

Heritage Citation

City Electric Light Company Substation No.3

Key details

Also known as	South Brisbane Transformer Station
Addresses	At 207A Ipswich Road, Woolloongabba, Queensland 4102
Type of place	Substation
Period	World War I 1914-1918
Style	Queenslander
Lot plan	L226_SL11640
Key dates	Local Heritage Place Since — 14 September 2018 Date of Citation — November 2015
Construction	Roof: Corrugated iron; Walls: Timber
Criterion for listing	(A) Historical; (B) Rarity

This simple timber substation was built circa 1917 for the City Electric Light Company. Known as substation number three, it is one of the company's earliest substations and was built as the company expanded its electricity supply from Brisbane City to the greater Brisbane and south-east Queensland region. Its construction in timber is unusual and is likely due to material shortages caused by World War One. The substation supplied Ipswich and Stephens Shire with electricity before the Brisbane City Council took control of the latter supply in 1925. The substation passed through the successors of the City Electric Light Company and is now held by Energex under a perpetual lease.

History

The history of electricity supply and distribution in Brisbane began with the demonstration of electric street lights in 1882. In 1887 the Barton and White electricity company was formed and built a powerhouse in Edison Lane behind the General Post Office (GPO). By 1896 the company was in dire financial straits as a lack of capital and the depression of the 1890s made its operations unviable. Supporters of the company financed the formation of the Brisbane Electricity Supply Co. Ltd (BES) in 1896.

That year the Queensland government introduced the *Electric Light and Power Act (1896)* to regulate the supply of electricity in the state. Brisbane Electricity Supply Co. Ltd. was granted the first Order-in-Council under the Act to supply electricity exclusively to a small part of North Brisbane adjacent to the G.P.O. In 1899 a new Order extended the company's area to the whole of the Brisbane Municipal Council from BES' new power station in Ann Street. In 1904, as part of a plan to attract more capital, the company was re-formed as the City Electric Light Company (CEL). The company's exclusive supply area was extended to Fortitude Valley in 1908. Demand grew and a new powerhouse in William Street was established in 1911.

The election of a radical State Labor Government in 1915 created uncertainty about the future of business as Labor's platform included the provision of basic services by state enterprises. In the short term private enterprises, such as CEL, were allowed to continue their operations. Protracted negotiations by CEL to supply electricity to South Brisbane were finalised in 1916 – including a clause incorporating the government's right to take over the company at five year intervals. The company constructed a substation in South Brisbane to convert electricity generated in the William Street powerhouse and carried by cable via the Victoria Bridge. Despite its tentative position, CEL focused on expansion in the 1910s. Its plans were somewhat hampered by challenging relationships with local and state governments, and the outbreak of World War One. Although CEL struggled to have Orders in Council granted to extend their supply of electricity to Brisbane's other local councils, businesses and large operations were in need of electricity suppliers like CEL. CEL could (and did) construct electrical plants and substations on private property.

In November 1916 the government offered a four-perch block of land for lease. The block was part of a larger site reserved in 1888 for a Woolloongabba/Thompson Estate School of Arts, which never proceeded. The government regained the property and advertised it for 'special lease' under the *Land Act 1910*, at £1 per annum rent for a twenty-five year period. The property fronted Ipswich Road and sat on the boundary of South Brisbane (which CEL was approved to supply) and Stephens Shire (which it was not). This section of Ipswich Road was then undergoing significant development. The site adjoined the Diamantina Hospital, while on the other side a Police Reserve was converted into the Queensland State Joinery in 1918.

CEL appears to have taken up the offer and installed plant inside this timber substation. The precise construction date of the substation is unknown. Construction of the substation met with considerably less fanfare than some of its earlier and later counterparts. The proposal, building and opening of other substations were reported in the media, but the construction of this small timber substation was quiet. The substation was standing by 1918, when it was listed in *Post Office Directories*.

The use of timber as a building material for this substation is notable. Timber was not unusual for early 'pole' substations (which were tin-roofed or open-air buildings with equipment installed inside). Most timber substations were intended to be temporary, and were later dismantled. Designs for free-standing substations became more elaborate after World War One, architecturally designed and using brick or concrete as the dominant material.

This is the only surviving timber substation identified in Brisbane.

The precise reason for the erection of the substation in this location is unclear, though there are several possible reasons. Amongst CEL's contracts was a 1916 agreement for some of the State Enterprises operations, including the fish refrigeration and government sawmill in South Brisbane. This substation was erected in front of the State Government Workshops or Joinery, though whether or not the company supplied these as well is not evident.

Additionally, while CEL struggled to receive authority to supply councils in Brisbane, it was effectively granted permission to supply private homes in Ipswich through its sister company, the Ipswich Electric Supply Company. A power station which was to be built at Ipswich was not intended to supply residences, and did not eventuate. The Ipswich Road substation, built on the boundary of the CEL's jurisdiction, acted as a transmission station, when supply commenced on 1 July 1919. In 1917 Stephens Shire allowed the Ipswich City Council to erect pole lines through the former's territory, along Ipswich Road. "Owing to war conditions," wrote the Ipswich City Council, "it would be impossible to obtain the required machinery and plant at present.... if the Ipswich Council could arrange with the councils of the Shires of Stephens, Yeerongpilly, and Sherwood, for consent to erect a pole line through those shires, the electricity could be, in the meantime, supplied from Brisbane". The Stephens Shire Council "warmly approved of the proposal, if only with the hope of inducing the gas company to extend its mains."¹

In the late 1920s and early 1930s, Orders in Council were granted by the State Government to local councils including Stephens, Coorparoo, Hamilton and Bulimba. This enabled the councils to become electricity authorities, and the councils received their bulk supply from the City Electric Light Company. Councils supplied their local areas in sections, usually starting with street lights and extending to houses. When Stephens Shire received its Order in Council to become an electricity authority, CEL supplied bulk power to the council through Substation No.3. Electric street lights in the Stephens Shire were turned on in a small ceremony on 1 November 1920.

With the amalgamation of local authorities to form 'Greater Brisbane' in 1925, the new Brisbane City Council became responsible for the supply of electricity to the enlarged city. This was, however, subject to the agreements between CEL and the former shires, which continued until their expiry dates, the final being 1935.

An offer from the Brisbane City Council to buy CEL was rejected as inadequate and the Council built its own powerstation at New Farm which opened in 1928. New Farm power station supplied electricity for Council operations, the tramway system and some individual consumers, while CEL supplied industrial and commercial customers in the city centre and South Brisbane. The two entities competed for Orders to supply neighbouring areas with electricity. The provision of electricity by twenty-one private and forty-one public suppliers prompted a Royal Commission into the Electricity Industry in 1937. As a result the State Electricity Commission was established to rationalise and control supply. In 1946, a joint investigation into the provision of electricity by the State Electricity Commission, Brisbane City Council and City Electric Light Company led to the construction of the Tennyson Powerstation and the doubling of CEL's Bulimba plant.

Responsibility for the supply of the Stephens Shire passed to the Brisbane City Council on 1 October 1925, and CEL retained Substation No. 3. In 1948, the City Electric Light Company was granted a perpetual lease over its four perch (107m²) site on Ipswich Road. Five years later the lease was transferred to CEL's replacement, the Southern Electric Authority of Queensland (SEAQ).

In 1961 the State Government determined that there should be one electricity authority for southeast Queensland. Title to Substation No. 3 was transferred to Brisbane City Council in 1964 before being transferred to SEAQ's replacement, the South East Queensland Electricity Board (SEQEB), in 1979. The substation

continued to be operated by SEQEB. It was transferred to the restructured authority Energex.

Description

This is a small timber substation situated along busy Ipswich Road. It occupies most of its 107m² site. It has a corrugated metal sheet roof with several large timber entrances. It has a gable front with three high-set windows.

Statement of significance

Relevant assessment criteria

This is a place of local heritage significance and meets one or more of the local heritage criteria under the Heritage planning scheme policy of the *Brisbane City Plan 2014*. It is significant because:

Historical

CRITERION A

The place is important in demonstrating the evolution or pattern of the city's or local area's history

for the evidence it provides of the expansion of the electricity supply by the City Electric Light Company through Woolloongabba and surrounding suburbs in the early twentieth century.

Rarity

CRITERION B

The place demonstrates rare, uncommon or endangered aspects of the city's or local area's cultural heritage

as the only surviving early twentieth-century timber substation in Brisbane.

References

1. *Daily Standard*, Wednesday 10 October 1917 p4
2. Brisbane City Council City Architecture and Heritage Team, citations
3. Brisbane City Council City Design, *BCC-owned Former Electricity and Tramways Substations Conservation Management Plan*
4. Osford-Jordan, Christopher William. *Study of the Architectural History of Brisbane Electricity Substations Before 1953*. (Unpub Thesis University of Queensland) January 1984
5. Department of Environment and Resource Management QHR 602495 citations -Coorparoo Substation No.210
6. Queensland Certificates of Title
7. Queensland Post Office Directories
8. Pugh's Almanac
9. J. Simmers 'The coming of the light to suburban Brisbane', published in *Australian Journal of Electrical & Electronics Engineering*, Vol 1, No.2, 2004, p.127-141, accessed via Queensland Energy Exhibition Centre website
10. M. Thomis *A History of the Electricity Supply Industry in Queensland Vol. I 1888-1938*, Booralong / Qld Electricity Commission, 1987

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Note: This citation has been prepared on the basis of evidence available at the time including an external examination of the building. The statement of significance is a summary of the most culturally important aspects of the property based on the available evidence, and may be re-assessed if further information becomes available. The purpose of this citation is to provide an informed evaluation for heritage registration and information. This does not negate the necessity for a thorough conservation study by a qualified practitioner, before any action is taken which may affect its heritage significance.

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