



On this Day: June

Sources are given for all key dates; if you have evidence that a date is incorrect, please advise the OT-150 group and we will correct it

4 June 1870

TCMC agrees to land cable at Port Darwin

Noel Osborne at his Adelaide hotel receives a telegram from his brother, Managing Director of TCMC: if SAG builds OLT to connect with the Australian network, they will land the cable at Port Darwin. But the Line has to be ready by 1 January 1872.¹ The House of Assembly passes the Port Augusta and Port Darwin Telegraph Bill on 10 June 1870 and the Treasurer (John Hart) tells Todd to get started.² Todd has already sent “a full specification of the materials he should require” to the Agent-General in London in anticipation of SAG’s offer being accepted. The first shipments should then arrive before the end of the year.³

The Legislative Council passes the Bill on 14 June⁴ and the Enabling Act (No 2, 1870) is given assent on 16 June 1870.⁵ Curiously, SAG doesn’t sign the contract with BAT until 19 June 1871.⁶

13 June 1872

Todd starts his journey south

Todd finally leaves the Roper River, two weeks later than he had intended.⁷ With him is Robert Patterson and Charles Wells. Patterson will supervise work on the Line while Todd will travel back to Adelaide, inspecting the work already completed. Warned of the risk of being unable to find water further south, Todd replies, “But I carry my Wells with me.”⁸

15 June 1872

BAT proposes cable from Port Darwin to Queensland

The Line is now 5½ months behind schedule. Concerned about the delay in completion, BAT proposes to exercise its right under clause 12 of the agreement with SAG to lay a cable from Port Darwin to Normanton on the Gulf of Carpentaria to connect with Australia via the Queensland telegraph network. Negotiations between SAG and BAT have, in fact, been going on since November 1871 with proposals and counter-proposals crossing each other as they take months to arrive at their destination⁹ – a clear demonstration of the importance of having the OTL connection.

20 June 1872

First message in Adelaide from Port Darwin

On Thursday night, 20 June, the Chief Secretary (Henry Ayers) receives a telegram sent by Todd from Port Darwin, dated 22 May. The message had been sent by telegraph over the completed Northern Section of the Line; the operator wrote it out and handed it to Dick Knuckey who carried it to Tennant Creek, the northern-most point of the

ADELAIDE, PORT DARWIN, AND LONDON TELEGRAPH.

DISPATCH OF FIRST MESSAGES TO EUROPE.

Messages will be received at any South Australian Telegraph Office for Transmission to London and other places in connection with the British Australian Telegraph Company's Cables during the ordinary office hours on Tuesday next, the 25th instant.

These Messages will be forwarded from Tennant's Creek by Horse Express over that portion of the Line at present incomplete, and are expected to reach their destination in 8 or 10 days.

The Government do not hold themselves responsible for any loss or delay in the transmission of these Messages, but all due precaution for their safety will be taken. a1767z

In June 1872, the British Australian Telegraph Company was ready to send the first messages to London [Evening Journal, 22 June 1872, p2a]

Southern Section, from where it was telegraphed to Adelaide. Knuckey had no path to follow and had to find his own way through “scores of miles of rough country”, literally blazing a trail for the horse express which would follow a few days later. In total, the message had taken 29 days to travel more than 3000 miles from north to south.¹⁰

23 June 1872

Overseas cable breaks

The receipt of Todd’s message in Adelaide encourages BAT’s representative, Samuel Kneve, to advertise a through-service to London on 22 June. He says messages will be carried “by Horse Express over that portion of the Line at present incomplete” and should reach their destination in eight to ten days.¹¹ But then the unthinkable happens – the undersea cable breaks or develops a fault.¹² It’s not clear which but the result is the same – messages dispatched for Europe are stuck at Port Darwin¹³ and will be until the cable is restored at midnight 20 October, a total of 117 days.¹⁴

Abbreviations:

BAT	British-Australian Telegraph Company
OTL	Overland Telegraph Line
SAG	South Australian Government
TCMC	Telegraph Construction and Maintenance Company

26 June 1872

The Horse Express begins

Ray Boucaut left Tennant Creek on 4 June to organise the Horse Express (estafette).¹⁵ At some point he passes Dick Knuckey making his way south with Todd's telegram but the men don't meet. Boucaut gets to Daly Waters on 15 June: Todd arrives there from the Roper River on 22 June.¹⁶ Boucaut has established four intermediate camps and is ready to make a start but Todd is waiting for the latest news from London.

When he learns of the cable break, Todd sends Boucaut south on 26 June. He is carrying the latest news from papers in Java (up to 14 June) and several private messages (which Todd thinks irregular, because the Line has not been formally opened, but permits).¹⁷

On the same day, the first horse express north leaves Tennant Creek with a score of private telegrams.¹⁸

27 June 1870

First call for tenders

Tenders for the CONSTRUCTION of a LINE of TELEGRAPH from PORT AUGUSTA to PORT DARWIN (dated 25 June) are published in Monday's papers. The work is divided into two portions: a Southern Portion about 1000 miles long, divided into three sub-sections; and a Northern Portion, also divided into three sub-sections totalling 1200 miles.¹⁹ Applications to work on the Line have already flooded in.²⁰ The next day, tenders for 30 000 insulator pins and 40 tons of wire are published (dated 27 June): tenderers only have a DAY in which to make their offers!²¹

References

1. *SA Register*, 9 June 1870, p4ef
2. *Evening Journal*, 11 June 1870, p3d
3. *SA Register*, 9 June 1870, p4ef
4. *SA Register*, 15 June 1870, p5a
5. *Express and Telegraph*, 17 June 1870, p2g
6. *SA Register*, 20 June 1871, p5c
7. *SA Advertiser*, 13 August 1873, p6c; Patterson Diary, 13 June
8. Denis Cryle, 2017, *Behind the Legend*, Australian Scholarly, Melbourne, p92
9. *SA Register*, 10 August 1872, p4d
10. *Evening Journal*, 21 June 1872, p2a
11. *Evening Journal*, 22 June 1872, p2a
12. *SA Advertiser*, 13 August 1873, p6c
13. *Adelaide Observer*, 29 June 1872, p2g
14. *SA Register*, 21 October 1872, p5f
15. *SA Advertiser*, 17 June 1872, p2e
16. *SA Advertiser*, 2 July 1872, p3a
17. *SA Advertiser*, 2 July 1872, p3b
18. *SA Register*, 15 July 1872, p4e
19. *Express and Telegraph*, 27 June 1870, p1b
20. *Adelaide Observer*, 18 June 1870, p8a
21. *Evening Journal*, 28 June 1870, p1f