

TRANSPORT MUSEUMS - A PROFESSIONAL'S VIEW

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INTRODUCTION

Thanks to the Chairman and members of the Council of Tramway Museums of Australasia to give this opening paper to the Third Australasian Tramway Museums Conference.

I am sure that the Honourable Tom Casey, the Minister for Tourism, Recreation and Sport, will make you formally welcome to South Australia on behalf of the State Government when he joins you for lunch on Tuesday. However, as that will be almost your closing session, let me take this opportunity of welcoming you all, particularly the interstate and New Zealand members, to Adelaide and to wish the best of success in your technical sessions, good fellowship and enjoyable visits to top off your stay in South Australia.

THE ROLE OF A DGT

Before moving to the formal topic which was allocated to me by your Chairman, I would like to make a few introductory comments on my own situation here in South Australia, particularly for those of you from interstate and New Zealand.

The Director-General of Transport is charged with four major responsibilities:

- a) Maintain an overview of all transport in South Australia and make recommendations to the Government, through the Honourable Minister of Transport and Local Government, on such things as finance, investment, closures and innovation.
- b) Co-ordinate all forms of transport in the Minister's portfolio i.e. basically land transport.
- c) Undertake and sponsor transport research and education.
- d) Permanent Head of the Department of Transport, which includes such diverse divisions as Motor Registration, Transport Planning, Road Safety, Government Garage and Local Government Office.

I do not have day-to-day involvement with the bus and rail operations except when problems arise. I used to be Chairman of the former S.A.R. Board but withdrew from that task when we integrated the M.T.T., S.A.R. and T.C.B. into the State Transport Authority, on the principle that we would like to keep separate our transport policy and operations. However, that has not worked out quite as well as we hoped

and a Bill has been introduced into Parliament just this week to increase the S.T.A. membership from 7 to 8 and permit me to increase the links in the portfolio.

In some ways, I am not an appropriate person to give this talk, as I am one of a minority of professionals who are also enthusiasts for and about the transport business. It is probably unfortunately true that many professionals in the transport world consider enthusiasts to be naive at best and idiots at worst; but you shouldn't feel too bad as they tend to pin similar brands on politicians, planners and users!

My enthusiasm for transport started in my very young years as I was born in Darlington, England, just two minutes from the L.N.E.R. main line near to the works of Robert Stephenson and Hawthorns, a major locomotive builder where my grandfather was erecting shop foreman. During my school days, Darlington was a trolley-bus town and I have many memories of the journey to school on centre entrance single deckers, and later of new double deckers limited by their size and so transferred to Doncaster and Bradford. As I grew older my university training spilled over into transport and I was able to write my doctorate thesis on the development of public passenger transport in West Yorkshire, a major British metropolitan area.

When time came and I had to earn a living, I concentrated initially on rail closures in the Canadian prairies and on the inter-city motor coach industry in Canada. Gradually my horizons were broadened to include trucking, ferries and the relationship between transport regulation and policy. As a result of this background, it is sometimes not easy to separate my enthusiasm from my professional responsibilities, though of course it is necessary to be able to do so.

It was an interesting exercise to look at my memberships when I was thinking about this talk; whereas one's curriculum vitae is expected to include academic and professional qualifications, chartered institutions etc., I thought I would look at my qualifications as an enthusiast: life memberships of the Gresley Society and the Bradford Trolleybus Association, membership of the Omnibus Society, Railway Correspondence & Travel Society, National Trackless Trolley Association, National Association of Timetable Collectors etc. etc. The periodicals and newsletters I receive at home on subscription from overseas still surprise me, while our Departmental library subscribes to a great range of enthusiast journals as well as the technical, professional and learned journals. Above all, I try to be a transport man - not a professional, not an enthusiast, not a rail man, bus man, tram buff, LRT advocate or whatever.

MY THOUGHTS ON TRANSPORT MUSEUMS

So much for my personal interests in the transport scene and my prejudices which will obviously affect the subject of my talk. When your Chairman asked me if I would talk on the subject of transport museums, I wondered how to tackle it. I have visited a few transport museums in my time, but have never given a lot of thought to what I might expect when I get there. So I apologise in advance if my thoughts are somewhat jumbled. By way of definition, I will use the word 'museum' in my talk to cover a range of preservation activities.

ADVERTISING & ACCESS

The first thing that I think is important is the ability of the visitor to determine where there is a transport museum or preserved railway in a particular city. Is it accessible? When is it open? Can I see if I stand outside the fence? Perhaps the transport collection is part of a national city or regional museum and cannot be separately identified. Whatever your status, make sure the existence of your museum is visible to the public. If they don't know about it, they won't get to visit. Secondly, tell people how to get to the museum.

I know this problem of visibility, advertising and access are easier to identify than to solve, as it is a subject of discussion at workshops at successive COTMA conferences. At the minimum, I suggest you aim to inform your own clientele - for example, Modern Tramway printed an article a couple of years ago (May 1974) during the petrol crisis on how to get to the Tramway Museum at Crich by public transport from major British cities. Puffing Billy, the Mile End Railway Museum and the Lithgow Zig-Zag, are examples of museums in Australia which are reasonably accessible by public transport, but unfortunately, most of you and most museums in North America, have to rely on auto traffic. Curiously, this is a feature of the land use/transport interface which is common to many would-be major attractors: schools, sports grounds, hospitals etc. Other location factors such as cheap land are much more important than access by public transport.

The other side of the publicity and access aspect which is obviously important in Australia, is to tie the museum to some related tourist venture if possible. Most importantly, it gives you a ready-made flow of travellers on which the museum can at once both rely on and contribute to e.g. Pichi Richi Railway, Beamish Museum, Yakima Valley, Kingston Flyer. These four examples are seasonal or permanent tourist fixtures, but on a smaller scale a museum can do itself a favour if it is allied to a festival or convention. A good example is the combination of the Old Midwest Threshers Reunion of which the Mount Pleasant preserved tram museum is the link between the camp ground and the display area.

There are also obvious advantages from a financial point of view to be affiliated with some tourist or heritage interest, but other speakers, such as your museum Treasurers and Mr. Williams, are better equipped to speak on that subject. For the same reason, I won't attempt to comment on the level of entrance fees, except to say to remind you that many of your visitors will be family groups. There is a parallel with public transit - if we want to attract families out of their automobiles we will have to give special concessions.

WHAT DO I EXPECT TO SEE?

If I have a preference, it is for the complete transport museum such as the Swiss Transport Museum or the St. Louis National Museum of Transport which "attempts to preserve the history of the technology and design of the implements of transportation and communications" with their array of trams, trains, rolling stock, telephones, buses and trucks. For the same reason, I liked the Clapham museum - not only for the big exhibits but the little things - nameplates, models, tickets, posters, paintings, seats, lampposts, notices, weigh-scales, bus stops and so on. Perhaps the purist welcomes the dispersion of that collection to York, Syon Park and elsewhere, but I prefer the complete museum concept. On a smaller scale, the Museums of Technology at the Smithsonian and in Ottawa, I

find equally attractive.

However, we have to accept that all museums cannot be such wide ranging and there is a need to cater to the live steam and live traction enthusiast. So somehow the community has to sustain both the large collections geared to a variety of interests and to maintaining history and heritage, and the smaller specialised museums: the preserved line, tramway museum, bus museum, model builders group and so on.

In the specialised area, I have four interests - one is the very specific preserved line where there may be only a handful of units but it is the trip which counts as much as the motive power.

Puffing Billy and the East Troy museums come to mind as examples. Secondly, I like the specialist museum which runs live service as an integral part of the collection e.g. St. Kilda. Thirdly, I can enjoy the heritage park concept where historic transport is presented in its natural setting e.g. S & D (NER) steam and Gateshead trams at Beamish, steam trams at the Kimberley Museum, electric trams at Ferrymead, horse trams in Calgary's heritage park. On a smaller scale is the Eccleshill industrial museum. Of course the perfect historical setting situation is San Francisco where the cable cars continue to provide regular public transit as well as preserving and demonstrating the role of cable technology in providing cheap travel. We believe the Glenelg Tram has some potential in demonstrating the advantages of the old interurban in the 1970s, while Detroit is using ex-Lisbon cars on its restored Washington Boulevard trolley line. Fourthly, I like the special trip behind live steam or an older diesel or electric loco or multiple-unit on routes no longer open to passengers - it is surprising how much scope there is for this type of trip, though it is inevitably expensive.

WHAT DEGREE OF ACCURACY?

I'm not a great purist when it comes to technical or historical accuracy. I think it is more important that the cars are clean and tidy, than whether they are painted and finished exactly as they ran in 1900 or 1937 and I don't believe the average visitor cares much either. In any case, many items of rolling stock probably went through two or three different livery schemes in their lifetime.

I think it is important for the museum to provide some variety in the types of vehicle exhibited. Try to produce a sequential history and add colour with contemporary posters and humour with amusing notices - I have one in my office from an 18th Century canal saying "The Punishment for Tampering with these Works is Transportation". In other words, if you finger the goods you will be shipped off to Australia!

Try to provide informative items such as headcodes, roller blinds, old timetables and tickets, fare equipment etc. Don't be ashamed to use models to fill up your blanks, or cutaways to explain how a thing worked! As a child, my indicator of a museum's success was how many things can I touch, turn, walk on, dabble with or drop a penny in to make it go. In many ways, it still is a major criterion - working apparatus is a great attractor. At the same time I guess from a management point of view, you have to avoid spreading your resources too thinly, and you also have a big investment in items which are not readily appreciated by the average visitor - track, overhead, spare parts, poles etc.

Perhaps this is where your Australasia-wide conference comes in. Instead of each museum trying to do everything, I hope your organisation will encourage the benefits of specialisation. Like North America, the great distances between cities mean that each museum has to be as comprehensive as possible, yet there are obvious geographic specialisations to be adopted by your regional museums, also some climatic ones e.g. use of open cars where the climate permits. But again, you are experts in this area so I will pass on with the final thought that Pichi Richi and the Zig-Zag demonstrate that a narrow specialisation need not limit success.

GENERAL ATTRACTIVENESS

The last general topic I want to talk about is the significance of the attractiveness and general appearance of your museum. In this sense, there is another parallel with the transit industry: it is no good trying to market your product unless that product is worth marketing!

Setting is important. Some museums are obviously better located than others in this respect. The Syon Park collection is housed in a pavilion in a beautiful location, while the Utrecht railway museum, particularly the tram extension, shows what can be done with good design. But I think perhaps what you do with your setting irrespective of the location and facilities is even more important. Try to achieve a sense of space. I for instance, am always a bit unhappy when I arrive at a museum to find absolutely everything jammed in and under cover, even though I recognise the significance of security and of climate - what is suitable for the Mile End Railway Museum would be useless for the Canadian Railway Museum at Delson.

A couple of small suggestions. I am one of these who is an inveterate book buyer - if you have a small shop or counter, keep it open as much as possible. To others the ability to get tea or coffee is vital, while ice-cream and soft drinks are always winners with the children, particularly if the museum is some distance from a major settlement or is the ultimate destination of a specially-made outing. Incidentally, don't begrudge or belittle any way of furthering your interests - the tram in the Old Spaghetti Factory chain of restaurants is a regular reminder of the tram to every diner - to children it may be the first time they ever ask the question "What is a tram?"

A descriptive booklet is also a useful asset. It need not be too expensive or complex, the Crich or St. Kilda brochures are adequate. Such a booklet serves a multitude of purposes - a guide to the museum, reminder of the trip, public relations document, something to be able to acquire if you didn't have time to visit or the museum wasn't open, and so on. Lastly, label your exhibits simply and clearly - it is very important if you are to increase your share of the casual visitor market.

CONCLUSION

I mentioned earlier that being a transport man by interest and profession, I have a preference for the comprehensive transport museum. It would be a wonderful achievement if Australia could merge its professional and enthusiast transport interests in the way the Swiss have with their Museum of Transport being an integral part of the headquarters of the Swiss Institute of Transport and Communications at Lucerne, with adjacent library, archives, lecture hall and conference centre, which has many of the advantages I spoke of earlier: location in a tourist centre,

beautiful site on the lake and in sight of the Gotthard railway, accessible by trolleybus or motor-launch and most importantly a great variety of exhibits.

But given the constraints of distance and resources, I think we must lower our horizons a little, and acknowledge that the efforts of your member museum organisations in Australia and New Zealand are tremendous. Bendigo and Ballarat are every bit as impressive as Berlin or Brno, St. Kilda is a step ahead of Seaton, and Christchurch has something to aim at in Crich. If I can quote from an early edition of the latter's guide book: "your achievements are the result of tremendous loyalty, hard work and sacrifice by your members". There is limited support from outside - in unemployment funds, heritage grants, material and items made available at scrap or less, but the finance usually has to depend on subscriptions, gate-takings and donations.

As a professional on the transport scene, I salute you. You never seem put off by the "It won't work" or "It can't be done" or "We tried it 30 years ago and it didn't work" syndrome that I have to fight every day in my job.

If I can close on a parochial note: As a South Australian, I am proud of and happy with the St. Kilda and Mile End Museums, which together with the private ventures such as Birdwood and the model-making organisations add to the excitement that is transport past, present and future. When we achieve the same public support and enthusiasm for the present day and future systems that you have generated for the past, I will be able to retire. We are making progress, as the Glenelg Tram and the Bee-line Bus show, but it is awfully slow and heavy going.

To those of you from interstate and overseas, I repeat my opening welcome. Have a successful conference and enjoy your stay in what we believe to be a tramway and museum oriented State.