

Landmarks: People and Places across Australia, a gallery bringing together over 1500 objects, explores the history of Australia since European settlement.

OBJECT BIOGRAPHY

Nowland's Mail Coach

Based in Gunnedah, Robert John Nowland began his career as a one-horse mail contractor in the 1860s, carrying mail to small settlements and isolated farms across the Liverpool Plains. Soon he was able to introduce a coach on the run to Walgett, and by the early 1880s, he owned a nexus of mail contracts and passenger lines that stretched 400 kilometres north to St George in Queensland, and some 350 kilometres west to Goodooga, beyond Lightning Ridge.



The story of Nowland's Mail Coach is told through the theme of Connecting the Nation, one of 10 themes of Australian history within the Landmarks gallery. This coach provides an intriguing insight into the history of this small time operator who made it big. Photo: George Serras, National Museum of Australia.

By the mid-1880s, Nowland had gone bust. An unfortunate combination of drought and competition led to him filing for insolvency, and now little evidence remains of the once-great Nowland's Line of Coaches. The thoroughbrace coach itself, used on the

Gunnedah to Coonabarabran run, hides its history under a coat of flaking brown paint.

However, if you know where to look, and do so under the right light, you can just discern the faint traces of lettering, spelling out GUNNEDAH and COONABARABRAN.

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Early on, the government of the colony of New South Wales was unable to provide postal services to all the districts under their jurisdiction, and so mail contracts were awarded to local operators. As well as an annual fee, these operators were given the right to the title of 'Royal Mail', distinguishing them from competitors.

R J Nowland founded a successful business based on mail contracts, and, by using coaches such as this one, he was able to maximise his profits by concurrently running a passenger service.

Though Cobb and Co. is today the most well-known of the nineteenth century coaching companies, they were by no means the only providers of mail and passenger services.

Mail coaches provided a lifeline of communication to these isolated settlements and were vital to the development of Australia's inland. They connected settlers with townships, and provided transport to the larger hubs and trading centres. The mail coach's bugle could sound at any time of the day or night, and packages were delivered and received at all hours. Deliveries could be delayed due to weather or accident, and if the coach got bogged, the passengers had to get out and help, no matter how much they had paid for their ticket.

The Nowland's Mail Coach has been in the collection of the National Museum of Australia since 1980, when it was purchased from the Royal Australian Historical Society (RAHS). The RAHS in turn had the coach donated to them by Messrs. E and D Carroll in 1921. The E and D Carroll in question were film-makers Edward and Daniel, who collaborated with Australian sporting identity Reginald 'Snowy' Baker on several films, including *The Lure of the Bush* (1919) and *The Man From Kangaroo* (1920), both of which feature cameo appearances by the coach and were partly filmed around Gunnedah.

In 1957, the RAHS lent the coach to the J. Arthur Rank Organisation for use as a prop in the movie *Robbery Under Arms*. It is likely that this was when the coach acquired its coat of brown paint, which National Museum conservators have identified as post Second World War army surplus paint.

As well as illustrating the story of an inland mail contractor, the coach represents an example of the technological advances of the day. The 'thoroughbrace' coach uses thick folds of leather to act as suspension, rather than the traditional metal springs of English coaches. This technology was developed in the United States to suit the frontier conditions of the time, and proved perfectly suited to the Australian outback.

The structure has the carriage almost literally slung between the axles, and the resultant movement is said to be a gentle side-to-side swaying, rather than the jolting up-and-down of traditional springs. However many passengers reportedly felt ill from the movement, and it was considered worthwhile to spend the few shillings extra it cost to secure the box seat beside the driver, regardless of the weather. Women and children were, of course, obliged to travel inside.

On initial perusal, there appears little of interest in the Nowland's 8-seater passenger coach. It is uncertain where or when it was made, or even by whom. However, once you penetrate the surface of the unremarkable brown paint, a fascinating story comes to light.

This coach once stirred the dust of the rough bush tracks that stretched from Gunnedah to Coonabarabran, a team of four horses pulling it through the day and night. An acetylene lamp was used to light the darkness, as the journey took around twelve hours. The sound of the coach's bugle echoing through the darkness was once welcomed by settlers as it stopped by each property to deliver mail, and the driver would share news and gossip, and perhaps a cup of tea.

Despite Nowland's financial difficulties, the Gunnedah to Coonabarabran run continued until 1919. It is reported that in 1917 R J's son Harvey Nowland introduced a motor car to the route, but in the event of inclement weather, he was still required to use the coach, its proven record and familiarity leading many to consider it the safer option.

Curator's notes:

The discovery of our coach's role in the 1957 movie *Robbery Under Arms* was definitely one of the high points of working on this exhibit for me. As a curator, it is always a kick to discover something new about an object, especially when it helps to fill in a gap like 'how and why was it painted this colour?'

Prior to our knowledge of this film, we had photographs of the coach on the set of *The Man From Kangaroo*, where it has its original paintwork, but aside from our conservator's opinion that it was post Second World War paint we had no idea why or when it had acquired the khaki paint job. It is hard trying to interpret an object that seems to have had its significance literally covered over, and we were even talking at one stage about stripping the khaki away in order to expose the GUNNEDAH TO COONABARABRAN lettering that we know is below.

But now the mystery appears to have been solved, and it seems that the J Arthur Rank organisation painted the coach this colour as a base coat, in order to paint the VR and Royal Mail insignias onto its sides for filming. Perhaps treating a historically significant object borrowed from a historical collection as a prop was ethically dubious. But for me as a curator, this information just adds to the coach's story.

This also illustrates why restoration of objects is a tricky business – which point do you choose to return to? If we had stripped off the khaki paint, we would have obliterated an important part of history.

Despite the fact that it makes telling the Liverpool Plains story a little more difficult because the connection to the place is not immediately apparent, there is no knowing how the coach will be interpreted by future curators and historians. It is certainly a rare object that can talk to so many different aspects of the Australian story, from transport technology to the Australian film industry!

Object biography and curator's notes prepared by Isa Menzies, Curator, National Museum of Australia.

Landmarks: People and Places across Australia is the National Museum's newest and most ambitious gallery to date, bringing together over 1500 objects to create a history of Australia since European settlement.

For more information about the exhibition visit
<http://www.nma.gov.au/exhibitions/landmarks>