

## **The Tramway Museum Journal of Record - Core business or obsolete legacy?**

Paper for COTMA 2012

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In recent years there have been several “half century anniversaries” for the tram preservation sector in New Zealand. Some key ones have included: 2007 saw 50 years since the pioneer Matakoho venture which has directly evolved into today’s MoTaT at Western Springs, Auckland; celebrations in Christchurch just a couple of weeks before the devastating February 2011 earthquakes marked 50 years since the first meeting from which today’s Ferrymead (and tomorrow’s re-started City Tramway) developed; and soon (2014) we will have the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the closing of New Zealand’s last conventional (20th century electric) street tramway, in Wellington.

This year 2012 is another of those half-centuries for us – 50 years since the journal “Tramway Topics” was first published. Begun as a cyclostyled newsletter to keep the few scattered enthusiasts informed of the various preservation plans, it has survived to now be a quarterly periodical of the tramway museums to cover “New Zealand electric transit – past, present and future”. Tramway Topics started life as the joint newsletter of the Christchurch and Wellington branches of the Tramway Preservation Association, which in 1964 became the autonomous Tramway Historical Society and the Wellington Tramway Museum respectively. Later the Tramway Division of MOTAT joined in taking nominal responsibility for the journal. In practice, the 'proprietorship' of Topics was assumed by whichever museum organisation had a member who was willing and able to do the editing and desktop publishing of the journal. For much of the time, and currently, this has been the Wellington Tramway Museum. Contributing articles and photos has always been a voluntary labour of love by the enthusiast community; the editor/publisher now gets a small stipend just sufficient to cover computer-related expenses.

Nevertheless, Tramway Topics is now published in 24 pages of full colour in professionally-designed format and can take its place with confidence alongside rail enthusiast publications with a much bigger circulation. And therein lies the rub – the print run is only 470 but many copies are complimentary or remain unsold. The subscriber base is shrinking as older museum members die off and others are content with the excellent free PDF newsletters emailed by their respective organisations. Optimistic plans to sell more copies of Tramway Topics via magazine shops, other museum gift shops etc have not been realised because the proprietors do not have the resources or expertise for a marketing campaign.

This low subscriber base means that the cover price of \$NZ 10.00 is quite high for only 24 pages. The NZ Railway Observer, for example, is \$12.00 for 40 pages and the New Zealand Railfan is sold in shops in large quantities at \$14.00 for 80 pages. The latter publication pays its authors, too! The fixed cost of printing, even using modern digital

printers, means that the per-copy price would have to rise further if circulation was to shrink any more. When the price of postage to subscribers is added – and that is also climbing as mail volumes shrink – it really does raise the question of whether maintaining a quality paper-based journal for such a small niche is a sustainable exercise, regardless of who owns it.

On the not unreasonable assumption that the changes in tram preservation, as well as in New Zealand society generally, over the coming 50 years will accelerate by at least double the rate experienced since 1962, it's been worth asking whether putting museum effort into publishing Tramway Topics is still justified.

This COTMA conference is an opportunity to check this with colleagues. Are there any specifically New Zealand aspects about what Tramway Topics is? Or does its history and its future reflect Australian issues and indeed international issues in the tramway preservation movement?

Let's look at three big areas of change across those first 50 years.

Firstly, its core subject coverage. In 1962, the focus of Tramway Topics was on recording the death throes of NZ's last classic tram system, and of how relics or specimens might be saved from the scrapman to preserve some of the experience of a vanishing era. Today, Tramway Topics has a general "electric traction" coverage, including the trolleybus and the electric passenger train, which nowadays carry millions of passengers (and growing) annually. Historical and restoration subjects continue to feature, alongside coverage of plans for modern tramways.

Secondly, the market. Who reads it? The same sorts of people as in 1962, probably, but more of them (because the overall population has grown since then). There is some "casual" readership from users of libraries and of over-the-counter sales copies – there would have been none of that in 1962!

Thirdly, publishing technologies and format preferences. The web has become the mainstream way of finding out information on anything and everything, tramways included. Reading journals on the laptop or iPad in preference to holding a paper copy is widespread and looks set to become the generally preferred format within a few years. Museum newsletters and blogs like Trams Down Under are numerous and well-illustrated and, taken together, provide a sizeable - if rather randomized – resource on the core subject.

So, Tramway Topics and its context has changed across its first half-century. What about the overall nature of the NZ tramway museum sector today? And what are the implications of any obvious trends from this on the future of TT? The most obvious change in our sector has been its sheer scale and growth. 50 years on from the fledgling days when Tramway Topics began, we now have 4 (Ferryhead, WTM, MoTaT and Wynyard) active electric systems, plus Wanganui turning its first wheels and Christchurch City Tramway poised for rebirth before the year is out. MoTaT alone carries

hundreds of thousands of passengers a year on its trams and has even had to import Australian cars to deal with the traffic demand. The second change is that of the people involved – new generations, obviously, but including many for whom the museum itself is satisfaction enough without having to see it as a deliberate effort to represent remnants of a dying or dead technology. (Some of these aspects were covered in AS's paper to the 2006 Melbourne COTMA conference.) When historical information is needed, it may be easier for many to just search open websites rather than to feel it necessary to create the Museum's own journal.

As everyone at this Conference knows only too well, it's a full-time and demanding task running a tramway museum these days. On top of this, maintaining and repairing old technologies has large inherent costs which tend to keep growing. It's a reasonable expectation that Museums will run their own online newsletters or websites to keep members informed. So: is the publication of a magazine aimed at an audience beyond the museum membership or ridership – in other words, a "journal of record" for the tramway or electric traction sectors - a distraction from the everyday task of securing the museum's future?

In any case, the concept of the traditional tramway museum is changing, with more emphasis on supporting commercial and tourist heritage tramway operations, often downtown. This is partly in response to the decline in volunteerism and the aging of the core tram museum workforce. And of course modern trams or light rail in actual or proposed form are booming in Australasia as everywhere else. Is it therefore appropriate to expect museums to take responsibility for recording the 'tramway scene' when the traditional museum is a diminishing proportion of current tramway activity?

In some academic disciplines, the notion of the "authoritative journal of record" – the one that you just had to get your paper published in, or the one whose citation gave credibility to your research – has been challenged in today's web world. Constantly-changing active datasets, maintained and updated not at a central point but by teams of collaborators, are widespread. And if the "journal of record" has lost some of its lustre in some professional fields, then is it just arrogance in an amateur field like tramway preservation? In fact, the opposite justification can be claimed for the value of having a recognized journal of record for our sector. We are a small sector, and are driven by enthusiasm rather than by any claims for national importance. If we do not write the stories of tramway history and detail, no-one else much will. If what we do publish just gets scattered about on blogs or in newsletters whose primary purpose is keeping members informed about Society progress, then it may become as good as lost. The "Journal of Record" concept is a statement that there is one best place to search first for information of interest to the sector.

"to search" – ah, there's the single key factor influencing the shape of *Tramway Topics* beyond its first half-century. The past is indeed another country – which is, after all, why we put so much effort into our museums and into preservation, so that evidence of that past can be carried forward both for its own sake and for the enjoyment of future generations. *Tramway Topics* is one of the containers of that "evidence", but these days

(and this will be enduring, not just a passing technology fad) most looking back through documents and research material starts off with a web search, or some kind of on-line keyword search. In *Tramway Topics* 1962-1978 you really have to hunt and peck through those back issues to find any particular topic. It's not keyword searchable and so the search engines can't get into it. For future readers, it risks becoming a lost resource.

If ever there was a deserving "non-tram" project for our sector, it's surely the digitizing of the complete half-century of *Tramway Topics*, plus, naturally, the provision of each new issue in on-line formats. This doesn't have to be at the expense of print – the two can quite happily co-exist, as today's publishing mainstreams show. However, the balance of print and online distribution will be determined by demand, and there will probably come a point where digital delivery becomes so dominant that maintaining a handful of printed copies will become unaffordable. We can't say when this will be, any more than media giants like Fairfax can.

I am convinced that the results of online availability and searchability will be as useful and welcome in our own sector as the dramatic unlocking of New Zealand newspaper content has been through the National Library's *Papers Past*. In fact, *Papers Past* has itself become a significant contributor to the content of *Tramway Topics*.

There is a huge difference between a good credible journal and a miscellaneous herd of random blog postings and their ilk. *Tramway Topics* is our "journal of record" - not the only one, but the one which deserves special recognition and value. It is interesting to see that the current WTM Constitution includes amongst its *Objects* "to foster an intelligent interest in tramways generally" and amongst its *Activities* "the publication of a periodical or periodicals of tramway interest". It is likely that other museums, in both countries, have similar constitutional objectives to engage in work beyond the limits of their running lines. Sure, these constitutions were shaped around fifty years ago, but the concept of a periodical can be delivered through a well-organized e-journal and website.

Most important of all is that the "Journal of Record" whose production is recognized as a core value by the museum directly helps the museum's main work. Interpretation and restoration informed by, and backed up with, good research is more likely to be of higher quality than if it were just undertaken on the basis of a few web searches and newsletter items. Our trams exist in a context, and a good research journal nourishes that context.

So the best strategy is to build on past and present mana, and to assert the value of history recording as an enduring core value and purpose of tramway museums. This is a call to resist the risk of dropping the journal of record in the face of resource pressures needed to maintain physical assets and to build passenger revenue traffic volumes. But this history recording (current history as well as the past of the "classic tram era") is only justified **if it** emphasises on-line formats (including for all back-files) so as to achieve optimum exposure to web search engines, and exposure to actual information-seeking preferences in the wider community.

**END**