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Albany's Old Post Office Building

By Malcolm Traill, Public Programs Officer, WA Museum – Albany. ©2013.

3

Old Post Office – current view

2013 is the 150th anniversary of the plans for this building. It was designed in 1863 by the Colony's Public Works Department's Clerk of Works, James Manning as the Albany post office, customs house and court house. There was a small conglomeration of government buildings built around what is now Lawley Park in the early years of the settlement, but these were roughly built and by 1850s, they were beginning to reach their use-by dates.

Old Post Office, around 1870

The building was the largest and grandest in Albany at that stage. It was three storeys high, built into the hillside of Mount Clarence and with a prominent spot near the new Town Jetty which continued along the alignment of Spencer Street. It was also an engineering challenge. By building into the hillside, James Manning encountered major drainage issues, as underground streams ran down the hill and into the harbour. Many of these issues were only uncovered once some of the 7000 cubic yards of rock and soil were removed to construct the foundations.
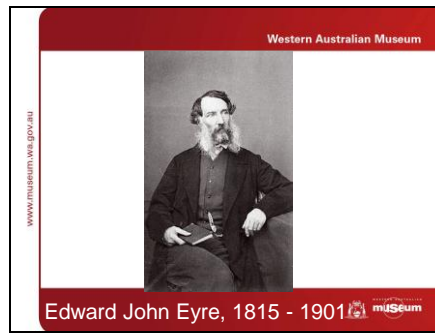
The reach of the telegraph extended from Perth to Albany in 1871 and the line terminated in this building. This had great commercial advantages for Perth as news and information could be delivered much more quickly once ships had docked at Albany. The greater breakthrough was the construction of the overland telegraph from Albany to Adelaide which began in 1875. This followed the route that was pioneered by Edward Eyre, 34 years earlier.

Eyre's Arrival in Albany, 1841

Plaque commemorating Eyre & Wylie

Eyre & Wylie's epic journey is recognized by a plaque outside this building.

7

Edward John Eyre, 1815 - 1901

Ever since that epic journey by Eyre, Wylie and Baxter (who died along the way), it had been a dream to connect east with west. Eyre was rewarded with some land (now Alison Hartman Gardens) in Albany by a grateful colonial government only to have it taken away by the local government when he failed to pay his rates! He was Governor of Jamaica at the time.

8

First Telegraph pole, 1875

Prior to this project, the eastern colonies just had to wait until ships arrived across the Bight for their news and information from the UK. By building a telegraph line, this could be transmitted almost immediately, saving days in time. Governor Weld planted the first pole for the line outside this building on January 1 1875.

9

Telegraph Station, Eucla
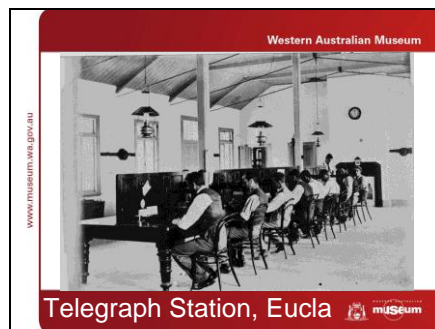
The construction of the telegraph line was a monumental feat of infrastructure and inter-colonial cooperation. The South Australian and Western Australian governments agreed to jointly fund the building of the line which would meet at Eucla. The WA Government had initially been a bit apathetic about the line but when the Overland Telegraph from Adelaide to Darwin was built in 1872, the government put aside its feelings that Albany was going to gain a greater advantage and agreed to the project. The advantages were that it would link Albany to the rest of the world much more quickly via the Overland Telegraph and then the undersea line from Darwin to Java.

10

Christmas at Eucla

The telegraph operations really did make the Post Office in Albany the centre of town as it became the communication hub with the rest of the world. Life in Eucla wasn't quite so much fun!

11

Plaque commemorating Telegraph link

Eventually the line did go through dry, waterless country to reach Eucla and meet up with the SA crew. By December 1877, Albany had received a message that read "Saturday 7pm Eucla line opened. Hurrah!".

12

Last Mail Coach from Albany, 1889

The terminus for the Mail Coach was just below the Old Post Office, where the Chipper Family coach would set off on a 55 hour journey to Perth. This routine would continue until the opening of the railway in 1889 meant the closure of the Mail Coach run.

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Albany Cottage Hospital, Vancouver St
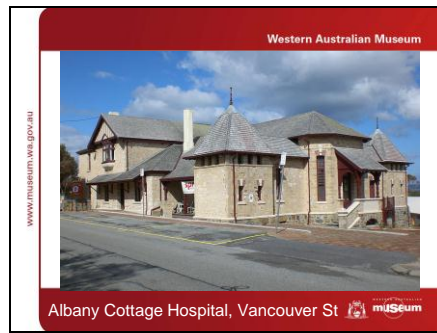
By the 1890s, Albany was beginning to boom. The railway had opened, the Deepwater Jetty had been built to accommodate more ships, the gold rush in Coolgardie and Kalgoorlie had begun bringing over 500 migrants per week into what had been known as 'Sleepy Hollow'. At the same time, a new hospital was being constructed, out of town on Vancouver Street, to quarantine townsfolk from the patients.

14

George Temple Poole, 1856 - 1934
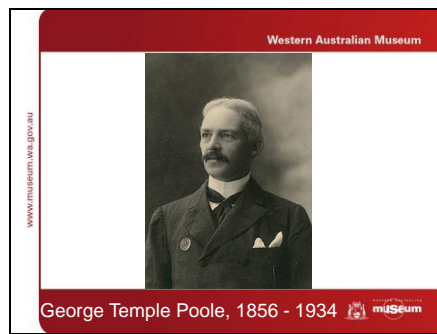
Plans were drawn up by Chief Architect of the Public Works Department George Temple Poole and these were put into action in 1894-5. His best-known buildings include the Treasury and Lands Buildings in central Perth, the Courthouse, Vancouver Arts Centre and extensions to the Post Office in Albany, the Perth railway station, the Perth Observatory building near Kings Park, the Perth Mint, and the Claremont and Walkaway railway stations which are almost identical!

15

Front entrance, c 1920.

Poole's extensions brought on the need to close Spencer Street which had run down the hill all the way to the foot of the Town Jetty. It extended the building westwards and also added the imposing clock tower and the wonderful newel-less spiral staircase that ascended to it. Sydney bluestone was specially imported for the job and the staircase is also unusual as it spirals anti-clockwise.

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Temple Poole Tower

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View from Spencer Street
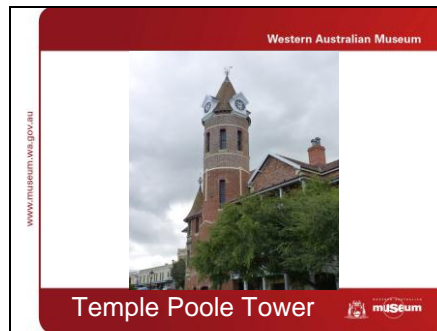
Interestingly the tower was initially built only to roof height. The extensions opened in 1896 but by 1900, there was obviously enough money to extend the tower by 20 feet. This was actually also necessary as the tower was too low for the weights to operate successfully! The clock could be seen so much better from all over town. You can see where the tower extension commences as the colour of bricks also changed.
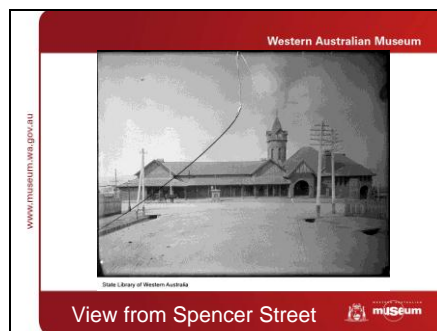
The clock continued to be a focal point of the building. In the 1920s and 1930s, the postmaster was a long-term Albany resident John Norman (snr) who held a long-standing antipathy towards Perth, going back to the time when the mail port was transferred from Albany to Fremantle in 1900. So to get back at Perth and the government, John Norman decided to calculate true Albany time, and set his clock accordingly. So as Albany is about 2° east of Perth, that is equivalent to about 8 minutes in time. So the clock was set 8 minutes ahead of Perth time, which used to confuse train travellers who would arrive, according to the clock, 8 minutes early every trip! Unfortunately this practice had to stop when ABC Radio began and times were standardised.

18

Stirling Terrace, 1900
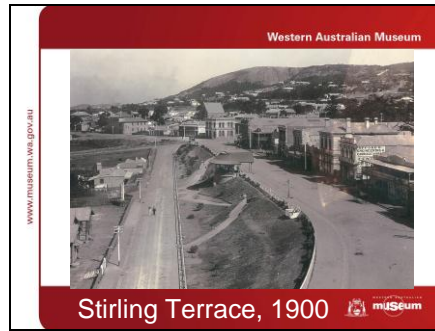
By 1900, Stirling Terrace was very much the main street of Albany, despite the 1888 construction of the Town Hall halfway up York Street. Stirling Terrace boasted four hotels, three banks, three department stores, shipping agencies, numerous small businesses like hairdresser, tobacconist, chemist, greengrocer, bakery & tearooms and even engineering works.


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Stirling Terrace, cnr. York Street
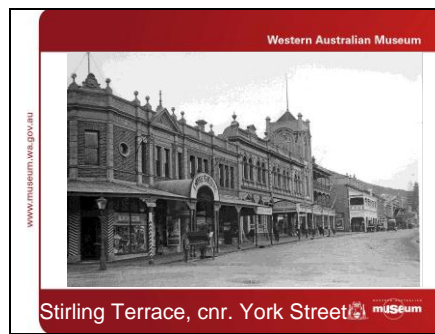
The town jetty and the railway station were the transport hubs and the Empire Theatre had frontages on Stirling Terrace and on the bottom of York Street. The 1897 development of the Jubilee Gardens along the slope between Upper & Lower Stirling Terraces to celebrate the diamond jubilee of Queen Victoria made this end of town the recreation centre as well. Behind the Royal George Hotel were the Cremorne Gardens which had an outdoor cinema and even a roller skating rink.


20

View of Town Jetty
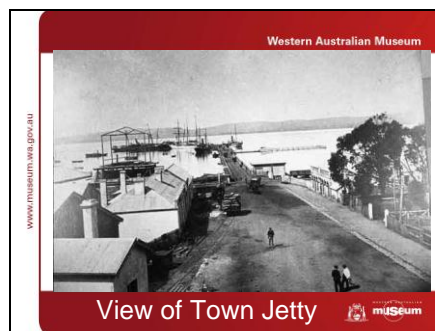
Remember that the waterline came right up to the base of the railway line, so the harbour was a lot closer to this building than it is today. You could look out of the windows and see exactly what was happening on the Town Jetty and the Town Beach.

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View of waterfront buildings
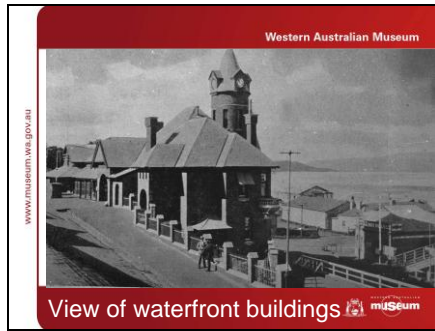
Access was via a wooden pedestrian bridge which went over the railway line and began from the little slip road to Stirling Terrace below. It went alongside the Old Bond Store which was part of the railway station precinct and ran directly to the start of the Town Jetty.

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Old Post Office, looking north
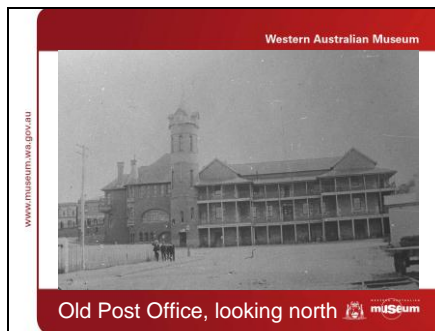
Like so many capital and regional cities in Australia, the Post Office was the centre of town. Traditionally distances between towns were measured from the Post Office. The postmaster was a respected member of the community and held a very high status.

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Old Post Office from Stirling Terrace

The internal layout of the Post Office also changed markedly with the Temple-Poole alterations. The Customs department eventually took over the middle and lower floors. You can still read the sign over the verandah from the south that reads HM Customs. They also retained the ground floor areas as warehouses and Bond Stores. These were known as the King's and Crown warehouses. Eventually one of these would be ceded to the Post Office. The top storey became the hub of the Post Office and this room was the main hall which contained the customer areas, the mail counters and general sales.

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Old Post Office, 1950s

By the 1950s, the town was on the move. York Street was developing as the town centre. The centre of local government was in the Town Hall and subsequently next door. The banks were beginning to relocate and post-war, there was only one major department store – Drew Robinsons – left in town.

25

Postcard from Albany, 1950s
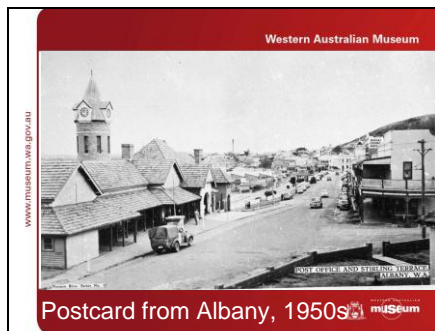
The newer emporia like Coles and Timewells were specialising and requiring smaller spaces. Entertainment was also changing. Radio and television meant that there was less congregating for band concerts and dances. The street was becoming too busy for motor races!

26

Current Albany Post Office

Eventually the Post Office decided to build new modern premises on the corner of York and Grey Streets in 1964. This marked the start of the real decline of Stirling Terrace and also a flood of applications to the Commonwealth for rental space.

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Old Post Office – current view

28

Old Post Office – current view

The Town of Albany negotiated with the Commonwealth Government to buy the building in 1967 for the sum of $15000.98, and by 1983, they embarked on a major restoration project which brought the building to pretty much the state you see it today. The Commonwealth Employment Office and Tax Department were federal offices that remained in the building, but they were joined by such a strange range of neighbours such as the Fellowship of Australian Writers (Albany Branch), Missions to Seamen, the Albany Pigeon Club, the Girl Guide Rangers, and a restaurant named 'Castle Lodge'. Missions to Seamen actually bought the Post Office counter for $5.00 and moved it one level down to their offices below. One change was to the name of the restaurant, the 'Penny Post', and many people around Albany still call this building by that name. It was one of the first fine-dining restaurants in regional WA and for a couple of decades, it had a reputation for top quality food and service.

Another significant tenant was the Telecommunications Museum which was a joint project between the Town of Albany and Telecom Australia, as Telstra were then known. This was a large and excellent museum that extended over the middle floor of the building, and really gave a good overview of the different stages of development of the building and the telecommunications that changed over the years. It took visitors right back to the days of the building of the telegraph line to Adelaide – they even had an original telegraph post from 1877 on display, and a working Morse Code transmitter that you could use.

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Old Post Office – current view

That brings us almost to the present day and the present occupants. Below, in the old damp Bond Store / Warehouse area is the Spectrum Theatre which has been there for perhaps 20 years. They have had their issues with drainage and damp, but continue as tenants to this day. In 2002, the University of WA relocated their Albany Centre here from the Headmasters House which is at the rear of Alison Hartman Gardens in York Street. The whole building was refurbished and given a new lease of life and is a great example of adaptive reuse of a heritage building.

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Thank You!