

# The Power Room

Chris. Cartledge ([cartledge@outlook.com](mailto:cartledge@outlook.com))

Before I joined the P.M.G.' Dept. at Alexandria as a 15-year-old on the 12th of January 1959 I had numerous jobs during my high school years.

The first was decanting potatoes from 60-pound hessian potato sacks into three and six-pound paper bags at a roadside stall on the banks of Cabbage Tree Creek in Fairy Meadow just around the corner from where I lived. I was also a JPO (Junior Postal Officer) in Fairy Meadow delivering telegrams during the school holidays. Another was delivering bread door to door from a horse-drawn bakers' cart (as you progressed along the street a whistle would bring the horse up to you for a refill of your basket). I also worked at a local dairy as a roustabout where I was eventually taught to hand milk the cows.

The most interesting job was delivering papers in Wollongong CBD. I would ride my bike into town after school to work at A. V. Green's newsagency in the main street. I worked Monday to Friday after school and on Saturday mornings, which was the best day of the week. Firstly, because the papers were very thin, about 20 pages (mostly a racing guide) and thus very easy to carry. Secondly, because most offices and many shops were closed Saturdays, only one paper boy was rostered for the whole CBD. This meant the boy rostered got to sell his papers in all 7 hotels in the Wollongong CBD. Selling papers in pubs can be quite lucrative because the drinkers often gave tips, telling you to keep the change, and depending on the price of the paper at the time, the tip could be half the price of the paper. I always did a second round of the pubs on a Saturday.

During the week there were four paper rounds in the CBD and luckily mine included the top end of town where the local telephone exchange was located. At the time, the Wollongong exchange complex consisted of a 2000/SE50 type auto exchange in a temporary fibro building. There was a manual trunk exchange where around 70 telephonists worked, an associated semi-auto trunk exchange and a long line/radio section. Remember, this is in the period before STD

(Subscriber Trunk Dialling). All but the auto exchange was located in a two-story brick building with the Power Room for the whole complex in the basement. Adjacent to the Power Room was the Battery Room and Emergency Plant Room.

I had regular customers in both buildings except however, for the boss in his office (Eric Bourne, who bought the Sun), you never knew where they were working on a particular day so I would walk through both buildings down the aisles of the equipment rooms looking for my regulars. I was not allowed in the Switch Room where the telephonists ('switches') worked connecting trunk calls, taking complaints and providing information to subscribers. There was a total of around 70 single women working varying shifts. It was not until 1966 that married women were allowed to work in the public service.

The Power Room was down three flights of stairs and they were quite steep. In those days there was a Senior Technician in charge of the Power Room (thinking back today I'm not sure what they did all day). Bob was one of my regulars and although he didn't tip, he bought both the Sun and the Mirror everyday so he was worth looking for. Like all the other Senior Techs he was on a 6-month shift rotation which included the Power Room.

Whilst Saturdays had the thinnest papers, in the mid-50s Thursday night shopping had been introduced so on a Thursday the papers were the biggest they would be all week, sometimes twice as thick and certainly a lot heavier. We carried the papers out the front using a large leather strap going diagonally across our chest, a bit like a seat belt in today's cars. The buckle was to the front as you needed to adjust it depending on the number and thickness of the papers you were carrying.

One Thursday, when I was particularly pregnant with papers, I couldn't find Bob in any of the equipment rooms so I headed for the Power Room. I was at the top of the last flight of stairs going down to the Power Room when I stumbled. As I fell forward, luckily the buckle let go and the

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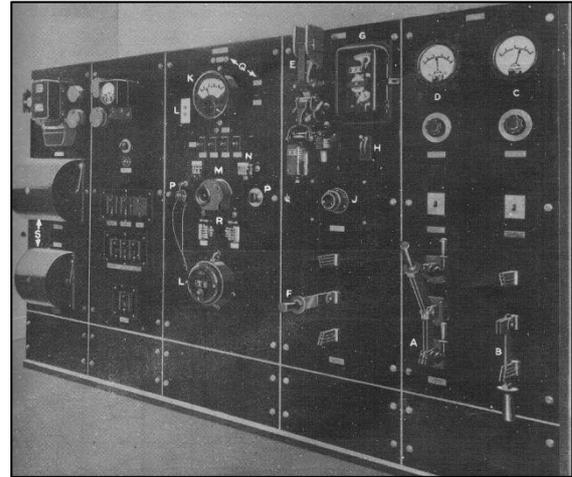
papers spread out in front of me across the remaining stairs and so I slid down head first on my belly like I was on a slippery dip, stopping when I slammed into the Power Room door. Not hurt, except for my pride, I was picking up the papers when Bob came through the door to investigate the noise. It was then that I noticed the buckle had become detached from the strap. Bob was a good bloke, he said wait there and in a couple of minutes came back with a lacing needle and waxed lacing twine and sewed the buckle back on the strap. It appears he borrowed the repair gear from the CI6 (Country Installation No.6) techs who were in the auto exchange doing block cabling for a new equipment racks.

Supervising Technician Stan Hatton (brother of Bernie) was another of my regulars, he bought the Daily Mirror. As a shift supervisor he too, could be hard to find. I would often find him in the radio section, working on the STC PCM (Sydney's Tightest Company - Pulse Code Modulation) radio carrier system or the newer Magneti Marelli radio terminal.

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After my first year as a Technician-In-Training, in Nov 1959 I was assigned to Wollongong Telephone Exchange together with fellow first yearers Tony Jones & Reg Page. I soon met a great range of characters, Bill De Vries being one of the standouts. I will never forget the gang of 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> year trainees who, on my first day, stripped off my underclothes and painted my undercarriage with oildag – an oil infused with graphite used to lubricate the bi-motional selectors. The jet-black stains never washed out of my Bonds. Bill was not part of these shenanigans.

On paydays the trainees took it in turns to run the 'two-bob-in', a winner takes all raffle (there were about 40 technical staff in the Wollongong multi-function district at that time). For a while Bill ran an alternate raffle on paydays. The prize was a very interesting wax candle in a shape you can guess – he had picked up the mould in Asia where he usually stopped over for a few days on his way home from the Netherlands where his parents lived. Bill was a single man and only child.



A typical 1950s power panel  
(from *Telephony 5*, 1960)

Back to the Power Room, visually it is an interesting place, with large rectifiers, associated Control Panels with volt and amp meters and various rotary knobs and a Discharge Panel with large brass knife switches etc. The Battery Room had large open cell lead-acid batteries (24v, 50v & 90v) and in the Emergency Plant Room a 4 machine all electric no-break set running continuously in case of any power interruptions which in the post war 1950s was pretty often. The visual potential of all this technical gear was not lost on Bill De Vries who was an amateur film maker.

It was the perfect setting for Bill's adaption of the pseudo-scientific Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde story. At different times Bill was an 'Area Tech' attending business around the CBD for maintenance purposes.

Bill had visited H Parsons Funeral Directors (I think they had a A5 Intercom System) so he had no compunctions asking for a loan of some fancy handles for the coffin he made for his movie.

Using the backdrops described above and volunteers from the technical staff in their grey dust coats Bill made an interesting and funny short movie, shot after hours of course!

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