

August Newsletter



Overland Telegraph
150th Anniversary
1872-2022

As advised in an earlier email, OT-150 (Overland Telegraph Line Sesquicentennial) will be emailing you at the beginning of each month until August

If you wish to withdraw from this email list, please advise by return email... thank-you

www.ot150.net

On this Day in August

In the ot150.net Library – Key dates – August: On the 22nd of August 1872, it finally came down to the last few miles of the Overland Telegraph Line. To speed things up, poles have been placed at ten to the mile, not the specified twenty, but it's enough to hold up the wire for now. Robert Patterson is showing the symptoms of malaria and has made camp at Frew's Ironstone Ponds. The Line is a few miles to the east where he has had a cut made in the wire so that he can make a ceremonial join. But the news has already flown down the Line and Adelaide is celebrating the completion of the Overland Telegraph.

The Evening Journal.
ADELAIDE :
THURSDAY, AUGUST 22, 1872.

THE OVERLAND TELEGRAPH JUST FINISHED.

mittee—Messrs. A. R. and F. J. Naish, with the R. J. Egerton Warburton (Mr. H. Y. Sparks). It any matches during Jan account of the heat members were nominated mencing the season was f

Gymnastic Entertainment by the Blondin Tr Port, on Wednesday evening, and will enable to Mr. Holman, whose referred to, a handsome do to the members of the manner in which they benevolent purposes. Comic songs and dances amusement of the audier

NEW ZEALAND BREED the Canterbury Times, the following informati prospects of the New markets:—"An extraor been put forth in Mess

at Warraroo on Sep-
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Port.
CO., } Port
WARD, } Augusta.
a236-40

late FREDERICK
pec'fully informed that
is late Residence,
on Friday afternoon,
Cemetery.
ENNINGS, Norwood.

ADELAIDE.
ved by the Council, until
, 1872, at 2 o'clock, for
Works:—
d relaying the kerbing,

Commemoration

On the afternoon of 22 August 1872, Engineer Robert Patterson joined the 3,200 km long Overland Telegraph wire stretching between Port Darwin and Port Augusta at Frew's Ponds, N.T. (about 20 km south of modern Dunmarra Roadhouse on the Stuart Highway), destroying a bottle of brandy in the process.

Morse code messages could then be tapped out between Darwin and Adelaide for the first time, taking minutes to cross the country instead of weeks. A string of congratulatory messages was transmitted from politicians, consuls, and senior public servants. They were published the next day in the newspapers and their words thrilled the people of Adelaide.

The newspapers were enthusiastic, the telegraph departments partied, banquets were planned, and a public holiday was announced. Patterson and the men who gathered around the pole in the bush celebrated too. They fired 21 shots from their revolvers and Patterson smashed a brandy bottle against the pole. The bottle, it is said, was filled frugally with tea—no one was about to waste good brandy, even for such a momentous occasion.

On this significant date, 22nd August, 150 years later, a commemoration is being planned by NT Heritage at the Charles Todd Memorial on the Stuart Highway about 20 km south of Dunmarra Roadhouse (650 km south of Darwin). It will be followed by an event at the actual joining pole, a 1.7 km. walk or bus ride through the bush to the west. There, will be re-enacted the celebrations held by Patterson and his team with a symbolic smashing of a brandy bottle against the pole.

Anyone planning to attend the event at the Charles Todd Memorial on 22 August is [asked to register](#). Details are on the [OT150 website](#), along with all the other sesquicentenary August events.

The OT Line – an Unexpected Cultural Dimension



With the OT line functioning, communications with the outside world were exciting. Little known is that in time, communications up the Line itself took a different turn. Dr. Philip Jones, Senior Researcher at the South Australian Museum, gave a presentation to the OT-150 Symposium in Adelaide, titled “More than an Infrastructure Project: The Overland Telegraph as a Line of Enquiry”. Philip said the conventional view of telegraph station personnel is that of facilitators, receiving and sending messages and servicing the Line. However, it is also clear that the stations played a key role in supporting exploring expeditions during the 1870s. These scientific expeditions of the 1890s stimulated active enquiry and collaboration between station staff and visiting scientists. Prominent among these was Frank Gillen, stationmaster at Alice Springs from 1892, who became a recognised anthropologist

Telegraph staff became a point of contact with local Aboriginal people: Arrernte women, for example, were able to supply examples of small animals, which they knew as food sources, to the Horn Scientific Expedition. Telegraph staff, including Charles Todd himself, also collected word lists of local languages. In these ways, it is possible to see the Line as a generator, not just a transmitter, of knowledge.

Transport

Transport was a key component in building the 3,200 km long telegraph line. In her monograph “Contribution of Afghan Cameleers and Camels to the Construction of the Overland Telegraph Line”, Pamela Rajkowski OAM outlines how horses, oxen and camels were used to support the construction and operation of the OT Line. As pack animals, it soon became evident that the camels had advantages over horses and oxen. First imported in 1866 by Thomas Elder of Beltana Station, camels were not only more attuned to the hot, dry climate, they also had a wider diet, not relying

mainly on the grasses favoured by horses and oxen. Camels enjoyed saltbush, prickly acacia, bluebush, sandalwood, mulga, sheoak, and mallee. They also reached higher feed such as wattle and gum which was beyond access to horses and oxen. Their height was also said to allow a maintenance worker to access the line from the back of a camel.

Elder established his Beltana Station as a central transport depot for the construction of the southern and central sections of the Line, an echo of the road trains that now traverse the continents interior. Elder went on to establish Australia's eponymous pioneering agri-business.

Fact: the "Afghans" were not people from modern day Afghanistan; "the ethnonym Afghan has been used historically to refer to a member of the Pashtuns" (Wikipedia). Australia's 19th Century Afghans came mainly from modern northwestern Pakistan.



AN INTERRUPTION ON THE OVERLAND TELEGRAPH LINE.

OVERLAND TELEGRAPH.

The COMMISSIONER of POLICE and Mr. WM. FORMBY still CONTINUE to PURCHASE HORSES, at the Survey Stockyards, for the Overland Telegraph Service.

GEO. HAMILTON,

Commissioner of Police.

Adelaide, August 17, 1870.

230c

South Australian Register, 8 Sep 1870. p.2

And what were the transports carrying?

Andrew Crouch in his book *Building the Line, The Construction of the Overland Telegraph Line* mentions that the 3,200 kms of telegraph wire, sourced overseas was part of the load:

“Stringing the robust no. 8 galvanised signal wire itself was a significant task. This was provided in one hundredweight (51 kg.) coils that had been sourced from Johnson and Nephew in Manchester, shipped to Adelaide and Port Augusta, and carted from there to each construction site. For the full route, this represented a weight of 310 tonnes, which was nevertheless a small amount compared with the weight of the poles. A coil would cover 520 metres or 6.5 pole spacings, so the wire had to be rolled out and carefully joined using soldiering at these intervals, using the Britannia method specified by Todd. This involved cleaning the ends with an acid fluid, hooking and tinning the wire ends, overlapping and wrapping them with lighter gauge wire, then soldering the joint before washing to remove the acid. The result was a clean electrical joint, strong in tension. Rolling out, joining and stringing the wire progressed at an average rate of 20 miles per week. Spans of the line with jointing intact survive to this day.”

Did you Realise

The Overland Telegraph construction is often portrayed as “a flash in the pan”, an idea conceived at the last moment and carried out with surprising haste. In fact, the concept of telegraphically connecting Australia to the world was one that was discussed starting as early as 1858, well before telegraphic technology was capable of such a feat. The technologies, connections and explorations required to make the OTL possible have the following timeline:

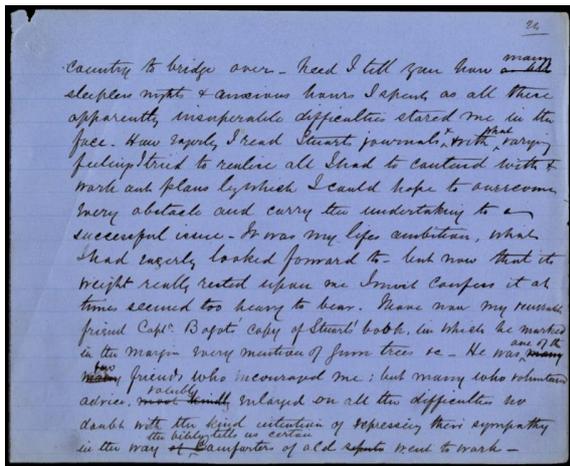
- 1851 First undersea cable Dover to Calais
- 1858 [Todd submits a report](#) outlining 4 potential ways of connecting Australia to the European telegraph system.
- 1859 The South Australian Government announces a prize of £2000 for the first European to cross the continent and establish a route for an overland telegraph line from Adelaide to the north coast.
- 1862 John McDoull Stuart makes the first successful European crossing of Australia north to south
- 1864 First connection to India via an unreliable, mainly land-based line
- 1866 After 3 attempts, a transatlantic cable was successfully commissioned
- 1870 First reliable connection to India mainly by undersea cable
- 1870 Cable from Madras to Penang and on to Singapore
- 1870 Cable from Singapore to Batavia
- 1872 Completion of the Overland Telegraph Line

to comprehend the frenzy of laying sea cables in the 20 years preceding the OT Line, [see here](#)

It’s surprising then to realise that as early as December 1858, a mere two years after arriving in the isolated Colony, and well before the technology was in place, Todd wrote a report outlining four possible ways of connecting Australia to the world. Indeed, only a year later with the Government offering prize money, the notion of an overland line to the north coast was a well-entrenched idea. The Superintendent of Telegraphs was forewarned and known for his dedication to detail, Todd would have started planning well before June 1870, possibly starting with a list of materials required to do the job. All this while waiting for the overseas developments to make the plan a possibility.

Todd Corner

Proof of Todd's forward planning comes from a diary entry



Under the heading of "Stuart, Todd, and the Overland Telegraph" Richard Venus presented the Annual John McDouall Stuart Address on 24 July. Stuart was the first European to reach the northern coast of the Australian continent via an overland route. This feat was the culmination of six expeditions and there is no doubt that Stuart's accounts of these gruelling ventures through the centre of Australia influenced the decision to build the Overland Telegraph. Almost straightaway, people began using the phrase "Stuart's Track" and talked of it as a route by which horses could be exported to India.

Stuart's influence on the concept and planning of the Overland Telegraph Line is unquestionable. But his influence goes deeper than that. Todd gave a public lecture on the Overland Telegraph in July 1873 and in his [handwritten manuscript](#) which is in the State Library, Todd says he had "decided on following Stuart's route generally" and had with him a copy of Stuart's book in which Captain John Bagot, who ran the Peake cattle station, had marked every reference to gum trees which would be helpful in finding poles for the Line. But it went deeper than that. Todd said, "Need I tell you how many sleepless nights and anxious hours I spent ... How eagerly I read Stuart's journals and with what varying feelings I tried to realise all I had to contend with ...". For Todd researchers, this short passage is a rare glimpse of the stress experienced by a great leader known for his relentless ability to plan and organise remarkable achievements.

There are three new opportunities to build your knowledge of Sir Charles:

- ABC Science Show, 23 July 2022 - [Celebrating Charles Todd and the overland telegraph](#)
- State Library of South Australia, August 16 - [Celebrating the personal life of Sir Charles Todd](#)
- Astronomical Society of S. A., August 3 - [Sir Charles Todd: The professional life and contributions of the SA pioneer](#)

The OTL becomes the OTT

The OT-150 Symposium made us all too aware that the original line has disintegrated in its 150 years. Some of it was shifted a few years after completion to follow the path of the new northern railway line, leaving the line and booster stations to disintegrate. A good example is the second and third stations out of Port Augusta, Strangways Springs and The Peak stations only operated for about 20 years (see [FOMS brochure](#)). Other parts were stripped of poles and wire which served no purpose in the new forms of telecommunications, some parts became isolated on private no-entry property, while other sections were lost from memory.

With the significant completion date of August 22 soon upon us, OT enthusiasts will be planning to their own Overland Telegraph Tracks (OTT) as they visit those parts of the line that are accessible and significant to their particular interests. Several publications may be of value in planning a trip while the NT has a number of events planned for August which may be appealing Outback experiences, even for children (outlined below).

Derek Pugh's book, *Twenty to the Mile* is an easy read on the history of the construction of the Line. Unusually, in Chapter 9 the author relates his recent experience of traveling up the line which gives

the reader pointers that might interest them in their own plans. In addition, the [Explorers Way Book](#) is a good guide to driving up through the Centre and features articles on both the OT-150 events and Sir Charles Todd. An [online version](#) is also available.

OT150 Events SA *(all August events attached as a flyer)*

Sir Charles Todd: The professional life and contributions of the SA pioneer

Wednesday 3 August, 8 pm - University of Adelaide, Braggs Lecture Theater

By: The Astronomical Society of South Australia <[CLICK](#)>

The Overland Telegraph, short stories by OT descendants, Morse Code demonstration

Monday, 15 August, 10.30am - 2.30 pm - Walkerville Uniting Church, 17 Smith Street, Walkerville

By: The Pioneers Association of South Australia <\$5, bring a packed lunch>

Celebrating the personal life of Sir Charles Todd

Tuesday, 16 August, 11 AM, repeat 5.30 PM - State Library of South Australia, Hetzel Lecture Theatre

By: State Library of South Australia <[CLICK](#)>

ANPEX 2022 Philatelic Exhibition – Stamps and telegrams relating to the Overland Telegraph

Sat/Sunday, 20 & 21 August, 10 AM to 4 PM - Hectorville Community Centre

By: Philatelic Council of South Australia <public invited>

The Overland Telegraph Line - A 150 Year Celebration with Speakers, Video and Demonstration

Monday, 22 August, 1 PM - State Library of S. A., Hetzel Lecture Theatre

By: Institution of Engineering Technology and Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers Retired IET and IEEE Retired Engineers Group <[CLICK](#)>

OT150 Events NT

Play Group and story time for under 5's - Outside activities and entertainment

Thursday, 11 August, 9am to 12 Noon – Alice Springs Telegraph Station Historic Precinct

NT Parks and Wildlife

08 8951 8250

Alice Springs Telegraph Station Open Day – Historic, cultural activities, demonstrations. food stalls.

Saturday, 13 August, 11am to 3pm

NT Parks and Wildlife - Alice Springs Region

08 8951 8272

150 years at Barrow Creek – cuppa and chat with historians Stuart Traynor and Andrew Crouch

Tuesday, 16 August, 10am-3pm - Barrow Creek Telegraph Station

NT Parks and Wildlife

08 8951 8272

Historic Talk – Experience Morse Code equipment with telegraphist Laurie Wallace

Friday to Saturday, 19-27 August – Alice Springs Telegraph Station

NT Parks and Wildlife

08 8951 8272

Diner Under the Stars - Family friendly event, historic talks, live music, play, food stalls. door prize

Saturday, 20 August, 5-8pm - Tennant Creek Telegraph Station

NT Parks and Wildlife (entry by donation)

08 8951 8272

OTL Sesquicentenary Official Commemoration

Monday, 22 August, 10am - Dunmarra Roadhouse, Stuart Highway

Presentation, short bush walk and re-enactment

NT Heritage

(08) 8999 5039, heritage@nt.gov.au

Mates of the Murrnaji 2022 Muster – Commemoration, social intercourse and traditional Pub brief

Monday, 22 August, 10am - Frew Ponds Historical Reserve, Newcastle Waters, Daly Waters Pub

Mates of the Murrnaji

krafty@matesofthemurrnaji.com.au

August at the Alice Springs Telegraph Station - Breakfast and ABC Radio broadcast

TBC August - Alice Springs Telegraph Station

NT Parks and Wildlife

nt@ot150.net

Talk to us

The OT-150 Committee is very interested in hearing about the work of our community members.

Please contact us with any material you have developed or discovered that you believe will be of interest, whether for the Newsletter or the website. info@ot150.net

Mac Benoy, OT-150 Coordinator