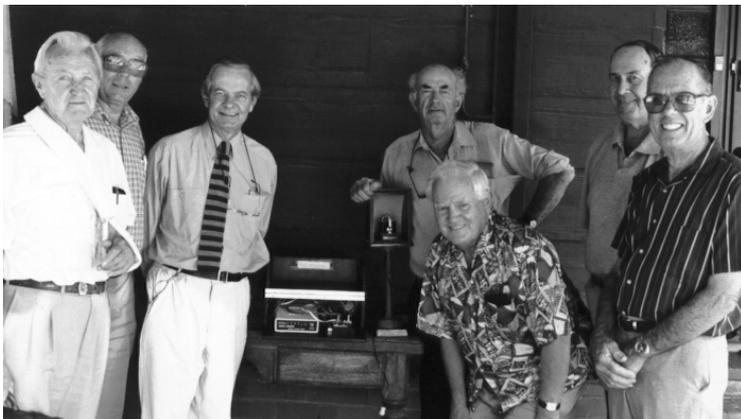


1942 Perth CTO



1898 at Menzies

The photograph in Issue No 5 of the "Messenger" of the early days telegraphists reminded me of my association with Tom Bastian. Tom had retired to live in Bagot Road Subiaco opposite the King Edward Memorial Hospital for Women and came back to help with the war effort. He came to Western Australia from Bendigo in the late 1890's and went to the Coolgardie goldfields. I first met him on the 'polar' line at Subiaco when I was made acting Postal Clerk in August 1942 after passing the required morse test. Subiaco was like being thrown into the deep end of a swimming pool with virtually non stop telegraph from 9am to 6pm (office hours) and later if not clear at GB (usually 6.10pm). It was scramble along the best I could to get up to the operating speeds required by traffic. Tom was wonderful. He usually worked 4 days a week of 6½ hours from 9am mostly on the Subiaco line and he nursed me along. It wasn't long before I became competent to hold my own. After his shift he used to catch the tram home from Perth and come and sit by me still working with his relief to chat briefly and give me support. We had our own little secret code which he taught me and I now know it to be the US Landline code which was used in the Eastern Colonies up to 1897. It used to trick those around us when he occasionally used the different signals. He really was a kind and thoughtful man and typical of all those old-time telegraphists who went out of their way to help those just starting out in their careers after they themselves had been through a lifetime as a telegraph operator. The June 1934 staff list shows T A Bastian as Telegraphist Perth CTO, DOB 8.7.1875, first appointment (WA) 19.3.1897. His name does not appear in the June 1937 staff list so presumably he retired before then.



**WE REMEMBER...**



We regret to record the passing of two of our fellow Morsecodians in recent months:

**Stan Dick** ex Telegraphist/ Supervisor who worked mainly in Kalgoorlie and Perth telegraphs,

and **Wally Daws** who worked in many Post Offices in WA including the nor-west and goldfields. He was Postmaster at Melville on his retirement.

We extend our sympathy to their relatives.

The Morsecodians Fraternity of Western Australia (Inc.)

President: Colin Smith

Secretary/Treas: Terry Keays

39 Cumberland Way

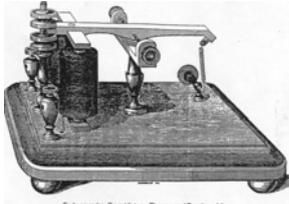
BASSENDAN WA 6054

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**Telegraphs Era:**

Morsecode telegraph commenced with Samuel Morse in the USA in 1844. It spread to Australia with the first line between Melbourne and Williamstown in 1854. In ensuing years it spread to other Australian States. Its longevity was remarkable. Despite the invention of the telephone, it was many years before telegrams were phased out. The number of telegrams sent annually in Australia declined from 35 million in 1975 to 3 million in 1985. The first telephone exchange opened in Wellington Street Perth on 1st December 1887, but it was not until the 18th of December 1930 that the first trunk call to another State was made. On June 21, 1986, precisely 117 years to the day after James Coats Fleming's first telegram was sent in WA, Telecom replaced the aging TRESS network with a computer-based message system.

**On left:** Sub-committee for the 130th anniversary met on 9th April 1999. L to R: Barrie Field, Don Tyler, Larry Rice, Ken Knox, John Meadowcroft (front), Col Smith, Col Hopkins.



Early sounder. From History, Theory, and Practice of the Electric Telegraph, by George S. Prescott, Boston 1864

Sounder 1864



Sounder 1999  
Bill Morrow model

## COOLGARDIE 1898

(Quoted from the Souvenir Booklet of 1898 of the Postal and Telegraph Departments of Western Australia.)

Coolgardie, the principal township of the Eastern goldfields, is situated about 114 miles east of Southern Cross, and is the headquarters of the Warden of the Coolgardie goldfields, and contains a population of about 11,000. It is also a municipality represented by a chairman and six councillors. In the municipality there are a number of imposing buildings, built of brick and stone used for the purpose of mining business, also a Club, Stock Exchange, Chamber of Commerce, ten hotels, a large number of stores, some minor factories, a small theatre, several churches and schools. Coolgardie possesses five newspapers, namely daily morning and evening papers and three weeklies. A large block of Government buildings stands in the centre of the town, and in these the courts of the Warden and Resident Magistrate are held. The town, which for some time has had telegraphic communications, is connected to Perth by a railway which has recently been carried on to Kalgoorlie, Kanowna and Menzies. Within a few miles of the town a very large number of mining leases are taken up, some of which possess rich reefs, upon which batteries and other appliances for obtaining gold are now in actual operation. Saw mills, brick and tile mills and breweries have been established and good building stone is being locally quarried.

Fresh water is obtainable in the town, but the main supply is from condensing plants. The Hampton Land Company's estate, where a township has been laid out and strenuous efforts to test the agricultural and other capabilities are being made, approaches to within 2½ miles of the townsite on the eastern side. Small outlying settlements, named Toorak and Montana, are being used for residential purposes.

### As seen from 'totherside.

Reprinted from "THE TRANSMITTER"  
Nov 13 1894.

The following interesting particulars in connection with telegraphic work in Western Australia are extracted from a letter dated August, and written by an ex-New South Wales operator, now in Perth, to a friend in Sydney:- "I cannot say that I am too much in love with Perth, which is very quiet after Sydney, and we appear here to be so far out of the world. The staff work week about hours being from 8 am or 9 am to 1.30 pm and 1.30 pm to 7 pm, at which hour all offices close. We take it in turns about incoming on at 8 and 9 o'clock in the morning. The men working the intercolonial and Coolgardie lines are, however, often kept on till 11pm and sometimes later. These opera-

tors are allowed off for tea from 5 pm to 7 pm and should be well up so much the better for them. If the work continues to be as brisk as it is at present, which is not unlikely, a duplex to Coolgardie will probably be shortly erected. An operator is on duty from 9 to 10 o'clock each night for press which rarely exceeds 400 words and is paid 6s per week by the newspaper people for this extra duty. There are no tape instruments in use here, all being sounders. We have several very good lady telegraphists, one at North-ampton is an exceptionally fast hand, both at sending and receiving. You will smile when you hear that we have only seven lines in the head office, which means that the staff is a small one. In the telephone branch the gentler sex only are employed, and there are some very fine girls amongst them. I found the English alphabet, which is used here, rather confusing after having been for so many years accustomed to the Ameri-

can system, as you have it in N S Wales. The figures, however, are not the same as the English code. Mr McGauran, when superintendent here, having altered them. Living is expensive. I pay 25s per week for accommodation, and at that figure it is very expensive. Regarding our prospects, I think that if we (the new-comers) remain in this colony a few years some of us will be in fairly good positions, but it takes a lot to induce one to stay who has a knowledge of the enjoyments so readily obtainable in Sydney."

(Ed note: This letter throws light on the use of sounders. There is nothing definite in older papers so far accessed as to when sounders replaced tapes in WA and at least now we know they were in use in 1894.)