Telling the Railways’ Story

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Abstract
The NSW Rail Transport Museum (NSWRTM) is an independent, not for profit company, established in 1962 for the purpose of collecting, preserving and presenting the railway heritage of NSW for the benefit, enjoyment and education of the community. The vision is based on market and community relevance and membership support, and hence sustainability. This paper discusses how the NSWRTM is working to realise that vision. This paper also canvasses the traditional approach of ‘heritage’ professionals, with their focus on built heritage and place, and explores the appropriateness of this view to moveable heritage items, particularly railway rolling stock and other transport items. Implicit in this issue are the questions of operation versus static display, preservation of fabric versus necessary maintenance, and compliance with access and regulatory regimes versus conservation and ‘authenticity’.

Introduction
The NSW Rail Transport Museum (NSWRTM) is an independent, not for profit company, established in 1962 for the purpose of collecting, preserving and presenting the railway heritage of NSW for the benefit, enjoyment and education of the community. The Museum has over 2000 members, including an active volunteer workforce of over 300 and a small number of full time staff. A voluntary board and a management committee administer the museum. It is accredited as a rail operator under the NSW Rail Safety Act 2002 and is a specialist provider of heritage train services. It has network access rights on the NSW main line rail network and also leases and maintains a fourteen kilometre section of the original main southern railway from Picton to Thirlmere and Buxton (NSW Rail Transport Museum 2008).

The NSWRTM has a vision for a living museum and for heritage rail operations which are highly valued by the community. The vision is based on market and community relevance and membership support, and hence sustainability. Critical elements in realising this vision include telling the railway story in the context of social history. The NSWRTM seeks to facilitate community interpretation of a living collection in a museum which conserves and interprets the artefacts, the memorabilia, their significance and the stories behind them, so as to provide a sense of belonging and a link with the past. This is enhanced by showcasing an authentically presented rail heritage fleet to the community, as a result of substantial volunteer and community support, as well as the maintenance of traditional skills. Importantly, the museum uses the leverage that the significance and social value of its collection, and its volunteers, provide in order to achieve its vision.

This paper discusses how the NSWRTM is working to realise that vision, through imaginative interpretive activities; a wide range of heritage experiences and rail travel products; developing regional tourism; presenting an authentic NSW country railway experience; training and nurturing young people by building competency, commitment and experience, and also by honouring and emulating the dedication and skills of older workers; and, complementing the current rail story with a self-contained heritage training ground.

This paper also canvasses the traditional approach of ‘heritage’ professionals, with their focus on built heritage and place, and explores the appropriateness of this view to moveable heritage items, particularly railway rolling stock and other transport items. Implicit in this issue are the questions of operation versus static display, preservation of fabric versus necessary maintenance, and compliance with access and regulatory regimes versus conservation and ‘authenticity’.

The traditional market for heritage rail activities
In the 1950s and 60s, when a number of rail preservation groups, including the NSWRTM, were being formed, rail transport and passenger rail travel were still very much a part of everyday life for most people — in NSW at least. The NSW Government Railways was at that time one of the largest employers in Australia, with over 50,000 employees, and made an enormous contribution to the culture of the day, through extensive training and education, a paternalistic approach to its workers, the employment of many family groups, and the sheer relevance of ‘the railways’ to society as its then traditional principal means of transport and communication.

The formation of enthusiast-based preservation groups in that period was a reflection of the widespread community interest in railways, the fascination with the technology, the appeal of rail travel and particularly the steam locomotive, and a desire to see these immensely interesting, evocative, and socially and technically significant artefacts preserved. The interest in preservation was stimulated by a realisation that times were changing, that railways (particularly the steam locomotive) were in decline, and that railway artefacts and culture needed to be saved for posterity. Given the substantial numbers of people in the period who were involved and interested, the rail preservation community largely provided its own market — enthusiasts.

Heritage rail experiences have also found a significant market among ‘ordinary’ (non-enthusiast) people who although they had no direct connection or interest in railways, have personal recollections of rail travel. For these people, a trip on an old train or a visit to a railway museum can evoke nostalgia. Such wistful sentiments generally bring back the good memories while dimming the less savoury aspects, such as freezing in a poorly-heated dogbox carriage; suffering the soot, smoke and fumes of non-air-conditioned steam-hauled trains; or, changing trains at a country station at 3.00 am in winter. So for many years since the 1960s, these people who ‘remember’ the way it used to be have sought to enjoy re-created rail experiences through their patronage of rail preservation groups.

Thanks in no small part to Reverend Wilbert Awdry in writing the Thomas the Tank Engine stories, small children remain an important part of the market for rail preservation activities. Awdry’s stories celebrated their 60th anniversary in 2005. Awdry’s son, Christopher, the original target audience for the
Thomas stories, continued by publishing further stories in the
1980s, and when Britt Allcroft began the television production
of the stories in 1984, this colourful version of the railways’
story was communicated even more successfully to a second
and now a third generation. Trains, and particularly steam
locomotives, have an undeniable innate appeal and character
which, to date, has never failed to reach and inspire small
children, so this segment of the market — stimulated by
commercial interests based on the Thomas stories and also the
Hogwarts express from the Harry Potter stories — seems to be
here to stay.

The makeup of traditional major markets for heritage rail
experiences can be summarised as comprising three major
groups: enthusiasts, people who remember and small children.
The first of these, enthusiasts, are numerically diminishing as
those who were directly involved grow older and die, with little
replacement from today’s community. Likewise, the number of
people attracted to rail heritage experiences out of
nostalgic yearning is also declining as fewer people use rail
today, and the reminiscence can last only as long as the
memories of former railway travellers. Small children at least
represent a steady, potentially growing market segment that is
kept buoyant by Thomas and similar cultural stimuli. There
can be little doubt that overall our market, based on the
traditional groups, is not growing. In the long term, our market
is probably shrinking.

Challenges: changes in society

Although people today have perhaps more leisure time and
more disposable income than ever, rail heritage groups and
railway museums today face a huge range of competing
attractors. The entertainment culture of today, particularly for
the young, is very different from that of the 1960s and 70s. The
quality of films, either at the cinema or now so readily available
on DVD, is superb and compelling. Other electronic pursuits —
computer games, or even the productive use of computers —
also provide strong competition from more traditional leisure
activities, many of which, such as cricket, are doing better than
ever. Since the 1960s and 70s, museums of any kind, and ‘old’
things generally, have become to some extent passé, especially to teenagers, so that the sources for a future market and
volunteer base have diminished; attracting these people is
now much harder.

Regrettably, given their significance in the development of the
nation, railways have declined as a means of everyday
transport, particularly for other than essentially intra-city
commuter travel. While rail may to some extent be undergoing
a well-overdue resurgence for freight, it is simply the case that
‘railways’ are today much less important to the Australian
community. Practically no one goes on holidays by train. Country train travel is almost a novelty, and passenger services
in NSW at least have continued to decline to match demand.
The result is a waning in the relevance of railways to the
community. The need, in the face of this, is to educate people
in the significance of the railways, the contribution they have
made to society, and the richness, complexity and importance
of the railways’ story — the story of how the railways
contributed to the settlement of Australia and communication
between developing communities, supplemented by the
fascinating details of their technological development.

Associated with the declining relevance of the railways in society
generally, and a decrease in the market for rail heritage activities,
is a reduction in the available workforce for volunteer-based rail
preservation organisations. The base is declining, the existing
group of dedicated people instilled with a ‘railway culture’ from
the 1950s and 60s is ageing and dying, and the skills are being
diluted. There is a desperate need to get more young people
involved, to motivate and train them, otherwise the future for rail
heritage may be limited. While the NSWRtM has a strong and
substantial membership base, a culture of service, and a
gratifying number of active volunteers, we need to be ever more
diligent in recruiting to attract and motivate volunteers,
even given the evident trends in society at large.

Perhaps the decline of rail in its overall community relevance is
a subset of a more pervasive complaint, where manufacturing
and all things industrial have waned substantially. Our jobs,
manufactories and work structures have seen Australia, in
earlier times largely an industrial society, subsumed by a
service industry culture, as most of our traditional industry has
moved offshore; industrial artefacts and the manufacturing
industry are no longer so much part of our society. Thus people
are now less attuned to the role of industry in Australia, and
their lifestyle is more consumer-driven and more oriented
towards entertainment ‘on a platter’. Apart from the market
implications for rail transport and rail heritage activities, which
are based on heavy engineering, this perhaps poses a further
threat to the notion of volunteering in general.

Challenges: operation or display?

The inherent conflict between conservation and use or
operation has always been an issue for rail preservation
groups, but to a large extent it has been something of a
‘sleeper.’ In those formative days of the 1950s and 60s, much
of the ‘heritage’ rolling stock inherited by preservation groups
had significant residual life, even some steam locomotives, and
the task of operating heritage trains or ‘tourist’ railways was
comparatively straightforward.

If there was any awareness then of the conflict between use
and conservation, it was muted, mitigated by the available
people, materials and skills, and swamped by enthusiasm for
running and working on trains. Today, there is heightened
awareness of the importance of conservation and proper
heritage management principles, so the dilemma is now more
apparent, especially for those groups which actually operate
trains. To make matters worse, the sheer age of the equipment
has become more significant, as it has approached the end of
its life and become more maintenance-intensive, increasing
pressures to rebuild or renew major components — and
adding to costs. It is now more difficult than ever, with little
prospect in sight for improvement, to balance operational
needs with available resources.

The market today

Increasingly, today’s market for rail heritage consists
necessarily of ‘non-railway’ people. Yet these people have to
be made aware of our offer and be interested, educated and
engaged. Children remain a key and sustainable or, one hopes,
growing market, and this segment provides enormous leverage
to bring families and adults to share the experiences of their
children. Conversely, many of the older people that make up
the traditional market can now introduce their grandchildren to
the fascination of the railway story. Heritage railways and rail
museums are positioned as an ideal family attraction, and this
Sustainability

Sustainability for rail heritage stems from two major elements: community relevance and conservation of the artefacts or infrastructure that underpin the offer. Community relevance can only come from engaging, widening and maintaining our audience, through innovative and compelling interpretation, education to facilitate and encourage appreciation, and presenting the role and story of rail in its social context. Locomotives, trains and hardware are a vital support act to the real story of rail — but they alone, without the necessary emphasis on interpretation, are not sufficient to capture people’s imagination and sustain a strong market. Therefore the NSWRTM is seeking to foster interpretation of railways in relation to people, engineering, landscape and development — more effectively demonstrating the relevance and importance of the rail heritage collection to the community and complementing the contemporary rail story. The bottom line is that relevance and engaging a wider market brings paying customers and, as noted earlier, new recruits, vital for survival not only of rail heritage organisations, but for cost-effective stewardship of valuable community heritage assets. A continuous flow of new recruits also means a potentially wider skills and cultural base, again fostering a virtuous circle of relevance.

While in most railway museums, the vast majority of rolling stock exhibits will, for all sorts of valid reasons, be essentially static displays, a degree of interactivity is essential to engage visitors. The ultimate in interactivity is an operating train which re-creates aspects of rail transport or travel that visitors can understand and identify with. Thus a living railway museum ultimately needs operating trains. This introduces the other part of the sustainability equation, conservation, giving rise to the dilemma of the need to maintain ageing equipment, particularly equipment in running order, in the context of proper heritage management and conservation principles. This is not so straightforward. It requires a mostly delicate balance between operational needs, resources and heritage considerations. It is vital that all these elements be kept in mind, and the NSWRTM constantly strives to maintain that balance.

Telling the railways’ story

At the NSWRM today, we are very much mindful of the changes that have been occurring in the community and the market, and of the related issues such as conservation that underpin future sustainability. We are therefore aware of the need to engage and educate people in the NSW railway story — by staging events that re-create socially significant aspects of railway operations and history, and providing information packages and widely accessible interpretive materials which can capture the imagination of ‘non-railway’ people.

We are developing a refreshed, contemporary edge in the NSWRTM’s core products of heritage journeys and experiences and we are offering value-added products to attract a new generation of visitors and travellers, supporters and volunteers — refocussing our role on viability and worth through greater community relevance. At Thirlmere, the NSWRTM has a major museum located with an operating heritage railway. This fortunate circumstance was one of the key factors in the selection of Thirlmere as the site for the museum when the move from Enfield was mandated in 1974. Having our own railway at Thirlmere adds substantially to our vision for a living museum by presenting an authentic and engaging NSW country railway experience on the state’s one truly representative branch line rural railway.

Our main-line train operations, now evocatively branded ‘Heritage Express’, offer the widest range of heritage rail travel products and experiences in NSW, and arguably Australia, with steam and vintage diesel nostalgia day trips and Southern Aurora rail escapes and restaurant trains. It is the largest fleet in NSW of authentically-presented heritage rolling stock, facilitating innovative and viable operations to develop regional tourism and showcase the rail heritage fleet for the community. And unlike most other museums, a rail museum which actually operates trains can take its story to the people, all over the
state and even beyond. We are developing our ‘outreach’
program to make the railway story ever more accessible, taking
relevant trains to country and regional centres. An excellent
example was the major tour in Easter 2005, which took the
Southern Aurora, with comprehensive rail historical displays
courtesy of the Australian Railway Historical Society (NSW
Division), all over NSW, to the delight and fascination of local
residents in the centres visited. These elements help us to tell
the railway story in the context of social history. Each aspect of
our offer can provide an experience with wide appeal, and can
tell or reinforce different parts of the story.

How to tell the story?

Firstly, we are developing the concept of a living collection. This
means regular changes to the display, distinctive themes for
trains and exhibits, and special exhibitions and displays, as well
as operation of special authentic trains on the Thirlmere Heritage
Railway. Thirlmere provides a consolidated venue for authentic
train operations, and consists of servicing and restoration based
on balancing proper heritage considerations and customer
expectations, in the context of telling the railway story.

Next, we have been taking a heritage management approach
to all our conservation and restoration activities. Our operations
derive from accepted heritage principles, policies, planning,
and protocols for operations that take into account the heritage
significance and age of the equipment. Our planning for several
years now has included comprehensive and innovative
conservation management plans (especially in respect to rolling
stock) and project management processes that include a
mentor for every restoration project to ensure that policies and
plans are followed.

As a vital element in telling the story, our interpretation strategy
is being updated and strengthened. Interpretation needs to be
innovative and imaginative to bring out the significance of the exhibits, whether static or operational, and the stories behind
them. This makes the artefacts relevant to visitors and fosters
a sense of engagement. An essential ingredient of the
interpretation mix, and a necessary facet of all activities is
education, as understanding leads to appreciation. Our aim is
to provide educational links for all age groups, relating to
school curricula where possible.

What are we doing?
The museum at Thirlmere is being enhanced, as and when
resources permit, to showcase railway relics in context and
convey the romance of rail. It seeks to improve the telling of the
story of the great socio-technical system that is the railways,
including signals and safe-working, management and control
hierarchy, rules and roles, workshops and infrastructure. The
Thirlmere Heritage Railway is increasingly being operated and
promoted to depict a day on the railway; moving the goods,
mail and passengers — presenting an authentic NSW country
railway experience. The Thirlmere Heritage Railway allows us to
portray railways in the landscape and society, by displaying in
operation freight, mixed, passenger trains, and explaining their
relevance to society and regional development. The physical
aspects of the offer are being improved by the development of
imaginative interpretative activities as our interpretation strategy
is developed and strengthened.

Our main-line trains operating on the NSW (and occasionally
interstate) network offer a wide range of heritage experiences
and rail travel products to showcase an authentically-presented
rail heritage fleet, and to foster development of regional
tourism. In addition, train operations support the maintenance
of a self-contained training ground for heritage train operations,
maintenance and restoration, ensuring the retention and
development of critical heritage rail skills. We are now seeking
to leverage the significance and social value of our collection
and our workers to broaden our community and volunteer
support. This will allow us to build on what is the largest railway
heritage membership base in NSW. We are increasingly
nurturing and training our young people, building competency,
commitment and experience, and honouring and encouraging
emulation of the dedication and skills of older workers, so as to
maintain heritage skills. We are also looking to implement a
new formalised training and development program partnered
with RailCorp and other organisations such as TAFE.

When have we succeeded?
In formulating our vision for a living museum and for sustainable
heritage rail operations that are valued by the community, we
have found additional inspiration from the writings of Colin
Divall (Professor of Transport History at York University) and
Andrew Scott (Head of the National Railway Museum, York). In
particular, we were taken, and identify, with their judgement that ‘[w]hen a transport museum succeeds, it ceases to be a
museum of transport alone’ (Divall and Scott 2001: 181.) For
us, that says it all — a museum is about history, telling a story
about people.

Heritage management in NSW

The heritage ‘industry,’ in NSW, as elsewhere, has traditionally
focused strongly on built heritage and place — a location, or
usually a fixed structure or building. This clearly stems from the
Burra Charter and a tradition of saving heritage buildings (See
Walker & Marquis-Kyle 2004). Until recently, there has been
little interest in movable items by heritage students and
practitioners, except in the context of being adjuncts to a
building. Movable items have generally been treated as
belonging to a building or place. Although there have no doubt
been exceptions, the bias toward that approach is quite strong.
In December 1998, the Heritage Council of NSW adopted
guidelines for movable heritage which suffer from this bias, and
these have not been updated or amended since publication in

The Movable Heritage Principles include such items as:

1. Movable heritage relates to places and people.
5. Retain movable heritage within its relationship to
places and people, unless there is no prudent or
feasible alternative to its removal.
6. Remove movable heritage from its relationship to
places and people only when the items and collections
are under threat and this is the only means of
safeguarding or investigating significance.
9. Acquire movable heritage where there is no alternative
to removal, where this serves clearly defined collecting
policies.
10. Reinstall or return items and collections to places and
people when circumstances change (NSW Heritage
Office 2000: 2-4).

While the rest of the Principles seem sound, based on
understanding, education, assessing significance, providing
access, and documenting the item, the bias towards the linkage to place is evident from the examples quoted above. This approach is probably appropriate for the vast majority of movable items such as furniture and objects that clearly do have a ‘home,’ but it is almost invariably inappropriate for transport-related items such as railway rolling stock or even motor vehicles. Transport-related items, particularly railway rolling stock, in most cases simply do not have a ‘home’; they travelled all over the state. Some items, such as 27 Class locomotives at Narrabri West, had an association with a particular location, but only for a specific period. One of the few exceptions to the ubiquitousness of trains might be the Silver City Comet, which obviously has a strong association with Broken Hill (although this train certainly saw a number of other parts of NSW at various times). As we see it, the most appropriate focus for rail-related movable heritage is on the connection with people and the story the item can reveal in a social context.

Although the above policies and bias towards association with place have had little, if any, practical effect on the preservation, the story the item can reveal in a social context.

outcomes has been a lack of appropriate nomenclature or preservation of fabric versus necessary maintenance. While in classification systems. The NSWRTM has recently been awarded a grant from the Heritage Office for a project to record related movable heritage is on the connection with people and various times). As we see it, the most appropriate focus for rail-and classify privately-owned heritage rolling stock in NSW, and as part of that, has developed a coherent system of nomenclature which will help the Heritage Office, and heritage practitioners generally, to understand and come to grips with rail heritage.

For some years in rail preservation circles both in Australia and overseas, there has been a degree of recognition of the inherent conflict between operation of heritage equipment and its conservation. Obviously, from the point of view of telling the railways’ story and maximising the accessibility and interpretation of railway rolling stock, it is desirable to operate it and let the community see it and understand it in action. On the other hand, to use an item is to cause wear and tear, requiring maintenance, replacement of more ‘consumable’ parts, and ultimately, replacement of major components such as wheels or boilers. A range of approaches to the dilemma is evident from one organisation to the next, and no doubt there will always be room for debate and adjustment. How much should an item be operated? How fast? How much load? And how should it be repaired or restored? Obviously any level of operation must compromise the life of an item or its major components. The key is balance; as long as both sides of the equation are properly and carefully considered, it can be argued and defended that the selected approach is reasonable. The NSWRTM has developed protocols for operation of heritage rolling stock which aim to moderate and limit the level of use of heritage equipment, and to provide appropriate parameters for their operation, so as to:

• ensure responsible conservation of valuable heritage items;
• prolong their life;
• avoid compromising maintenance standards;
• avoid overtaxing maintenance and servicing resources;
• minimise the possibility of failure or damage; and,
• maximise reliability in service.

These protocols are consistent with the NSWRTM’s conservation philosophy and exhibits management policies.

The balance needs also to consider the equation of preservation of fabric versus necessary maintenance. While in revenue service with the ‘NSW Railways,’ rolling stock items were repaired, modified, rebuilt and updated over their lives, with the result that most are in reality very much like ‘grandfather’s axe.’ The concept of ‘original fabric,’ almost sacred in the traditional built heritage field, has little meaning for a steam locomotive which has had every major component replaced, possibly several times, over its life. Recognising this, all we can reasonably do if an item is to be operated is, when maintaining or repairing it, to use materials and methods that replicate the originals as closely as practicable. Changes or modifications should be reversible wherever possible, must be sympathetic to the original configuration and materials, and should also be identifiable. And of course it all must be carefully recorded. These principles are included in all the NSWRTM’s conservation management plans.

The operation versus conservation equation is further upset by the need for compliance with modern access and regulatory regimes, and even the changes on the rail network, where for example, the servicing of steam locomotives en route is generally no longer possible. Once again, fitment of mandated but non-authentic equipment, such as speedometers or sand-removal gear, or other equipment to make practical servicing easier on a modern railway, must be carried out with the above principles very much in mind.

The conflict between necessary operation of railway heritage equipment and its evermore-difficult presentation and conservation will remain. However, this conflict applies to the continued use of any old technology. More serious is the problem of finding the volunteers to operate and conserve the equipment from a declining demographic base — a problem which only the continued engagement of family groups and their children may mitigate.

Bibliography