South Head Signal Station

Establishment of a look out post

The origin of the signal station lies in the establishment in 1790 of a lookout post at South Head. In January 1790, Captain Hunter and others from the *Sirius*, went to South Head at Watsons Bay to erect a flagstaff which would serve as a landmark for ships arriving at the heads, as well as serving as a means of communicating their arrival to the new settlement at Sydney Cove.

The flagstaff

The flagstaff and a small hut for shelter were put up close to the site of the present day Signal Station. Stone huts for the signallers' accommodation were built and located probably where Robertson Park is today.

Daniel Southwell

Daniel Southwell was made the first Superintendent of the lookout post in 1790. Robert Watson, after whom Watsons Bay is named, was also employed as a Signal Master.

Flag raising

A flag was raised as a signal for the first time on February 10th 1790 to indicate the arrival of the ship *Supply*. Later that year a nine-metre high brick column was built near the flagstaff, which further alerted ships to the presence of a settlement. When the ship *Bellona* arrived at the heads after dark in 1793, a large fire was lit at South Head to serve as a beacon for the ship. This was the first recorded use of a navigational light in Australia. Later an iron tripod 'fire basket' was built for this purpose and lit at night to guide vessels to the harbour entrance.

Introduction of Flag signals

A semaphore mast (an apparatus for making signals) was later erected near the flagstaff. In 1832 a code of flag signals was introduced enabling messages to be sent via relay stations as far as Government House at Parramatta. The messages contained information about the type of ship, where it had come from and what cargo it was carrying.

Architect – Mortimer Lewis

In 1838 it was decided to replace the brick column with a new tower. The Colonial Architect Mortimer Lewis designed an octagonal two storey sandstone tower. The height of the tower was raised to its present 4 storeys in the 1890s. A residence for the Signal Master was built soon after the erection of the tower.

First telegraph line

The opening of the first telegraph line in NSW, from the Signal Station to the Royal Exchange in Bridge Street, took place in 1858.

Communication on ships entering and leaving Sydney Harbour

The Signal Station continued its role of recording and communicating the movement of shipping entering and leaving Sydney Harbour, until the Maritime Services Board removed their operation from the Signal Station in 1992. It was then taken over by Coast Guard Sydney and has operated ever since as a Category 1 Search and Rescue Base, monitoring small craft and recreational boaters.

Oldest facility in Australia

The South Head Signal Station at Watsons Bay marks the site of over 200 years of continuous service and it is the oldest facility in Australia that has been in continuous use since it was installed.

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