

Words across water

Communications have come a long way in a century, **Gill Vowles** reports

ONE of the most significant events in Australia's communications history will be re-enacted in Devonport next week.

In 1906 the Marconi Wireless Telegraphy Company transmitted the first Australian telegram across open water, between Queenscliff in Victoria and East Devonport.

On July 12, the 100th anniversary of the transmission, the event will be re-enacted in both Devonport and Queenscliff.

Marconi Centenary Committee secretary Ron Churcher said the 1906 experiment was a landmark event.

"This was not just an Australian first, it was also the first transmission broadcast

over water in the Southern Hemisphere," he said.

Mr Churcher said fears over Germany's expansionist intentions had led to the communications trial.

"There was a great kerfuffle at the time with the Germans already in New Guinea," Mr Churcher said.

"The British Colonial Secretary, Joseph Chamberlain, approached Prime Minister Alfred Deakin about constructing a chain of shore stations around the Australian coastline for ship-to-shore communications and the government agreed to give the Marconi Company a temporary licence to conduct experiments across Bass Strait."

Mr Churcher said almost the whole population of Devonport had attended the



STRAIT-TALKING: Faye Gardam, right, and Tony Bedelph of the Marconi Centenary Committee tap out a message on some old telegraph equipment. Picture: ROSS MARSDEN

1906 transmission. "It was quite controversial at the time, with sceptical local bookmakers accepting bets on whether the transmission would succeed."

"Many of the town councillors said such a new-fangled thing would never work and the only dignitary who attended the transmission in Devonport was the Town Board chairman, John Luck."

On the other side of Bass Strait, Queenscliff had more luck in attracting VIPs, with Prime Minister Deakin, Governor-General Lord Northcote and Victorian Governor Reginald Talbot among the 250 guests.

Mr Churcher said the ab-

sence of Tasmania's Governor, Sir Gerald Strickland, made delivering the transmitted messages complex.

"When a message for the Governor came through, it was written out by the operator, taken by a boy on a bicycle to the boatman of a ferry, who rowed it across the river and took it to the local telegraph office for transmission to Hobart."

"The reverse procedure delivered the Governor's reply and it was all accomplished in 40 minutes."

Mr Churcher said many later communications developments could be traced to the 1906 experiment.

This included the Federal

Government passing a Navigation Act in 1912 making it compulsory for all ships in Australian waters carrying more than 50 passengers to have wireless equipment.

Next week's re-enactment has been organised by the Devonport City Council, North West Amateur Radio Interest Group and Devonport Maritime Museum.

The Victorian event has been organised by the Queenscliff City Council and Geelong Amateur Radio Club.

"The original messages of greetings and goodwill were transmitted using a spark transmitter but we will have to use a modern transceiver and antennas," Mr Churcher

"This was not just an

Australian first, it was also the first transmission broadcast over water in the Southern Hemisphere"

said of the re-enactment. "We will do the introductions in morse code, as occurred in 1906, but then we will let people speak to each other."

Mr Churcher said the celebrations would continue until July 16 with a special event station being set up at the Maritime Museum.

"This will allow us to talk to people around the world on amateur radio."

The Maritime Museum will also host an exhibition of old radios and communications artefacts from July 12-16.

A highlight of the celebrations will occur on July 13 when students from the Devonport and Reece high schools will use either amateur radio equipment or a tele-bridge to speak to astronauts on the international space station.

"That just shows how far we've come," Mr Churcher said. "In 1906 it was astonishing to be able to send a morse code transmission across water; a hundred years later we're talking to people in space."