Barrow Creek Telegraph Station

Historical Reserve

The Reserve

Barrow Creek Telegraph Station is located 282 kilometres north of Alice Springs on the Stuart Highway, midway between the towns of Alice Springs and Tennant Creek.

In 1860 John McDouall Stuart, on the return journey of his first attempt to cross Australia from south to north, named Barrow Creek after J. H. Barrow, who was a member of the South Australian Parliament.

The Barrow Creek Telegraph Station was one of twelve repeater Stations between Adelaide and Port Darwin. Three of these are now managed by Parks and Wildlife as Historical Reserves, the other two being at Alice Springs and Tennant Creek.

The Station at Barrow Creek is unique in that it had a continuous association with telecommunications technology until 1980, first with the telegraph and later as a repeater station for an army telephone line. The Historical Reserve protects the Telegraph Station buildings along with their associated resources of historical and cultural significance. It also provides a tourist destination for travellers along the Stuart Highway.

Establishing the Station

The site was chosen in 1871 by John Ross' Overland Telegraph (OT) exploring party which was assessing Stuart's route for a telegraph line through Central Australia. The site was chosen due to the presence of surface water and a good chance of obtaining water by sinking a well about 10 to 12 feet.

Poling and wiring of the OT line in the Barrow Creek area was completed in 1871 by a team under the supervision of A. T. Woods and Stephen Jarvis.
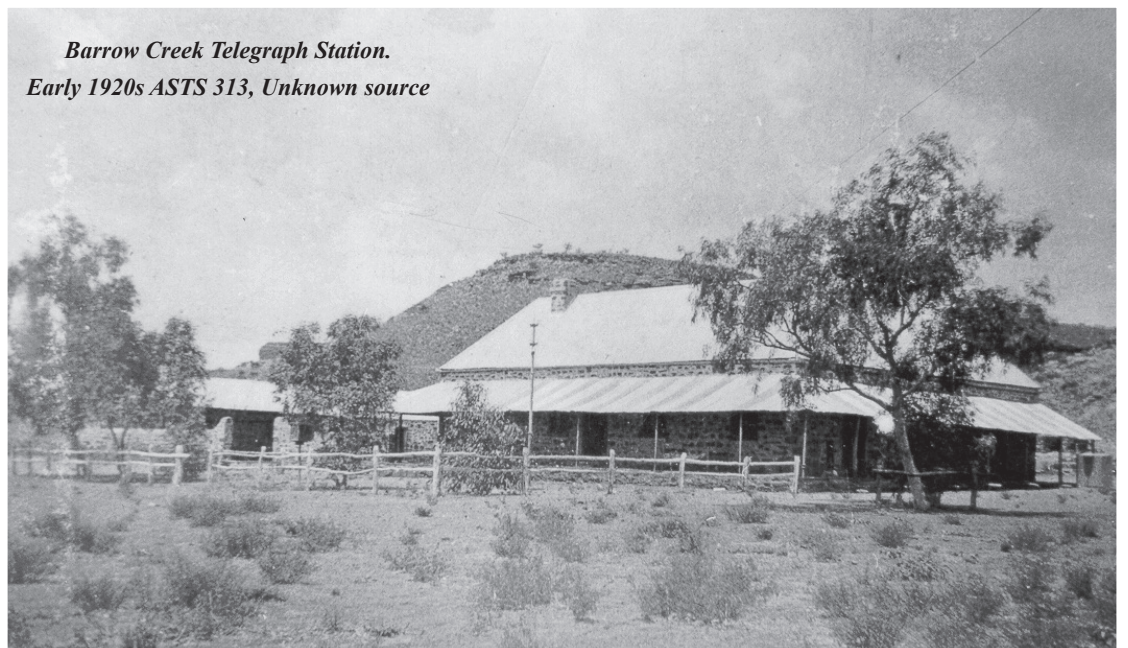
By January 1872, Jarvis and the team had also built a little stone hut and partly built the front wall of the Telegraph office.

On 16 August 1872, the Post Master General Charles Todd visited Barrow Creek on his way to Central Mount Stuart for the official opening of the Telegraph line. While he was there, Todd and the construction party held a formal ceremony to open the Telegraph Station.

Todd informed J. H. Barrow of his opening of the station:
"It is a good substantial stone building on one of the prettiest sites on the Overland Telegraph, and will trust soon be the nucleus of a thriving settlement, 1200 miles by line from Adelaide."

Two days later, the Barrow Creek Telegraph Station was completed and had its first permanent staff which included men from the construction team.

Barrow Creek Telegraph Station.
Early 1920s ASTS 313, Unknown source

Barrow Creek Telegraph Station Historical Reserve

Line party in camp near Barrow Creek.

Early 1920's
ASTS 293
Unknown Source

To protect the line, access into the Station in the early years was only via the internal courtyard and the windows were unglazed and blocked by iron bars. Loopholes were placed in the walls through which firearms could be discharged.

Operation of the Station: a time line

In 1873, 5000 sheep were driven overland from South Australia by Alfred Giles to be distributed amongst the Telegraph Stations along the OT Line. In that same year local Aboriginal people speared a horse and some sheep at Barrow Creek. As a result Mounted Constable Samuel Gason was stationed at Barrow Creek as part of the Far North Division of the South Australia Police Force and the Barrow Creek Police Station was officially opened.

Only eight days after this, local Aboriginal people attacked the Station while all staff were outside in the cool of the evening. Linesman John Franks was speared and died instantly as he rushed towards the safety of the courtyard. Also speared was the Station Master, James Stapleton and Assistant Ernest Flint.

The Station was held under siege for 24 hours. The following day Stapleton died from his wounds and a line party arrived from Tennant Creek to reinforce the Station. The bodies of Stapleton and Franks were buried in the cemetery nearby which can be seen today.

Over the next two months, Mounted Constable Gason, with assistance from a Constable from Peake in South Australia

and staff from the Barrow Creek and Tennant Creek Telegraph Stations carried out reprisals on Aboriginal people between Taylor Creek and Central Mount Stuart.

The fence from the Telegraph Station to the wagon shed was constructed in the period 1879-81 as part of a plan to construct a fortified outer courtyard. The fence from the wagon shed to the blacksmith's hut was built much later.

In 1884 Charles Todd described the Station as *"eight rooms, blacksmith shop, harness room, cartshed and store detached, all of stone, stockyard, yank and well"*. At this time the Station was staffed by the Station Master, one operator, six linesman and labourers. Stock included 280 sheep, 52 cattle and 24 horses.

By 1880 the Station was very much in its present form with an elaborate stone fence, wagon shed, blacksmith's hut and a verandah on the western side of the main building. Barrow Creek had non-Aboriginal population of eight, comprising the seven Telegraph Station staff and one police trooper. These men were provided with meat, milk and hides by a herd of around 250 sheep and 50 cattle.

On the opposite side of the modern highway was the site of a dam and vegetable garden. Nearby was also a lime kiln to provide for the building needs of the Telegraph Station.

One of the great difficulties of life here was the lack of water. The waterhole in Barrow Creek was not permanent as at first thought and the Station's shallow well was brackish. This was suitable for irrigating the vegetable garden and fruit trees, but drinking water had to be carted about 15 kilometres from Taylor Creek. The situation improved when a deeper well was sunk by Ned Ryan's well sinking party in 1879.

During the early part of the twentieth century some of the Telegraph Station staff took up grazing licenses on the Stirling and Taylor Creeks.

In 1930 the Telegraph Station was transferred to the Police Department on the understanding that postal business would be undertaken by the Constable or his wife.

The dam provided water for the Telegraph Station and the vegetable garden.
Pre 1900. ASTS 1591, Mortlock Library, Source Miss E. Moore

Information Sheet

Barrow Creek Telegraph Station Historical Reserve

Grave of James Stapleton and John Franks, Barrow Creek.
ASTS 81, Bradshaw Collection.

The men who staffed the Telegraph Station found life monotonous in the extreme, with little to break the uniformity of their days. One of the most momentous events at Barrow Creek was the opening of the store and the existing hotel in 1932. This occurred just in time to take advantage of the gold rush to Tennant Creek the following year.

The Telegraph Station operated basically unchanged until 1935 when the OT line ceased to carry international traffic following the establishment of the Pacific and Indian Ocean cables.

In 1941 Army units began installing a third wire on the OT poles to operate a three channel telephone system from Darwin to Adelaide. The telephone repeater station alongside the Telegraph Station was established during this time. In May 1942, Army units were stationed at Barrow Creek and the Telegraph Station became a staging camp for Army convoys.

In 1946 control of the Station was back to the Post Master General Department and used as a line Depot for repairs and maintenance until 1975 when the Station was transferred to Telecom Australia.

In 1980 a microwave telecommunications link replaced the telephone carrier wave system making the Barrow Creek Telegraph Station redundant. However it was occupied until 1986 by retired former linesman Tom Roberts acting as caretaker.

Exploring the Buildings

The **Telegraph Office** was originally constructed without verandahs; these were added onto the buildings by 1879. The building forms a U-shape courtyard closed by a section of wall and gates. The original function of the rooms is unclear but it would appear that the telegraph office occupied the central rooms in the front section with quarters for staff and a kitchen in the flanking wings. The courtyard contains an underground cistern which collected rain water from the roof. The original roof was destroyed during a gale in 1941 and was subsequently replaced with a lower pitched roof on a steel frame. In 1965-66, the verandahs were paved and stone balustrades constructed. The central courtyard was also paved around the same time.

The **wagon shed** was in existence by 1879 according to early sketches of the site and possibly was constructed shortly after 1875. Its present form of an open central section and an enclosed room at either end seems have remained unchanged since construction. A sheep yard immediately to the north of the building, which used the building as its southern perimeter, no longer exists.
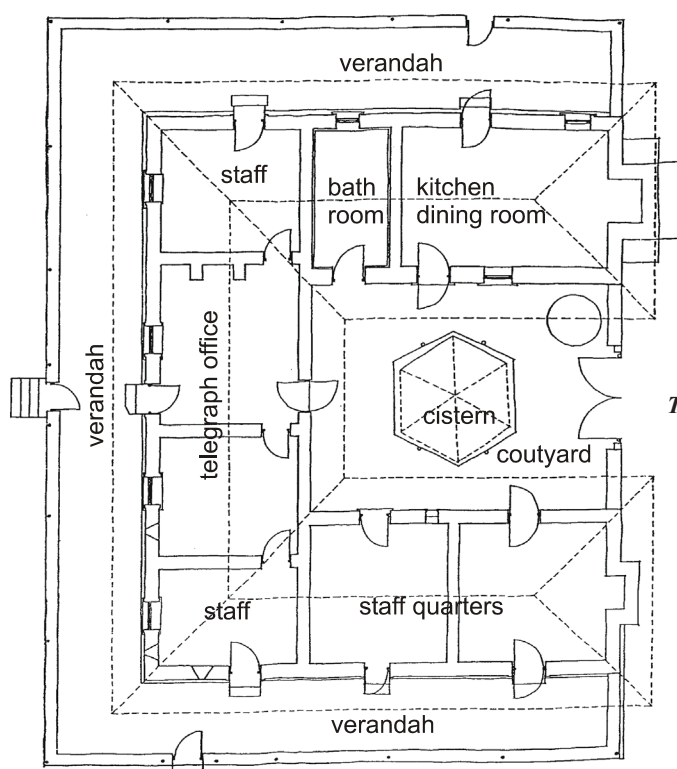
The **blacksmith's hut** was largely reconstructed in 1965-66 with only a small section of the original fabrication surviving in the southeast corner. Today, the building accommodates a varied collection of blacksmithing tools with a direct relationship to the site. A timber-frame thatched awning once stood to the west of the blacksmith's hut.

A program of conservation works was undertaken by Parks and Wildlife between 1992 and 1994 supervised by a qualified conservation architect. Conservation work included installation of subsoil drainage, rendering of internal walls, removal of cement repairs, replacement or repair of water tanks and blocking off water entering the courtyard cistern to prevent rising damp.

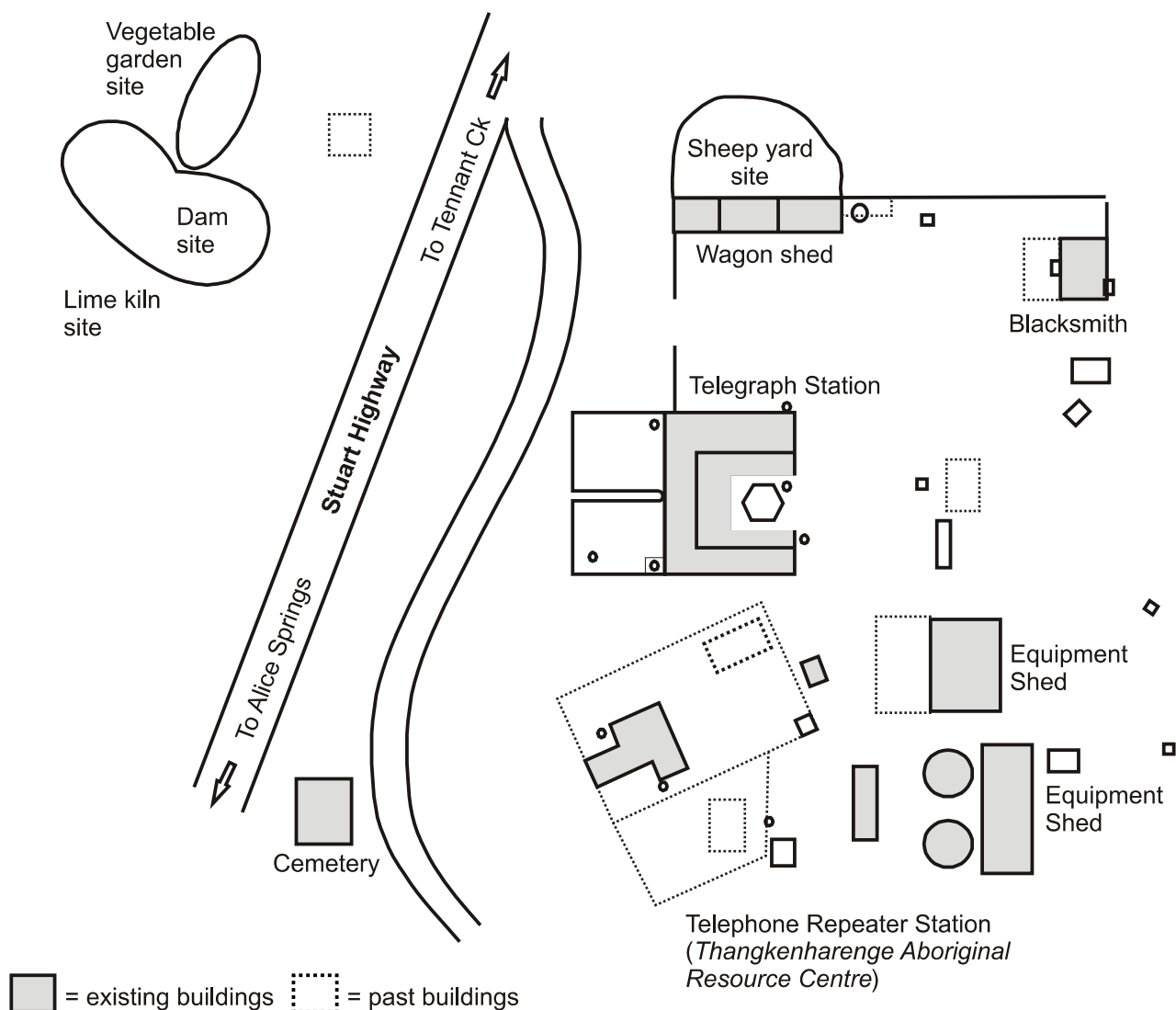## Barrow Creek Telegraph Station Today

Barrow Creek Telegraph Station is an important historic site that has significant contribution listed on the Register of the National Estate.

The Parks and Wildlife Commission welcomes you to the Telegraph Station site. Examine the buildings, wagon and blacksmith's hut and imagine how life must have been back in earlier days.

Floor plan of the Telegraph Office building

Barrow Creek Telegraph Station Historical Reserve

Vegetable garden site

Dam site

Lime kiln site

To Tennant Ck

Stuart Highway

To Alice Springs

Sheep yard site

Wagon shed

Blacksmith

Telegraph Station

Equipment Shed

Equipment Shed

Cemetery

Telephone Repeater Station (*Thangkenharenge Aboriginal Resource Centre*)

■ = existing buildings ⬚ = past buildings

Site Plan for the Barrow Creek Telegraph Station