

Photo: Dean McVicol



Prime Minister John Howard inspects the conserved interior of Sir Robert Menzies' former car.

CONSERVATION

Conserving Menzies' Bentley

Not a mausoleum to mechanical ingenuity but an embodiment of a significant Australian, Sir Robert Menzies' 1963 S3 Bentley has been conserved to reflect the aspects of wear that encapsulate that significance. Rather than reeking of the sanitised stench of a sparkling detail job, cigar smoke lingers and the fusty mustiness of 'old times' remains.

Sir Robert's physical form is captured in the sagging leather upholstery of his favourite seat. Although he was perceived by critics as aloof and untouchable, a greasy head mark on the vehicle's roof is lasting proof that Sir Robert was undeniably human.

Philosophy and ethics are as integral to the Museum's conservation of technological objects as more practical applications like reconstructing an engine or stabilising corrosion. In a national social history museum, conservation practices must result in more than a static, pristine specimen. In accordance with the Museum's charter, objects should play an active part in revealing the stories of ordinary and extraordinary Australians.

Museum conservators David Thurrowgood and David Hallam, in their paper *Preserving significance: Why the journey mattered more than the car*, call for 'a healthy balance between the nostalgic desire to see something operate the way it did when it was new, and the museum appreciation that we preserve collections in perpetuity for the benefit of humanity.'

Like some conservationists' quest for the re-creation of pristine wilderness, certain car enthusiasts might quibble over a car's lack of re-chroming, re-upholstering and vigorous renewal. But rather than obliterating the life of the past in favour of a fabricated falsity, technological conservators are now intent on preserving the signs of an object's life experience to retain its historic significance.

'Our big emphasis now is preserving those signs that show how and why it was used, maintaining the history, otherwise there is no point having a Bentley in the National Museum of Australia,' David Thurrowgood said in a *Canberra Times* article.

Natural instinct must be suppressed when the very human imperative to 'improve' inevitably presents during technological object conservation. Museums should seek to preserve the integrity of our technological history with the same fervour which is extended to the defence of humanity's great works of art and literature.

The S3 model made its debut in October 1962 and was designed to offer the best in passenger comfort. The brochure boasted that the 'exhaust system had three acoustic silencers made of stainless steel, each tuned in series to absorb a different range of frequencies, so that only the ticking of the clock could be heard'!

The 2.5-tonne Bentley was one of four imported to Australia for prime ministers, visiting heads of state and dignitaries. This particular vehicle was assigned to Sir Robert following his retirement as Prime Minister on 20 January 1966. He is reported to have had a particular fondness for the ZSF 200, with its walnut veneer dashboard and deeply cushioned leather seats.

For Robert Menzies' postwar Liberal Party, the car was an important symbol and practical measure of individual freedom and prosperity. The Menzies era saw tremendous development in the type of car people commonly drove. Transportation at the beginning of the period had been modest, typified by the Volkswagen Beetle and Morris Minor. But by the end of Menzies' second term of office (1949-1966), Australians were able to afford powerful 'muscle cars' such as the Holden Monaro and Falcon GT.

Menzies was a great exponent of the motor car, making good use of a series of official vehicles, including a Buick and Cadillac in addition to the familiar Bentley. However, his former press secretary, Sir William Heseltine, observed that Menzies was reticent for many years to countenance the purchase of a new vehicle, as he felt it was wrong to spend public money in the pursuit of his own comfort or convenience. A deep love of the familiar also seemed to contribute to his reticence, to many a motor mechanics' despair.

Photo: Heide Smith, National Museum of Australia



The Bentley outside The Lodge.

Menzies' symbolic relationship with cars came to a climax when his retirement was announced. When he left Parliament House with his long time driver, Ray Coppin, to go to Yarralumla to hand his resignation to the Governor-General, Menzies marked the occasion by sitting in the back seat of his official C-1 registered Bentley. It had been his normal practice to sit alongside Coppin in the front.

In retirement, Sir Robert's Bentley was an integral part in his passion for sport. While his cricket-going ritual somewhat waned in his later years due to the crowd's rowdy nature, as number one ticket holder for the Carlton Football Club his attendance at their matches continued unabated.

In the early 1970s a special platform was constructed so Sir Robert could barrack from the comfort of his Bentley. According to the Australian Football League's website, he was always rugged up in a hat, scarf and coat, with a thermos of something hot, but despite the many great goals he must have witnessed, there is no evidence that Sir Robert ever tooted a six-pointer.

The last entry in the owner's manual and logbook records the driver's signature and an R Menzies as passenger. The date was 16 August 1977. Sir Robert died on 15 May 1978, aged 83.

After years of storage in a Department of Transport shed, the car, along with the original owner's manual and logbook were donated to the Museum. As it was unusable, a three-year conservation challenge followed.

A notorious design fault, the cylinder liners inside the S3's engine have rubber O-ring seals which with time become brittle and crack, causing major engine corrosion. Once the engine was fully dismantled, the mechanical team decided the damaged pistons required replacement.

A Melbourne company was commissioned to reproduce the pistons, using carefully specified measurements including compression heights. At the Museum, all introduced material is either clearly and permanently marked with the letters 'NMA' and the date, or where impractical, is manufactured from materials easily distinguishable from the original.

Rather than the here and now dictating a display imperative, the Museum's approach promotes the importance of presenting an object with all its warts and glory.

The treatments and care we administer in the laboratory ought to return to the

object, as much as possible, its significance ... it must be remembered that... the object is not inert physical matter... they are important... because of all they hold that is still alive in them... as an embodiment of the imagination... charged with very diverse meanings

Through its faults, its wear and tear, and now despite its final passage through conservation, Sir Robert Menzies' Bentley story is still very much intact for future generations to enjoy and understand.

Sir Robert Menzies' Bentley will be on display in the Museum Hall over summer.

Eleanor Palmer is a Canberra writer

Photo: Deem McNeill



Museum Director Craddock Morton and Prime Minister John Howard inspect the Bentley at Parliament House.