

1916-2006: 90 YEARS OF ELECTRICITY IN ALBURY

Edited talk by Joe Wooding (presented at A&DHS General Meeting, March 2006 and reprinted from A&DHS Bulletin No 456)

Providing the light comes on when the fridge door is opened and the shower is hot, very few of us care or even need to know what is occurring at our fingertips, but so reliant have we become on electricity, every aspect of our daily lives is now dependant on it.

90 years have elapsed since Albury first made use of this marvellous 19th century invention. The story of electricity in Albury is not hard to find. The *Border Post*, the *Albury Daily News* and the *Border Morning Mail* all contain considerable information, although reporters display a quaint lack of any technical understanding.

In the mid 1990's the Albury City Council commissioned brief on early water pumping and electricity generation. It also contains references to the Gas Works, early street lighting and Albury Sewerage Scheme. It soon became obvious that others had visited this subject prior to me. The Historical Society's Helen Livsey and Howard Jones receive considerable acknowledgement in the report. Country Energy's Ray Gorman has also been very helpful.

Technical terms have been kept to a minimum, but some are unavoidable when dealing with power distribution and consumption.

Today, energy comes in many forms. Albury's early lighting was provided by candles, kerosene or oil, until electricity was introduced in 1916.

A snippet of early deliberations and difficulties is provided:

1866 October 10 - *Border Post* complaint, 'On stormy nights when lights are most required, the lamps invariably get blown out by the wind. Doubtless this is owing to the lamps having too much draught or ventilation.'

1874 June 27 - *Border Post*, 'Gas Lighting - Alderman Solomon enquires re gas lighting of the town. The Mayor could not shed any lustre on the question.'

1879 May 31 - *Border Post*, 'Street Lighting - Beyond a joke to hear of the large amount paid by the Borough Council for kerosene when so little light is shed in consideration thereof. Last Wednesday night, not a single lamp post in Albury was illuminated.'

1883 June 6 - *Border Post*: Albury's first view of electricity was reported when the lighting of the engine shed was tested for the forthcoming banquet to celebrate linking the NSW & Victorian railways between Albury and Wodonga.

1883 June 16 - *Border Post*, 'The Banquet - 1016 gentlemen were seated and 40 Press representatives were served by 225 waiters. The dinner commenced at 3 pm but although daylight was in possession outside, the interior was found illuminated in the most perfect manner.' (Not a word of the ladies.)

1889 October 25 - *Border Post*: Council debate was reported on Albury Gas Company and first reference to Albury electricity found. 'Alderman Ten Brink stated that thousands of pounds would have been saved had the Council adopted a system of electric lighting three years ago.'

1890 February 7 - *Border Post*, 'Installation of the electric light in Goulburn, may be of interest to the ratepayers of Albury in view of the proposal to adopt a similar means of lighting here.' The report contained considerable technical information.

- 1896 September 15 - *Border Post*, 'Lighting of the Town - Electricity Proposed- The Mayor & some of the aldermen are seriously considering a proposal to light the town by electricity. Mr Alcock, of the Alcock Electric Lighting Company of Melbourne, is at present in Albury in connection with the lighting of the Exhibition Building'.
- 1896 October 1 - *Border Post*, 'The Electric Light for Albury, Report of an Expert - Its Adoption Strongly Recommended - Efficiency and Economy'.
- 1906 October 18 - *Border Morning Mail*, 'Electricity for Albury - Proposal of an Alderman, Price of gas too high. Discussion at the Council table. Alderman Brann stated that the surest way to get a reduction in gas prices would be to go in for electric lighting of their own for the town.'
- 1910 April 22 - *Border Morning Mail*, 'Expert recommends a central Power Station driven by suction gas engines, capable of supplying current for public & private lighting as well as electric pumping at the Water Works and power for any sewerage scheme in the future.'
- 1910 December 9 - *Border Morning Mail*, 'Electric light for Albury - Another step taken. Council Engineer, Mr W J Andrew, perused tenders for combined electric lighting and pumping plant for the municipality. The Power Station will be built in the town area and will consist of two engines of 150 hp each. Electric current for pumping purposes will be conveyed to the Water Works by cable at a pressure of 3000 volts. Special meeting arranged to hear from government expert and the £10,000 to be borrowed had to be referred to the ratepayers.'
- 1911 January 21 - *Border Morning Mail*: The report of Mildura in darkness due to failure of their power supply did nothing to help those pushing for electricity in Albury.
- 1912 September 26 - *Border Morning Mail*, 'Public meeting called on electricity issue.
- 1912 October 5 - *Border Morning Mail*, 'Albury Electric Scheme - Polling today. The town's progress at stake. Voting at the Town Hall between 8 am and 6 pm on the question of the Council borrowing £10,500 for the above scheme.'
3-1 voted in favour with a disappointingly small turnout. Of the 882 ratepayers eligible, only 200 voted.
- 1913 August 9 - *Border Morning Mail*, 'Albury Electric Light - Scheme Now Assured Commonwealth Bank advance £10,500.
- 1915 - Scheme well underway. Many reports
- 1916 July 10 - *Border Morning Mail*: Main features described. Current available shortly.
- 1916 July 28 - *Border Morning Mail*, 'Electricity Scheme Completed - Albury illuminated last night, a brilliant sight. The street lightings softer brilliancy is so great that the papers on the boards outside the Border Morning Mail office can be read.'
- 1916 July 29 - *Border Morning Mail*, 'New Electric Scheme Formally Opened Yesterday when the Mayoress, Mrs P D Burrows, performed the switching on ceremony at the Town Hall. It was described as if day had re-appeared. It was not a twinkling brilliancy but a brilliancy so still and steady that the eye could not detect the slightest pulsation of the burning fluid. [Journalistic imagination knew no bounds]. Cost was approximately £20,000.'

1917 January 10 - *Border Morning Mail*, 'Electricity Works Committee Report - kite flying near the electric wires was causing problems.' [Football was another problem in the 1960's].

1919 January 23 - *Border Morning Mail*, 'Albury Council Electrical Engineer, Mr C E Vormister, granted leave of absence to visit England to fully investigate the workings of power plants.'

Plans were prepared for installing three additional boilers and two additional generators with a planned increase in capacity from 300 to 1200 kW. This was not carried out.

1922 One new boiler was installed with a new 300 kW alternator, doubling Mungabareena Power House output to 600 kW.

1925 Albury's rapidly increasing electrical consumption persuaded Council to look at other measures, with an estimate of up to £60,000. Council decided to construct a 3 x 500 kW plant at the Railway Station to alleviate the huge cost of carting coal to Mungabareena. At this time, the State Electricity Commission (SEC) was extending their system in North East Victoria and offered to provide Albury with a bulk supply which was accepted - and with good reason.

From 1916 to December 31, 1924, coal used at the Water Works was 16,396 tons at a cost of £28,094. Total income was £90,563 and expenses, including interest and depreciation £68,099.

1926 May 20 - Sir John Monash switched off the electric current from the Waterworks and switched on the new supply originating at Yallourn in Victoria.

Great emphasis was placed on the fact that power was coming 300 miles from Gippsland. While this is true, the SEC already had in service, a 120 kV line from Yallourn to Thomastown (to feed Melbourne) and a 66 kV line roughly along the Hume Highway from Thomastown to Wangaratta where 22 kV continued to Springhurst. It was from this point a new 22 kV line to the Union Bridge sub-station at Albury was connected. Two circuits at 3.3 kV then crossed the Murray to a new brick sub-station on the corner of Hovell and Kiewa streets Albury. Five 3.3 kV circuits were used to feed the 9 existing sub-stations scattered around the town. These were located at the Waterworks, North Street, Schubach Street, Albury Woollen Mills, Nurigong Street, Volt Lane, Guinea Street, Wyse Street and the Hospital in Smollett Street.

Corowa and Wahgunyah had been linked to the Victorian system on February 2, with a 22kV line from Springhurst.

1927 -The supply was extended to Lavington and out to the Newtown Orphanage and a little of the Hume Shire.

In the 1930's the 3.3 kV was increased to 6.6 kV when supply to Jindera, Howlong and the closer parts of the shire were connected. It was not until after the War that Brocklesby,

Balldale, Gerogery Table Top, Mullengandra and Wymah were all connected.

On February 28, 1958, Murray River County Council (MRCC) was constituted with Cr Bill Alexander as Chairman, and in late April, incorporated the Albury City Council Electricity Supply Department. This new undertaking, headed by Chief Electrical Engineer Hec Dawson and County Clerk Bill Jackson, eventually covered the electricity distribution from Wymah in

the east to the South Australian border. Each shire or municipality had representation on the Council. There was some resentment to the headquarters being in Albury.

The County area was extended on December 1, 1965 to include the reticulated areas of Wentworth Shire and was further extended on October 30, 1974 to include an additional two areas of Wentworth Shire.

A further extension of Council boundaries to incorporate those parts of Balranald and Wentworth Shires not already within the County district, was made by proclamation effective January 1, 1982.

At 5.19 am May 7, 1958, Albury changed from the Victorian system to the NSW grid. A large sub-station had been built in Union Road where a 132 kV line from Wagga terminated, as did the feed from the Hume Dam. Another 132 kV line from Union Road took power west to Corowa, Mulwala and Finley. Albury and Hume Shire took supply at 22 kV, but it took some years for the MRCC to upgrade its system from 6.6 kV to 22 kV. Some of us may remember when power to Dean Street and nearby areas was placed underground from 1961. This was part of the upgrade.

A devastating fire at the Union Road sub-station in 1989 had Albury's power supply at crisis point. A second sub-station in Jelbart Road has now been commissioned greatly diminishing the possibility of a repeat failure.

Who would have dreamed that Albury's 300 kW demand in 1916 could exceed 100 MW in 2006, which does not include 85 MW used by the area's largest consumer, Australian Newsprint Mill at Ettamogah.

The Murray River County Council changed its name and became Murray River Electricity in 1987. NSW power distribution was in the hands of 28 county councils when rationalisation occurred in 1996 - nine county councils in Southern NSW were merged to become Great Southern Energy. In 2002, nearly all of country NSW came under a new banner - Country Energy. The far west of NSW was exempted as was the Newcastle-Sydney-Wollongong areas.