

A well-planned operation

Alison Wain

Question and answer session

Fred Haynes: In your considerations for keeping the thing moving, nowadays one of the more modern considerations is - can a terrorist can steal it and use it?

Alison Wain: That's one we hadn't actually thought about I'd have to say.

Fred Haynes: Because that's one of the things...when they took HMAS Brisbane up and they're sinking it off the coast they've got to make all the gun barrels safe so nobody can recover them and use them. And all sorts of those considerations.

Alison Wain: We've certainly dealt with those considerations with regard to firearms, yes, and we do have a policy in place for that, but a whole vehicle I hadn't actually considered.

Fred Haynes: Particularly the Bushmaster!

Alison Wain: Well yes!

Chris Knapp: Do you actually advocate running your objects or do you have a secondary collection that you will run?

Alison Wain: That's really something that we decide on a case by case basis, with a huge input from the curators. We would look at, the curators would look at what the object...what its intended role is in the collection, and certainly they have acquired a number of objects specifically with the idea that they will function as running objects for open days, for special events. And certainly if an object's acquired with that in mind then we would work with it on that basis and yes, it's a different level of collection. So I think it's really a case by case basis.

Chris Knapp: I don't know if you have many volunteers work with you, but we find at home - we've got a hundred and fifty volunteers - and every now and again one will come to us with their favourite aeroplane or their favourite vehicle and have a case to get it running. Do you find it's usually personal preference that drives somebody to start the ball rolling on a particular object?

Alison Wain: Not these days - I don't know what it was like in the past. Certainly the volunteers, yes, regularly express a fondness for a particular vehicle and say "I wish you could get the 'X' running" and we've, I guess, been trying to talk to them a lot about why we do things and what the constraints are and how difficult it is to responsibly keep an object in an operational condition, and I think the people that we've got volunteering with us now understand that a lot more. I think the planning processes within the Memorial are actually very well integrated - the business planning and so forth - so while I think that there's a certain level of personal preference that gets any project up and running - you've got to have someone that acts as an advocate for it - I think that's very much mediated by a very strong planning

process and a very strong consultative process, so if there's a real problem with that it gets picked up pretty early.

Barbara Reeve: I just want to respond to Chris's last point. We did in the past have a very volunteer-driven conservation program, especially for the large technology objects and the choice of objects that were worked on was very much driven by who the volunteers were, what their background was, what their interest was. And then how the object got conserved or restored was also very strongly driven by what the volunteers knew, how they knew how to do it and so on. Today, as Alison has said, all of our conservation projects are very much part of the overall corporate strategy – where are we going, what are we doing, how are we getting there? And that's set in three year corporate plans, so at the moment our next big objective is the development of the post 45 galleries. And the last three year project was the redevelopment of ANZAC Hall, so to that end we were working on the Beaufort and the Lancaster and that's where the volunteers were assigned. We said "You're hired as a volunteer to work on the Beaufort or to work on the Lancaster – those are our priorities at the moment and that's what we will be working on." At the moment there is, I think, a vocal minority in favour of working on the Tiger Moth – it just isn't in our business plan. In the future, when we get it into the business plan, we'll certainly contact those people and get them back and say "Hey we're going to work on the Tiger Moth now", but we very much respond to what the corporate priorities are. We help to set them to some degree – all the senior managers sit around and determine where we're going to go and what we're going to do. But in fact where we are at the moment is at the end of a 10 or 15 year gallery master plan. In the 1980s we said "OK – we're going to redevelop the galleries - there's Gallery Redevelopment Stage One, Stage Two and Stage Three". This is Stage Three, the redevelopment of the post 45 galleries. Once we've finished the redevelopment of the post 45 galleries, in fact, it'll be pretty much a brave new world – I don't know where we're going to go after that. We'll have finished the gallery master plan and that was a huge huge thing that came out in - 1990?

Alison Wain: I'm sure actually it was before I was here.

Barbara Reeve: And so that's part of that. But bringing everybody on board and changing their perspective from the way things happened in the 1980s when you could put up your hand and say "Hey, I've got a volunteer organization and we'd like to work on your DH9" – we're not dependent on that any more. We have the resources in house, we have the skills in house, and we have the political determination in-house to go where we see that we need to go. And I loved your point about not saying no – that is something that all of the conservators in this institution have had drilled into them – you never say no – you say "Of course we can do it – here's how".

Alison Wain: Or "Here's another option".

John White or Mike Cecil would you like to speak to that point from the curatorial point of view?

John White: There's a couple of points here. As a curator I'm very mindful that we do operate on three year cycles. I'm also mindful that projects like the Lancaster and

the Beaufort could never be completed in a three year cycle. And there are some real problems – if you are looking at the solution to REALLY big objects, you actually might need to be working on them for 10 years, and also at that stage you're well in advance of a display requirement for the item. So I think it would actually be more reasonable to say that we have to factor in some aspects of urgent work – for instance what we're doing with the V2 at the moment - looking at solving some major problems with that so that we actually have the flexibility to make decisions later on. And I think really the way that, as a curator, I approach this is - I try and be flexible about the use of the objects, and to think imaginatively about the uses of the objects over time. An idea now might take 10 years to turn into a reality and that's part of a curatorial role - to push on a number of fronts so that a proposition becomes possible in the longer term. But I think that we like to think about issues and treat – as you pointed out – objects very individually and take advantage of the points there.

I also wanted to pick up on something mentioned earlier by Dave [Hallam], which is that the operation of some objects is in fact an excellent way of keeping on top of their preservation, and that's something that we've come to recognize much more clearly, particularly in the last five years.

Nikki King-Smith: A simple question. Who makes the final decision?

Alison Wain: Again, I would say that the way we aim to work here is that we get information from the curators about what the significance of the object is and what its intended role in the collection is, and then as conservators we do a close examination of that object, usually with the curator as well and work out different options for achieving what the curator wants to achieve with it. But also obviously trying to balance long term role in the collection with immediate display imperatives, so it's really an iterative process – it's back and forth, back and forth, back and forth. One issue we do have is that I think in the past we haven't sufficiently involved our management in that iterative process, and so we've had unfortunate situations towards the end of projects where management has said "I don't like that. Change it." And of course that's really really difficult – sometimes the object's on a pole in the gallery - it's difficult and dangerous to access. So we're at the moment trying to develop a policy or some guidelines on how to – it is really a PR thing like Chris Knapp was talking about – to involve them, to make sure that what we're thinking about as curators and conservators gets clearly across to management so they're not surprised by the outcome, they feel part of it. I think that's really important as well.