

Museum Archives: A Case Study — The Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences, Sydney

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During 1980, as part of the Diploma of Archives Administration course at the University of New South Wales, three students — Mark Brogan, Lindy Saul and Tony Mitchell — under the supervision of Baiba Irving and Peter Orlovich, undertook General Assignments on particular record groups of the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences at Ultimo in Sydney. Following the completion of the course, a number of students, under the direction of Peter Orlovich, sorted, arranged and boxed the Museum's archival holdings prior to their removal to a more clean, secure and salubrious environment at the Museum's repository at Redfern. Eventually it is anticipated that they will be housed in the new Powerhouse Museum currently under construction in Ultimo.

The significance of this work can be appreciated not only in terms of the intrinsic value of the archival sources "discovered" and arranged at the Museum but also in the implicit intimation of the wealth of unexplored sources for the study of social, intellectual, cultural and economic history which await the resourceful archivist. Until comparatively recent times, the casual visitor to the Museum could be forgiven for believing it a torpid, neglected institution filled with aging, dour, uninteresting and increasingly irrelevant exhibits in an era when technological advances had overtaken it and ceased to be represented. Indeed, it was more likely to evoke nostalgic recollections of school parties tramping through in the 1950's, so little had it seemed to change. Yet such impressions were by no means accurate reflections of the important role the institution had fulfilled in the scientific, educational and economic development of the state or of the extraordinary energy, enthusiasm, dedication and ability its professional staff had always exhibited.

The origins of the Museum date from 1878, the year Sydney held its

International Exhibition, that tangible symbol of the Victorian world's fascination with and faith in industrial progress. In that year, a Special Committee of the Trustees of the Australian Museum was set up to plan for a technological, industrial and sanitary museum. The object was partly educational and partly economic; to provide a means for the better education and instruction of the people of N.S.W., especially in areas where industrial and technological changes were rapidly transforming life and by its research and collections to be a stimulus for the economic development of the colony and its resources. Donations by exhibitors were sought and accommodation was found in the Garden Palace (in the Botanic Gardens) which had housed the Exhibition. It was planned to open the Museum in 1882. The emphasis was on the practical and useful application of science and technology to N.S.W. society and economy.

Despite early setbacks — defalcations were discovered in the Museum's accounts and the acting Secretary, Charles Buckland, was dismissed and disappeared in August 1882; the Garden Palace was consumed by fire in September 1882 along with the records and almost the entire collection of specimens — the Museum finally opened in December 1883 in the Agricultural Hall in the Domain. It immediately became very successful by attracting visitors and donations of specimens from private individuals and companies both from Australia and overseas; by its research interests and activities; and by the authority it rapidly acquired, in developing and encouraging indigenous industries based on the natural resources of N.S.W. — particularly wool, timber, building materials, fishing and essential oils distilled from eucalypts. However, even by the mid 1880's, it found its capacities curtailed by the perennial problems of lack of exhibition space and government parsimony.

With the reorganisation of technical education in N.S.W., which brought the Museum under the Technical Education Branch of the Department of Public Instruction in November 1889, the Committee of Management formally transferred the Museum to that department on 1 January 1890 hoping, thereby, to solve the institution's problems. The Museum's collections and expertise were envisaged as supplementing the resources of technical colleges. In addition to the opening, in August 1893, of new premises for the Museum on Technical College land in Ultimo, branch museums were formed in those towns possessing technical colleges — Bathurst, Goulburn, Newcastle, West Maitland and Broken Hill. From 1 January 1890, the Museum officially adopted the name the Technological Museum, by which it had been popularly known, rather than the more unwieldy Technological, Industrial and Sanitary Museum.

The period from 1890 to the First World War was one of consolidation and steady, if unspectacular, progress for the Museum. Research work continued, the quality of the technical publications by the Museum's

gradually increased professional staff enhanced its reputation, and its educational function was extended downwards into schools with assistance and advice to many intent on establishing school museums. Indeed, the vast number and well-informed character of the inquiries directed to the Museum suggest a high level of popular interest and participation in scientific enquiry and the considerable appreciation the public had for the Museum.

The First World War was a catalyst for the Museum. Communication with Europe was impeded, the regular flow of imported products disrupted, and technical expertise and research information from more advanced industrialised countries no longer a source to be tapped. As a consequence, increased demands were made on the Museum's resources by the industrial and commercial communities for the specialised advice and expertise the Museum had accumulated — particularly for reports on trade, substitute commodities and scientific matters. Concentrating as it had done on indigenous materials and resources, the museum was well equipped for this role, and, indeed, before the creation of the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research in 1926 (the forerunner of the C.S.I.R.O.) it was one of the few institutions in Australia with such a capacity.

During the 1920's and 30's these services to industry and the public continued, especially as regards economic botany, zoology and geology. The Museum also showed itself aware of the importance of new and significant technologies which were beginning to make an impact. Plastics and radio were merely two which the Museum sought to exhibit to the general public, and from the mid 1930's Museum officers were broadcasting regularly both for schools and the general public about Australia's natural heritage and its own collections. At the same period, it was suggested that the Museum, already short of exhibition and storage space, needed alternative accommodation, and the Queen Victoria Building in George Street was mooted as a possibility. Nothing came of the proposal but the necessity for more accommodation was to become a recurrent theme until the Powerhouse project was finally accepted and begun in 1980.

The Second World War once again saw the Museum's resources harnessed for the emergency, but this time more directly related to Government and military requirements. Research work was conducted for the Commonwealth Government, the Australian Army and United States forces, and, from 1940, a regular *News Bulletin* was published by the Museum containing information germane to the war effort. At the end of the war, in tacit recognition of the position the institution had gradually come to occupy, the N.S.W. Parliament passed the first piece of legislation dealing explicitly with the Museum. The Museum of Technology and Applied Sciences Act of 1945 created a more autonomous position for the Museum with a Board of Trustees to

administer its affairs. However, the change in status did not automatically result in a change of fortune. In the postwar period the Board was confronted with the continuing problems of accommodation, inadequate finance, steadily growing collections and quasi-moribund branch museums, some of which required closure and some of which were revived with municipal assistance.

It has only been in the last few years that long term programmes have been adopted that promise an end to these problems and that signify, perhaps belatedly, a thorough understanding of the full cultural and educational value of the Museum, its possibly unique collections, and its tourist potential. Much of its research capacity has now been transferred elsewhere but what remains is an institution that reflects the pragmatic and utilitarian ethos of our age just as it did the Victorian era one hundred years ago.

My interest in the Museum was first aroused some years ago when, seeking refuge from a wet Sunday afternoon, I took my small son along to pass away a few hours. For him, the visit was an unqualified success, and at his insistence we became regular visitors. Initially, what he found fascinating was the vast range of models that could be put in motion at the press of a button. The static exhibits never quite had the same appeal. On subsequent visits there always seemed to be other working exhibits to capture his attention and interest. I was impressed generally with the range and quality of the collections and their unexploited potential. For both of us it was an awe inspiring moment when we stood in silent wonder at the scale and grandeur of the Museum's Boulton and Watt engine.

Thus, last year, faced with the prospect of a general assignment for the Archives Administration Course at the University of N.S.W., my mind turned toward the Museum and the records it would have generated over its hundred year history. It was fortuitous that my interest coincided with an era of transition in the Museum, when its records were recognised as valuable and required sorting and appraisal prior to rehousing in more suitable storage. After several enquiries and visits to the Museum, the librarian, Lana Das, led me up E Floor where its records were stored. I was quite unprepared for the experience. Amongst the clutter of dust-covered remnants of collections and the backlog of years of unprocessed library material, were shelves of bound volumes and wooden cabinets ten feet high which, when opened, revealed a mass of archival records barely touched and extending back to the 1880s. E Floor has been far from ideal as a storage area; it is a large open space, extending through the length of the Museum immediately under the roof and natural light is provided only by skylights under the eaves. There is no air-conditioning, and, located as it is, it experiences extremes of temperature during the year. Ultimo is an industrial suburb, close to the city centre, and the Museum is situated on a very busy road, consequently the transmission of dust

into the area over the decades has been very considerable. Yet, in spite of these conditions, the records overall were in good condition; there was very little evidence of mould, termite damage or stains. They were coated with a thick layer of black dust to be sure, but that could be accounted for by the environment rather than degeneration of the material.

E Floor was not a pleasant place to work, but the archival material uncovered was ample reward for the discomforts. The bound volumes consisted of minute books, correspondence, administrative, financial and library records, stock book registers, and branch museum records; in fact, well over a hundred series, most of them covering the early period of the Museum's existence. Most significant among these were Committee of Management Minute Books, 1882-1889; the registers to inwards correspondence, 1882-1932 (15 volumes), and two major series of correspondence sent, 1882-1921 (47 volumes) and 1921-1936 (48 volumes). It was found possible to locate particular items of correspondence by using the Register of Inwards correspondence along with the indexes at the front of each volume of correspondence sent. An inventory to the Museum's bound holdings was produced by Tony Mitchell, an index to the first series of letterbooks by Lindy Saul and a guide to the second series of correspondence by Mark Brogan.

At the end of the year, students of the course generously gave their time to boxing some 100 metres of records. Most of this material consisted of correspondence received by the Museum, an almost complete collection from 1884 to 1975, but also included collectors' diaries (1890-1904), research notes and papers of some of the Museum's staff, general administration and financial records.

Of particular archival interest were the different registration methods employed by the Museum, the significance of administrative change on the development of the record system, and the rapid expansion in size and diversity of the records in the last twenty years. At various stages the Museum used single number, annual single number and classified registration systems. Quite marked changes appeared in the records and their maintenance with different Curators and Directors, and the quantitative and qualitative transformation of the records in recent years is a demonstration of the increasing complexity of administrative arrangements in what has organisationally been a relatively small institution.

Museums, and particularly technological museums, are mirrors in so many ways of the societal environment in which they exist. The records of the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences, quite apart from their institutional value, provide an unique window into Australian society, especially for the period up to the Second World War. With the filter of European cultural predispositions gradually fading towards the end of the 19th century, Australians were perceiving more clearly the features of the physical environment in which they found themselves, exploring and

defining it in terms of the social and economic determinants of the period. The Museum may have been in part a catalyst for this it is true, but it also provided a focus and reference for the investigations of all manner of people who experienced the interest and necessity to come to terms with their environment.

Just as they did for the late 19th century, so through its history, the Museum's records show the evolution and increasing complexity of that society, the gradual divorce of man from his natural environment through scientific advances, and the change to the more manipulative technology that characterises the modern world. They document more vividly than most records the path we have trod, the transition in precepts and values from a simpler and more isolated society to the all embracing, ubiquitous technology of the present.