

COTMA IN REVIEW

Presented by Dr John C. Radcliffe

Chairman, COTMA

I believe there are a series of stages and developments in our museums and these are:-

(a) Establishment

A properly constituted body to organise and operate the museum.

(b) Collection

Often loosely termed "preservation" (which it isn't!). It is a process by which we see all these things disappearing and then somebody races out and starts rounding them up.

(Dr Radcliffe attempts to illustrate by means of a graph depicting the two stages taking place simultaneously.)

Along the bottom axis, I'd like to put the extent of what it is we are looking at, and on the vertical axis - the quality.

Now, let us just consider collections. What tends to happen in the earlier stages is that we collect things that we shouldn't probably collect and often the quality is wrong. We get things which are perhaps significant to various people but they are not chosen for the right reasons. An example being tram No 192 at St Kilda. We have that because there was "a tram attached to a piece of stained-glass" which has "HTT" on it. (Horse-drawn Tramways Trust). In fact, this tram was not the best quality "D" type tram we could have obtained and for that we have an inferior exhibit when, in fact, we could have had a better one. Many people look at this as preservation and, of course, it isn't - it is getting the stuff together.

(c) Accommodation

Can we house the collection and how effectively do we do it? I'd suggest to you that really this process to this point is survival. If we don't at least get that far then our museums won't even survive!

(d) Building the Line

(e) Restoration and Maintenance

These developments tend to follow this order but some museums may have slightly varying priorities).

(f) Operation - Running the Cars

(g) Administration

There usually is a large amount of capital invested even though it may be a hobby but it still needs to be managed competently.

(h) Scholarship and Useology

If we are running museums we have to be aware that the basic function of a museum is, in fact, to have reasonable standards of scholarship. For example; have we painted a car in a colour scheme that appeals to us, or is it's paint scheme historically correct for the era that we are seeking and properly researched.

(i) Display and Interpretation

The public want to gain some sort of understanding as to what we are on about; what the trams had to do with society; what their role was; what human interest stories were involved with them; where did they come from; who built them; who drove them; how were they involved with the development of the city; what emergencies had to be sorted out and by whom?

(j) Integrating with Broader Community Activities

Sometimes the appeal of a tram museum in itself is not sufficient. Other aspects of historical interest can often be integrated for a far better all around display.

(k) Handing on the Heritage

Dr Radcliffe then went on to illustrate these points with the use of slides.

Some of you will be familiar with this particular institution. This is the museum at Crich. It is excellent in many of the characteristics which I have listed. It presents quite a good vision to the public, has a good collection, good accommodation, excellent workshops, fine restoration facilities, technologically it is very good. The restoration of the under-side of the vehicle has much to commend it; a certain amount of effort being put into display.

Only on one day of the year, however, does it really have anything to do with another section of the community which is the "Extravaganza" and I think that it is in that area that it is probably having a problem because Crich is beginning to lose numbers of visitors. It is not really associated with the wider community. It is a tramway operation on top of a hill in the middle of Derbyshire and you go there for a specific purpose which is to see the trams.

Let's look at another example. A question of planning. In 1975 this particular museum (Vernish) looked like this and now, five years later, you can see they have constructed a town around those poles and the tramway itself is built into a much broader community operation in the same way as at MOTAT and Ferrymead and developing. But their standards of scholarship are not particularly good in this tram (now showing). This is a Sheffield tram and they had a taste for an open top tram so they took the roof off it, put their own number on it! This keeps the customers happy riding on an open-top tram, but historically, of course, it is completely ruined.

Let's look at National Motor Museum. It has an impressive collection of buildings holding many, many examples of early automobiles and the like, the mono-rail neatly has a station in the middle of it as you pass through the roof. They have also gone in for some "hack" vehicles like this example of a 1974 Ford truck chassis with a replica body of a London B type bus built on top.

But the really impressive part is a part that the public do not see and that is the library. This library is probably worth more than the cars in real

monetary terms as well as in historical value (approximately \$2million). Access to information of historical importance from this source is priceless and a great asset to any museum.

Let's have a look at the National Railway Museum in York. Again, this is not out in the scrub by itself. It is in a major tourist town. Everybody goes to see the York Minster which is just around the corner and over the hill and you can walk from there to the Railway Museum in fifteen minutes. So it is partly integrated with a broader community.

Inside the building the locomotives are tastefully displayed. Their display standards are excellent. The reserve collection store is also excellent although this is what the public do not see and here you will see the locomotives and carriages that are not being displayed, protected by dust sheets.

Toronto is another city where a tramway museum has integrated its activities with other things and in this case - tourism. The tram showing now is run by the Toronto Tram Commission so there is a direct association between the museum and tourism and the tram itself provides additional financial support because there is an operation out into the broader community.

At this stage, Mr Jim Walker from the Orange Empire Rail Museum was asked for his comments...

We, in Los Angeles, have an annual conference which yields approximately 150 members attending from many more museums and the like than, of course, are part of COTMA, and an important aspect of these meetings is the communication with one another. Just by keeping in touch with each other, I have always said, if you trace back, almost every problem a museum has, is usually due to lack of communication. If you can share your problems with a fellow organisation then they may well be solved sooner. Keep on talking to one another.

On the subject of content of these conferences in general, the attendance would depend to a large extent on whereabouts it was being held. We do try to go to places that are entertaining, but, just like yourselves, there are limitations to what people can afford in travel expenses to attend. We have had some bad situations for conferences in so much as there may be too many distractions going on outside whilst the meeting is in progress for instance. We have even thought of having them at a venue that does not even have a museum close by in order to avoid this but it has not caught on yet.

Some of the best workshops I have attended were actually held in the shop itself. They showed the machine doing rewinding; they put the riveter in front of us; at one place in the woodshop, they saw the trees down, they store the lumber and they bring it back in and finish it - a real "hands on" demonstration!

In my experience of conferences, I see too many people sit silently (by nature that may be how they are anyway) hoping that the other people will say it for them. This is fine, but we should ask ourselves the question when it is all over, "Did the right people attend the conference and what about the ones that did not?" And what can you do to get more people to attend, especially those who are up and coming. Perhaps those who are unable to attend could get together to help those who really would like to - particularly the younger members. Let us not have the museum grow old with us, because it will die with us too.