

Davis' 60th anniversary

Friday the 13th of January will mark the 60th anniversary of the opening of Davis station back in 1957.

This week we look back at the conditions and facilities provided for that initial Davis wintering team.

After journeying from Mawson, the Kista Dan arrived at the Vestfold Hills near Magnetic Island on 11th January 1957. An aerial recce of the coast was undertaken by Phil Law (the then Director of the Antarctic Division) and Grove the pilot.

Law noted three inlets and three indentations that could potentially be suitable as sites for the station. He returned to the ship and at 11 pm (24 hrs of sunlight in early January), and took Dingle, Macey, Stinear, Gallasch and Heidemann in the ship's boat to examine the shoreline more closely.

None of the sites looked promising initially, but on closer examination of an indentation Law had labelled 'B', it was decided that, although not ideal because a lack of water supply, this site could work.

At around midday the following day, the first DUKW (amphibious vehicles) landed on the beach, unloaded some cargo and the men cleared a track from the beach to the building site with picks and shovels. They set up a temporary camp on the beach and brought the hut sections ashore. Construction of the station huts started in earnest the following morning – Sunday 13th January.

As Phil Law states: 'At 1600 hours on January 13th 1957 work stopped and all hands assembled around a flagpole, which had been strapped to the wall of the first hut being erected, which was the sleeping hut. Phillip Law made short speech stressing the importance of the new station in the IGY program. This was followed by short account of achievements of Captain John King Davis, the singing of *God Save the Queen*, three cheers and then back to work'.

The station basically consisted of three main huts (sleeping, community and powerhouse – all connected), along with a store, a garage and an aurora observatory.

The sleeping hut:

This was the first building erected at Davis and was basically an aluminium sheathed hut with five single cubicles. Each had a raised bunk with desk and drawers underneath. The hut was heated electrically by a heater at one end and the warm air ducted to each compartment at floor level.

The community hut:

Contained the kitchen, mess, radio room and met office and was joined by a corridor to the sleeping hut. The five wintering expeditioners basically spent their time in a "living" area that was little more than 15 ft by 10 ft (14 m²).

This hut was barely suitable for its intended role: by mid-May snow drifts had sealed off the main access resulting in access via the corridor to the Engine Hut or via the roof hatches. By September, considerable water leaks were occurring through the walls and roof as the winter snow drifts began to thaw. Apart from the corridors that joined the community hut to the sleeping hut, another corridor was installed to join this hut to the engine hut.

The engine hut:

Initially housed the two Lister 15kVa generator plants, a small workshop and the station bathroom.

Water was obtained in winter by using heat exhaust from the engines to melt ice, and in summer a solar still was used to desalinate seawater. Fresh water was a major concern and the chief engineer of the *Kista Dan* rigged up a distilling plant with two electric elements.

Bob Dingle (OIC) years later fessed up that alternative methods were also adopted: "We had a small plywood dinghy on the base with us, and if we saw a little bit of ice floating down the bay, we'd jump in the dinghy and go out and lasso this bit of ice and bring it into shore. And then take it back to camp and chop it up and put it into the snow melter. But once we had our first blizzard (and the snow came) we had no problem as far as water was concerned after that."

W.R.J. Dingle interviewed by Tim Bowden ABC – 25 Nov 1987

The solar still to produce fresh water from salt water was one of many different methods adopted over the next 50 years to supply adequate fresh water at Davis. The black cylindrical container with tap and length of hose was designed to store seawater. Reverse osmosis is now utilised at Davis to carry out the same task.

The store hut:

This hut was isolated from the other buildings to serve as an emergency shelter should the main buildings be damaged as a result of fire.

The garage:

Was also constructed away from the main buildings and apart from the storage of vehicles (Fergie Tractor that winter), but also where met balloons could be filled with hydrogen.

The aurora hut:

Was a perspex-domed observatory located on the slope above the station, housing the all sky camera for aurora photography.

The balloon theodolite shelter was never considered part of the station proper due to its distance from the main buildings, but served its purpose through to 1994 when a new meteorology shelter was commissioned.

By the evening of January 20th (eight days after starting), the station was deemed ready for occupation and the *Kista Dan* set sail for Mawson. It returned in mid February to drop off Nils Lied who had just completed a winter at Mawson and had volunteered to double up.

The first wintering party comprised of:

- W.R.J. Dingle, OIC & Met: Previous winters at Heard Island - 1947, Mawson - 1954 and Macquarie Island - 1956 (Bob Dingle travelled back to Australia from Macquarie

Island on the December 1956 relief voyage and six days later was heading south to Davis).

- B. Steiner, Geologist: Mawson - 1954
- A.C. Hawker, Radio Supervisor: Macquarie Island - 1954
- N.T. Lied, Radio Officer: Heard Island - 1951 and Mawson - 1956
- W.C. Lucas, Diesel Mechanic: First Winter

Their main scientific tasks were carrying out a geological survey of the east coast of Prydz Bay, and conducting meteorological and auroral observations.

The party was not completely isolated, as Beaver aircraft flew between Mawson station (established February 1954) and Davis several times transferring personnel and supplies.

During May of 1957, the Mawson surveyor Morris Fisher spent time at Davis and later on in August, Bruce Steinar was flown 637 kilometres to Mawson to continue his geology work.

Although the buildings did have their problems some of them were in continuous use into the early 2000s. None of the original station remains at Davis, with the last of the buildings being removed during the 2007–08 summer.

So finally a happy 60th birthday to Davis – of the 79 of us here at present, only four of us have also reached that milestone.

Mark



An aerial view of Davis in January 1957.
(Photo: Phil Law)



Law's sketch of possible sites for the station. Site 2 is Heidemann...
(Photo: From "You Have to Be Lucky" by Phillip Law)



Naming of the station in honour of John King Davis, 13 Jan...
(Photo: AAD)



Radio operator Alan Hawker at work.
(Photo: Bob Dingle)



All the latest appliances for 1957.
(Photo: Bob Dingle)



Nils Lied in the escape hatch at the rear of the Community...
(Photo: Bob Dingle)



Solar still at Davis in 1958.
(Photo: Peter King)



Augmenting the water stocks.
(Photo: Alan Campbell-Drury)



Main complex at Davis 1957. L-R:Powerhouse, the Community Hall (with main access...
(Photo: Phil Law)



Davis 1957 wintering team: Nils 'Father' Lied, Bruce Stinear, William 'Bob' Dingle,...
(Photo: AAD)