Department for Environment and Heritage
TUNNEL VISIONS
Persistent Myths About Adelaide's Underground History

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Along with ghost stories, tunnel tales are a perennial favourite in the popular press, and are cheerfully perpetuated by tour operators and publicans everywhere. It seems the public just can't get enough about hidden worlds and mysterious goings-on just beneath our feet. But how much is fact and how much is fiction?

For the purposes of my talk I am using the Concise Oxford Dictionary's definition of a tunnel as:

> **'An artificial subterranean passage through a hill etc,
> or under a road or river, especially for a road or rail'**

I need to emphasise that a tunnel is a *passage* or corridor connecting two spaces. That is, it must *lead somewhere*. It should be open at both ends. Some definitions specify that a tunnel must be at least twice as long in the horizontal dimension as it is in the vertical. Thus a tunnel is not a cellar, basement, or other underground room.

Within the restrictions of my definition will concentrate on just two or three of Adelaide's tunnel stories.

King William Road Tunnel

King William Road, looking south, c 1900

Elder Park viewed from North Adelaide. The cutting for the King William Road tunnel can be seen in the centre of the picture, as the rail line goes under the road at the extreme left. This photo is undated but possibly early 1900s. (Photo courtesy of the National Railway Museum, Port Adelaide SA)

Probably most Adelaidians would have heard about a tunnel running under King William Road. A number of different stories seem to converge on this particular tunnel. The versions I have come across include:

- That there was a tunnel running from Government House to Parliament House, to facilitate secret meetings between Parliamentarians and the Governor;
- That there was a private underground passage linking Parliament House and the Adelaide Railway station so MPs could catch their trains without having to brave the weather;
- That a tunnel extended underground beneath North Terrace, all the way to Pulteney Street, or even as far as Frome Road;
- That an underground railway branch line ran through the tunnel; and
- that it incorporated one or more underground station platforms, and was used to deliver goods to various North Terrace businesses via a network of connecting tunnels.

Well, there <u>was</u> definitely a tunnel under King William Road. Indeed, it's still there, though filled in with rubble. It runs diagonally under the road, between where the Festival Centre now stands and just north of the boundary of the Government House Domain.

It is my suspicion that this rather modest little tunnel has given rise to most, if not all, of the stories I just mentioned.

I might mention at this point that I have referred to the work of P J Barry and George Daws for much of my information on the King William Road Tunnel.

OLD CITY SUBWAY AS FESTIVAL WALKWAY

REDISCOVERY OF 1886 RAIL TUNNEL

OLD RAIL TUNNEL BENEATH KING WILLIAM ROAD

Adelaide News, 4/10/1973

The tunnel was 'rediscovered' in 1973, around the time of the opening of the new Festival Centre. As part of this development, reconstruction work was taking place on King William Road. It was known from the old Adelaide City Council records that there had once been a tunnel under the road, through which a railway spur line to the old Exhibition Grounds used to pass. The opportunity was taken to expose the tunnel to see whether it would be worthwhile restoring it as a pedestrian sub-way. A section of the tunnel was excavated, revealing a bluestone-lined tunnel 15 feet wide and at least 30 feet long. The Council thought that, restored to its original appearance, the tunnel would make a grand addition and counterpoint to the modern architectural form of the new Festival Centre precinct, whilst allowing Festival patrons to cross the road in safety. And it would be a tourist attraction. The State Government agreed to contribute towards the estimated $35,000 cost of the project, plans were drawn up, and tenders called.

Alas, it turned out that the initial estimates were grossly inadequate, and with the projected costs escalating to $90,000 or possibly $140,000 for complete restoration, the project was abandoned. The test excavations were refilled with quarry rubble, and sealed with a temporary surface coat.

The tunnel has an interesting history: It dates back to the very early days of the colony, well before the railway. This type of underpass was known as a 'cattle creep', or 'cattle arch', and this gives a clue to its function as a means of permitting grazing livestock to cross from paddocks either side of the road, without obstructing traffic or straying.

From around 1850 a detachment of the Royal Sappers and Miners, engaged on survey work, was housed in cottages on the site of the present Parade Ground, and

their horses were stabled on the open ground to the west. Horses belonging to the South Australian Mounted Police, based on North Terrace, were also kept here, and it became known as the Police Paddock.

When King William Street was extended through the Government Domain in the mid 1850s, and the first City Bridge was constructed across the Torrens, the barracks were effectively cut off from the stables and paddocks on the other side of the road. The bridge had to be built high enough to escape the floods, which periodically cut off North Adelaide from the city proper, and this meant substantial earthworks were needed to raise the level of the road on the southern approach. The steep embankment thus created was an obstacle, which was dealt with by including in the plans 'a small bridgeway …to admit of communication with the police paddock' (this is quoted from a report prepared for the Legislative Council by William Bennett Hays, Colonial Architect and Supervisor of Works).

It seems highly likely that the 'bridgeway' referred to is the tunnel that exists today, and that it was built as part of the construction works for the new road. An alternative theory is that the need for the tunnel only became apparent after the road was completed, and that it was constructed by the Sappers and Miners.

However given the above evidence it is much more probable that the underpass was constructed at the same time, and by the same government contractors engaged to carry out the roadworks. Work commenced on the embankment in December 1854, and the *South Australian Register* of 1 June 1855 reported that the roadway linking King William Street to the new bridge was complete and open to traffic.
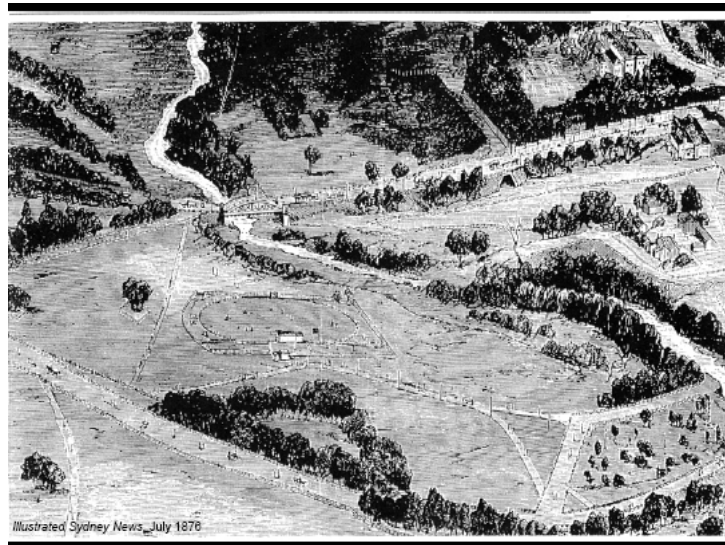
View across North Parklands looking south-east towards King William Road. Government House in upper right corner. (Illustrated Sydney News July 1876 (reproduced in Heritage of the City of Adelaide*)*

This detail taken from a view of Adelaide published in the *Illustrated Sydney News* in July 1876 clearly shows the western opening of the tunnel through the embankment leading down to the iron bridge over the Torrens.

In 1886 the tunnel was deepened and underpinned to accommodate a railway branch line connecting the Exhibition Grounds with Adelaide Railway Station in preparation for the Jubilee International Exhibition of the following year.
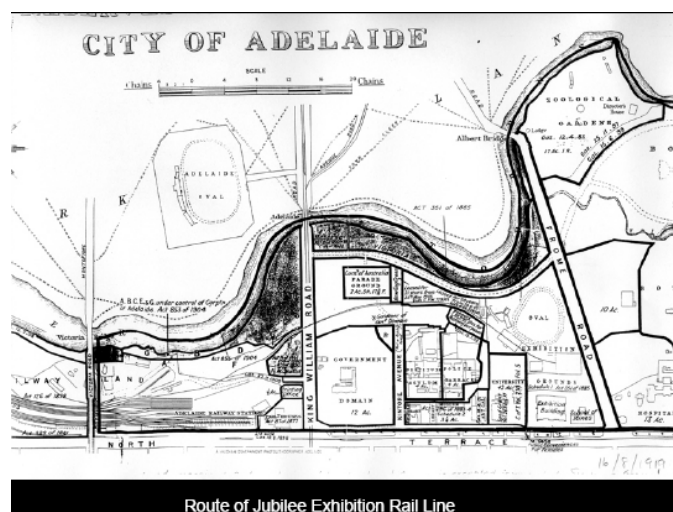
1919 map showing route of the Jubilee Railway branch line (also known as the Exhibition line). Adelaide City Archives

The line ran eastwards from the north side of the station, via a shallow cutting alongside the City Baths, under King William Road and along the southern side of the Torrens Parade Ground. From there it ran parallel to the river before veering south, passing through the British Machinery Hall and terminating inside the northern annexe of the Exhibition Building on the western side of Frome Road. It was used for transporting exhibits of heavy machinery and other goods to the grounds. These included a locomotive and tender, built in Ballarat, which were installed at the end of the track on 20 May 1887, so it can be assumed the line would have been opened shortly before that date.

The Jubilee Exhibition ran until January 1888, after which the line continued in use, providing access to the Exhibition Building and Jubilee Oval for various purposes for another forty years. It was used to transport construction materials for new university buildings, as well as exhibits for the Chamber of Manufactures' exhibitions and Royal Agricultural and Horticultural Society's spring and autumn shows.

The line was not intended for passenger transport, and had no platform at Adelaide station, but between 1899 and 1902 it did carry passenger trains transporting Boer War troops from the Parade Ground to Port Adelaide for embarkation for South Africa. During the Spanish Influenza epidemic in 1919 the branch line was used to transport around 600 people brought by train from Melbourne to a temporary quarantine station set up in tents on the Jubilee Oval.

After the Show Society relocated to Wayville in 1924, the line was considered to be redundant and the tracks were taken up in August 1927. The cutting through Elder Park was filled in the following year, and it is probable that the tunnel was backfilled and sealed at the same time. Since then, both entrances have been blocked off with tons of earth as the road above has been progressively widened.

The Treasury Tunnels – Medina Grand Hotel

Treasury Tunnels, Medina Grand Hotel
Image courtesy of SA Life Magazine

The Treasury Tunnels are another open secret, especially since the publicity surrounding the recent redevelopment of the old Treasury Building as the Medina Grand Hotel. The Treasury complex was built as government offices, and constructed in several stages. The present façades date from 1858 through to 1876 though there are still remnants of the original 1839 structure within the building. For over 150 years, up to the early 1990s, the building provided office accommodation for various colonial officials and government departments including the Governor, Colonial Secretary, Colonial Treasurer, and the Registrar-General and Land Office. In 1852 the State Assay Office was set up there, and meetings of the State Cabinet were held in the Cabinet Room upstairs, until moved to the new State Administration Centre in 1968.

Though it does incorporate a bona fide connecting passage, the main underground area is really a series of basements. They included the Treasury Vaults, into which the gold brought from Victoria by the Gold Escort was safely stowed away. Between February 1852 and February 1853 nearly 13 tonnes of gold were handled by the Assay Office. However the popularly-held belief that the two small 'smelt ovens' located in the basement were used to melt down the gold has been fairly conclusively debunked as a myth: They were in fact constructed some years after the gold escorts ceased, and are too small to produce the high-temperature smelting which gold requires. The smelting operations were actually carried out in a ground-floor addition constructed in March 1852, which incorporated a furnace room with five smelting furnaces and associated equipment. Nothing remains of these additions.

It is now believed the two small furnaces in the basement were installed around 1862, and were used in connection with lithographic processing for the production of maps for the Survey office.

The last – northeastern - wing was constructed in 1907 to house the expanded photolithographic department. In 1909 a narrow tunnel was built, linking the printing rooms in the basement of the new building to the basement storeroom in the old 1867 eastern section of the Survey Department. There is still evidence of rails

running along the floor of the tunnel, perhaps the remnant of a light trolley system for transporting materials used for the printing process. Coal or coke would have been delivered via the chute on the southern end of the cellars, so perhaps this trolley system was also used to transport fuel for the small furnaces, and to warm the workers occupying the subterranean offices.
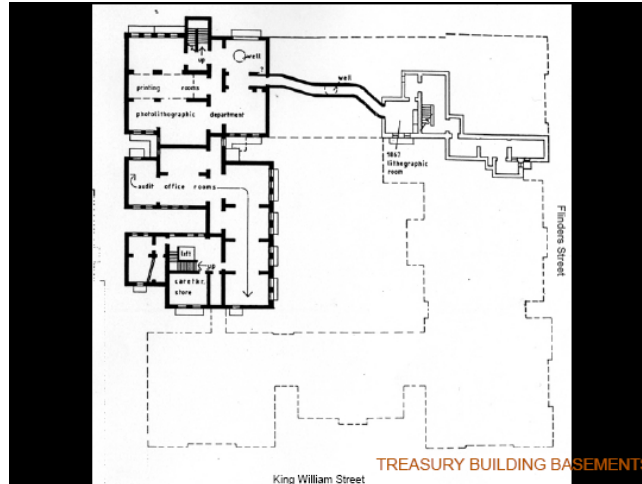
Plan of Treasury basements showing 1909 tunnel connecting new Photolithographic department with old section.
Possible location of tunnel under Flinders Street to Torrens Building extending from basement at south eastern corner. (image adapted from DEH files)

There is also believed to have been another, much longer tunnel, running from the basement of the old section, under Flinders Street and connecting to the Torrens Building on Victoria Square. This tunnel was apparently frequented by scuttling clerks transferring dockets and plans between the offices, and was intended as an emergency escape route for officials should they ever need to make a discreet exit. Evidence in the form of plans or photographs has yet to be found to support this, or the claim that a similar tunnel ran under King William Street to the Post Office.

Tunnels in private houses – 'Roseneath'

Some of the grander residences of Adelaide and North Adelaide are said to have their own tunnel stories. 'Roseneath', a two-storey Georgian villa at Walkerville, built around 1847, is claimed to have once had a tunnel running under the road and a short distance to the river. The purpose of the tunnel was supposedly to allow the occupants to collect water without being seen by, or having to look upon any Aboriginal person. Given its very early date, it makes sense that it might also have served to prevent the occupants being trapped inside the house in the event of an attack, particularly if the house were to be set alight. This tunnel is presumed to have been filled in, and its exact location is not known.
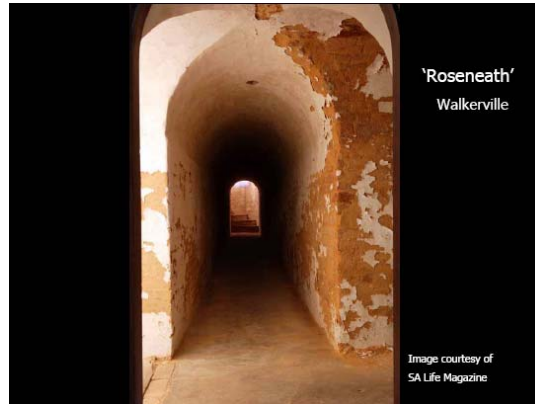
Photo of underground passage connecting main house with Kitchen / Servants' Quarters, 'Roseneath', Walkerville. (Image courtesy of SA Life magazine)

However, 'Roseneath' has another tunnel, whose existence is in no doubt at all: This narrow brick-lined tunnel, together with linked cellars or semi-underground rooms on either side, is still accessible and in use by the present owners.
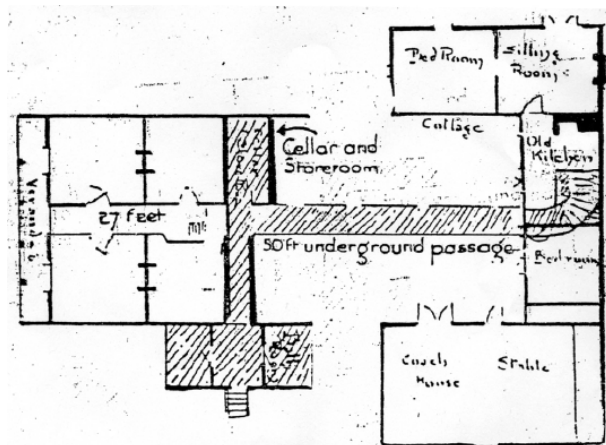
Floor plan of Roseneath. From an article by Winnifred Scott, 'Roseneath – a Sidelight on Australian History', in Australian Home Beautiful, 1 March 1933

'Roseneath' was built for James W McDonald, an official with the Burra Mines. He would have known about tunnels, and with the technology and manpower available to him it was logical for him to incorporate in the design of his home this underground passageway linking the main house with the kitchen and servants' quarters located on the other side of the courtyard at the rear.

The main house is built into the side of a slope and the tunnel extends back 50 feet into the higher ground at the rear, emerging by way of a winding stairway into the old kitchen. It's believed the tunnel was built for security reasons, as an escape route to the main house, and as a weatherproof connection between the buildings.

In Conclusion….
In this brief paper I have only been able to touch on the interesting subject of railway tunnels, and I can do no more than mention other underground structures, such as bunkers and air-raid shelters associated with wartime defence, sewerage and

stormwater drains, brewery and winery cellars, subterranean rooms, and of course mines, all of which fall outside my definition.

Tunnel stories persist because they are good stories. Some of them have been shown to have a sound basis in fact, but others are … well perhaps we should say, not yet proven.

And they are difficult to conclusively disprove. The physical evidence for tunnels is by its very nature hidden, and the documentary history, too, is often buried deep. So there remains the possibility that future researchers may uncover evidence to substantiate even the most fantastical stories of Adelaide's secret underground history.