

BALLARAT, ELECTRICITY AND THE STATE ELECTRICITY COMMISSION

NOTES.- DRAFT NOTES PREPARED BY ROBERT W.P. ASHLEY 1989.

Ballarat has a long and proud history of involvement with the development and use of electricity. As early as 1870, Henry Sutton at the age of 14 years invented a dynamo electric machine and went on to become world-wide famous for his inventions. The Ballarat historian of the 19th century recorded a further interest in what today we would regard as Television. William Withers wrote in 1887:

"But, greater marvel still, in some sense, Mr Sutton has designed, but not yet constructed, an apparatus by which he hopes to be able to see here in Ballarat, by aid of electricity, the race for the Melbourne Cup." (W.B. WITHERS, P. 319)

In fact, says Withers:

"...there was only a space of 16 days between Sutton's discovery of carbon filament, as used in the present electric lamps, (1887) and the discovery by Edison, ..." (W.B. Withers, p. 316)

Ballarat was at first lit with gas, however, in 1885 a small 25 h.p. plant was installed in a building later known as MacRobertson's Warehouse, in Dana Street. Nine years later the capacity of this plant was increased to 100 h.p., however by 1904 there was in existence only about 2¹/₄ miles of reticulation mains. (Ballarat Courier, 28 February 1936)

In 1885 there was also an attempt at generating electricity using a small hydro-electric plant in Bridge Street where underneath today still flows the Yarrowee Creek. According to Arthur Senior, late Installations Inspector, the small plant produced supply at 65 volts and was used to illuminate an art class with 6 arc lamps. This class for artists was held in a room in the building later owned by Coles and Company, previously Morshead's.

In 1894, Messrs, H.A. Thompson, F.W. Niven, W. Coltman, G. Ruffle, Wm. Bently, F.H. Tuthill, W.H. Shaw, J.A. Dawson and A.W. Rogers with a capital of \$100 000, approached the Ballarat City Council with a proposition to light the streets of Ballarat with electric arc lamps. By 1895 the small Dana Street plant, although somewhat enlarged was called on to supply lighting for the shop-keepers and Ballarat's appearance changed dramatically. (Nathan F. Spielvogel, History of Ballarat, 1935, p. 59.)

By 1904 the Dana Street based company was transferred to the British Insulated Wire Co. Ltd. (British Insulated and Helsby Cables Pty Ltd.)

On August 23, 1904 the foundation stone for a new power station was laid and which can still be seen at the Wendouree Parade site. In fact the new power station was partly built from a blue stone flour mill which stood on the site and the wall to the west is part of the old Fry's Flour Mill. Old iron rails were used in the construction of the new power station offices which have been in continual use to this day.

"The original plant put down in the new power station in 1904, consisted of direct current generators driven by reciprocating steam engines, and had a total capacity of 900 kilowatts. In 1913, the plant was enlarged to 1,200 kilowatts. By 1924, the demand for electricity had again exceeded the capacity of the plant, and it was decided to change over to alternating current machines driven by modern steam turbines. These were installed in 1925, and had a capacity of 3,300 kilowatts."

(W. Jack, History of Ballarat Tramways - 1887-1953)

Almost one year after the "A" Station foundation stone had been laid the company styled, THE ELECTRIC SUPPLY COMPANY OF VICTORIA LIMITED, inaugurated the electric tram service to replace the horse drawn trams on August 18, 1905.

Percival John Pringle, M.I.M.E., M.I.E.E., Manager 1909, became Engineer for Generation.

The electric tram services continued to run through two World Wars, a major rebuilding of the system and falling patronage until the last tram of September 19, 1971, which ran from Lydiard Street North to Sebastopol. The trams used direct current and were one of the reasons for the retention of the old Wendouree Parade "A" station for so many years after it had ceased generating sometime about 1959. Until 1924, the greater part of the central area of Ballarat was supplied with direct current via cables laid underground as early as 1894. One of the early underground D.C. junction boxes has been recovered and is on display in the new conference room. It took a number of years for Ballarat to be converted from Direct Current to Alternating Current after the State Electricity Commission took over in 1934.

The process of conversion lasted into the 1970's with the Ballarat Courier and Harry Brown the Printer (Late of Armstrong Street) among the very last to have D.C. electric motors. With the removal of the tramway system it was possible to dismantle the historic old "A" station. One of its turbines was given to the State Museum of Victoria.

Although the State Electricity Commission had built offices in other areas of the State of Victoria such as Dandenong, Benalla and Colac, the existence of the Electric Supply Company and its assets in Bendigo and Ballarat (and in Coolgardie in Western Australia) prevented an early arrival of the SEC in the two large provincial cities. In the year that General Sir John Monash died, 1931, the SEC took over the direction of the Ballarat and Bendigo Electric Supply Company and began to plan to include these cities in the State Grid which eventually connected two major cities to the Brown Coal burning generation plant at Yallourn. Due to the Depression, work on a 66,000 kV line to Bendigo had been halted at Castlemaine in 1929, however in 1934 it was proposed to extend the line to Bendigo. This enabled the Bendigo Power Station to be closed down on December 31, 1937. During 1936 the SEC extended the Turbine Room at "A" Station. One Brush Ljungstrom Turbine was taken to Ballarat from Bendigo. The 66,000 kV line was connected to Bendigo in 1936 which allowed one of the 1,400 kW generators to go to Ballarat. (19th Annual Report of SEC, 1938, p.30.)

Ballarat "A" Power Station continued to supply the needs of the Ballarat district and its tramways as an isolated system in the State until 1942 when a 66,000 kV line reached Ballarat. (Cecil Edwards, **BROWN POWER**, p. 299.)

With the development of Ballarat's Electricity Supply system, offices were purchased in Sturt Street to house the Tramway administration and for Show Room/Customer Appliance contact purposes. Sturt Street offices, at first at No 13, Sturt Street in 1936. No 208, Sturt Street was in 1905 ART GALLERY ASSOCIATION TECHNICAL ART SCHOOL and in 1935 Jago's Footwear Store. An old Masonic Hall built in 1873 in Camp Street was bought by the SEC in 1942 and converted into the Electra Hall for use by employees for recreation and meetings. (SEC News July 1985 p. 11.)

What had been the Power Station's Superintendent's home adjacent the Wendouree Parade Power Station, was converted into a "set of offices to house the Engineer and his staff including a drawing office and canteen room. For a number of years the "Mains staff" used a small brick building still standing to the east of the Power Station in Wendouree Parade which had been the office to the Flour Mill. It is thought to be one of the older buildings of Ballarat.

Over a number of years the "COTTAGE" as the green painted residence became known, in which the Distribution Engineer and his staff worked, saw many many physical changes.

In 1939 it was condemned as temporary premises pending the construction of a new office. (As told to the Drawing Office Staff by the late Lyall Sanderson Dimsey, one time Electricity Sales Engineer of Ballarat and later Dandenong.)

The Bathroom had been converted into a Tea-making facility, and long used by the late Mrs Mary Walker. It was home to a great number of persons who have made their mark in the SEC including the first SEC Employee Commissioner to be appointed - namely Kevin Flynn.

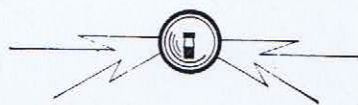
Throughout the 1960's various ideas for a new Regional or Branch Office were investigated. The old Lextron Street Site was sold, the Tramway Sheds in Wendouree Parade were on too high a rated area; the Sturt Street offices of three stories; a converted Flour Mill come power station, and even the dismantled "B" Station in Creswick Road which had been built in 1951-52 and closed down about 1970 were looked at by architects.

All these plans came to nothing as they were found to be unsatisfactory for the carrying out of the Region's business.

On 12th and 13th October 1972 for the first time in the history of the Mid-Western Region, the Branch was honoured with a visit from the SEC Board of Commissioners.



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(BALLARAT BRANCH)

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