

We The People

Program 388 July 6, 2020

We the People 388 The Pacific Cable Station & Cable Street Park – a source of civic shame



Good day to you. Take a drive north on Main Beach Parade past Narro neck, and you will encounter a small, rather neglected park on the corner of Cable Street. This little patch of dirt will not catch your eye as you drive past, yet it was the site of an astounding feat of engineering that began in 1899 and played a critical role in Australia's communications with the world until 1962. Until 1872, Australia's communications with the rest of the world was via sea mail, with letters being passed between ships on international routes, taking months to reach their final destination. The Eastern Cable Company then opened the first telegraphic link with Britain, routed via Gibraltar, Suez, India and Singapore, through Darwin to Adelaide.

There were two problems with the Eastern Cable link, firstly, because the route traversed many countries that were not part of the British Empire, it might not be secure in times of war and secondly, because it had monopoly over international cable traffic, it was expensive to use. A Pacific Cable route was proposed in 1887, to pass through former British colonies or dependencies - from Vancouver to Southport, via Fanning Island (now part of Kiribati), Norfolk Island, Fiji and New Zealand. This would connect to the Atlantic Cable from Canada to Britain. It was considered that this route would be more secure in times of war and also break the Eastern Cable Company's monopoly to lower the cost of communication between Britain and Australia. The Pacific Cable Act was passed, and a consortium formed for the project. It was a bold undertaking, laying a length of wire cable to span almost 3,500 nautical miles at depths of up to 5.5 kilometres, at a cost of 2 million pounds, from the decks of the purpose-built ship *Colonia*, and the *Anglica*. The cable made landfall and terminated at a small hut in the sand dunes at Cable Street on 8 March 1902. From there it connected under the Nerang River to the Pacific Cable Station in Bauer Street, Southport, which had a staff of 22 officers. The first message was sent on 31 Oct 1902.

The Pacific Cable became the terminal for all Australian eastern seaboard communications. Officers handled around 500 messages every weekday. The Station became a training facility for other cable stations overseas. It remained in service for 60 years. It was a critical method of communication during WW1, although it was cut briefly by the German cruiser *Nürnberg* at Fanning Island in 1914. In WW2, following the bombing of Pearl Harbour the link was considered a Japanese bombing target, so schools in Southport were closed and children sent to the country for a period in early 1942. The Pacific Cable was made redundant in 1962 with the development of a telephone cable between Sydney and Vancouver, which in turn has been superseded by satellite communications. The original hut was damaged by erosion in 1950 and then restored. It remains standing in Cable Street Park today. Although heritage listed in 2007, its modest appearance suggests nothing of its important historical role in Australia's communications history. It resembles an old, red brick toilet block, although there is an interesting commemorative plaque on display. There are also some wonderful photos in the old Main Beach Surf Pavilion, showing the cable being pulled ashore at Cable Street. Sadly, our Council approved a massive, over-scale highrise development adjacent to the park that doesn't appear to have any side setback, meaning that the developer can build right up to the park boundary, so no doubt there will be an annexing of this historic park during construction and a permanent intrusion once the building is complete. Their neglect of this important little park is a source of civic shame. It is to be hoped that the community rallies behind local efforts to restore it and properly present its fascinating history. It is also hoped this radio broadcast causes embarrassment for the Council such is their lack of focus regarding heritage and the public interest.

Until next time this is Kent Bayley with thanks to Deborah Kelly