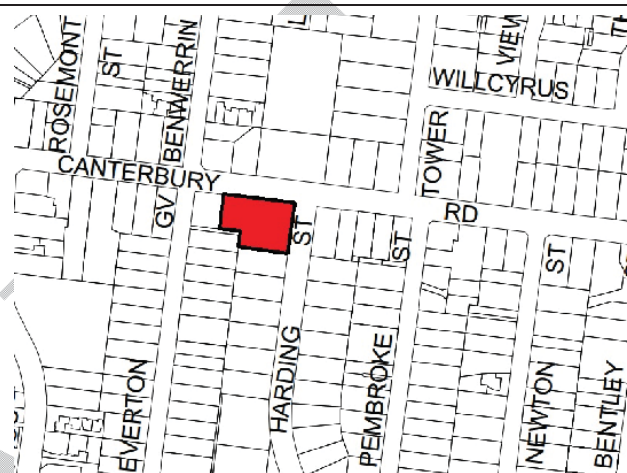


IDENTIFIER	TELECOMMUNICATIONS RELAY TOWER	Citation No	E004
Other name/s		Melway ref	46 K12
Address	728 Canterbury Road SURREY HILLS	Date/s	1961-63
Designer/s		Builder/s	



Photograph by Built Heritage, 13 February 2014



Proposed extent of HO

Heritage Group	Postal and Telecommunications	Condition	Good
Heritage Category	Television or Radio Mast/Tower	Intactness	Good (substantially unaltered)
Theme/s	3.7 Establishing and maintaining communications [subtheme: <i>Developing electronic means of communication after 1945</i>]		
Recommendation	Include on heritage overlay schedule as Individual heritage place		

History

This complex, comprising a 150 foot steel tower and building, was erected in 1961-63 as a relay station to support television and radio links between the city and broadcasting stations in regional Victoria. The project was initiated by the Postmaster-General's Department, which needed to find an alternative to the aerial mast on the roof of the City West Telephone exchange, which was erected in Little Bourke Street between 1928 and 1935. By 1960, the proliferation of new high-rise buildings in Melbourne (following the abolition of CBD height limits in 1958) was such that the City West tower could no longer transmit effectively. One microwave radio route was already entirely blocked, and others were threatened. The solution was to provide a relay station on a suitably elevated location in the suburbs. At that time, the highest point in the metropolitan area was the crest of Delaney's Hill in Surrey Hills, more than 400 feet (120 metres) above sea level. The high altitude of this point had previously attracted one other significant public utility: MMBW Reservoir No 1, which was established on the north side of Canterbury Road in 1891 to improve water supply to the elevated eastern suburbs. Following this tradition, a site for the new relay station was selected on the corner of Canterbury road and Harding Street. The complex was to comprise a steel-framed tower 150 feet (45 metres) high, and a large two-storey building for equipment and staff. Plans were duly prepared and, in an effort to soften its impact, the two-storey structure was conceived as 'a contemporary-styled building designed to blend in with the surrounding area... enhanced by a garden setting'.

When a perspective drawing of the proposed development was published in July 1961, community reaction was far from enthusiastic. Residents of Harding Street immediately (and ironically) dispatched a telegraphed request to the Postmaster-General, Charles Davidson, demanding that the project be halted. When Davidson responded that the project would proceed regardless (adding 'if any further particulars were desired, he would happy to furnish them'), the residents organised a petition that, by early August, had 43 signatures. The issues with which the community was concerned (or, as one article put it, 'bitterly angry') included a perceived reduction in property values (quoted as 'up to fifty percent') and compromise of the '70 mile wide panorama which those with homes on the higher grounds enjoy'. In the petition, the proposed tower was likened a coal mine derrick, with the agglomeration of communications equipment at its apex referred to as 'that slovenly top, with the utensils splattered over it, as big as a two-storey house'.

Notwithstanding such emotive statements, it appeared that residents were largely if not entirely concerned with questions of aesthetics and did not oppose the provision of the infrastructure *per se*. The chairman of the protest committee, Stanley Morrison, who lived directly opposite the proposed site, at 3 Harding Street, told the *Age* that if the project was to proceed, 'it should be redesigned by a panel of architects after the engineers had stated their requirements'. This position was echoed by Melbourne University's Professor of Architecture, the outspoken Brian Lewis, who was quoted as saying 'I think the design, as illustrated, stinks.... It would be hard to imagine anything worse than what is proposed'. Concerns were also expressed by the Landscape Preservation Council of the National Trust. In a letter to the Postmaster General, spokesman Neville Roennfeldt described the tower as 'a gaunt and skeletal structure, with its array of dish antennas [*sic*] staring glassily from a top-heavy platform'. The structure, he asserted, 'is likely to become the most prominent and dominating eyesore in all of Melbourne's eastern suburbs'. To prevent this, Roennfeldt suggested that the building should be screened by 'a complete perimeter of large trees', and the tower itself (an 'unavoidable prominence'), be redesigned 'so that a less glaringly ugly edifice be imposed on the city'.

Towards the end of August 1961, the incoming Director-General of Posts & Telegraphs, F P O'Grady, told the press that the PMG Department ultimately intended to discontinue the use of towers of this type, stating that 'high-flying balloons, city rooftops and mountain tops offered great promise for television and radio transmission instead of towers'. However, he also noted that was too late to halt the project at Surrey Hills, which was already under construction. In early September, architect Neil Clerehan reported in his weekly column in the *Age* that a resolution of sorts had finally been reached: 'when the PMG Department asked the neighbours what they would like done to the steel shape to preserve the beauty of our eastern suburbs, their only suggestion was for a Lilydale stone base'.

Construction proceeded and was nearing completion twelve months later, when it was reported that PMG workmen were installing the first of several directional aerials at the top of the tower. It was pointed out that this bell-shaped object, more properly referred to as a horn antenna or horn reflector, was then the only one of its type in Australia. It was stated that any one of the tower's single radio beams was capable of transmitting 4,800 telephone channels, or five separate TV pictures. Upon completion in early 1963, the facility was intended to handle all radio, telephone and telegraph outlets from Melbourne for at least the next decade. Those residents who had protested against its construction appear to have been placated by the feature wall of Lilydale stone along the Harding Street frontage. As local historian Andrew Ward observed two decades later, 'in time, people grew used to it and some even considered it rather sculptural. At least, unlike a freeway, it neither smells nor makes a noise'. Today, the facility is operated by Telstra and supports mobile telephone services as well as transmitters for HF and FM radio.

Description

The relay station at 728 Canterbury Road occupies a large corner site, roughly the equivalent of three standard residential allotments. The building is a two-storey structure of orange brick construction, with a low gabled roof penetrated by a vented belvedere. Set well back from Canterbury Road, its street facade is broken up into a series of narrow full-height bays that contain metal-framed double-hung sash windows between textured pre-cast concrete spandrels. The third bay from the right (west) end is recessed, forming a porch that opens onto a small area enclosed by a low wall clad with random-coursed Lilydale stone. The bay at the extreme left (east) end incorporates the main

entrance, with a glazed door opening onto a terrazzo porch and sheltered by a cantilevered awning. The Canterbury Road façade is otherwise screened by a tall row of Italian Cypress trees (and other smaller shrubs) planted hard up against the building, in a continuous planter box defined by a low brick wall.

The more utilitarian Harding Street elevation has two full-height bays: one with metal-framed windows, and the other with a tall access doorway to the first floor. The rear elevation, facing the tower yard, has elongated horizontal bays of windows at the upper level, with tinted glazing. The tower yard is enclosed by a screen wall clad in random-coursed Lilydale stone, with a vehicle gateway at the far end. The tower itself is a tall tapering steel-trussed structure on a square plan. It incorporates several platforms, connected by open flights of steps. The communications equipment affixed to the uppermost level of the tower includes a number of circular dishes as well as tall vertical antennae for mobile phone services. Some of the items that were evident on the tower in early photographs have since been removed.

Comparative Analysis

The relay station at 728 Canterbury Road is unique in the municipality, and rare in a broader metropolitan context. As such, it has few comparators in the City of Whitehorse. As a local example of the post-war theme of the expansion of broadcasting and telecommunications infrastructure, it can be broadly compared with such sites as the new branch telephone exchange at 463-65 Whitehorse Road, Mitcham (1959). This is not only analogous in date but also in its architectural expression, with its stark orange brick walls and low gabled roof, and its decisive attempt to soften its streetscape impact by setback and landscaping. As an example of post-war broadcasting infrastructure that was considered innovative at its time of construction, comparisons could also be drawn between the Surrey Hills tower and the Aussat earth satellite station in Burwood East, which dates from the mid-1950s.

Ultimately, the relay station at Surrey Hills needs to be considered in the much broader statewide context of the expansion of telecommunications infrastructure from the late 1950s, which included the introduction of STD service (1960), the completion of the Sydney-to-Melbourne coaxial cable (1962) and the opening of Victoria's first automatic postal station (1962).

Statement of Significance

What is significant?

The relay station at 728 Canterbury Road, Surrey Hills, comprises a large two-storey gable-roofed orange brick building with a façade (screened from the street by Italian Cypress trees and smaller shrubs) of narrow bays with pre-cast spandrels and metal-framed windows. To the rear, in a yard enclosed by a screen wall of Lilydale stonework, is a steel-framed tower, 150 feet (45 metres) tall. Erected in 1961-63, the facility was a response to the increased demand for telephone and telegraphic services in the post-war period, as well as the introduction of television broadcasting and, specifically, to relay signals to regional TV stations.

How is it significant?

The relay station is of historic and aesthetic significance to the City of Whitehorse.

How is it significant?

Historically, the relay station is significant for associations with the expansion of broadcasting and telecommunications infrastructure that took place in Victoria from the late 1950s. At that time, the boom of residential and commercial development saw the demand for telephone and telegraph services increase to an unprecedented extent and this, coupled with the introduction of television broadcasting in the 1956, prompted a massive upgrade of facilities. Intended to replace the aerial mast at the City West Telephone Exchange (which was losing efficacy due to the increased number of high-rise city buildings), the relay station at Surrey Hills was a major step in linking communications between the CBD and regional Victoria.

Aesthetically, the relay station is significant as a landmark on the highest point of what was then the entire Melbourne metropolitan area (since eclipsed, only slightly, by Mount Cooper in Bundoora). Although residents at the time were concerned that the new facility would be an eyesore, attempts were made to soften the appearance of the building through setback, landscaping and, notably, by the incorporation of a feature wall of Lilydale stonework that was specifically requested by residents. The outcome was a mixed success, with some residents that still consider it ugly while others admire its sculptural form. Either way, the two-storey building is a smart (and virtually unaltered) example of contemporary utility architecture of the period, and the tower remains a striking element in the suburban landscape.

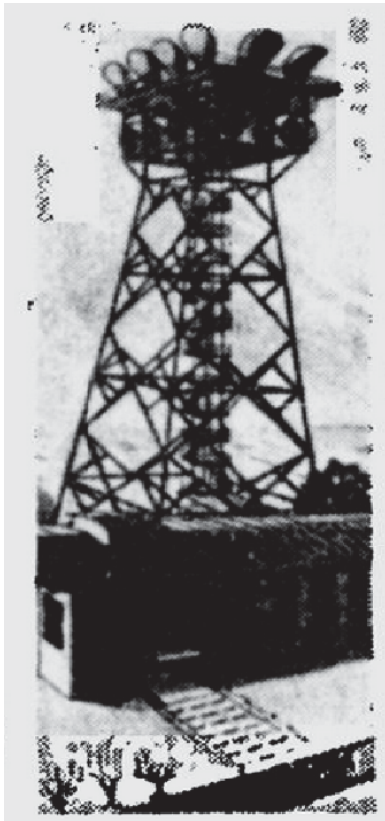
References

- 'Stir over Surrey Hills tower plan', *Age*, 4 August 1961, p 6.
- 'PMG Tower "most prominent eyesore"', *Age*, 11 August 1961, p 6.
- 'PO hopes to end "eyesore" towers', *Age*, 23 August 1961, p 7.
- Neil Clerehan, 'Make a "Feature", or play it down?', *Age*, 4 September 1961, p 8.
- 'Directional aerial at Surrey Hills', *Age*, 26 September 1962, p 8.
- 'Nerve centre', *Age*, 16 May 1963, p 5.
- Andrew Lemon, *Box Hill*, pp 208-209.

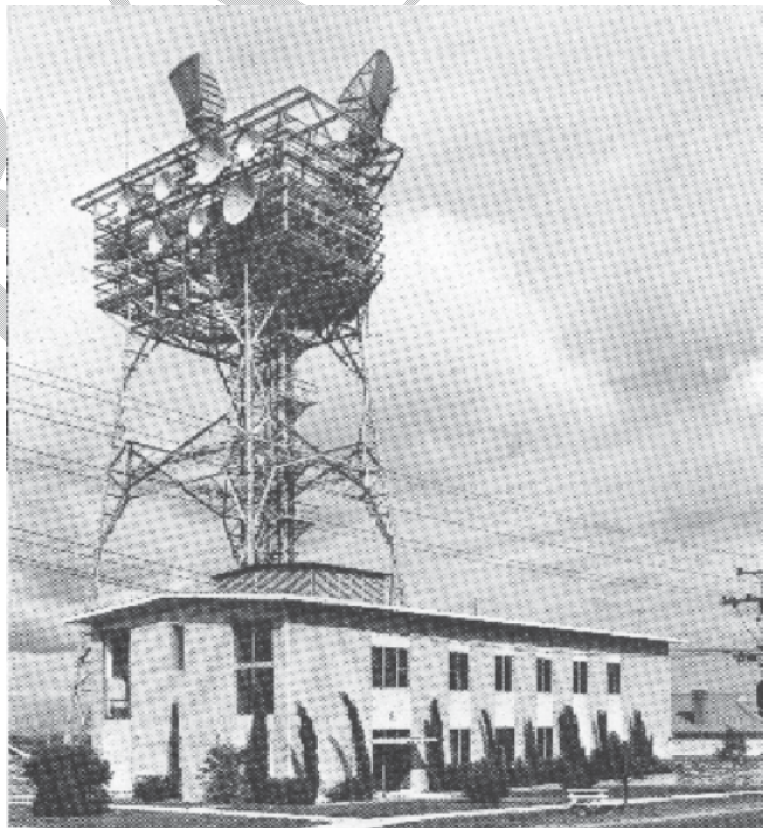
Identified by

Heritage Alliance (additional research and assessment by Built Heritage Pty Ltd)

Historical Image/s



Original perspective drawing (1961)



Contemporary photograph from the Victorian Yearbook (1973)