

OUR CULTURAL HERITAGE

Warren Doubleday and Richard Gilbert
Ballarat Tramway Preservation Society

INTRODUCTION

The question we must ask ourselves is

"Are tramway museums part of cultural heritage?"

Street tramways have a strong cultural heritage in Australia. They were a prominent feature in the street scenes of our major cities for many years. They transported people to and from their homes for work, shopping or leisure.

Melbourne has only in recent years recognised this cultural aspect. It is now developing this around its trams, from both heritage and lifestyle viewpoints. But have we translated this cultural heritage into the way we present our collections to the public, so they may understand and appreciate their past?

SOME DEFINITIONS:

Culture is each society's special way of perceiving and representing life in its place and time [1, p.7]

And its relevance to history?

For others, culture is learning and the intellectual achievements of society. Some place emphasis on history: as material artefacts, museums, monuments and sites; it is written and oral expression, . . .

This paper looks at the cultural heritage aspects of tramway museums and draws heavily on an article by Warren Doubleday from the December 1991 issue of *Newsrail: Culture! What relevance to Railway History?* This article was written following the announcement of the Victorian Government's cultural policy in 1991. It also drew upon two articles by Jim Longworth in the May and June 1991 issues of *Railway Digest*. He examined the cultural significance of preserved railways or that of the operation of heritage trains. The need for this examination grew out of the 3801 accident. I would commend these articles to all those operating preserved railways or tramways.

THE VICTORIAN GOVERNMENT'S CULTURAL POLICY

The Victorian Government announced this new policy in June 1991. Its objective is to provide a framework for developing culture in its many forms: traditional and innovative arts, recreation and sport, education and heritage. The policy booklet *Mapping our Culture* points out that culture is relevant to all Victorians, whether we place value on the Melbourne Cup, regional art galleries or our universities and schools. Victoria has often been the seedbed of new forms of culture, and the Cultural Policy aims to encourage this.

With regard to the heritage aspects of the policy, the area that the various preserved railways/tramways fall within the policy points out that:

Conserving and enhancing Victoria's cultural heritage is a priority of the Cultural Policy. That heritage is not only the many buildings and objects of the past but also the social history of Victorians. Information collections and access to them are an essential part of developing ways of improving Victoria's future.[1, p.3]

Some of the Strategic Actions proposed by Heritage and Tradition section of the policy are [1, p.30]:

- develop appropriate legislation and infrastructure for heritage protection, including objects and artefacts;
- develop a State Cultural Heritage Strategy based on widespread public consultation;
- establish and maintain a State register of significant portable cultural heritage;
- implementation of the Museums and Historical Collections Policy of the Museums Advisory Board;
- the development of the thematic museums, based on existing collections, facilities and sites, such as a multi-location Victorian Maritime Museum and a network of Historic House museums;
- the provision of support services to encourage regional co-operation between museums and historical societies.

The policy also addresses the important aspect of social history. This would allow, for instance, the development of social history collections and research to reflect Victoria's social development through the construction of transport links and their support facilities. For example, the importance of railways in the provision of employment to local communities and the acceptance of immigrants into the railways/tramways employment.

ITS IMPORTANCE TO US!

Longworth in his paper *Tourist Railways - money trees, cultural cancers, or?* [2, p. 173] notes that:

There is likely to be an increased requirement on private railway operators to validate their place as providers of cultural heritage, resourcing as they do, the tourist market. Those seeking government funding are especially likely to need increased explanation of why they should be supported by the overall community.

(The following comments were written for the railway viewpoint, however, many of them apply equally to the tramway aspect.)

Some railway enthusiasts in management positions of preserved railways have long recognised this need, but have often neither fully understood it, nor had a government policy on which to construct a case for funding. To gain continuing access to funding, they will need to place their project submissions into a cultural context.

Decisions about the presentation of railway objects or their lines, are too often made on expediency, simplicity or commercial points, or even on just a whim of management. There is little thinking sometimes of the heritage or cultural aspects. Longworth points out,

Meritorious good may be seen as residing in the significance of the proposal to the region's cultural heritage: this is a particularly powerful argument given the place that railways played in developing this nation's rural and mining industries, although it should be realised that tourist developments will severely compromise the pure cultural significance of any resource used as an attraction. Denial of access to non-paying visitors, inappropriate site works, display of decontextualised relics, hyperreal presentation and gaudy servicing of visitors all detract from the historical authenticity of the visiting experience. The visiting experience shifts from being within the social context of education to that of entertainment.

Many preserved, or "tourist", railway operators face this quandary. To overcome it, policies on the collection, its presentation and conservation will be a requirement. The formation of these acquisition and heritage policies by the railway operators will provide a framework for planning decisions. Such policies go a long way in building a case for government funding, or even just focusing people's attention on what they are doing. Government through its various "arts" or "museums" programmes will favour those who have established such policies and show that they are relevant to the culture of Victoria.

The other advantage of such policies and discussions over the cultural heritage of railways is that it allows the assessment of the attributes of the preserved train relevant to us and our society. [3, p. 194]

However, it raises other questions. Are we conserving the railway relics for future generations to enjoy, or are we selfishly consuming them now? Will R class locomotives and 1900 era carriages still be operable in 600 years time? Well, that depends on what we do now, and of course it begs the further question, will there still be tracks suitable on which to run a R class? For the point of the discussion, let's assume yes.

First we have to establish that the train or locomotive is culturally significant and that it is worthwhile to preserve it. Then we must ensure that this can be done, by recording, conserving, establishing the maintenance facilities and maintaining an understanding of the past technology.

The view of the author is that too many railway enthusiasts are pure consumers, and could not care about the future. This selfishness applies particularly to the one sided steam fanatics. They do not look at the other aspects of railway operation or to the long term preservation of equipment etc. It is a complex system, a lot of which depends upon the people who operate or maintain the railway or the piece of equipment itself. Too little work is done to understand or record the "software", ie., the personal component or the methods of maintenance.

It is hoped that the existence of a cultural policy will provide the process to enable the preservation of the relics and the provision of suitable maintenance facilities. It should foster the desire through education, and thereby knowledge, to include for example the social side of railway history.

OUR TRAMWAY CULTURAL HERITAGE

Though repeating the opening paragraph of this paper, Australian street tramways have a rich cultural heritage. They had significant influence in the ways the cities were developed up to the second world war, they provided a relatively cheap means of getting around town. A number of authors have written books and articles on the tramway hardware, with some reference to the people or the software that ran them. This later aspect is what too often we tend to ignore in our museums.

We would argue that many of these aspects have been recognised by the COTMA museums, although most of us still have a long way to go to present them properly. Most of us are undertaking good conservation and preservation work, and aiming to present our tramways in a view that would enable their cultural heritage to be understood by the visitor. Most of us suffer from the inability to present our major exhibits in their correct habitat, a street with live motor cars etc. to contend with, and stops to pick up and set down passengers at. Fortunately at Ballarat, we are able to do that, and this is an element we are able to capitalise on.

While tramways did not have the political significance that railways did, they were often influential in the local political scene throughout Australia. The people, the lines, the equipment and their facilities were all part of the tramway culture that developed over the Victorian era and extended up to the 1960's in Australia. In Ballarat for example, the street trackage has been in the Gardens Reserve for over 100 years, and its attendant overhead clutter for almost 90 years.

TRAM MUSEUMS AND CULTURE

The last 30 to 40 years have seen the development of a very extensive world wide movement for the conservation of tramway equipment, lines and facilities. This is almost entirely volunteer based, with only some professional management or workshop based personnel. Australia is no exception to this movement.

The Australasian groups have, generally, a high community acceptance of their activities. This is shown in the assistance, in the form of either equipment, facilities or money, that has been or is being provided by government or their authorities. To ensure that this continues, the various groups will have to understand what they are doing and think towards to the future.

In Victoria, government, whether state or local, has recognised by its past actions the importance of conservation of tramway culture. They have offered the opportunity, not only to enhance the preservation activities of the various groups, but also to conserve many aspects of Victorian culture for present and future generations. It is up to us to recognise and use this aspect to our advantage in the future.

Even in Victoria, we get many visitors from Melbourne who do not know much about Melbourne's tramway system, let alone use it. If you live near Dandenong, Frankston or Knox, for example, there is no need to travel to the CBD. Many of our visitors are locals bringing their grandchildren along for a ride on the tramway, to show them a past bit of Ballarat's history. This applies to all of COTMA's museums. The knowledge of trams today exists for many only within a museum environment.

This problem of lack of actual tramways operating in reality is a problem that we have to face if we are to encourage young volunteers to join and continue the operations after we pass on. It will help to promote the ongoing commitment and involvement of these volunteers if their managers, ie the elected boards, understand their position in the overall picture of what they are doing.

Our tramway heritage is not a plaything, and simple commercially expedient solutions should be avoided if it is to survive in a worthwhile form for future generations. The visitor's dollars will be the prime source of funding. However, it must be properly presented for them to undergo a culturally enriching trip, and not just be another form of entertainment.

CONCLUSIONS

Australasian Tramway Museums are a part of society's Cultural Heritage. To ensure that our tramway cultural heritage survives in an operable condition, we must all understand the cultural process and work accordingly. To continue to gain funding for our future operations, we will have to express our presentations for funding in terms of this cultural heritage. It will not be handed to us on a platter, as it has been done sometimes in the past.

If our museum operations are to stay relevant to the public, which is rapidly becoming one which never saw our trams operating in their real environment, we must tailor our presentations to explain how and where they once fitted into their past culture. This will also be essential if we are to encourage the young volunteers to join and continue the operations after we pass on.

REFERENCES

Primary reference:

Doubleday, W.A.: *Culture! What relevance to Railway History?*, ARHS Vic Division Newsrail, December 1991, pp 385, 386.

Other references:

1. Victorian Ministry for the Arts: *Mapping our Culture*, A Policy for Victoria, June 1991.
2. Longworth, J.: "Tourist railways, money trees, cultural cancers, or?", *ARHS NSW Div. , Railway Digest*, May 1991.
3. Longworth, J.: "Establishing the cultural significance of heritage trains - a draft methodology", *ARHS NSW Div. , Railway Digest*, June 1991.