

WOLLONGONG'S FIRST TELEGRAPH STATION MASTER

RICHARD CHARLES WILLS

The receipt of an enquiry from Joy Pickette of Coonabarabaan into the history of Richard Charles Wills whose marriage certificate listed him as "Telegraph Master, Wollongong" has sparked a search into the history of the telegraph station in Wollongong; a subject which as far as I am aware has not been researched before.

Initial information comes from searching the Blue Books, the Public Service Lists, which record Wills' appointments in the service, and a little reading:-

"In Sydney Saul Samuel, with the help of Henry Parkes, managed to persuade the government to have a select committee examine the information he had brought back from Melbourne, and early in 1857 the government accepted the committee's recommendation that immediate steps be taken in concert with the Government of Victoria to connect Sydney and Melbourne [by telegraph], and that a sum of £38,000 (\$76,000) be put on the estimates for that purpose (1)".

The Wills family had arrived from Devon per *Sultana* on 19 May 1855. The father, Charles, was shown on the shipping lists as a farm labourer while his son Richard was shown as 13 years old. The whole family apart from the 4 year old daughter Alice could read and write.

Charles Wills, was one of the very earliest people to join the Telegraph Service. The date of his first appointment was 26 February 1858 when he took on the position of Overseer at 12/- (\$1.20) a day with an allowance of 6/- (60c) for forage. The Telegraph Service at that time came under the aegis of the Commissioner for Railways, Edward Cracknell became his assistant in charge of the "Electric Telegraph". After Cracknell, Charles Wills was the fifth appointee to the service. Richard Charles Wills, at the ripe old age of about 16, joined the service on 9 December 1858.

In 1858 the Blue Books only list the personnel at one station, presumably Sydney. By 1861 some 29 country stations with their staffs are listed - Wollongong is not one of them.

Reverting to Richard Charles Wills: on 9 November 1859 he became Construction Surveyor, Electric Telegraph Branch, New Line, Parramatta. This period was followed by a stint as Operating Clerk on the Northern Line at £150 (\$300) pa.

On 8 August 1862 Richard, now 20 or thereabouts, was appointed Telegraph Station Master at Wollongong at £200 (\$400) pa, pledging £100 as surety.

Regrettably there are no Electoral Rolls for the years 1862 to 1868 but the rolls for 1869/70 and 1870/71 show Richard with a household in Market Street. Did Richard live in the Post Office? Were the Wills family the first residents in our Museum of to-day?

Richard married Alice Lewin in 1865 and a child, Minnie A. was registered to them in 1868. This appears to have been their only child.

Richard remained at Wollongong until 1 April 1870 when he was transferred to Deniliquin, his place here being taken by Philip Mackel.

A. P. Doyle

1. Edgar Harcourt, *Taming the Tyrant: the first 100 years of Australia's International Communications*. Allen & Unwin Sydney 1987.