

The Story of Lord Howe's Meteorological Service – by Daphne Nichols

The First Meteorological Office on Lord Howe (Photos courtesy of the LHI Historical Society)



"Rainfall readings commenced on the Island in 1886, and records of climatological data began the following year. Observations were taken by a succession of residents including Campbell Stevens, William Thompson and Edith Kirby.

The Meteorological Office shared the two-room wireless station from 1939, until 1955, when an independent station was completed on the eastern side of the Island above Middle Beach.

Eight Island residents were employed to build the [Middle Beach] 'met' under the supervision of a Sydney appointed foreman, Bill McGee (McGees Parade, so named). Work on the project was soon interrupted when they ran out of gravel needed for the cement footings. In fear of losing their lucrative employment while awaiting further supplies from the mainland, the 'gang of eight' hatched a plan to source material from the base of treacherously steep cliffs at a site aptly named Hells Gate. In a task that McGee deemed too dangerous and could not be done, they achieved the 'impossible' by erecting a flying fox, with Wally Wilson's horse, Girlie, providing the motive power.

The new facility was state-of-the-art at the time. It had a 277F S-band radar and an AWA 72 MHz radiosonde ground station. In addition, a voice radio link was established between Lord Howe Island and Sydney airport. The station was capable of weather surveillance out to a maximum range of 445kms. Eventually it became the southernmost station in the cyclone tracking network.

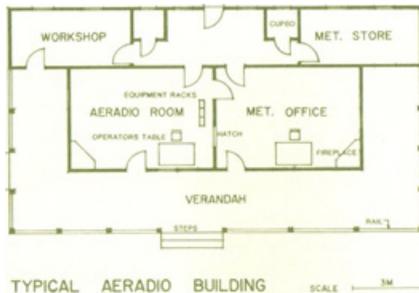
Power was essential to the station's operation. The Department of Civil Aviation had its own works program at the time of the new construction. Apart from upgrading radio equipment, a new power station was being installed that would more than meet the requirements of both Departments.

34 AERADIO OPERATORS AT KEY POINTS

CANBERRA, Thursday—Thirty-four aeradio operators are to be stationed at key points along Australian air routes. Applications for these positions were called for by the Civil Aviation Department in to-day's Commonwealth Gazette.

Salaries of the operators will range from £222 to £342.

The operators will be drafted to the following centres: Canberra, Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Adelaide, Hobart, Port Moresby, Kalgoorlie, Holbrook, Kempsey, Liverpool, Lord Howe Island, Rose Bay, Nhili, Archerfield, Charleville, Cloncurry, Cooktown, Karumba, Rockhampton, Townsville, Alice Springs, Daly Waters, Oodnadatta, Ceduna, Forrest, Hall's Creek, Maylands, Onslow, Port Hedland, Launceston, Darwin, Groote Eylandt, and Salamau. The selected officers will later be required to undergo a course of specialised training at a departmental school.



The first official meteorological office on Lord Howe was a shared space within an 'aeradio' building constructed in 1939 - now the Crooked Post Bar. This base communicated with flying boats operating between Sydney and Auckland. The Lord Howe Met officer made observations taken at 9.00am and 3.00pm. These were transmitted to Sydney - the nearest forecasting centre. The first Met man on the job was Albert Kahn, assisted by Island resident, Mick Nichols.

In 1939, reports appeared in the Australian press about the construction of 34 aeradio and met facilities at sites around Australia including Lord Howe Island. (Courier-Mail - Brisbane - Friday 5 May 1939, page 3



Above: Work on the Met station overlooking Middle Beach commenced in 1953 and can be seen proceeding at the end of a newly formed section of road, later known as "McGee's Parade" after the public works foreman who supervised construction, which was completed in 1955.

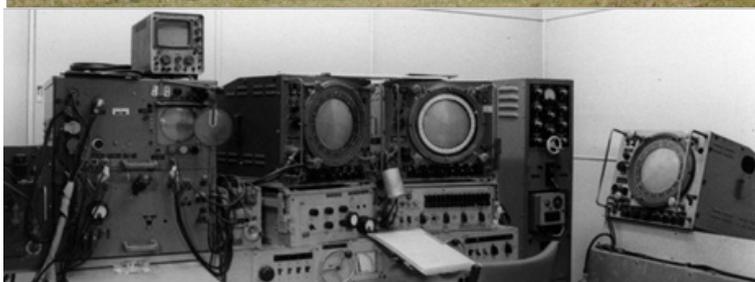
ISLAND INTEL - BLAST FROM THE PAST



Above: Middle Beach Met Station under construction.



Above and below: Completed Met Station overlooking Middle Beach



Above: A 'nerve centre' of the Middle Beach Met Station was a 277F radar recycled from World War II. A weather balloon released daily, and tracked by the radar, provided information on upper atmospheric conditions useful to high-flying aircraft.



Finally, in 1988, the Met Station was relocated to its existing site adjacent to the airport. Here it could more accurately monitor wind-speeds and conditions affecting the operation of aircraft on the strip.

Consequently, surplus power was made available to the Board. By 1955 all houses on the Island had electric lighting and were allowed to run a refrigerator. Prior to this time, guesthouses and several private homes had installed their own power generators.

The provision of Met staff residences initially proved difficult; and mainland employees were forced to find temporary quarters until the houses were built. Three prefabricated Riley Newson homes were shipped from Sydney on two vessels in September, 1952. One ship arrived with a modest assortment of parts for the three homes, while the greater part of the consignment was carried on *M.V. Awahou*. About 150km south of the Island, that ship foundered and was lost with all hands. Further, when the *Jaques del Mar* washed onto the reef in 1954, the only cargo left on her to unload was Commonwealth property including VHF transmitter's, drums of fuel, telegraph poles, copper cable and parts for the Met homes.

As the adverse weather conditions continued, the boat crew normally employed to work the ships refused to go near the wreck unless they were given complete salvage rights. This was not acceptable to the powers concerned and, in a 5-day operation, the salvage work was successfully undertaken by Commonwealth employees living on the Island.

Daily operation of the Met commenced at 2.30am, ceasing at 10.00pm except when flying boats were scheduled to depart from Sydney before 5.00am. On these occasions it was manned the full 24 hours. The staff consisted of three Observers and one Senior Radio 'tech' Observer. Mainland staff were employed on three-year terms while Islander Mick Nichols was the only long-term employee. He received on-Island training as an Observer in 1939 and remained with the Bureau until retirement in 1971. After the airstrip was constructed, the need to collect more accurate data for aircraft led to the relocation of the station in November, 1988, to the present site near the airport.

A focal point for the Met Station's operation for tourists is the daily release of weather balloons. They witness the take-off but never the landing.

However, on 8 March, 2004, they observed both. The morning balloon reached a height of 110,000 feet before bursting and descending to earth. Normally the upper wind structure is such that the balloons are taken away to the east (by the strong westerly winds aloft) and land in the ocean some 50 to 100kms away. On this day the balloon travelled approximately 30km to the east before being blown back by easterly winds above 50,000 feet. When the balloon burst, a rapid descent landed it on the golf course – about 500 metres away from where it was released two and a half hours earlier. [Editor's note: Stan Fenton was playing golf when the remnants of the balloon landed!]

Met Memoirs

Over the next few Signals, "Blast from the Past" will publish a series of memoirs by Met Observers and their families. The first of these comes from Russell Franks, the son of Gwenda and Neville Franks. The family were the very first occupants of Met House 3.

Russell Franks: My Memories of Lord Howe Island: 1954 to 1957 (or thereabouts).

We left Sydney (Rose Bay) early in the morning, a noisy take off, turbulent flight and the rumble as we landed on the lagoon (Thought we had hit the reef). I was a 10-year-old. The first place we lived was just up from the wharf. The Met homes were not complete. I was intrigued by the glows in the bush at night. Glowing fungi!



Franks family in front of Met House 3: Left to right: Adults - Leslie Herbert (maternal grandfather), Gwenda Franks, Neville Franks; Children - Christine Franks & Russell Franks .

There were 5 boys in my class: Ross McBean, Esven Fenton, Barney Nichols, Geoff Cairns and Bruce Thompson. Harry Cairns was Headmaster. School ran from Primary to Leaving Certificate. It had two classrooms and its own tennis court and was next to the oval. It also had a model of the Island. It was the kids' job to roll the tennis court each Friday. We built a fort in the bush behind the tennis court out of disused wooden packing crates. The school was divided into two houses, Lidgbird and Gower which were used mainly for sporting activities.

The oval was used by RAAF Neptune Bombers who targeted the oval with bundled magazines and newspapers. Talk about class interruption...

Each Easter, Val McBean, wife of Administrator Jim McBean, would make Easter eggs which were solid rich chocolate impregnated with raisins. (They took days to eat.)

At home my chores included: twice weekly hand pumping water into a gravity tank, lighting the copper and supplying wood to the fuel stove. We also had an electric stove. Mum used to make bread, so another job was sifting the weevils out of the flour. Each morning, I would go to the local dairy and get a billy of milk.

One thrill was going out in a launch, towing a lighter to unload a visiting ship delivering freight, back to the wharf and into an old Thornycroft truck.



Picnic behind 'Pinetrees'. From left to right: Gwenda Franks, Bruce Thompson, Russell Franks (at the rear); Mick Thompson, John Thompson (reclining); Betty Thompson and Neville Franks.



Me with the criminal, Kim!

I had a wire haired fox terrier called "Kim"; a great companion but he got up to mischief, so was sent off the Island due to conduct unbecoming. (In company, chased calves).

Swimming at Blinky, I was saved when the sandbar I was standing on collapsed and out I went; a wee scary!

We had a lot of freedom. I used to ride my bike to the pictures. Many a time I would arrive home covered in spider webs from riding down a track and the light on my bike would go out. I remember one movie, "The Tanks are Coming". (Guess what... it's now on UTUBE!) The pictures in the hall were a social occasion as were events at the Bowling Club (even including the laying of a new concrete floor!).

Sunday school picnics were held at North Bay; boy, did we eat well!

Flight deck on the flying boat: the pilot opened the side window and gave a hand signal before banking for his approach into Rose Bay.

A great community with most adults being called Auntie/ Uncle.....and the freedom to roam. The Island lent itself to mischief, such a safe place for a kid!

PS. I didn't enjoy the trip to the dentist.

Disclaimer: Memory is Fickle!

References: Lord Howe Rising, Daphne Nichols, Pp 143-145. Photos: Courtesy of Lord Howe Island Historical Society & Russell Franks. *Met Memoir* by Russell Franks.

MAX WEBB Optometrist



**Monday 24th March to
Wednesday 25th March 2025**

**Anyone wishing to make an appointment
please contact the Hospital on 6563 2000**

THOUGHT OF THE MONTH

FROM JILL

SHARING

There isn't much that I can do
But I can share my thoughts with you;
And now and then we'll share a joke,
To ease the burden of your yoke.

There isn't much that I can do,
But I can share a song with you;
And we can laugh or share a smile,
Although we trek a weary mile.

There isn't much that I can do,
Except to be a friend to you,
Reminding you though skies are grey,
Tomorrow brings another day.

There isn't much that I can do,
But I can share your hopes with you,
Though distance may divide our ways,
In spirit we can share our days.