

THE PROS AND CONS OF A COMPOSITE MUSEUM

Presented by Simon Wood, Chairman
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Introduction

I am Chairman of a Composite Museum Structure known as the Ferrymead Trust. It is incorporated as a Charitable Trust, and administers an area of approximately 100 acres at Christchurch, New Zealand.

The land is well within the boundaries of Greater Christchurch, a City of some 300,000 people. The site has a clear historical significance, as the first railway in New Zealand operated from it, and its main entrance is on Bridle Path Road, which is itself formed along the walking track used by the pioneer settlers of this Province to reach the Canterbury Plains from the Port of Lyttelton. The name "Ferrymead" ("the meadow by the ferry") records that the adjacent Heathcote River was the first natural obstacle on the pilgrim path, and was therefore the site of the first ferry and of an early Inn catering for the thirsts of heavily laden people who had just climbed and descended from a steep hill of some 2,000 feet. The irregularity of the ferry ensured the success of the Inn, and made the Ferrymead area a natural early tourist trap. The whole area administered by the Trust and its Member Societies is low lying and subject to occasional flooding, and although this necessitates filling the ground some 3 feet deep before buildings can be erected, the compensating factor is that the Trust was able to acquire a large central site, which had remained undeveloped for over 100 years. It also permitted the purchase of some 65 acres ten years ago for only \$200.00 per acre.

Next Saturday, April 29th, is the 10th Anniversary of the Incorporation of the Ferrymead Trust, and this Conference is therefore held at a very appropriate time for considering the advantages and disadvantages of the type of organisation that has been evolved. The opinions I will now express are my own, and should not necessarily be taken as those of the 22 Corporate Bodies whose representatives make up the Ferrymead Trust Board.

Before examining just how our system works, I think I should first state my opinion on administrative arrangements in a notional perfect museum. My opinion is based on ten years' experience as President of a Member Society, as Co-founder and fund raiser, as Deputy Chairman for five years and Chairman for another five.

The perfect museum administration has as its chief officer a benevolent, visionary, bachelor dictator, possessed of unlimited funds, with power of life and death over all who work under or with him. He should be exempt from all laws, and immune from prosecution. The leaders of all Political Parties and Local Bodies should owe him favours and large sums of money. He should have power of conscription over the local populace, and the right to seize and retain anything he considers to be an exhibit, and to require the owner to move it to his museum and erect it in running order at the owner's expense. He should have the right to run his own armed Police, and to drain on to neighbouring properties. He should be charming, handsome and wise, and the sole owner of the museum. He should hold office for life and on his death his successor should be appointed by that great ex-Australian, Prince Leonard Casley, Monarch of the Principality of Hutt in Western

Australia, who has apparently succeeded in proclaiming his farming museum near Geraldton a Sovereign State seceding from the Commonwealth of Australia, and now printing its own currency and postage stamps and operating its own Airforce and Navy, conferring titles, and insisting on visas for entry. Should he require an Advisory Committee, this should be made up of Messrs. Muldoon, Bjelke Petersen, and Enoch Powell.

Having expressed that view, you may wonder how I became Chairman of the Ferrymead Trust, which is essentially a democratic composite body. There are three reasons:

- (1) I was there;
- (2) The Trust needs a lawyer about once a week, and this was a cunning way of trapping a free one into the system; (The Ferrymead Trust never pays for anything unless there is absolutely no alternative.)
- (3) No-one else wanted the job.

In a composite Organisation, everyone wants to do the "thing" that attracted him there in the first place, and the job of co-ordinating and fund raising is, by comparison, a tedious task, best left to someone else.

The Trust was originally formed with impetus from Jaycees, with the Heathcote County Council adopting the role of Kindly Uncle. It brought together on one site three existing organisations, the Tramway Historical Society, the New Zealand Railway and Locomotive Society and the Museum of Science and Industry. It was immediately joined by all the Christchurch Local Bodies, the Historic Places Trust, Local Pressure Groups and two other Clubs interested in vintage vehicles and aviation. Only Corporate Bodies can be members of the Trust, and each appoints a Trustee. The Board meets quarterly. Day to day administration is handled by an elected executive, and the grass roots of the whole Organisation is a large planning Committee, which, in effect, initiates all new ventures.

The Chief Executive is the full time Director, Don Muir, who is usually on site seven days a week, who has a staff varying in numbers between thirty and eighty, nearly all of whom are members of a Special Work Force and whose wages are refunded to the Trust by the State.

The finances of the Trust have always been precarious, and without annual Local Body grants which are currently about \$30,000 per annum, the Organisation would have ceased to exist years ago. Although cash resources have always been slim, there has been a notable growth in capital assets in the form of land, buildings and exhibits. The Trust has borrowed to capacity, and currently owes about \$70,000 on a mortgage and on debentures to Members, and although on paper it has a surplus of assets over liabilities, amounting to \$168,000, its real worth (including the worth of Member Societies) is probably about \$1,000,000. This has been achieved in ten years by a loosely-knit Federal Organisation, the Members of which have contributed something like 1½ million man hours of voluntary labour. It is the biggest Community project in Christchurch, and in the whole history of the City the only thing involving greater Community participation would be the organisation of the Commonwealth Games. Ferrymead is nevertheless just a big ugly construction site with a large County rubbish dump as its centre, but the Public do not seem to mind this, as it is currently enjoying paid public patronage (mainly at weekends) of approximately 50,000 people per annum.

Disadvantages of a Composite Museum Organisation

The disadvantages as I see them in the Ferrymead Organisation are:

- (1) No-one can ever be told to do anything except the staff. Administration is by persuasion, and this is a very time consuming method. Instant decisions are seldom possible. Blinding flashes of inspiration are torn to shreds in a complicated committee structure. If, for example, someone in the Tramway Historical Society wants to build a shed for his pet project, he must first persuade the Society Committee. This will involve reports and assessments, as the proposer is always one-eyed and disregards conflicting claims for money, man-power and space. The proposal will then have to be put to the Township and Planning Committee of the Trust, whose twenty-two members will almost certainly want to put it in a different place, make it a different shape and colour, and put a lean-to on to it for another purpose. It will then have to be approved by the Executive, and get a building permit from the County. If funds are not available, and it costs more than \$5,000, it will have to be referred to the full Trust Board. It will then be put on a deferred budget for action when funds permit. The proposer will then be morally obliged to take part in fund raising activities. If the money is then raised, the question of priorities for use of funds may then have changed. A year will have elapsed. His enthusiasm has waned, as he has by then thought up two more projects, and by then his former girl-friend is his wife, who keeps asking him why he is not digging the garden.
- (2) There is a definite rivalry for scarce funds. Trams and trains earn fares. The Tramway Historical Society has always been very business-like, and makes little demand on joint funds. The Railway and Locomotive Society sees itself as a Hobbyist Group, in which money is only used for survival. Fire Engines and Aircraft make no money, but provide popular exhibits. Every Society thinks that its demands are not given proper weight. If it were not for the effects of large quantities of beer, drunk in two local pubs, serious rifts could have developed between groups.
- (3) There are great problems in communication, because rank and file members of each Society can not be properly informed of decisions made at the top of the Committee tier system, and third hand verbal communication frequently results in the widespread dissemination of faulty news.
- (4) The Committee System is designed for democratic ends. Efficient administration and democracy are quite incompatible. Everyone concerned in the decision making process is giving up his own spare time. Too much of this time is involved in Committees. It is normal for there to be twenty or more Committees and Sub-Committees operating simultaneously at Ferrymead. I have myself spent over 3,000 hours on Ferrymead Committees. I imagine that there are a number of long serving members who would easily beat that figure.
- (5) Design and planning are not best achieved in a multiple Committee situation. No major work of art was ever created by a Committee.
- (6) Because of ordinary democratic pressures, Ferrymead has always undertaken too many simultaneous projects, all simultaneously starved of labour and money. The time between starting and completing a building project at

Ferrymead can be up to five years, as different pressure groups proceed with their pet project in the face of general shortages of everything required. Without the democratic process, the entire resources could be much more easily concentrated, and Ferrymead would not have the appearance of an eternal construction site.

- (7) The variety of projects causes confusion in the public mind, and is bad for public relations. There must be few firms in Christchurch that have not at some time been approached for a Ferrymead favour. Having made what it considers to be a generous donation of say building materials, the same firm may be approached two weeks later by another Ferrymead group, quite ignorant of past favours.

Advantages of a Composite Museum Organisation

The advantages as I see them are more numerous than the disadvantages, and most of these stem from sheer size. The very appropriate symbol of the ancient Roman empire was the *fasces*, a bundle of sticks tied together, each very weak, but when combined, able to support a large weapon. The main advantages are:

- (1) The bigger a museum, the more likely it is that individual members of the public will find something of absorbing interest to them as individuals. Ferrymead is deliberately planned as a large sprawling complex connected by various forms of vintage transport. The purpose of transport is a journey to somewhere. There may be interest in the ride itself, but a journey to a place has to be more interesting than a merry-go-round. At Easter there were about 18,000 people at Ferrymead over a three day period. Nearly all of these had a ride on a tram. Could the trams alone have attracted such a crowd? I think not.
- (2) One day there will be seven or eight major exhibition halls. These are deliberately sited about a mile from the main entrance, to give point to a tram or train ride. The first of these buildings is the Hall of Wheels. This building would cost at least \$250,000 to duplicate. It was built by the Trust, because the Organisation which originally planned it was not big enough or sufficiently dedicated. It was built with borrowed money, under guarantees given by the various Member Societies. No individual Member Society could have handled such a big project, but the combined borrowing power of all Societies has produced a remarkable building, which has in turn created major cash flows for our Railway and our Tramway.
- (3) All restorers of museum exhibits need buildings. The composite size of Ferrymead permitted the formation of the Ferrymead Construction Company Limited, a wholly owned subsidiary, designed to build buildings for the Trust and for Member Societies at cost. The Hall of Wheels would not be standing today had it been built on an ordinary building contract. The lowest tender price for the building some four years ago was \$223,000. Approximately \$100,000 was saved by using our own small construction gang. It stands today as a monument to them, and to what can be achieved by joint venture.

- (4) Ferrymead has always been supported by Christchurch Local Bodies. From the outset a joint approach by a composite group gained public financial support, where smaller more specialised societies have consistently failed when making similar approaches.
- (5) The Trust has been able to operate as a Merchant Banker, borrowing surplus funds from Member Societies, and lending them to others. Worthwhile projects have been accelerated by this method, and no money has ever been lost in the process.
- (6) The first major building at Ferrymead, the Tram Barn, was built with the help of \$16,000 raised in the first joint fund raising, a Queen Carnival. The joint organisation was able to get help from eight other service groups in Christchurch, to assist in the campaign, which also financed the purchase of land. At that time the Tramway Historical Society had no capital at all, and so profited immediately by entering a joint venture.
- (7) The most precious asset of all is personal enthusiasm. In lengthy projects specialised enthusiasm should not be diverted for too long into fund raising. People do not like endless involvement in something they never intended to do. The friendly competition between our Railway and our Tramway has undoubtedly benefited both. Competition resparks flagging enthusiasm, and a lot of this is needed to keep voluntary work going out of doors in mid-winter Christchurch weather. Similarly, enthusiasm has been directed at higher and higher standards of quality under competitive influence. A horse drawn tram is now being re-restored, and no one will convince me that the quality of restoration of fire appliances in another Society has nothing to do with this thought process.
- (8) The enthusiasm of a voluntary labour force is also kept up by contact with a larger group. Although small specialist groups have been the keynote, there is now a definite recognisable Ferrymead Fraternity, which has worked together, and drunk together on joint projects, particularly joint Festivals and Fairs. A Ferrymead volunteer may once have had to explain what he was doing. Now, an association with the project needs no explaining, and is something that has general community support. Without unity, the various groups would have remained, in public estimation, curious hobbyist cranks. There is now a considerable social life associated with the Ferrymead project, and there have been several joint expeditions and holidays.
- (9) There are advantages in the pooling of information. Ferrymead members are between them familiar with hundreds of museum organisations outside New Zealand, and there is a continuous inter-change of information and help. For example, we have two notable exhibits from the United States, and even an offer of substantial help from a major museum in Moscow.
- (10) Much help has been gained by individual groups from the process I call "levitation". Quite large pieces of plant periodically vanish, only to reappear six months later untouched by human hand in the shed of another member society a mile away. Sometimes levitated articles have even been thoughtfully painted in a new colour, but levitation saves duplication and purchase, and in the end nobody loses.

- (11) Voluntary bodies really work effectively only at weekends. No public museum can operate on this basis. Continuity is essential. No Ferrymead Society has ever been able to afford a permanent staff, but the pooling of resources has provided an office and central administration for some years. The public at large will never take seriously an Organisation which is just not there for five days each week.
- (12) Important specialised exhibits are sometimes offered to a specialist society, which does not want them for temporary and very good reasons. A Kb locomotive, once the pride of the New Zealand Railways, and two electric locomotives were acquired, although our own Locomotive Society did not want them at the time. In both cases this was done because of enthusiasm from individual members of the Tramway Society trespassing outside its normal field. In both cases the Locomotive Society changed its mind later, and is now delighted with the acquisitions. But for this, all three would have been scrapped, so that a composite organisation sometimes has unpredictable long term advantages.
- (13) The joint venture has always engaged in joint fund raising with the result that no member society has ever had to pay a membership fee or levy. The Trust can therefore proudly claim that it has never cost a cent, when viewed from the angle of an individual group.
- (14) Harder times for our Country have brought an unexpected bonus in the form of the Special Work Force which is part of the Government's Unemployment Relief Programme. This means that work now proceeds at Ferrymead seven days a week, and every Society has benefitted. This assistance came originally because the Trust made an approach to the Government to be declared a "Local Body" for the purposes of the scheme. As Christchurch Local Bodies were all partners with the founder societies, it was not difficult to persuade the Government. But for the existence of a central administration with an existing supervisory staff, it would not have been possible to obtain this major source of labour, which has since worked well in the joint interest. Indeed, the enthusiasm of these workers is such that at the Easter Festival twenty-three of them volunteered their services without charge for the whole weekend. This must demonstrate the ultimate continuing enthusiasm which a composite organisation can generate.

CONCLUSION

I hope that delegates to this Conference will learn something of our unusual methods, and particularly from our mistakes. I can only say in conclusion that a composite organisation has suited our strange history and circumstances and that, with the advantage of hindsight, I am still strongly of the opinion that any Tramway Museum is well advised to consider a composite operation.