

out of THE STORES



Bentley motor car used by Sir Robert Menzies.
photo: Heidi Smith

LARGE OBJECTS CONSERVATION

Museum stores are important, active and living areas of a museum. Much more comes from the stores than just objects. The stores can unlock social histories, object stories, technological understandings, preservation issues and research opportunities. Our collections are repositories of information that can be unlocked through research, interrogation, interpretation and use. Museums, like libraries, hold vast quantities of information that can be read and interpreted. The large object collections hold many stories about the development of Australia's communications, transport and energy networks.

The vehicle collection at the Museum is an eclectic mixture that has been assembled by advantageous collecting by the Museum and its predecessors. It contains Australian built family transport and government cars as well as nuclear disarmament protest vehicles, trucks, and a small selection of vehicles powered by alternative energy sources. These are stored alongside an extensive steam power collection, bicycles and a large selection of horse drawn vehicles.

With the introduction of the Museum's new collections policy there is scope to develop the collection to further encompass the Australian identity. As part of the collection review we can expect that the collection will be expanded to include other areas such as commuter transport, expeditions, sporting history and rural life.

Francis Birtle's Bean car — 'The Sundowner'.



What's happening to the vehicle collections?

Registration, through Ian Cramer, is currently re-organising the large object storage as part of the redevelopment of one of the Museum's repositories in the Canberra suburb of Mitchell. This redevelopment includes establishment of five work bays for conservation treatments and a machine tool area that will allow Museum staff to carry out some of the delicate and complex operations required to conserve form and function.

It will also include storage for vehicles which have ongoing conservation maintenance requirements and which are in the early stages of conservation treatment. This will allow maintenance, survey and treatment development programs to be implemented more effectively.

The conservation section's large objects team is working in three areas to ensure the vehicle collection is conserved and maintained in a systematic manner. Surveying of the collections is used to identify their conservation needs and to establish a maintenance program for all functional objects. This survey work is helping to quantify the conservation backlog and maintenance requirements of the collection. In consultation with curators and based on upcoming exhibitions treatment programs are then developed.

In addition to exhibition work, the section is currently engaged in work to reduce the backlog. This includes major treatments on both the Crossley and Delauney Belleville motor cars. After the work area is fully established these programs will also include volunteer projects.

Research and procedural development is the other major activity of the conservation section.

Major object treatments are often what people who view the behind the scenes of a museum expect to see. Often visitors ask how many objects we have 'restored' only to be disappointed when we say 'none!'. Prior to major work being undertaken on Museum objects, extensive research is required by both curatorial and conservation areas. The goal is not to restore but to preserve the form, function and social history of the object as it was last used. The goal is not to preserve technology in an 'as new' state for its own sake but to preserve the reasons it was important enough to Australia for it to be included in the National Historical Collection.

This approach is being carried out through some of our current major object treatments.

Car Collection

Saw Doctor's Wagon

For the *Rare Trades* exhibition, collections management is documenting and conserving the Saw Doctor's Wagon — a time capsule of a vanished way of life. Registration is documenting and accessioning the wagon as it cleans and stabilises the structure and contents. The wagon has sat untouched and gathering dust in a shed for 30 years. The brush vacuuming and washing seem to go on for ever! After the initial cleaning, the wagon and its contents will be documented, structurally consolidated and treated to prevent further deterioration and corrosion.

Before the wagon goes on display, it will be placed on a sub-frame which will stabilise the structure and overcome basic structural flaws. Once clean and stable the external paint will be waxed and in-painted. We expect the final results will be the addition of a new display icon to the Museum's collection. The tractor which towed the wagon and the Saw Doctor's equipment will be preserved in working condition.

Delauney Belleville

The Delauney Belleville (c.1913) is the Museum's oldest motor car. It was a local Canberra region car for many decades and is reputed to have been present at the opening of Old Parliament House. The car was heavily restored during the 1960s and is representative of the beginnings of vintage car restoration culture. The car is being conserved as an example of a 1960s restored car rather than only as an example of early road transport. This car's 1960s restoration relates to a particular era when 'old junk' began to be recognised as worth preserving, and the heritage preservation movement began to grow in Australia. The Delauney has undergone treatment to rectify several decades of lack of systematic maintenance and is now close to being fully operation for use in public display.



The Delauney Belleville — the Museum's oldest motor car.

Crossley

After the Duke and Duchess of York used the Crossley for their 1927 tour it was sold into private hands and appears to have been used extensively. Over the years, the car has been repaired many times in an attempt to keep it going, without any particular reference to the car's earlier significance — that is, until the Museum purchased it in 1976. The present work on the Crossley is aimed at stabilising surviving original components of the car and ensuring that it can be preserved in an operational and maintainable condition into the future. This has meant dealing with some interesting early design technologies. Most early aluminium alloy components used in this car have a low resistance to corrosion in contact with water: several parts have been remanufactured and the deteriorated originals put into storage. The car was also repaired for inclusion in the 1988 Bicentennial Rally. Unfortunately, some of this work did not survive well, and has had to be re-evaluated with a view to ensuring the vehicle can be maintained as a functional object. Museum approaches have changed to constant maintenance rather than cyclic rebuilds, and we know this approach will ensure long-term preservation. We expect the Crossley will be on the road by late December 2002.

Development of procedures and product

As part of the large objects program, the Museum is developing and building staff expertise through establishing procedures and protocols for using the collection and establishing a scientific base for the use and preservation of functional objects. Using this knowledge, we are developing products based on collections and research-derived knowledge, including writing a publication on the preservation of motor vehicles and the development of lubrication recommendations for museum collections and private owners of old machinery.

We are extracting knowledge from the stores.

David Thurrowgood and David Hallam
Conservation

Historic VEHICLE Club



As mentioned in Carolyn Forster's article, 2003 will see the long awaited launch of our Historic Vehicle Club. We are starting a register of people interested in the activities of the club.

Contact the Friends office on 02 6208 5048 if you are interested in finding out more.