

To market, to market

This case study compares the different treatment methods of three historic tabletop wheat wagons (*pictured here*) that are very similar.

Background

Tabletop wagons are an important part of Australia's agricultural history. As industry began to grow in the 1890s and roads improved, there was a need to speed up the process of transporting wheat and wool to market. The durable, tabletop wagon had a larger tray size and a slightly concave shape, which prevented bags of wheat from falling off. It also had better wheels for handling tight corners. Eight to 11 horses were used to move the tabletop wagons and they could pull up to a 20 tonne load. After World War I, motorised trucks began to replace tabletop wagons.

Significance

Views and methods on how to preserve farm machinery have changed over the past few decades. The trend to restore old machinery to its former glory has lost favour. With the knowledge gained from past mistakes, MAAS staff now advise owners of historic farm machinery to write a significance statement about their object or collection of objects before beginning treatment. The idea is to examine an object in the wider context of the society it came from and therefore gain an understanding about its importance. This means researching as much as possible about your farm machinery. By investigating its rarity, the history of its working life, the condition, the times it came from and the impact it had on the farming community, you will begin to have an idea of how important your object is and whether it might be of local, state, national or international significance. You can then write a significance statement that will help guide decisions on how to preserve your object.

Advice on writing significance statements can be sought from your local or regional museum, from independent consultants or from staff at



Case study 1. The 'Daylight' wagon prior to restoration. B1572



The 'Daylight's' sister wagon, 'Moonlight', carrying 186 bags of wheat, and weighing 17.5 tons in 1924. It was drawn by 11 horses for 11 miles (18 km).



Case study 2. 'One of the Best' wagon on display at the Museum of the Riverina. Accession no 1052



Case study 3. 'Australian Hero' wheat wagon owned by Dubbo Regional Museum 1996.

MAAS or Museums & Galleries of NSW. The following publications may also be of assistance:

- **Safe in the Shed:**
<http://www.environment.nsw.gov.au/resources/heritagebranch/heritage/safeinshedfinal.pdf>
- **Significance 2.0:**
<http://www.environment.gov.au/heritage/publications/significance2-0/>

Definitions

- *Preventive conservation* — all actions are aimed at safeguarding cultural property for the future. The purpose of conservation is to study, record and retain the culturally significant qualities of the object with the least possible intervention. All measures and actions are aimed at avoiding and minimising future deterioration or loss. They are indirect, do not interfere with the materials and structures of the items or modify their appearance.

Examples of preventive conservation are: appropriate measures and actions for registration; storage; handling; packing and transportation; security; environmental management (light, humidity, pollution and pest control); emergency planning; education of staff; public awareness and legal compliance.

- *Conservation treatment* — all actions directly applied to an item aim at arresting current damaging processes or reinforcing their structure. The least intrusive methods are chosen with the aim of preventing further damage and protecting the significance of the object. Treatment should be of a high standard and use appropriate materials.
- *Restoration* — the process of repairing or renovating a building, work of art, etc, so as to restore it to its original or previously known condition. All actions are aimed at facilitating an object's appreciation, understanding and use. These actions are only carried out when the item has lost part of its significance or function through past alteration or deterioration. They are based on respect for the original material. Most often, such actions modify the appearance of the item.¹

Case study treatment comparison

The 'Daylight' is an interpretive object that shows how tabletop wagons looked when they

first went into service, 'One of the Best' shows both sides of the story and the 'Australian Hero' shows the history of a much loved wagon over the course of its working life.

Case study 1. 'Daylight' wagon restoration

History

The 'Daylight' wheat wagon was made by Westcotts, near Parkes, NSW, in 1909 and is on display at the Powerhouse Discovery Centre at Castle Hill. The owner, Phillip Symonds of Coobang, wanted some changes made to the wagon before he purchased it. John Westcott didn't agree to this for a one-off request but when Symonds' two brothers also wanted the altered wagons, Westcotts agreed to the changes. The other wagons were called 'Moonlight' and 'Starlight' but they are no longer in existence. After this, Westcotts altered all its wagons to incorporate the improved changes. Harry Kinscher, a specialist painter who worked for Westcotts, painted a rising sun with five pointed rays on both sides of the wagon. This design was copied from the label on a can of varnish. The 'Daylight' could carry 100–120 three-bushel bags of wheat and was hauled by eight to 11 horses. The 'Daylight' was last used to carry wheat to Parkes in 1939. John L Jeffries-Britten donated it to the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences (MAAS) in 1964.



The restored 'Daylight' wheat wagon on display at the Powerhouse Discovery Centre.



Brake pads showing the original condition and the restored condition.



Original wheel showing damage, detail of restored wheel, and the rising sun label.

Restoration treatment by MAAS

At the time of treatment in 1982, it was understood that the 'Daylight' was very significant and not many of these wagons were in existence. Restoration was common practice in museums throughout the world at that time. Due to the poor condition of the wagon, the decision was made to restore it. In retrospect, the course of action we would undertake today would be conservation treatment which would arrest the decay but would keep the historical integrity of the wagon.

The original colours of the 'Daylight' were very bold. When MAAS acquired the wagon in 1964, harsh weather conditions as well as dust, dirt and insects had taken their toll on it. In 1982, conservators examined the existing, faded paint of the wagon and identified the original colours. Paint manufacture has changed considerably since the wagon was made in 1909 and, whilst the colours may have been bold, they did not have the glossy shine of modern paints. However, the new paint used was made to match these colours at Museum's best practice standards. The wagon was completely restored by contractors who replicated the exact colours. The wagon was then coated with two coats of varnish. Unfortunately, no record of the treatment report was given to the Museum.

This kind of interventive treatment was done with the best intentions in the belief that MAAS was providing a picture of how the wagon looked when it was originally produced. It was also argued that the wood was protected against further deterioration. This argument is

no longer relevant as the object is stored in an environmentally stable building that is dust, pest and pollutant free and is displayed under low light. The original paint finishes have been irretrievably lost, as have the signs of wear that show the history of the wagon during its working life. This treatment would not be done today as it has destroyed the working history of the wagon.

Case study 2. 'One of the Best' wagon half restoration/half conservation

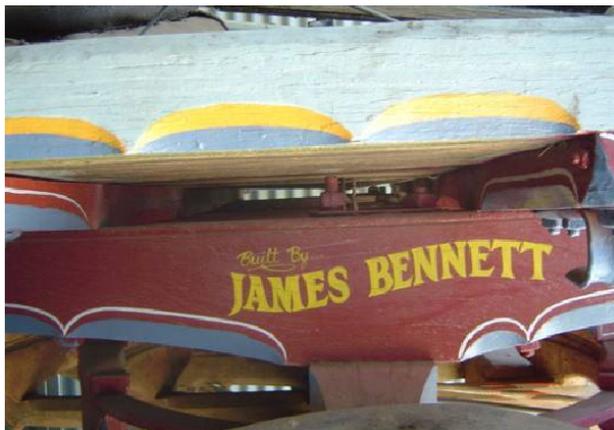
History

The second example is from the Museum of the Riverina in Wagga Wagga. The wagon was made by Bennett's Coach and Wagon Works in St Marys, a Sydney suburb, and was called 'One of the Best'. Albert H Le Lievre ran a successful property called The Hill at North Berry Jerry, 12 miles north of Coolamon. Albert kindly donated his wagon to the museum in 1967.

Half restoration/half conservation treatment

Somewhere along the pathway from restoration to preservation, probably during the 1950s, there was an approach to treatment which involved restoring one half of an object and leaving the other half intact. The Powerhouse Discovery Centre has an example of a Cobb and Co coach that has undergone the same treatment.

One half of this wagon has been restored to the original colours of red with white, yellow, light and dark blue decoration. Two wheels have been painted light blue with dark, blue stripes. The other half of the wagon has been left in the condition in which it came to the museum.



The restored half of 'One of the Best' wagon.



The unrestored half of the wagon showing the tool box and the original paintwork.

We would not recommend this treatment today, but the half and half approach does provide an interesting reference point for visitors to see two very different treatment techniques. Hopefully visitors will realise what valuable information is lost when objects are painted over.

Case study 3. 'Australian Hero' wagon conservation

History

The third tabletop wagon is owned by the Dubbo Regional Museum. It is known as the 'Australian Hero' wool wagon and was made by Bennett's Coach and Wagon Works. These wagons became famous throughout Australia. It took about a week to make each wagon before it was painted in the standard Bennett colours of blue with a bright red undercarriage and wheels, (unless otherwise specified by the purchaser). A box called a 'coffin' could be built at the back of the wagon for the driver's supplies. The wagon cost between £150–250 (\$270–360).

George Buck of Dubbo first purchased this wagon in 1915. The 'Hero' label may have been named after George as he was a prosperous local farmer who grew prize-winning wheat and bred quality draught horses in the district. The wagon was used until 1932 and was acquired by the Dubbo Historical Society in 1963.

Conservation treatment

As you can see from the photo of the 'Australian Hero' wool wagon on display at the Dubbo Regional Museum, these caretakers have kept the historical integrity of the wagon by conserving and preserving it. The original paint finishes, signs of wear and tear, and repairs undertaken on it during its working life are still visible.

As the Dubbo Regional Museum was volunteer run prior to 2006, there is not much documentation on the wagon before this date but it may not have been restored because its significance was well understood or funds for restoration were limited. In 2006, the museum developed a policy that only preventive or conservation techniques would be undertaken on their objects.



The 'Hero' wagon on display at the Dubbo Regional Museum.

This wagon has a far more interesting tale to tell than the other wheat wagons. It was conserved in 2009 when white rot was discovered, mostly in the planking section. This was treated and the wagon is now inspected on a quarterly basis. It is brush vacuumed every two years. The wagon is displayed in an environmentally-controlled building, with controlled lighting and is kept clean from dust, pests and pollutants. The 'Australian Hero' can tell its story for many generations to come. The museum staff understand and value its significance and they begin all their educational tours with the wagon. Damage such as the twisted rope hooks, faded colour and modified additions are pointed out to help describe its history. It is considered far more significant because it has not been restored.



Original paint is still visible on the wheel of the 'Hero' wagon in Dubbo.

Conclusion

There are many examples of restored farm machinery around the country. Hopefully, restoration is no longer seen as a desirable option and that opinion has shifted. We now recognise that our primary duty of care lies in preserving and conserving rather than restoring objects. Conservation entails arresting the decay and preservation means providing a stable environment in which to store or display objects, if possible. This can allow present and future generations to view historic objects in their original form, showing the traditional materials and craftsmanship. Replicas or digitally altered photographs can show how an historic object might have looked originally.

References

1. ICOM-CC Resolution on Terminology English — CeROArt
ceroart.revues.org/2794?file=1

This case study is part of a series developed by Powerhouse Museum Conservation department, May 2014.

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