

# Transport – Mules to Missiles (1)

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The title of this paper needs some clarification, or does it? Perhaps the mules could be likened to those conscientious over-worked museologists who share the onerous burdens of conserving the heritage of this country. Missiles could be the treatment needed to awaken those responsible into taking positive steps to alleviate the present critical problems of storage and conservation in Australia. Or on the other hand, mules to missiles may well represent a span of time in this technological age, or perhaps it represents the vast range of objects to be found in some of the major museums to emphasise the enormity of the problems of conservation and storage.

In fact all assumptions could be true. The recent report of the Committee of Inquiry on Museums and National Collections, *"Museums in Australia, 1975"*, revealed not only the diverse range of collections held by the major institutions but also highlighted the critical problem of storage and conservation faced by those institutions.

Of the sixteen museums and art galleries listed in the report, classified as major institutions, thirteen have reached saturation point in their storage facilities. The remaining three have utilised 80 to 90% of their storage capability. As for conservation, the proportion of conservators to the hundreds of thousands of items held in institutions and museums throughout Australia can be likened to a drop of water in the ocean.

One curator mentioned in the report estimated that it would take 200 years to carry out the conservation work so badly needed for his collections.

Storage and conservation problems have been the worry of directors and curators for a long, long time. Museums designed before the turn of the century invariably were built without proper provision for storage of reserve or study collections and very little was known about conservation.

Basements, cellars, passageways and attics became the storage areas for exhibits. Where museums were fortunate in obtaining off-site storage, the buildings concerned were unsuitable, for example, redundant wood and iron wool-sheds.

Every museum, institution and art gallery is no doubt obligated by its policy to collect, preserve, research and display its collections to the public. It is the function of collecting items over many years that has been the major contribution to the present critical storage problems of museums but there are other contributing factors which should be noted:

1. Aesthetic ideas of design today mean fewer exhibits on display tomorrow and more items to be stored in the reserve collections.
2. Over-enthusiastic curators accepting objects without proper appraisal of the long-term need of storing the items before they are required for display.
3. Over-enthusiastic donors who insist that the curator accept a collection of odds and ends, although only one object among them may really be needed for the collection.
4. Acceptance of loans which are not wanted for display should be discouraged, as they impose a greater responsibility on the curator and take up valuable storage space.

Perhaps we are partially to blame for our storage problems as unfortunately we have come to accept a store as a structure of secondary importance and we tend to treat objects placed in the structure at the same level, i.e., out of sight, out of mind.

This attitude or state of mind is rife throughout the country. It has even pervaded the minds of those responsible for designing our museums, and likewise, when funds are sought to build a store for museum exhibits, it promptly receives the lowest of low priorities.

Furthermore, should one be conscious of the difference between an ordinary store and a museum store and seek to have a store constructed, that is, insulated, air-conditioned and equipped with controlled lighting, you could well end up before the Master of Lunacy.

It must be remembered that the items housed in a museum store should be regarded as of equal importance and value to those on display in the museum, and therefore they command to be treated and conserved in the same way. This does mean controlled air-conditioning, correct lighting, clear space around each object, smoke detectors, fire-fighting equipment, proper lifting and transporting equipment and an effective security system.

In basic terms, museums are repositories for the artefacts and specimens of our cultural and national heritage for all time. Clearly, then, this implies that every exhibit must be preserved in such a manner now to ensure that it will still exist in good order and condition in not only 100 years time, but for as long as the object can be made to last.

Every known treatment for conserving every kind of material of which the objects are made should be available to every object housed in museums and museum stores.

Governments must also accept the blame for the present chaotic condition of our museum storage areas as without finance, curators have been forced to utilise every square inch of space in their institution or stores. Forced can also mean pushed, squeezed, pressed and jammed. Unfortunately, this describes what happens to museum exhibits relegated to the store, and it is under these conditions that priceless exhibits are exposed to physical damage, quite apart from the conservational problems of dust, dampness, heat, light and industrial fallout. It is apparent then that proper storage facilities will reduce the rate of progressive deterioration of our national treasures but the monumental task of conservation and restoration still remains.

Very few museums receive or acquire objects in mint condition. Most objects which find their way into museums need some conservation, whilst others need a vast amount of restoration to bring them to their original condition.

The huge transport and engineering collections in the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences are not exempt from this state of affairs. This is especially true of the transport collection which owes its origin to the first Committee of Management of the Museum. In 1883, they had the foresight to approach the then Under Secretary for Public Instruction to ensure that the first locomotive to run on rails in the State of N.S.W. be placed in the care of the Museum for preservation.

Since that day the Museum has been actively engaged in building up its collection of transport items with the result that a storage area of some 40,000 square feet is now required to house the collection. The Trustees of the Museum have also been actively engaged each year since 1934 in pressing the Government for a new museum with suitable storage and restoration facilities. Although a feasibility study was undertaken in 1975 by the Government Architect, work has not as yet started on preparing the working drawings for that edifice.

In the meantime the problem of restoration and storage has become more critical as curators, and properly so, are endeavouring to acquire more items in readiness for the new museum.

Like many other similar Australian institutions, the museum was designed and built before the turn of the century to accommodate the technology of that era. Although the building was an imposing five-storey structure at that time, funds were not available to line the inner walls or cover the bare wooden flooring boards with an appropriate floor covering or to install a lift, even though the lift well still remains waiting for the installation. It was built without proper reserve storage, conservation or restoration facilities, and consequently the museum has had to depend on the good will of other Government Departments to assist in the restoration of the larger transport items in the collections.

It is doubtful whether any single institution could ever afford the facilities and expertise needed to rebuild a locomotive, railway carriage, tramcar or an aeroplane. The cost of equipment, space and the expertise would be prohibitive for such specialised projects. There is a vast difference between restoring a broken handle of a porcelain vase and the complete restoration of a broken down, badly thrashed, rusted out 1948 Holden motor car.

Unfortunately there is no magical ten-second fix-it conservation kit available to the restorer of motor vehicles or other forms of transport. Long and patient work, common sense, sweat and tears, coupled with an intricate knowledge of how such vehicles are constructed (and perhaps the stubbornness of a mule) are the ingredients needed to tackle such a heart-rending project as mentioned above.

Where one restorer is required to repair a porcelain vase, a number of artificers specialising in different fields are needed to restore the Holden motor car. Motor mechanics, panel beaters, motor electricians, motor trimmers, spray painters, electroplaters and body aligners are the essential characters in such a restoration programme. It is evident that each tradesman will require a fully equipped workshop to carry out his part of the project.

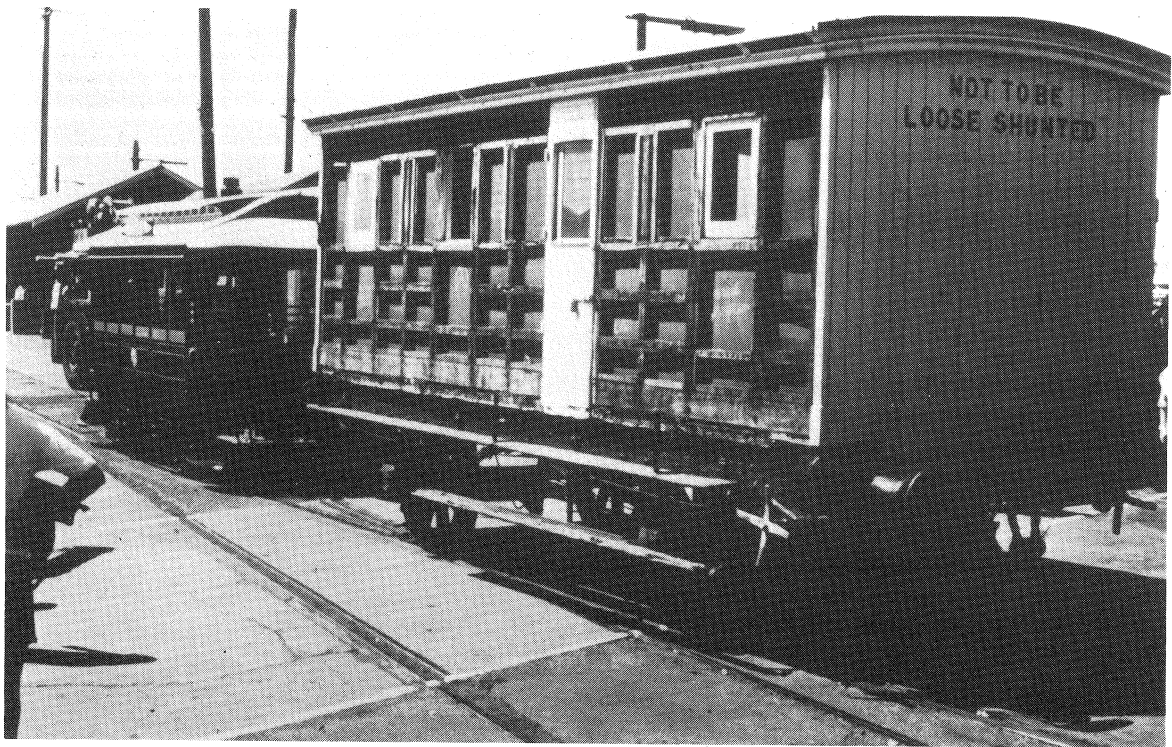


Figure 1. Unrestored 2nd class railway carriage of 1855 with a fully restored cable tram trailer of 1904.

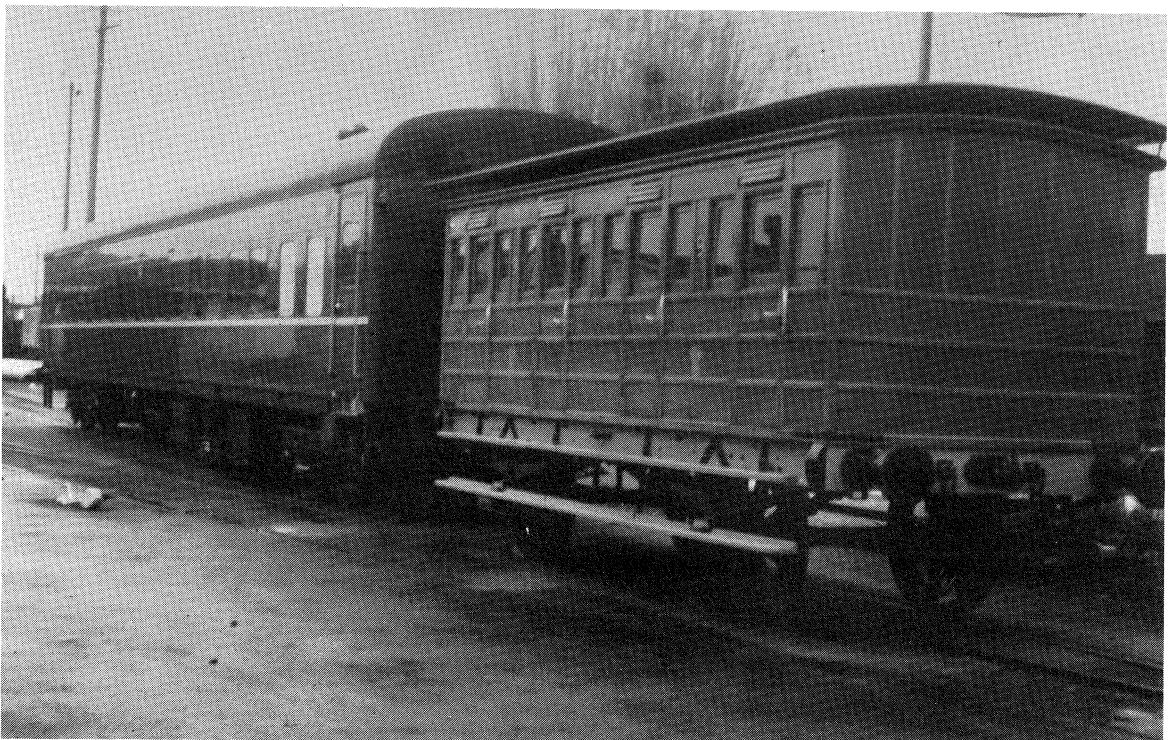


Figure 2. Completely restored 1855 railway carriage, compared for size with a 1955 air-conditioned carriage.



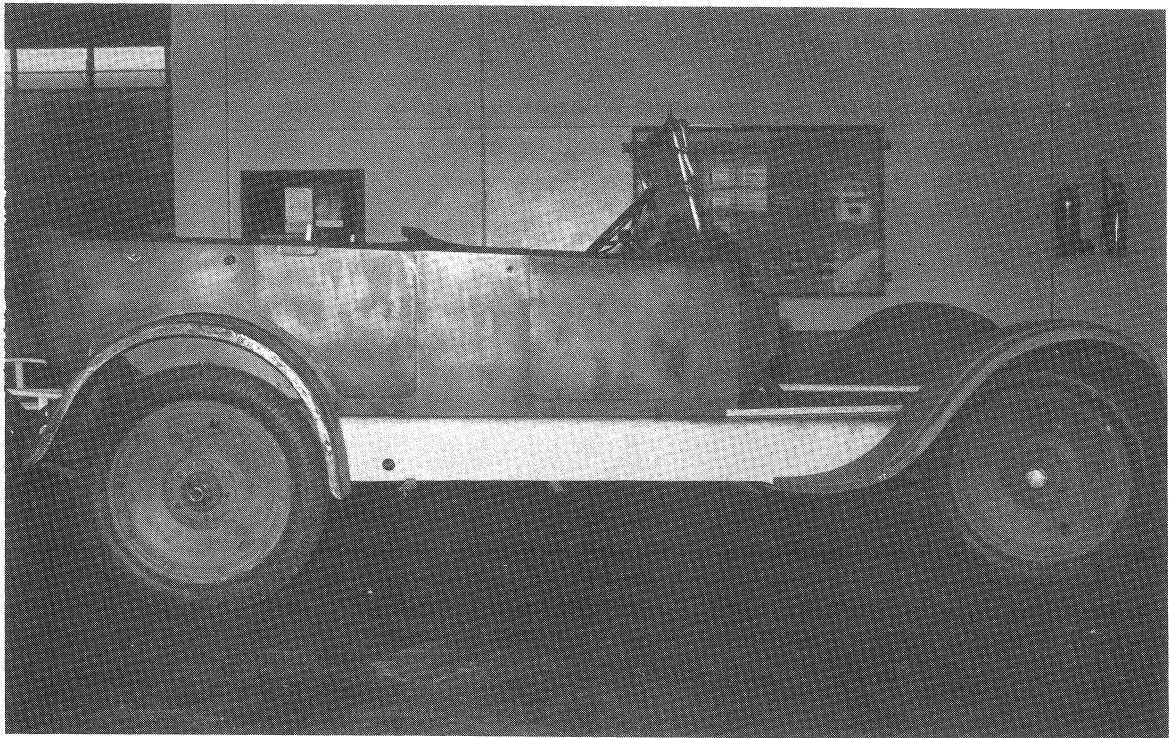


Figure 3. 1923 Australian Six motor car under restoration.

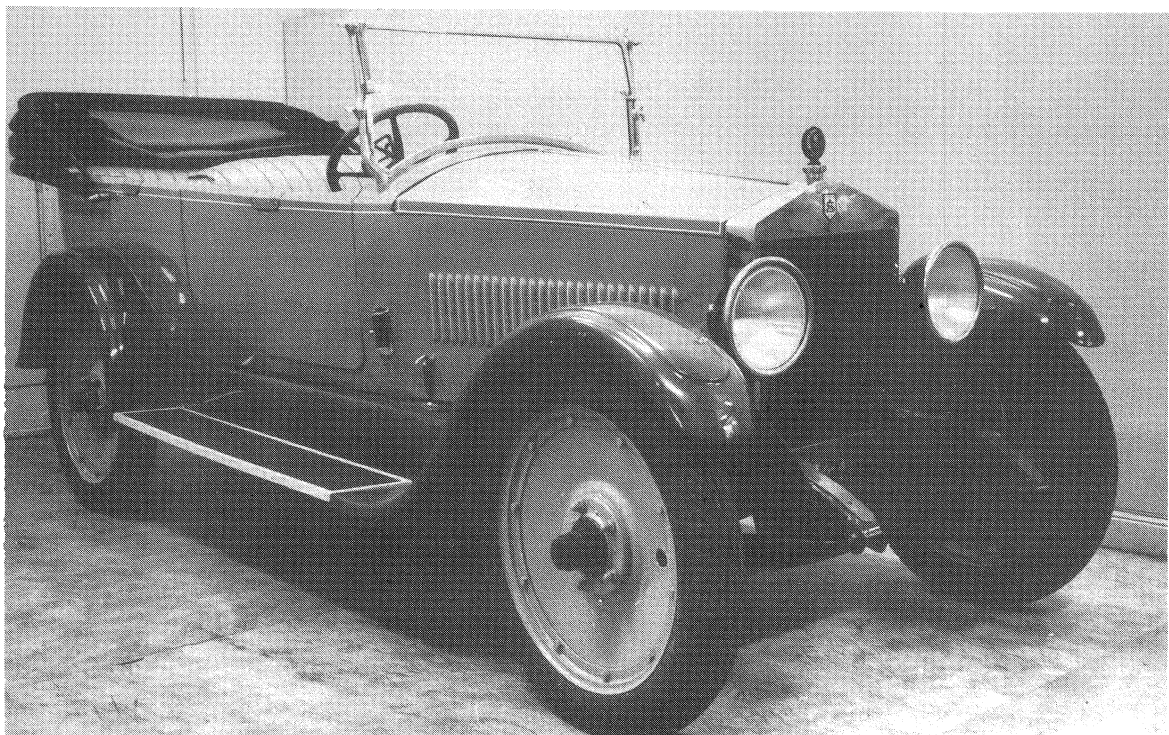


Figure 4. Fully restored 1923 Australian Six motor car.

If it was decided to rebuild a horse-drawn carriage, then an entirely different orientated group would be needed: such as a blacksmith, wheelwright, coach builder, coach-trimmer, coach painter, signwriter and harness maker, as well as the fully equipped workshops as before.

However, a different set of circumstances arise if the carriage happened to be of a great age and of important historical value. It would then become the conservator's task to consolidate the materials of which the carriage was made to prevent any further deterioration. The conservator would also need a properly equipped laboratory and work area and supporting staff to undertake such a large project.

But what of other transport items — bicycles, motorcycles, fire engines, buses, trams, locomotives, railway carriages, aeroplanes, sleds and ship models that are in need of conservation? Equally important

are the restoration and conservation of other collections in the museum — textiles, ceramics, arms and armour, musical instruments, furniture, telephones, radios, industrial machinery, domestic appliances and so on.

Even if the larger transport items, locomotives, railway carriages, tram cars and aeroplanes are farmed out for restoration, a huge combined conservation laboratory, restoration workshops and storage facilities would still be required to cope with the present restoration programme, let alone planning for the future intake of exhibits.

No doubt the same problems of a lesser or greater degree exist in other institutions throughout Australia, and without the persistence of the mule and impact of the missile, the preservation of our national and cultural heritage is in jeopardy of being lost to future generations.



Figure 5. 1911 Bleriot monoplane dwarfed by the tail fin of a 1960 Qantas V-Jet airliner.