

# Disabled Access

## *A Problem or an Opportunity?*

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### **Introductory Remarks**

The time is fast approaching when we will be legally required to provide access for disabled people of many kinds to our museums and vehicles.

Some of us have already gone part of the way in meeting these requirements, but we still have a long way to go.

There is a great variety of disability, and also degrees of disability. Probably the first thing we think of is wheelchairs. However we would all be aware that many generally mobile people have difficulty climbing into our trams. So while wheelchair access is probably the most likely thing exercising our minds in this regard, there are many people likely to benefit from some ramp or platform arrangement. However, there are also deaf, blind and intellectually disabled people who may visit our sites and we need to provide for them. A lot of this may simply be the way we react on a person-to-person basis, but there may also be infrastructural ways we can make their visit more comfortable and rewarding.

This session seeks to explore briefly the range and degree of disability, how far we should try to accommodate them and then look in detail at providing efficient, easily used and cost-effective access for the mobility-impaired.

### **Who are the Disabled?**

More people than we might expect:

There are varieties of disability and there are degrees of disability. These can be exhibited in hearing, sight, mobility and intellectual capacity. One that often escapes attention is the 'able but older' visitor, who may struggle to board a tram but chooses not to ask for help.

### **How Do We Deal With Them?**

No matter the variety or degree, the common thread is that disabled visitors wish to be treated normally. Therefore it is important

- To respect the need for independence;
- To respect their residual abilities and their desire to use them.

It naturally follows that

- It is important to talk with the obviously disabled and/or their carers about what level of assistance is needed;
- Museum staff must be alert to offer assistance to the less obvious ‘able but older’ who struggle as a consequence of their desire for independence, but may be putting themselves at risk in doing so.

### **Where Do We Deal With Them?**

Museums reported most effort goes into dealing with the mobility-impaired riding the heritage vehicles. These are predominantly the ageing with slow unassisted walking, walking sticks, walking frames and wheelchairs. However, museums have to consider access issues in car parks, grounds, displays, toilets and tea rooms.

### **What Has Been/Is Being Done?**

Most museums are working on, or thinking about, access issues, especially for the mobility-impaired. These include

- Platforms and ramps;
- Planks or sheeting to span the gap between a platform and foot or floor boards;
- Some are thinking about lifts (TMSV was thinking about a portable lift);
- Increasing the number and reducing the size of steps (the second step up into an old tram is often the more difficult).

### ***Notable Efforts Reported***

- Crich did a ‘whole of museum’ study which resulted in steps into shops changed to ramps and pathways across tracks being relaid
- Crich has developed an ‘access tram’ that has a hydraulic lift, extra-wide doors and space for four wheelchairs
- Crich has developed a guidebook in braille;
- Ballarat is developing a website which converts text to audio;
- Brisbane received plaudits all round from the general public after remodelling the toilets for disabled access;
- Bendigo uses a demountable aluminium flooring for wheelchair access at the mine and brick kerbing at foot board height.

### ***Room for Thinking***

SPER reported a drop-off in elderly visitors because of access difficulties

Crich reported an increase in patronage following its access improvements

Take a lesson from airlines: if it is at all possible, persons in wheelchairs or gophers are transferred to other chairs built to fit through tight spaces and are then transferred into regular seating

Some trams are better suited for mobility-impaired people than others and those better suited should be favoured at special events. However:

- There can be PR problems with using designated trams for disabled access because of their suitability in mixed running with unsuitable ones. Visitors don't like waiting around for the 'right' tram and families can get offside as a consequence;
- How easy is it to get a disabled person off a tram in an emergency?
- Do any trams carry stretchers, which may be a way of getting mobility-impaired off quickly?
- Kerb heights are sometimes built to running board levels, but this has not always been successful and there is some danger of slipping between the two;
- In Sacramento, the front door next to the motorman is supposed to align with a ramp in the safety zone, but it often has the effect of blocking an entrance. Also, some trams have drop-down steps, but most people seem to struggle on regardless of these facilities;
- In Portland, trams have a low floor tram coupled with a high floor tram. Some have a push-button slide from the floor to the pavement, but this can also create a trip point. The lesson to be learned is that care has to be exercised so that solving one problem doesn't create another;
- There must be disabled access at both ends of a journey;
- Care should be exercised in carrying prams and wheelchairs to avoid damaging coach work.