

Working on the Railways

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The State Rail Authority of NSW has a continuous history as a publicly-aimed organisation of 131 years. Its Archive Section dates from the Centenary Celebrations of 1855, and presents enormous problems for the first professional appointee to head the Section.

The State Rail Authority of New South Wales traces its origins back to April 1849, when the Sydney Railway Company was incorporated by Act of Parliament. Because of financial difficulties, the Company was never able to function effectively as a private enterprise railway service and repeatedly had to seek government-guaranteed loans to support its operations. As a result (and this brief introduction leaves out of consideration the creation of the Hunter Valley Railway Co. in 1853), the government, on the recommendation of a Parliamentary Committee, in December 1854 legislated to restrict the activities of the Sydney Railway Company to the section of line being constructed between Sydney and Parramatta, and authorised appointment of three commissioners to oversee future construction and operation of railways under government ownership, and, if thought desirable, to purchase the railway and other works of the Sydney and Hunter River Railway Companies. Both companies were quick to take advantage of this, and in July and September of 1855 the government of N.S.W. took over the assets of both companies, becoming the first such public enterprise in the world.

Formal opening of railway services in N.S.W. took place in September 1855 when the Governor-General and party embarked for the brief trip to Parramatta. The railway services at this time, up until August 1856, were operated under lease by a private contractor. From September 1856, railway services have been operated for the public (other than minor mining and industrial branch lines) by the State Government.

The Archives Section of the State Rail Authority came into existence as a result of the Centenary Celebrations which ended in September 1955. The then Research Officer in the Secretariat Mr R. Wylie had amassed a huge collection of plans, drawings, documents and photographs from various Branches within the Department of Railways in order to mount part of the Exhibition. He was able to persuade the then Secretary for Railways that



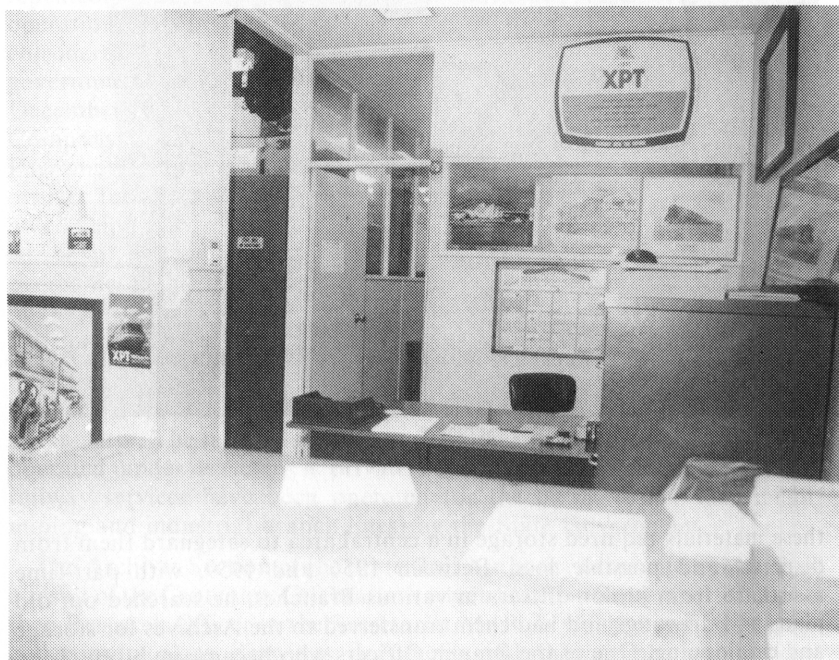
Public entrance to Archives Section.

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these materials required storage in a central area to safeguard them from dispersal and possible loss. Between 1956 and 1959, with part-time assistance from junior officers in various Branches, he searched out old plans and drawings and had them transferred to the Archives for storage and cataloguing. One of the Branch Officers who became involved, John Forsyth, was transferred in 1959 to the Secretariat to understudy Mr. Wylie who retired in 1961.

Besides collecting plans and drawings (and other records), the Section was responsible for the planning and running of eighty-seven 'Vintage Train' steam tours between 1960 and 1974, as well as the organisation and mounting of railway exhibitions in many country towns. From the retirement of Mr. Wylie in 1961, the Section was literally a 'one man band', the Archives Officer's time being fully occupied in dealing with public and internal inquiries, preparation of technical histories of the various lines, dealing with incoming records (as, for example, the transfer in March 1967 of 70,000 engineering drawing negatives) and organising the above-mentioned steam trains. In 1968 a Junior Clerk was appointed to assist, while at the same time expansion of storage space on another floor alleviated some of the more pressing problems. An Assistant Archives Officer was appointed in 1972, and in 1973 the Section moved into its present accommodation.

This present accommodation of some 490 square metres houses approximately 600 shelf metres of records and documents, an estimated 150,000-plus plans, drawings and diagrams, and some 100,000 microfilm aperture cards, the majority of which are of plans and drawings held in Archives, while a significant number are of plans and drawings acquired from the Branches in order to satisfy researchers' needs.



Public reference area.

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There has never been a consistent accessioning system, or documentation of transfers, and records, when transferred to Archives, have often been broken up into subject-oriented boxes and bundles. For instance, drawings of locomotive parts originating from Mechanical Branch have not been kept in drawing number order, but have been identified as belonging to particular classes of locomotives, and bundled together, after microfilming, as such. Consequently, when an inquiry is made from Mechanical Branch regarding the whereabouts of Drawing No. 560732, it becomes a little difficult to be precise as to its location. Fortunately, no transfer documentation exists, so in most cases it is possible to shake one's head sagaciously and say: 'No, such trivia would never have been sent to Archives', or: 'Every time the Branch can't find it, they say it's in Archives, tell them to look again.' So, what happens when a particular document or plan or drawing simply has to be found?

There are a variety of finding aids built up over the years. The primary one is the card index, consisting of about 60,000 cards in two parts, an alphabetic subject index (which may be sub-divided internally by geographic or generic areas) and an index of station names.

Both contain a variety of card types which indicate the nature of the record concerned (plans, for instance, are variously represented as being of mechanical or civil engineering or architectural interest), or which simply record a piece of information on a subject, the source of which may or may not be identified.

The cards bear location references derived from shelf units and numbers, and, in some cases, an identifying item number. In many cases, as items have been moved from place to place, location references have not been changed to record current locations. Complicating this scheme of arrangement is the fact that, in the recent past, an abortive attempt has been made to compile subject-oriented boxes, in which previously-boxed records have been raided to make up the contents of these latter-day compilations. Fortunately, this effort was discontinued after only 20 metres of such subject-oriented boxes had been compiled. Less fortunately, the 'old' boxes from which these compilations were cannibalised were scattered indiscriminately through the available storage spaces. Predictably, much of the indexing was never updated to reflect this activity.

Compounding these problems is the fact that there were no authorised subject lists or set filing rules for index cards, though there is a remarkable consistency deriving from the simple fact that one person has been largely responsible for the maintenance of the card index for a long time. Despite its drawbacks, the card index is an irreplaceable resource. Other materials which qualify as finding aids include the histories of the various lines which have been compiled over the years, most of which can be used to answer specific inquiries, and most of which can be used as a quick entry into the various sources available to answer those inquiries which require a little more thought. Other materials which have been compiled specifically for

publication (for instance, on the characteristics and manufacturing and operational histories of locomotives) afford an invaluable ready-reference resource.

The situation, therefore, is one that will be familiar to most professional archivists. Identification and retention of records of permanent value has depended on the exertions and native wit of one or two individuals. Little or nothing has been done to document the origins or nature of records which have been transferred. As a result, it is impossible to gauge the quantities of records likely to be transferred from Branches in future years. Practically no work has been done on administrative history, records systems analysis or arrangement and description.

Apart from the difficulties of intellectual control, the existing storage, office, and processing areas give rise to much concern. These are divided into two areas, on one floor, the larger of which houses the main records storage and processing areas, as well as office and public access areas. These are so arranged that it is impossible to isolate storage and processing areas from public access areas. The subsidiary storage area has part-walls which leave a gap of some .75m to the ceiling. Both storage areas are filled beyond capacity. No accessions have been accepted since January 1986 other than materials of undoubted significance which stood at risk of damage or loss.

Additional space has been allocated for the use of Archives in the existing area pending relocation of other Sections' impedimenta. The area allocated, when fitted out, should afford space for the next 10 to 15 years.

At present, the Section deals with an average 18 inquiries daily from members of the public and SRA and Urban Transit Authority (UTA) staff. This total does not include orders received from The Railway Shop for photographs, plans and other materials. (Orders are placed at the Shop by members of the public using volumes of photocopies of such materials held by Archives. In most cases, these are adequate to meet demand, further inquiries are directed to Archives.)

Other than inquiries generated by railway enthusiasts, the Section's primary function is to ensure that records of SRA and UTA are disposed of in accordance with the requirements of The Archives Act, 1960. Given the staffing constraints, requests for appraisal of records are dealt with on an ad hoc basis — there simply is not the time to conduct detailed records surveys or compile Functional Records Disposal Schedules. Some progress has been made in persuading Branches and Sections that adequate documentation is required before disposal decisions can be authorised. Such progress, however, has only been at series level, with the result that a few Continuing Disposal Recommendations for particular low-level bulk series have been ratified by the Archives Authority of New South Wales. Such actions generally arise from the fact that notice is circulated on a quarterly basis, by the medium of an authoritative internal publication, that no records are to be destroyed without reference to the Archives



Part of plans storage.
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Secondary storage area.
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Section. In this connection, the General Records Disposal Schedule issued by the Archives Authority has been invaluable.

Staffing of the Archives Section, as intimated above, has always been inadequate, given the size of the organisations it is meant to serve, the requirements of the Archives Act, and public interest in the areas it covers. Establishment on my arrival was three: Archives Officer, Assistant Archives Officer, and Grade I Clerk. Submissions having been made and argued over, it is expected that the establishment will rise to seven: Senior Archivist, two Archives Officers (Technical Services and Reference

Services), two Assistant Archives Officers, Clerk, and Receptionist/Typist. It is not likely that the Section will reach such an establishment in the immediate future, because there simply is not enough space to accommodate all of them.

Is it all worth it? Undoubtedly. The Archives Section houses a collection of materials without parallel in the world, documenting, despite its shortcomings, the origins, growth and development of probably the largest single government employer institution in the State. There are few parts of the State in which railway employees have not been a significant part of the workforce. One employee, indeed, rose to be Prime Minister of the Commonwealth. Who were they? Where did they work? What did they do? Under what conditions? Why were they there? What buildings and other works did they bring with them? The resources of the Archives can provide answers to such questions, and many more. It is always invidious to isolate particular series or items to explain what any archives is about, but perhaps a couple of examples will do. One of my favourites, for aesthetic more than other reasons, is also one of the most significant — Proclaimed Plans.

These, which vary in size (one Plan may be ten or more metres long in a single roll), detail the lands to be resumed for construction of railways, and bear the signatures of the Commissioner of the time and the Clerk of the Legislative Council. The majority of them are hand-coloured, and, together with the 'Taking Books', which specify the areas concerned, their condition, and owners, and sums claimed and paid in compensation, document a wealth of detail on geographic and socio-economic factors in urban, suburban, rural and industrial areas of the State. The earliest such documents date from 1849. Another favourite, and probably the most valuable series of all, is the Annual Reports, dating from 1859. In most cases, particularly between about 1862 and 1942, these contain an amazing wealth of statistical detail on the operations of the railway system. In various appendices, such information will typically include: exhaustive lists of materials imported for construction; rolling stock ordered from local manufacturers; detailed breakdowns of staff numbers, passenger tickets issued, goods and livestock shipped, and revenue earned, at each and every station in the system.

Given the existing and promised resources, and the potential usage, there are more than enough reasons to be optimistic about future developments.

A word of warning. None of the above should be read in any way as a criticism of the efforts of my predecessors. Against great odds, with little but an intimate knowledge of the system and a great deal of native shrewdness, they were able to amass, and protect against the vagaries of management, some of the most significant records, I suspect, in Australia. At the same time, they were able to produce publications and other reference sources (which are still in daily use) sufficient to satisfy 90% of casual inquiries. Hopefully, in twenty years time, I will be able to point to such an achievement, at least.