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Do you know what is under your feet?

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Abstract
What is under your feet and totally ignored? What do you walk over every day? What is essential in an emergency? What provides access to essential utilities? The answer lies under our feet. What is it? Give up yet? The answer is the humble utility inspection cover. Utilities like electricity, water, gas, sewerage, communications and others are essential in any community. Camden has acquired the utilities as time has progressed over the past 150 years to the present. Argyle Street has a number of utilities buried beneath the street and footpaths. Their histories provide a valuable insight into the town’s development and progress, particularly in the 20th century.

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that is under your feet? 

By Ian Willis 

hat is under your feet and totally ignored? What do you walk over every day? What is essential in an emergency? What provides access to essential utilities? The answer lies under our feet. What is it? Give up yet? The answer is the humble utility inspection cover. 

Utilities like electricity, water, gas, sewerage, communications and others are essential in any community. Camden has acquired the utilities as it has progressed over the past 150 years to the present. Argyle Street has a number of utilities buried beneath the street and footpaths. Their histories provide a valuable insight into the town’s development and progress, particularly in the 20th century. 

The arrival of electricity, gas and water were part of Camden modernism and its influence on the town. Each of these utilities has transnational origins well beyond the town and wider world. 

For example the supply of clean drinking water in Camden was linked to an outbreak of scarlet fever in the later 19th century. Contagious diseases were a major health concern in the 19th century and were an ever present worry in daily life. Clean drinking water had an important influence on the development of public health. 

I was walking along Camden’s Argyle Street and it struck me that utility inspection covers are a historical statement in their own right. They are an entrance for the utility service as they also provide an entry to the right. They are an entry point for the utility inspection cover. 

The Durham cover is for the Camden gas supply which was installed in 1912 by the Camden Gas Company. The gasworks was built in Mitchell Street and made gas from coal. There were a number of gas street lights in Argyle Street which were turned on in early 1912. The Camden News reported in January 1912 that many private homes and businesses had been connected to the gas supply network and were fitted for gas lighting. 

Mr Murray the gasworks manager reported that construction at the gasworks had been completed, the retort had been lit and he anticipated full supply by the end of the month. (Camden News, 4 January 1912) Throughout 1912 there was an ongoing dispute between Mr Alexander, the managing director of the Camden Gas Company, and Camden Municipal Council over damage to Argyle Street while laying gas pipes and who was going to pay for it. (Camden News, 12 September 1912) 

In 1946 Camden Municipal Council purchased the Camden Gas Company. The gasworks were sold to AGL in 1970. (Peter Mylrea, ‘Gas and Electricity in Camden’, Camden History March 2008.) 

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What is this for the NRCC and does it still exist? 

The simple answer is no. The NRCC does not exist anymore. The NRCC was the Nepean River County Council. It was the electricity supplier for the Campbelltown, Camden and Picton area from 1954 to 1979 when it was amalgamated with Prospect County Council. This in turn became Integral Energy. Integral Energy was formed by the amalgamation of Illawarra Electricity and Prospect Electricity with over 807,000 customers. 

Former linesmen Joe Hanger recalls working for the NRCC. 

“In 1954 we were transferred to Nepean River County Council. They wanted linesmen and I went on the line crew and eventually worked my way up and got a pole inspec
tor job going around cross-creosoting the poles. Eventually I got my own crew, mainly pole dressing. There were 7-8 in the crew. I was then made a foreman in about 1978.” 

Working in the outdoor crews could be dangerous as Hanger recalls. 

“In July 1974 I fell from a 40ft pole while doing work near The Oaks. We had to check out why a back feed to The Oaks was losing voltage. We were looking for crook joints. The pole is still out there, near a bend just before the straight road into The Oaks. We had opened the air break switch behind us and the airbreak switch ahead, we forgot that the transformer was on the other side of the open point. I checked the pole and Neville Brown had gone along to the next pole to open the next section. I was standing on the low voltage cross-arm and grabbed one of the wires and was struck by the electricity. Luckily my weight caused me to fall away. I ended up falling about 25 feet and just another pole lying on the ground. If I had the belt I would have been okay but I didn’t use it again.” 

The Camden Historical Society meets for lively discussions and guest speakers on the second Wednesday of each month at 7.30pm at the Camden Museum on John Street Camden. Interested visitors and new members are most welcome. For further information call John on 4655 9210.