

ENGINEERS AUSTRALIA

## CEREMONY REPORT

# *Overland Telegraph*

# *Joining Point*

## *Heritage Recognition Ceremony*

Frews Ponds, 25 km south of Dunmarra, Northern Territory



**Wednesday 22 August 2012**

**The 140<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the joining of the wires of the  
Overland Telegraph**

**Cover Photograph:**

Ceremony attendees, after the unveiling of the interpretation panel. They are from left to right:

Judy Richardson, National Trust of Australia (Northern Territory) & Friends of the North Australian Railway, Secretary.

Yvonne Forrest, Historical Society of the Northern Territory.

Lorna Mumme.

Ted Mumme, Motor Vehicle Enthusiasts Club & former Telstra employee.

Wendy James, Historical Society of the Northern Territory.

Trevor Horman, Engineering Heritage Committee, Northern Division, Chair; Member of Engineering Heritage Australia National Board for Northern Division; National Trust of Australia (Northern Territory), Chair & Friends of the North Australian Railway, President.

Eddie Weber, Northern Government Representative.

Janet Weber.

Steve Sawyer, Engineers Australia, Alice Springs Regional Group.

Kathleen Todd.

Richard Venus, Member of Engineering Heritage Australia National Board for South Australia Division & Graphic Designer for the interpretation panel.

Julian Todd, Great Great Grandson of Sir Charles Todd, builder of the Overland Telegraph Line.

Bronwyn Russell, Director, Northern Division, Engineers Australia.

Owen Peake, Immediate Past Chair of Engineering Heritage Australia National Board.

Karen Relph, Northern Division, Engineers Australia.

Earl James, Historical Society of the Northern Territory.

Pam Venus.

Bev Phelps, Historical Society of the Northern Territory.

*Image: Owen Peake*

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## **1 Introduction:**

The ceremony for the marking of the **Overland Telegraph Joining Point** with an **ENGINEERING HERITAGE NATIONAL LANDMARK** was conducted at on 22 August April 2012 at the Overland Telegraph Obelisk, 25 km south of Dunmarra on the Stuart Highway at about noon.

There were 18 people in attendance.

## **2 Invitations:**

Trevor Horman invited the majority of the attendees.

## **3. Distinguished Guests :**

Mr Julian Todd, Great, Great Grandson of Sir Charles Todd and his wife Kathleen attended the ceremony with his wife Kathleen.

## **4 Program of Events:**

Two programs were used - one for the evening celebrations on 21 August at Dunmarra Roadhouse (see Attachment 1) and one for the ceremony and other events on 22 August in the vicinity of the Joining Point (see Attachment 2)

## **5 Speech Notes:**

Speech Notes were not provided for records.

## **6 Media Release:**

Northern Division of Engineers Australia made a Media Release. Copy is at Attachment 3.

## **7 Media Articles:**

### **7.1 ARTICLE FOR ENGINEERS AUSTRALIA MAGAZINE**

Article written by Owen Peake is at Attachment 4.

### **7.2 ARTICLE FOR NORTHERN DIVISION NEWSLETTER**

Article written by Owen Peake is at Attachment 5.

## 8 Letters of Thanks:

Thanks were sent to the following:

- By Trevor Horman to Gary Frost at Dunmarra Roadhouse by email on 23 August 2012.
- By Trevor Horman to Brad, Lisa and Justin at Hayfield Station by email on 23 August 2012.

## 9 Costing:

Costs of the project were as per the following table:

No.	Item	Paid by:	Amount
1	1 off Engineering Heritage Australia marker disc	EHA National Budget	\$200
2	Graphic design for interpretation panel	EHA National Budget	\$438
3	Manufacture of interpretation panel (vitreous enamel on steel substrate manufactured by Glassmetal Industries, Geelong including freight by air to Darwin.	Engineers Australia, Northern Division	\$1892
4	Manufacture of interpretation panel mounting frame. (Frame had been in stock since <i>Young Australian</i> ceremony in 2011).	Engineers Australia, Northern Division	\$800 (estimate)
5	Installation of panel mounting frame and fixing of panel.	Carried out by volunteers	Nil
	<b>ESTIMATED TOTAL COST</b>		<b>\$3330</b>

## 10 Allocation of Tasks

There was no formal document allocating tasks. Tasks were generally carried out as follows:

- Trevor Horman, as Chair of the Northern Division Heritage Committee, was the main driver in the organisation of the event assisted by Bronwyn Russell and Karen Relph in the Darwin office of Engineers Australia.
- Owen Peake & Richard Venus collaborated on the writing of the nomination document with considerable input from Trevor Horman.
- Richard Venus designed the interpretation panel.
- Many others assisted in various ways.

## 11 Interpretation Panel:

The interpretation panel has been erected on a steel stand at the western side of the Stuart Highway near the Obelisk approx. 26.4 km south of Dunmarra. It has been located out of the line of traffic by placing it behind an existing timber fence. The panel is 1200 mm wide and 600 mm high and reproduced by screen printing in vitreous enamel on a steel substrate.

The panel was manufactured by Glassmetal Industries in Geelong, Victoria.

### Joining Point of the Overland Telegraph, 22 August 1872

## An important link in the electric chain ...


*Thanks to his message from Darwin about dawn on the night the Overland Telegraph was finally joined*


**Hours not Months ...**  
The 3176 kilometre Overland Telegraph Line completed the first communication link between Australia and Europe. The Line from Adelaide was constructed in an easterly westerly from Darwin to Java (Indonesia). From there, telegraph lines ran through Asia, India, the Middle East, and Europe.

Messages could now be sent by telegraph between Australia and England in hours rather than sending a letter by ship when a sea-way trip could take as long as 1100 days.

Although the line was joined in August, the message sent in Java had taken on 29 June 1872. It took four months before it could be received. The first telegraph message from overseas was received in Adelaide on 21 October 1872.

Today, messages are sent through fibre-optic cables, microwave transmitters, and satellites, and take only seconds to arrive anywhere in the world.





*John Lillis, Robert Patterson, Charles Todd and Alexander Mitchell at Paper River*


**A Monumental Undertaking ...**  
Even by today's standards, the Overland Telegraph Line was a massive project but it was built in less than two years. Nearly 30 000 poles had to be filled with insulators and lightning rods and strung in the bush. Some poles were cut from local timber; other poles were made of iron and imported from England. The project was planned in the finest detail by Sir Charles Todd, Superintendent of Posts and Telegraphs for South Australia. Todd personally supervised the completion of the line and then rode with a small party 2600 kilometres from Perth to Adelaide to inspect the work.

*Reproducing the historical marker placed on the Overland Telegraph Line in 1954, under the auspices of the Australian Bicentennial and the Overland Telegraph Line 150th Anniversary. The date 2000/2001 was added after consultation with the Department of Heritage.*

**A Shocking Result ...**  
The final join in the Overland Telegraph was made just 1.6 kilometres to the west of here by engineer Robert Patterson on 22 August 1872. He wrote this account in his diary:

*"Half the party sat on the wire, and the other half of the crew sat, and equipped with all night and tools to help the two men. All our forces would not do this. I was attached every minute were in one end. The moment I touched it to the other and the current passed through my body from all the batteries on the line, I had a good and hot go. Next time I proceeded was unwillingly and used my hands to hold the wire. In about five minutes I had the full shock complete, and I believe was in considerable pain. Part Davis, it would have been with England had not the [wires] made better than."*

**Joining Point Location Plan**





**Mr Charles Todd (1825 - 1914)**  
Charles Todd was an exceptionally capable man with many skills who served South Australia and Australia well for more than half a century. He served as an electrical engineer, telegraph engineer, and public administrator and public administrator for all Australia. Todd was a hard, well-organized man, well-liked and admired by his staff and subordinates as a "revered servant".

**Robert Patterson (1844 - 1917)**  
Patterson, who had the task of joining the wires, was a carpenter and experienced railway engineer. In 1868 he was selected to manage the telegraph line between Darwin and Adelaide. He supervised the construction of the Overland Telegraph project over many years.

**John Lillis** later became Superintendent of Posts and Telegraphs of Darwin.

**Alexander Mitchell** was also a member of the party and was the first to receive the message from Darwin in 1872.

## Overland Telegraph Joining Point Interpretation panel

**12 Photographs:**



**Trevor Horman speaking at the dinner  
at Dunmarra on 21 August 23012**



**Bronwyn Russell speaking at the dinner  
at Dunmarra on 21 August 23012**



**Part of the dinner group singing the National Anthem at Dunmarra**



**Julian Todd re-enacting earlier days at Dunmarra on 21 August 2012**





**Erecting the interpretation panel frame at the Obelisk on 22 August 2012.  
From left: Steve Sawyer, Owen Peake and Eddie Weber.**



**Frews Ponds on 22 August 2012.  
One of the key waterholes which made the building of the Overland Telegraph  
possible and Patterson's camping place at the time of the Joining.**



**Lancewood near the Joining Point Pole.  
This country was difficult for Stuart and later those who built the Overland Telegraph.**



**Julian and Kathleen Todd at the Joining Point Pole.  
22 August 2012**



**The Joining Pole**

**What happened at this pole in the middle of nowhere changed Australia forever.  
From left: Owen Peake, Julian Todd, Trevor Horman and Richard Venus  
on 22 August 2012**

## Attachment 1 - Program for Dinner at Dunmarra 21 August 2012

Engineering Heritage Australia

presents a

Commemorative Dinner to celebrate the

140<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the

Completion of the Overland Telegraph

Port Augusta to Port Darwin

Tuesday 21 August 2012

Dunmarra Wayside Inn



*“We have this day, within two years, completed a line of communication two thousand miles long through the very centre of Australia, until a few years ago a Terra Incognita believed to be a desert”*

Charles Todd, who was at that time 552 km further south

at Central Mount Stuart, sent this message to Adelaide.

Thursday 22 August 1872

# Dinner Program

6.30 pm Pre-dinner drinks

7pm Dinner commences

Welcome by EHA Board Member  
SA Parliamentary Debate January 1872  
Message from William Harvey (Section E and F)  
Message from John Lewis (Estafette Contractor)  
Groan by engineer Robert Patterson  
Victory speech by Charles Todd

8.30pm Re-building the OT (led by Steve Sawyer)

9pm 1984 Heritage Survey of the OT

(Earl and Wendy James video record).

## The Overland Telegraph Menu

Our host Gary Frost has the following Menu suggestions:

- Medallions of kangaroo on vegetable
- Marinated buffalo roast ( if available)
- Baked rabbit with wild herbs and spices on vegetable plus a red current sauce
- Baked local barramundi in wine, lemon juice, wild herbs with salad or vegetables

For those who do not like game meats we have a selection of prime yearling beef cuts, barra or chicken

## Attachment 2 - Program for Events at Joining Point 22 August 2012

Engineering Heritage Australia

Ceremony to celebrate the  
140<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the  
Completion of the Overland Telegraph  
Port Augusta to Port Darwin  
Wednesday 22 August 2012  
Near Frews Ironstone Pond, NT



*“We have this day, within two years, completed a line of communication two thousand miles long through the very centre of Australia, until a few years ago a Terra Incognita believed to be a desert”*

Charles Todd, who was at that time 552 km further south  
at Central Mount Stuart, sent this message to Adelaide.

Thursday 22 August 1872

# Ceremony Program

9am Travel with Hayfield guide to Frew's Ironstone Ponds (found by John McDouall Stuart in April 1862). Robert Patterson (Commander of the NT Expedition) was camped at the Ponds in August 1872.

10.30 Travel with Hayfield guide to the 52 pole remnant section of the original Overland Telegraph line. In particular pole 4E2B near the centre of the "wiggle".

12 noon Gather at the Todd Memorial Obelisk  
about 30km south of Dunmarra.

Welcome to the Ceremony - EHA Board Member

Owen Peake.

Acknowledge the traditional owners, the Jingili people.

The story and the significance of the OT as an engineering project of national significance in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Introduce Julian Todd – great great grandson of

Sir Charles Todd.

Message from the Morsecodians – Bronwyn Russell.

Unveiling of the new EHA Interpretive sign.

Retreat to Dunmarra Wayside Inn for lunch.

## Attachment 3 - Media Release

15 August 2012



### Media Release

#### **Celebrating Engineering Heritage in the Northern Territory 140<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Overland Telegraph**

In keeping with the "Year of the Regional Engineering Team" theme, Engineers Australia is involved in the commemorations and celebrations of the completion of the Overland Telegraph on 22<sup>nd</sup> August 2012. The Overland Telegraph was one of the major engineering projects of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Australia.

On the 22<sup>nd</sup> August Engineers Australia and Engineering Heritage Australia will be conducting a site visit of the line near Frew Ponds (18kms south of Dunmurra) to the Overland Telegraph memorial site where a ceremony will be held with the installation of new interpretive sign. Lunch will be held at the Frews Ironstone Pond (6.5kms) following the ceremony. This is the spot where the single wire was joined in 1872.

On the 21<sup>st</sup> August, the evening prior to the ceremony and installation, a dinner will be held at the Dunmurra Inn. In keeping with the era of 1872, the menu will include such delights as medallions of kangaroo on veg, marinated buffalo roast, baked wild rabbit with wild herbs and spices and baked local barramundi in wine, lemon juice and salad or vegetable from 6.30pm. The dinner promises to be lots of fun with play acting recreating the event.

#### **Some background history of the Overland Telegraph**

The South Australian Government had contracts with the British and Australian Telegraph Company who were building the line north of Port Darwin including the submarine cable to Java (immediately west of Bali). This contract contained savage penalties of approximately £3,000 per month if completion of the Overland Telegraph Line was not achieved by 1 January 1872. This was a massive incentive for the South Australian Government to complete the work on time.

The detailed events in the last few months leading up to the joining of the wires at Frew Ponds are difficult to piece together from the published material available. It is clear that work was proceeding on several fronts with independent parties working without communication with other parties for considerable times and in some cases

Survey House  
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being supplied from different supply routes either from the south or from the Roper River.

The last pole was planted on 9<sup>th</sup> August 1872 and all that remained was to finalise the wiring north from Tomkinson Creek (between Powell Creek and Attack Creek). A comprehensive article is available if required on the heritage of the Overland Telegraph for publication.

The President of Engineering Heritage Australia, Owen Peake said "this is a significant event for Engineers Australia. We welcome members of the general public to help celebrate the occasion. There is limited accommodation however camping facilities with spaces for the dinner still available". If you wish to attend please call Engineers Australia on 8981 4137.

**For more information contact**

Bronwyn Russell  
Director  
Engineers Australia  
Northern Division  
Telephone 0414 894547

Heritage photography available with further photography available following the event.

Survey House  
14 Shepherd Street, Darwin NT 0800  
Phone: 08 8981 4137 Facsimile: 08 8981 3449  
[www.engineersaustralia.org.au](http://www.engineersaustralia.org.au)

## Attachment 4 - Article for EA Magazine

### ARTICLE FOR EA MAGAZINE OVERLAND TELEGRAPH JOINING POINT

#### Joining the Wire

The joining of the Overland Telegraph Line near Frews Ponds, 700 km south of Darwin on 22 August 1872 was the culmination of arguably the most ambitious engineering project of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Australia.

The 3178 km link between Darwin and Adelaide brought communication times with England, and the rest of the world, down to a few hours. Prior to this the only communication was the mail carried by ships which typically took three months to make the journey from England to Australia.

One hundred and forty years to the day later a group of engineering heritage enthusiasts, including Julian Todd the great great grandson of Charles Todd, the man responsible for the building of the Overland Telegraph Line for the South Australian government, celebrated the anniversary with an informal ceremony at the obelisk which commemorates the joining, on the side of the Stuart Highway, 1.6 km east of the actual joining point. The ceremony included the unveiling of an Engineering Heritage National Landmark marker and an interpretation panel telling the story of the joining. A toast was drunk from insulators from the line and a 21 gun salute was fired (with appropriate fireworks rather than the Colt revolvers used in 1872).

Todd and his team built the line in just 15 months through mostly unsettled country only explored about 10 years previously by John McDouall Stuart. The line construction required the erection of 36,000 poles which carried a single strand of wire. Twelve telegraph stations were constructed between Darwin and Adelaide. Many of these became the nucleus of the present-day towns spread along the route which is now best known as the corridor of the iconic Stuart Highway - "The Track" as the people who live along it say.

The completion of the project was delayed by the 1871/72 Top End wet season leaving a section between the King River, south of Katherine and Tennant Creek incomplete at the time of the contract deadline of 31 December 1871. Todd blazed an alternative supply route up the Roper River and across country to the vicinity of present-day Mataranka to get the line finished in August 1872. The liquidated damages for late completion were, however, avoided by the failure of the privately-owned submarine cable between Darwin and Java. When the cable was repaired the first telegraph traffic between London and Adelaide occurred on 21 November 1872 ending Australia's communication isolation forever.

Owen Peake  
Engineering Heritage Australia

**PHOTOGRAPH CAPTION**

Julian Todd, great great grandson of Sir Charles Todd, at the Joining Pole of the Overland Telegraph

**Photo ID: Julian Todd at the Joining Pole.22 Aug 2012**

## **Attachment 5 - Article for Northern Division Newsletter**

### **ARTICLE FOR EA NORTHERN DIVISION NEWSLETTER OVERLAND TELEGRAPH JOINING POINT**

#### **Celebrations at Dunmarra to commemorate OT joining**

The joining of the Overland Telegraph Line near Frews Ponds, 700 km south of Darwin on 22 August 1872 was the culmination of arguably the most ambitious engineering project of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Australia.

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The previous evening a celebratory dinner was held at Dunmarra Roadhouse including re-enactment of some of the historic speeches, a competition involving the building of a model of the telegraph line and a presentation by Earl James of material on his 1984 survey of the line. Gary, who runs the roadhouse put on a special spread for the event.

On the morning of the ceremony a work party drove down to the obelisk and erected the interpretation panel mounting frame. Trevor Horman then led us out onto Hayfield Station to inspect Frews Ponds where Robert Patterson and his men were camped at the time of the line joining. We came across Brad, Manager of Hayfield, at their Centre Yard, mustering cattle.

After the ceremony the group did some bush bashing with the four wheel drives in the convoy and visited the actual joining point located in a 52 pole segment of near-original line which has been preserved. This part of the day was led by Eddie Weber who is local representative of NT Parks and Wildlife and has been responsible for keeping the line segment maintained.

Todd and his team built the line in just 15 months through mostly unsettled country only explored 10 years previously by John McDouall Stuart. The line construction required the

erection of 36,000 poles which carried a single strand of wire. Twelve telegraph stations were constructed between Darwin and Adelaide. Many of these became the nucleus of the present-day towns spread along the route which is now best known as the corridor of the iconic Stuart Highway.

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Owen Peake  
Engineering Heritage Australia

#### **PHOTOGRAPH CAPTION**

Bronwyn Russell and Julian Todd unveil the interpretation panel and marker at the obelisk, 27 km south of Dunmarra

**Image ID: [Overland Telegraph Panel.22 Sept 2012](#)**

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