

Preserving significance: why the journey mattered more than the car

David Thurrowgood - Question and answer session

Nick Langford: In the photograph of the Benz engine that you said was highly polished – one of the things that I see as a problem for conservators (and this was discussed yesterday in a paper where [it was noted that] conservators aren't engineers and engineers aren't conservators) is that the rocker gear in that engine would have been polished from new, and that was to make the component much more reliable. So keeping it polished is part of the history of the thing as well, and that's something I suppose that conservators need to look at as well. It's just an example where some things were polished from new and some things weren't.

David Thurrowgood: I, as a conservator, don't tend to object to polishing things if they're supposed to be polished. What I do object is, in that case, where the nice little man seemed to go around every week to polish the thing again because people had put their hands all over it. Now polishing something once to a state where the makers intended it to be polished, and keeping it in that condition, is very different to polishing something routinely and progressively wearing down that object.

David Hallam: Would you like to talk about how the Bean car entered the museum?

David Thurrowgood: The Francis Birtles Bean car was possibly, depending on how you look at it, the National Museum's first object. In 1927 and 28 it was driven from London to Australia and after that it did a bit of promotional work for the Bean Car Company. The Bean Car Company then, in 1928, donated it to the Commonwealth for a national museum should one ever be built. Now, 75 years later, was when we actually came to doing conservation work on that object and getting it ready for display in the museum. The big thing for us in conserving that object is that it came to us as a functional object which had achieved this amazing journey. In the intervening time it had been shunted around between different government storage areas because, when it finished the journey, it was "just another car" of the period. For us it was important that it was given to us as a machine which still worked after finishing that amazing journey and we still wanted to make sure that that function was still available for that object, even though we're not ever going to take that object out and see how fast it'll go or what else it can do. The important thing is that in people's imagination that car finished that journey, and was working then and is working now. It's capable of function but it's not something we're going to run out and use.

Dave Rockwell: If, as you state, it's not to be used, why was the decision made to replace the crown wheel and pinion?

David Thurrowgood: I should probably elucidate what I mean by "Not to be used". Some people will restore a museum object for use in terms of...they will use it in the car park for people to drive around and to show kids through. That's happened with one of our objects in the past (before it came to our museum). [I mean] "use" in a different context; this is an object which would be available for use in terms of

filming and research and study and it'll be run approximately every five years because we have ideas about the best ways of circulating inhibitors and maintaining the object. It's to be used as part of its maintenance and preservation, but not as an everyday display use.

That was the big part of its story – it drove from London to Australia, it still drives now – but we're not going to try to recreate that journey by any means, as has been suggested by some members of the public!

Col Ogilvie: I happen to be the pilot that drove that car. Old car, old fart – I drove it. To answer your question a little better – it was a question that I posed to the conservators way back – “Are we going to get this running?” The answer I got was “It was presented to the museum as a running object, it was functional; that was the charge we were given, that is the charge we should maintain.

Tony Coleman: That photo of the crown wheel and pinion wasn't the same car though was it?

David Thurrowgood: Yes, it was. The crown wheel and pinion were manufactured down in Melbourne from the originals which had missing teeth.

Tony Coleman: That picture shows a sankey wheel – the back wheel of the car's not a wire wheel of the Bean I didn't think?

David Thurrowgood: The car has three wire wheels and one sankey wheel – the sankey wheel was put on in place of one of the wire wheels that was damaged during the journey.

Tony Coleman: OK – that's fair enough!