

Overland Telegraph  
150th Anniversary  
1872-2022

*As advised in an earlier email, OT-150 (Overland Telegraph Line Sesquicentennial) will be emailing you at the beginning of each month until August*

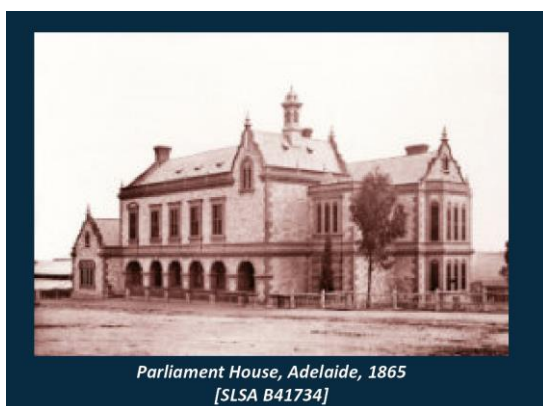
***If you wish to withdraw from this email list, please advise by return email... thank-you***

[www.ot150.net](http://www.ot150.net)

### **On this Day in April**

**In the ot150.net Library – Key dates – April:** Richard Venus identifies two dates of significance for the OT for this month, one from 162 years ago, and the other, 150 years ago. On the 21<sup>st</sup> of April 1860, explorer John McDouall Stuart reached “the centre of Australia”, having surveyed what would later be an important contribution to the directions chosen for the OT line.

Almost exactly ten years later, on the 18<sup>th</sup> April 1870, after meeting with Captain Noel Osborn of the British-Australian Telegraph Company, Charles Todd recommended that the Colonial Government immediately raise a loan of £120 000 to construct “a line of telegraph from Port Augusta to Port Darwin”. This starts the great gamble by South Australia to commit to a very tight timeline and an unknowable expense in connecting Australia to the global telegraph system.



Parliament House, Adelaide, 1865  
[SLSA B41734]

### **In the press**

**Overseas Interest:** Another two years later, on April 20<sup>th</sup> 1872, The Iron Times newspaper in London reports:

*Mr F. S. Dutton Agent-General for South Australia, has handed us a copy of a telegram received by him yesterday from the Government in Adelaide, which confirms the advices from Port Darwin we published on the 16th inst. Advices from Port Darwin yesterday say the gap is now only 200 miles, a horse estafette being organised, and the first batch of messages hourly expected.*

Over 90% of the length of the telegraph line has been completed in those two short years!

**Bite off more than you can chew:** “The Leader”, a weekly journal out of Melbourne reports....

*A GIGANTIC SCHEME - The South Australians have another big project afloat, one far surpassing in extent and in proposed cost the overland telegraph now in course of construction. They are applying to Parliament for a bill to enable them to construct a railway across the continent, from Port Augusta in the South to Port Darwin in the north*

### **Looking Back**

**What's Left?** Considering that the OT is sometimes titled, "Australia's biggest infrastructure project of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century", there is precious little of it left. Prominent features in its construction were the eleven repeater stations. Some have been handsomely maintained and restored, some are museums and some barely have their foundations left., Derek Pugh has a collection of [contemporary photographs of these places](#). Look for these locations, Beltana, The Peake, Charlotte Waters, Alice Springs, Barrow Creek, Tennant Creek, Powell Creek, Daily Waters, Katherine, Yam Creek and Port Darwin

### **More than just a communication Link – the OT as a Line of Enquiry**

Philip Jones, Senior Researcher at the South Australian Museum is detailing the unexpected contributions the OT Line made in the cultural and scientific development of the continent. The Line's officers were among the first Europeans to begin observing the cultural and natural phenomena of Australia's arid and tropical zones. They were drawn into the networks of colonial science, collecting and preserving natural history specimens, making meteorological observations, and bartering with Aboriginal people for representative examples of material culture. Scientists, explorers and travellers began using the Line and its repeater stations as a flexible base for their research. In this way, the Telegraph Line became a generator of data, specimens, artefacts and images, playing an instrumental role in the formation of knowledge about the continent itself.

### **In the OT-150 Library**

**Jobs, jobs, jobs:** In the Resources section, Andrew Crouch's document, *List of Overland Telegraph Workers* identifies 500+ workers who were hired to work on the construction of the Overland Telegraph Line. Completing such an ambitious undertaking required a range of skills and a volume of workers that could have taxed the resources of our young colony, but not so. In an article in the Adelaide Observer, 18 June 1870, Charles Todd said he had been "*so inundated with applications for employment on the overland telegraph line, that he has issued a notice that no further applications will be entertained until a time and place for receiving them has been duly announced by advertisement*". A listing of the job positions gives some idea of the range of skills that were required: Accountant, axeman, blacksmith, boatman, builder, bullock driver, cadet, camel handler, carpenter, contractor, cook, explorer, labourer, linesman, mason, medical officer, messenger, overseer of transport, poleman, saddler, seaman, shoeing smith, stockman, storekeeper, surveyor, teamster, telegraph operator, well-sinker, wheelwright and wireman,

**Dots and Dashes:** In the Telegrams section, Richard Venus' document, *How Did Telegraph Work* points out a common misperception on how telegraphists were able to distinguish between dots and dashes: Most of us tend to think of Morse Code being sent by radio operators where it's the length of the tone sound that's significant: a short signal (a "dit") is a dot and a long signal (a "dah") is a dash. However, telegraph operators are listening to the gap between the sounds: a short gap is a dot and a long gap is a dash.

## OT-150 Events

**Radio Interview:** Last weeks, there was a significant event in communicating the story of the OT Line. Derek Pugh was interviewed about his book *20 to the Mile*, by Richard Fiedler on ABC RN's Conversations program. It's an easy and informative listen, bound to please both OT enthusiasts and those only marginally interested. <Click> [here to listen](#)

**South Australia:** In 1862, explorer John McDouall Stuart completed the first European crossing of Australia from Adelaide to the Van Diemen Gulf, passing through the centre and returning safely along the same route. He and his companions are credited surveying the way to the north for the Overland Telegraph Line, 10 years later. Indeed, Charles Todd was a string advocate of Sturts explorations, realising that one day the colony would make use of his work to guide a telegraph route through the Centre.

John McDouall Stuart Museum

Open every Monday to Thursday 10 am to 4 pm

Adelaide Masonic Centre, 254 North Terrace

Sponsored by the John McDouall Stuart Society

[Contact](#)

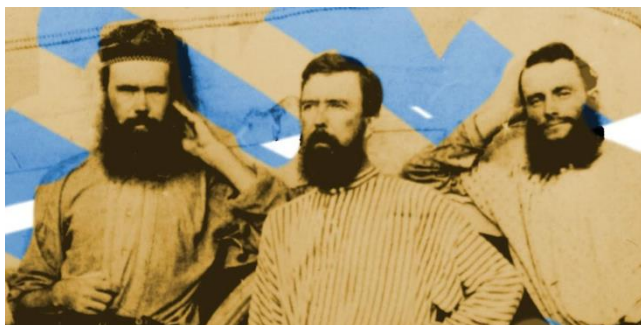
**Northern Territory:** The National Trust in Darwin has scheduled a display of OTL artefacts and photographs and a walk starting in April though to December.

Roadmasters House, 1 McMinn Street, Darwin

[contact](#)

## Images

Hate it or love it. The OT-150 Committee had an early disagreement amongst themselves. The choice of picture for the People section of the Gallery page of the website was not the original one proposed by the web designer (shown below). This "contemporised" image of the three 'lads', the hippy Patterson with a head band, and hipsters Todd and Mitchell with beards, was created using the original SA State Library image by a graphic artists with 35 years experience in the advertising industry (think "Mad Men"). Some react to the image as desecration of the historical record, others react positively to 3 personalities who could be with us today.



The OT-150 Committee is very interested in hosting on the website the work of its community members. Any material you have developed or discovered that you believe will be of interest, please contact us on [info@ot150.net](mailto:info@ot150.net)