

WHAT MAKES A TRAMWAY MUSEUM A MUSEUM

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"It's your displays" proclaimed Geoff Spiers, our first speaker this morning. In many words he exhorted us to understand that a museum is a display.

Perhaps it is.

But then our third speaker, Ms. Vivienne O'Neill, mused on the highlight of a family visit. A small cloud of dust announces the rapid and enthusiastic arrival of the kids to rejoin their parents. "Hey Mum and Dad! We've had a beaut ride on a tram".

To those kids the museum was an experience. They had participated in an active recreation of an unknown past.

Arthur Taylor, representing the "wobblies", would agree with the kids but for a different reason. He spoke of "the pure nostalgia - even down to punching tickets". This museum was also an experience, an active recreation of a well remembered past. (Note! Paper 5 by Arthur Taylor was delivered before this Paper - Ed.)

I sought the definition of a museum from several dictionaries and encyclopedias. In chorus they all started with "A building containing.....". Now that is a very limited and restrictive outlook. A museum can and must go much wider. Let me explain.

When I was a very young boy my mother would drag me off to the museum in Melbourne so that I could pontificate on the stuffed animals, old uniforms, Ned's armour and all that. The whole display was static, only the visitors moved.

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Some years later I discovered the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences in Sydney. There were buttons to push, rods cranked, gears whirled, things happened. Wow! This museum was alive, exciting.

Gerald Dee is a very well known and respected Victorian railwayman much of whose life has been spent at the regulator of steam locomotives. Well do I remember the first visit that both Gerald and I made to the Mile End Railway Museum here in Adelaide. "Bill, do you know what's wrong with all this?" sadly lamented Gerald after some time. Out of respect I allowed him to answer his own question. "All these locomotives. They're dead! Steam locomotives were alive, Bill. That's the way I want to remember them". I guess that, to a man who so often had walked among tracks of real breathing locomotives, this was like a graveyard.

I also remember well, my first visit to Britain. The Museum of Transport at Coplawhill in Glasgow was impressive. The old tram depot had been tastefully redecorated and turned into an excellently presented display of land transport vehicles and paraphernalia. I watched as a trained guide explained the era of the horse tram to an attentive group of school children who sat keenly rapt in his story. I was greatly impressed.

Then down to York, to the National Railway Museum. As I entered that vast hall I was struck with the most fabulous sense of awe. There they were before me - "Flying Scotsman", "Mallard", "Evening Star", "Green Arrow". I had read so much of them, seen photographs, watched films, but this, this was something else. I could actually touch the great "Mallard", the world's fastest even steam locomotive. Yes, it was real. What an experience! But what made it all so much more fantastic was to look at the smoke collectors in the roof above their funnels and know that 3 of the 4 were still very much alive and well.

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"Mallard" was the exception, so I donated towards its forthcoming restoration.

Geoff Spiers asked a question this morning which he left unanswered. "Why do you try to breathe life into dead things?" he asked of us. We can only muse on the purpose of his question but for whatever that purpose, it was an inspired thought. When we breathe new life into an old steam locomotive, or a tram, or a traction engine, or a waterwheel, we recreate living history. That, surely, is what our museums should be about.

There are different ways that this living history can materialise. In Bendigo we are restoring all our trams to authentic styles and colour schemes. At Ferny Grove it was the atmosphere inside the depot at night as the trams "cooled down" after a typical working day. At Loftus it is the realisation that track gauge and power supply were standard in more than 10 separate Australian city systems.

I was 4 years of age when I rode my last real cable tram in Melbourne. 45 years later, at Bylands, all those childhood memories rekindled when a cable tram again moved under me and under its own power.

At St. Kilda you can look at display pictures of trams operating in Adelaide "back in the days", then step out into the sunshine to see exactly the same trams alive and well, immaculately presented, waiting to take you for a ride to the beach.

But we can still do more.

At Moe in Victoria is Old Gipps town, a pioneer village totally consisting of authentic preserved buildings relocated from their original sites and arranged into a photogenic and realistic township. To walk in its main street is to be part of yesterday.

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At Glenorchy, the TTMS have relocated Newtown Station. Their signal box is the former Botanic Gardens station building and with a (new) roundhouse they too are doing a tremendous job to recreate yesterday, today.

The trams at the National Tramway Museum at Crich in England glide along Stephenson Place, a brilliant example of recreation of a typical British street scene with a real live tramway. All the street furniture, fences, waiting sheds are from here, there and everywhere and are the real thing. Crich is tramway museology at its best. I believe that I would find Ferrymead very similar.

But we still, sometimes, go one step further.

For instance, "wouldn't it be lovely" (as My Fair Lady exclaimed) if street trams still ran in King William Street North? Unfortunately, time has changed that streetscape.

But in York I wandered through a series of very narrow ancient streets with houses and shops way out of vertical and called appropriately "the Shambles". Here history is present. It has never changed.

And so it is at Ballarat. Beside Lake Wendouree there is a living museum that has never changed. S.E.C. trams still run in S.E.C. colours on S.E.C. track with crews in S.E.C. uniforms stopping their trams at S.E.C. style stops. The lake to the east and the Gardens to the west are also unchanged. This is no recreation. This is totally the real thing. This is part of Ballarat as it was and still is.

The Bendigo trams travel at "100 years an hour". As they rumble through Pall Mall, a street almost unchanged since the turn of the century. A recorded commentary tells passengers of the history of various buildings.

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Bendigo, is also no recreation. As your journey into history continues you realize that the museum trams are only part of a much larger museum. Bendigo, proudly, is its own museum. The museum, is Bendigo.

One of our Conference delegates summed up my feelings with a single word - ATMOSPHERE. He's right. Tram museums are, above all else, atmosphere.

That's why we "try to breathe life into dead things". Only when the museum is alive and realistic can we truly present the past and the atmosphere of the past. Only then have we really made our tram museum a museum.