

REGISTER OF HERITAGE PLACES - ASSESSMENT DOCUMENTATION

11. ASSESSMENT OF CULTURAL HERITAGE SIGNIFICANCE

The criteria adopted by the Heritage Council in November 1996 have been used to determine the cultural heritage significance of the place.

PRINCIPAL AUSTRALIAN HISTORIC THEME(S)

• 3.6.2 Developing electronic means of communication

• 3.19.2 Broadcasting

HERITAGE COUNCIL OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA THEME(S)

• 210 Telecommunications

• 309 Technology and technological change

11. 1 AESTHETIC VALUE*

ABC Transmission Station is a good regional example of the Inter War Stripped Classical style. (Criterion 1.1)

The transmission station building and the adjacent transmission tower are a landmark on the Arthur Road between Arthur River and Wagin. In contrast to the surrounding farmland, they form a significant cultural environment associated with radio communication. (Criterion 1.3)

11. 2. HISTORIC VALUE

ABC Transmission Station was built between 1935 and 1936 by the Commonwealth Department of Works for the Post Master Generals Department. It was purpose built to house the transmission equipment for the mast which broadcast radio signals to the South West of Western Australia. Since its construction, the place played an important role in the evolution of broadcasting in Western Australia and in bringing radio to the South West of Western Australia. (Criterion 2.1)

ABC Transmission Station provided work and opportunity in depressed times during the 1930s. (Criterion 2.2)

ABC Transmission Station was the site of the first national broadcast from the South West of WA. The broadcast of the opening celebrations nationwide demonstrates how significant the station was to the community and to a broader national network. (Criterion 2.2)

For consistency, all references to architectural style are taken from Apperly, Richard; Irving, Robert and Reynolds, Peter *A Pictorial Guide to Identifying Australian Architecture: Styles and Terms from 1788 to the Present*, Angus & Robertson, North Ryde, 1989

11. 3. SCIENTIFIC VALUE

ABC Transmission Station was a significant technical achievement at the time of construction as the mast was the tallest and most powerful (10kW) in Australia, a statement that was made again in 1957 when it was converted to a 50kW transmitter. As such, ABC Transmission Station has the potential to reveal technical information about the early years of broadcasting. (Criterion 3.1)

11. 4. SOCIAL VALUE

ABC Transmission Station has had an important role in bringing the community together as the site of many social gatherings and for its role in alerting the community during emergencies. The 50th anniversary celebrations in 1986 demonstrated the depth of community support for the place. (Criterion 4.2)

12. DEGREE OF SIGNIFICANCE

12. 1. RARITY

ABC Transmission Station, is an uncommon example of the Inter War Stripped Classical style in a remote rural location. It is the only known example of a transmission station of the period and style in Western Australia. The remnants of the equipment and installation at the station demonstrate the highest level of technical achievement at the time of construction. (Criterion 5.1)

12. 2 REPRESENTATIVENESS

ABC Transmission Station demonstrates the principal characteristics of a regional representation of Inter War Stripped Classical style of architecture. It is a fine example of its type in a remote rural landscape. (Criterion 6.1)

ABC Transmission Station represents the development of regional broadcasting in Australia. It was the first regional station in Western Australia forming part of the national network of the ABC. Three other masts of the same type were erected at the same time at Nhill in Victoria, Cummock near Dubbo in New South Wales and Lawrence near Grafton, New South Wales. (Criterion 6.1)

12.3 CONDITION

Continuous use and regular maintenance ensured that the building was maintained in good condition until recent years. Although the place is unoccupied and no longer maintained, it is in a fair condition with some walls showing evidence of moisture ingress, particularly the west side of the Porte Cochère.

12.4 INTEGRITY

ABC Transmission Station was purpose designed and constructed. It no longer functions as a transmission station and the fit out has been almost entirely removed. Except for the removal of the fit out, the place has not undergone any alterations. The place has a low degree of integrity.

12. 5 AUTHENTICITY

The transmission building remains intact, except for the removal of the fit out. There has been some impact on the original fabric resulting from a texture wall coating that has been applied to the entire exterior of the place. The place has a moderate degree of authenticity.

13. SUPPORTING EVIDENCE

The documentary evidence has been compiled by Prue Griffin, Historian. The physical evidence has been compiled by Laura Gray, Architect.

13. 1 DOCUMENTARY EVIDENCE

ABC Transmission Station was built between 1935 and 1936 by the Commonwealth Department of Works for the Post Master Generals Department. It was purpose built to house the transmission equipment for the mast which broadcast radio signals to the south west of Western Australia.

The history of broadcasting in Western Australia began with the privately owned 6WF on June 4 1924. This modest concern was taken over by the Australian Broadcasting Company on 1 July 1929. At this time there were 3890 licensed listeners, by July 1930, 5755 licenses were issued and with the introduction of more stations application for radio licenses increased. In 1930, the pioneer station 6WF became part of the national broadcasting network.1 It was at about this time that radio changed from a pastime of the enthusiast to a part of popular culture. It was noted in 'The Broadcaster' that;

the first really important outside transmission which gave a fillip to radio was the broadcast description of the 1932 Melbourne Cup - the description of previous Cups having been accompanied by known and unknown types of static - while the Test cricket broadcasts definitely established wireless as a permanent means of enjoyment in the home.²

The need to service the regional areas of Australia was recognized by the Australian Broadcasting Commission, which was the descendent organization of the Australian Broadcasting Company. The establishment of seven regional stations, nationwide, was designed to give reception free from the 'fading' which was a constant problem away from the metropolitan areas.3 The greater southern area of Western Australia was planned to be one of the first areas to receive a regional station. Three other masts of the same type were to be erected at Nhill in Victoria, Cummock near Dubbo in New South Wales and Lawrence near Grafton, New South Wales.⁴

Minding was chosen as the location for the transmitter because it was the highest point in the vicinity and its position would best serve the rapidly developing populations in the south west of Western Australia. Minding was a small farming locality 19 kilometres west of the town of Wagin. region's major products were wheat and sheep.

In 1935, the proposal for the construction of ABC Transmission Station was warmly greeted by the people of the Wagin district. Rural Australia was still in the grips of the depression with little work and poor returns for crops. The

¹ 'From 1910 to 1935', by Electron in *The Broadcaster Annual*, December 1934, p. 28.

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^{&#}x27;A preview of 1935', by Prospero in *The Broadcaster Annual*, December 1935, p. 48.

The Wagin Argus and Arthur Dumbleyung Lake Grace Express, 30 August 1934, p. 1. Register of Heritage Places - Assessment Doc'n

site chosen for *ABC Transmission Station* was on the farm of Deverick Francisco. The offer by the Post Master Generals to purchase the land was like 'manna from heaven' to the family not only for the payment but the possibility of work for the sons of the family.⁵ One son, Bert Francisco, went on to work as a technician at *ABC Transmission Station*, after initially working as a labourer in the construction phase.⁶

Construction of *ABC Transmission Station* had been planned since 1930, however it was not until May 1935 that earth works began. These delays were noted with some heavy irony in the local press as the opening time stretched further into the future:

But now the news is that we are to wait a little longer. Fifteen months longer, to be exact. For it would obviously be wrong for WA, with only three times the area of Victoria and NSW combined to have two national stations while NSW and Victoria has six between them ... If it has done nothing else Commonwealth control of broadcasting has acted as a great stimulus to the secession movement in Western Australia.⁷

Well, we have lost count of the number of promises made in connection with the opening date of our new regional Wireless Station but as Smith's Weekly puts it, 'the Postmaster General is Right – right or wrong'.⁸

The buildings and the transmitter were designed by architects and engineers of the Commonwealth Department of Public Works. Commentators noted that the building design was attractive but descriptions usually dwelt on the technical details of the building.

There will be an attractive entrance to the building and inside it will be divided into a control-amplifier room, a battery room, a transmitting room, an engine room and workshop. In the walls, ceiling and floor of the control-amplifier room and the battery room special copper meshing will be incorporated for sound purposes. The floors will be carefully constructed of reinforced concrete covered with bitumen. There will be the layer of copper meshing and a covering of magnesite.⁹

Once the project got under way it progressed through 1935. Representatives from the local Roads Board and newspaper made regular visits to check progress. These reports impart an enthusiasm and sense of ownership of the project as each stage was reached. Not least because it provided work and optimism in depressed times.¹⁰

Materials for the project were transported to the site by rail to the Dellyanine siding on the Wagin-Collie line and then transported to the site by motor trucks. Bricks were transported from Cardup, while some materials, including gravel and sand, were supplied locally.¹¹

The Department of Works Engineer in charge of construction was Harry Carrick. Carrick and some senior staff lived at the Palace Hotel in Wagin during the construction period. Much of the workforce, which numbered approximately 60 men lived on site in tents, except for those who lived locally. The conditions were very hard on the site as it was muddy and

⁵ OH 1477, Bert Francisco interviewed by Bill Bunbury 1986, Battye Library.

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⁷ The Wagin Argus, 10 January 1935, p. 5.

⁸ The Wagin Argus, 23 May 1935, p. 5.

⁹ Building and Construction, 31 May 1935, p. 8.

¹⁰ The Wagin Argus, 18 July, 19 September 1935 and 21 May, 27 August 1936.

¹¹ The Wagin Argus, 18 July 1935, p. 1.

OH 1477, Bert Francisco, op. cit.

particularly harsh in winter. Most workers were local but this situation changed as the more labour intensive tasks finished and the technical work of installing the machinery was undertaken by staff from the Post Master Generals (PMG) Department.¹³

The transmitter was driven by four diesel engines, and foundations for these units required exacting standards to minimise vibration;

Each cement foundation will have in its composition layers of felt and cork. When the block of the foundation is completed, a cavity of about ten inches will exist between the clay wall and the cement. This cavity will be packed with sawdust as a further means of preventing vibration.¹⁴

In addition to the transmitter building, staff quarters were built on site. These weatherboard structures on brick piers included two single men's quarters and three married men's quarters. These facilities were considered to be of a high standard and 'no modern convenience was overlooked'. 15

Work on the mast did not commence until mid 1936. The engineering firm in charge of construction was Johns and Weygood. The method of construction was to install an elevator inside the portion already built enabling the workmen to work around that portion. A trench took power cables from the buildings to the base of the mast. At the time of construction the 6WA mast was the tallest and most powerful in Australia. 16

The construction of the mast did not progress smoothly as strong winds plagued the construction period. By August, the mast was almost complete; it only remained to guy rope the top section of the mast. An exceptionally windy day on Tuesday the 25 August 1936 saw the top section fall and bring down approximately 300ft (approx. 91m) of the 650ft (approx. 198m) mast. The collapse did not greatly delay the opening of the transmitter and some workers thought it was a 'godsend' because the lower levels were strengthened after this incident. 17

During the latter part of 1936 a dispute over the naming of the station was revived with a petition from some 200 Wagin residents sent to the PMG Department. It was requested that the name be changed from 6WA Minding to 6WA Wagin. The residents expressed the view

that Minding was not really a town (as a matter of fact, a weatherboard School is the only building at Minding!) and that the name was not therefore included in any maps of WA whereas Wagin was a very important centre in the Great Southern'. 18

The PMG Department was however adamant in the choice of name. 19

Celebrations for the opening of ABC Transmission Station went ahead on 7 December 1936 with a gala ceremony at the Wagin Town Hall. The opening speech by the Post Master General, Senator AJ McLachlan, was relayed from Canberra and further speeches were made by local dignitaries and the WA manager of the ABC. A concert programme followed, led by the Perth Symphony Orchestra, which together with other artists had travelled to Wagin. After the concert the hall was cleared and Ron Moyles' Perth Dance

¹³ OH 1476, Mick Pagett. interviewed by Bill Bunbury 1986, Battye Library

¹⁴ The Wagin Argus, 18 July 1935, p. 1.

¹⁵ The Wagin Argus, 19 September 1935, p. 1.

¹⁶ The Wagin Argus, 21 May 1936, p. 1.

¹⁷ OH 1478, Fred Moore, interviewed by Bill Bunbury 1986, Battye Library.

¹⁸ The Wagin Argus, 27 August 1936. p. 1.

Band concluded the evening with a dance programme interspersed with various items from visiting artists. The evening finished at midnight and buses took the artists back to Perth. Unfortunately one bus crashed on the return trip and the injured were treated at *ABC Transmission Station* by the staff who had successfully transmitted the programme nationwide.²⁰

Once 6WA was fully operational it formed an important part of the local community. It brought money and people into the community. Staff at *ABC Transmission Station* numbered five originally and grew to eleven at one stage. Mechanics ran the diesel engines while the technicians and engineers operated the transmission of the signal. The group was close knit and well integrated into the community. In part because some staff were local men and also because the community were proud of the station.²¹ Tennis courts were located behind the houses and together with regular cricket matches these sporting events brought the staff and community together.²²

6WA Minding transmitted ABC programmes to South West WA. These programmes were created in Perth or more often the Eastern States. The programmes consisted of news, music and serials such as 'Blue Hills' and 'The Lawsons'. Special sporting events were also broadcast. *ABC Transmission Station* had a speech input room with a turntable where music could be broadcast if the signal failed or if special announcements had to be made.²³

An important role of *ABC Transmission Station* in the community was to inform the local community of emergencies. If bush fires threatened, broadcast shows were interrupted and the location of fires was given to alert volunteers and often *ABC Transmission Station* staff would assist in fighting fires.²⁴ On one occasion in 1957, a fire threatened *ABC Transmission Station* coming within a few yards of the diesel fuel store and burning half of the mast paddock.²⁵

During World War II, the staff were unable to enlist as they were providing an essential service, which women were considered unable to do.²⁶ The group formed part of the Volunteer Defence Corps and was armed with rifles. The chief engineer at the time feared that staff would injure themselves by accident rather that from any external threat. The fear of a Japanese invasion was taken seriously by Canberra and a house in Wagin was taken over as a temporary studio. This strategy was to ensure that broadcasting could continue if Perth was taken over, as 6WA was the only transmitter in Western Australia independent of a town power supply.²⁷

In the post war period *ABC Transmission Station* continued to operate as before. One mechanic, Mick Pagett, who worked at *ABC Transmission Station* in the 1950s described the workshops as a 'mechanic's dream' because the equipment was first class, the standards were high and supplies were readily available. Conditions in the engine room were incredibly noisy making sign language the only method of communication. Pagett returned in 1967 as a

The Wagin Argus, 10 December 1936, p. 3.

OH 1478, Percy Eaton interviewed by Bill Bunbury 1986 Battye Library.

OH 1476, Mick Pagett, op. cit.

OH 1478, Percy Eaton, op. cit.

OH 1476, Mick Pagett, op. cit.

ibid.

OH 1477, Jack Clugston interviewed by Bill Bunbury 1986, Battye Library.

OH 1478, Fred Moore, op. cit.

technician and he found the standards had dropped even though the physical working environment was better.²⁸

Although the 10kW transmitter installed in 1936 was the most powerful at the time, the speed of technological improvements meant that more powerful transmitters were soon available. In 1948, plans were drawn for the replacement of the transmitter by a 50kW model. At that time it was estimated to cost £28,000 but by the time the installation was completed in 1957 the changeover cost £51,500.²⁹ 6WA was again the most powerful transmitter in Australia. The installation was undertaken by PMG officers and it was planned to upgrade 2NR Grafton and 4QN Townsville in the same way. The new transmitter gave greater clarity of reception and sent a signal to a wider service area.³⁰

Shortly after this upgrade Minding gained access to the State's power grid and plans were made to change over to SEC supply. Perth contractor C A Hine and Co successfully bid a price of £2,307 to implement the changeover. The installation of a step down transformer was completed in mid 1961.³¹

As a result of this changeover, the diesel engines were no longer needed and staff numbers were reduced. This has been the pattern of change since that time. Greater technological improvements inevitably led towards *ABC Transmission Station* becoming an unmanned facility.

The 50th anniversary of the opening of 6WA was celebrated in 1986 with a programme broadcast from the station by ABC staff. The programme was accompanied by a reunion of former workers and interested people from the area indicating the interest that *ABC Transmission Station* still generates.³²

In 1994, owners of *ABC Transmission Station*, the National Transmission Agency, informed the Wagin Shire Council that they planned to demolish part of the buildings as the facility was being converted to an unmanned station. The proposal was to refurbish the engine room, cleaners' store and workshop of the main building which would have provided sufficient room to house present and future transmission equipment. The remainder of the main building as well as the two pump houses, the cooler house and one of the overhead water tanks were to be demolished and the two underground water tanks to be emptied and filled with sand.³³

This proposal was put on hold and in 1997 the Wagin Shire Council adopted its Municipal Inventory of Heritage Places which includes ABC Transmission Station. The place has been unoccupied since 1996^{34} and all equipment has been removed although the mast continues to operate under direction from Perth. In 2000, a local resident approached the National Transmission Authority with a proposal to purchase ABC Transmission Station and convert it to a residence. The potential sale of the place necessitated a heritage assessment as part of the disposal process.

OH 1476, Mick Pagett, op. cit.

File 2783, 6WA Wagin Provide 50kw transmitter, National Archives and *The Wagin Argus*, 10 October, 1958, p. 1.

Opening of new 50,000 watt transmitter 6WA, Wagin Wednesday, 9 October 1957' address by Mr. HB Halvorsen (Resident ABC Commissioner), PR 8679/WAG/15, and 'Opening of new 50kilowatt Transmitter 6WA, Minding – October 9, 1957' address by Mr. CG Friend, Director of Posts and Telegraphs, PR8679/WAG/16, Battye Library.

File P037, Dept of Works – PMG 6WA Minding, Changeover to SEC supply, National Archives.

³² 6WA Wagin, 50th Anniversary programme, ABC radio archives.

³³ The Wagin Argus, 27 January 1994, p. 1.

National Trust Assessment, Vyonne Geneve, 13/09/1999

13. 2 PHYSICAL EVIDENCE

ABC Transmission Station is situated on Arthur Road, 5 kilometres east of Arthur River, on the Arthur Road leading to Wagin, in the locality of Minding.

The place is easily identified, located on the crest of a hill, with the transmission tower at the rear, a row of sugar gums along the road frontage and the entrance gates and pillars, it is a visual contrast to the surrounding farmland. The building is partially obscured from view by shrubs and trees and due to the south facing aspect of the building. The sugar gums are planted at regular intervals along the road frontage west and east of the entry, and are set several metres inside the property boundary. They extend eastwards several hundred metres beyond the property. The boundary of the place is defined by a 2.0 metre high steel framed mesh link fence. The fence is set back approximately 25 metres from the front road boundary where the original formed concrete posts with 6 strands of wire are still in place on the east side of the entrance. The entry is identified by two entry pillars and wrought iron gates, and a more recent intrusive circular steel road side mail box. The pillars are obelisk in shape, constructed of rendered masonry, with a decorative geometric opening on three sides of the top portion with an electric light fitted from behind. On the front face of each pillar is a circular plague inscribed with 'W6A' across the centre and 1935 around the lower edge. The driveway is bitumen.

The site is level. There are minimal plantings that are laid out in an informal manner. The driveway accesses the west side of the building and the bitumen apron extends around the perimeter of the building. There are several outbuildings on the site, and a dam in the north west corner. At the rear of the building, the original below ground water tank has a corrugated iron gable roof and a surrounding fence. Adjacent to the water tank is the small corrugated iron clad pump house. On the west rear side of the driveway is a double garage clad in corrugated iron, also with a gable roof. Adjacent to the rear of the building is a detached engine room building, connected to the main building by an overhead duct. Within the rear courtyard of the main building there are two corrugated iron water tanks elevated on brick piers and steel framework, and a number of other service elements. In the south west corner in front of the building, there is a sump adjacent to a built up area which is reinforced with a laterite stone wall, where the septic tank is located.

ABC Transmission Station displays some characteristics of the 'Inter War Stripped Classical c.1915-c.1940' style of architecture as described in 'Identifying Australian Architecture.'35 The place typically has a symmetrical facade, simplified classical motifs concentrated at a key point, in the emphatic portico with classical columns, and plain wall surfaces light in colour and tone with an emphasis on the verticality of openings (windows).

ABC Transmission Station is a single storey rendered masonry building on a brick plinth. The entire exterior of the building has been texture coated over the original finish. The layout of the place is a 'U' shape with a central recessed court at the rear, and a full width symmetrical frontage featuring a central porte cochère. Either side of the port cochère, a small vertical window has been detailed with decorative wrought iron. The windows across the front facade are balanced with 6 windows each side of the porte cochère. The

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Apperly, Richard; Irving, Robert and Reynolds, Peter *A Pictorial Guide to Identifying Australian Architecture: Styles and Terms from 1788 to the Present*, Angus & Robertson, North Ryde, 1989, pp. 164-167.

two side elevations also have the same windows balanced within the wall. Each window is typical for the entire building. It is steel framed in a vertical format with five panes of wire glass. It seems that they are fixed glass, although some panes in various places had flywire panels over them. The hipped roof is clad with corrugated asbestos. Each of the three wings of the roof features elevated square boxed vents. The eaves are boxed except for the parapet walls of the porte cochère. Original rainheads and downpipes are in place throughout, and also show evidence of the texture coating. There is evidence of moisture ingress damaging the walls under the texture coating on the porte cochère.

The port cochère is a double storey volume with two fluted columns featured within the central front opening. The front parapet wall has a small stepped pediment. Central above the columns, on the parapet, are the words;

SOUTH WEST REGIONAL BROADCASTING STATION

The main entry is relatively unobtrusive in an asymmetrical location, within the porte cochère. The double doors enter into a small foyer which rises three steps to access the rooms on each side, and the central hall running eastwest. The ceiling height is double storey. The walls are hard plaster with an incised dado line at 1.7 metres high. The original vinyl tiles are still in place over most of the concrete floor. The ceilings in the front two office rooms each side of the foyer have decorative central square vents. The ceilings are plasterboard with battens, except the transmission room which has no battens. Suspended fluorescent lighting is in place throughout. The doors are typically have nine panels, with the exterior doors have the top three panels glazed. The original flywire doors are still in place on the two rear doors and the main entry doors have more recent security fly wire doors. The double external doors to the engine room and transmission rooms are steel-framed and clad.

Ahead of the entry is the testing room with some original built-in shelves still in place. Right along the central corridor (east) is the transmission room. All fittings have been removed although there is evidence of an asbestos walled partition. The toilet and shower facility (the original facility was located outside) have a terrazzo wall partition and c.1970s floor tiles and fit out. Turning left from the entry, towards the other end of the main corridor is the engine room. On the right before the engine room entry is the rear access door. The engine room is a functional space with corbelled engaged piers supporting the gantry structure. The steel truss roof structure is revealed with asbestos and batten lining against the roof cladding. The floor is concrete except for the removable timber floor panel in the power distribution cubicles. The only remaining equipment in the engine room is the gantry and one engine. Some built-in workbenches remain in the workshop, along the front of the engine room.

The transmission equipment room at the rear of the main building was inaccessible. The south wall has a series of metal vented panels, and the north wall, a series of double shutter openings. On the east side, a pedestrian path of bitumen leads from the site boundary to the site several hundred metres to the east where the residences of the transmission staff were located (they have since been removed). The transmission mast is located several hundred metres to the north east.

The proposed subdivision boundary forms an appropriate curtilage of the site. The assessment includes the row of sugar gum trees, the entry pillars

and gates, the original road side concrete fence, the outbuildings; underground tank, pump house, and garage, and the main building and associated transmission equipment room.

13. 3 COMPARATIVE INFORMATION

There are no comparative transmission stations in Western Australia of similar age and design. The stations built at the same time in Cummock, Nhill and Grafton still exist although it has not been determined to what degree the buildings are of the same scale and design.

13. 4 KEY REFERENCES

National Trust Assessment of ABC Transmitter Station, prepared by Vyonne Geneve, August 1999.

13. 5 FURTHER RESEARCH