

PLOD ESSAY: A Curator for the Museum's Treasure

Mark Robertson has been uncovering the treasure in our museum and he let me have a look.

"I was supposed to be rearranging the items on the Station platform," he said, "but before I did that I went to a couple of workshops the Shire was offering for groups like ours. We were taught that the first thing we had to do was put tags on everything and write down what they are, including their stories if possible. So the first job I did became working out what we've got. For instance these two items are part of Dowson's water aerating factory..."

At the Shire workshop he learned how to determine which things should be restored and which should be left alone.

"I have made sure that everything is okay, but, for instance there is a bit of asbestos in this egg incubator from somewhere or other. We have to wait to clean that up. I am clearing a lot of stuff out of what will eventually be the main entrance of the museum. This area used to be the station ticket office, where you could see routes and time schedules and buy your tickets. There are all sorts of valuable item in here. For instance, this is the door from the gaol cell of the Wonthaggi police station. It has all the graffiti on it from as early as the 1920s. This red chair used to be what the person who sold the tickets at the union theatre sat on. And we have the Cinema ticket box with the original tickets in it plus notes about who reserved seats or when the tickets will be picked up. Here are the ends of some of seats from the Union theatre that were pulled out after the fire. I won't clean these up too much because that will erase the story about the fire if I do. You've got to try to preserve the story. The dirt tells the story, too. It's a fine line about how much you fix. Like you wouldn't replace every bit of timber on the dray. And you can preserve the rust. On big things like the dray wheels the rust forms a



crust and doesn't get any worse if it is kept out of the weather. The rust tells a story, too. I have yet to really get to work on much of this big stuff until we decide what is going to happen out here.

"Here is a machine from Wrench's footwear that they used to roll the hides in to make the leather for the boots. This has been out in the weather and needs to be worked on to bring it back so it can work. I have done all the various bottles from Powlett Hotel with the Hotel labels on them – tawny port, sweet sherry. All of these old suitcases were getting wet so I've cleaned all of them up. This one is Dr Sleeman's wife's hatbox and there is another doctor's bag, which might be Sleeman's. I've got all these bags lined up on the luggage cart that was used at the station. One of the suitcases contained a whole bandsman's outfit plus a little pennant. On one of the suitcases is a

label 'Brisbane Central to Melbourne, Passenger Luggage'. I've cleaned all these cases up with Inox which is a natural oil based cleaner. No additives in it. So I don't want to make things look new but just stop more deterioration happening. I also got the water cooler working. This has always been on the platform for every one to use.

"Here is something amazing: These are the original pipes that carried the water mains. They are made of long strips of timber held together with tightly wound quarter-inch-gage wire and wrapped with layers of heavily tarred paper or cloth and rolled in stones. Amazing. Imagine making them. They've only been taken out a few years ago. They were salvaged from a recent subdivision.

"Recently, Fay let me into the little compressor shed to look at the stuff that had been put in there from the shipping container that leaked, only to find that this shed was also leaking. So I grabbed out as much as I could. There was a set of index card drawers like they used to have in Libraries. It had been rained on, so I dragged that out of the shed to have a look. We couldn't open any of drawers. They were so warped that I had to just take it apart and by doing

that, of course, it was completely destroyed, but what was inside it was a treasure. It was full of little things and they were all waterlogged, rusted and corroded. I have got to work on those. I've measured and described everything and these lists will go in the database."



Mark shows me a group of lead-glass perfume dispensers and silver brushes and combs with ivory handles. He found those in the shed and they went up to the town hall for the display of couturier clothing from the 1940s that was held last month. So they went from being found in the shed rotting to a beautiful display. Bits of rust can be seen on these pieces, but that indicates its history. Another six months in the shed and much of this would have been lost.

Mark shows me the glass cabinet that Irene was so chuffed about securing for the Museum last year and it is full of miscellaneous paraphernalia, accessories, implements that Mark had found and cleaned up. It is a miracle what he has done and it brings the past alive like nothing else can. In it, there's an old bicycle repair kit that riders used to have hanging from the back of the seat. Bicycles were an important mode of transportation in a town that for a long time only had as many automobiles as you could count on one hand. Mark points out some little tiny oil bottles, which, he says, are probably worth a fortune to antiques hunters. There are ancient clothes pegs, shoe-trees, straight razors, strops, a bottle opener from the Powlett Hotel, lots of shaving gear, shaving brushes. A Silver Box sits in the corner for sharpening razor blades. You put a blade in the box and it turns the blade around and rubs stones on it or something.



Mark had no idea how it works, but he knows it does. There's an elaborate National Bank ink stand, gramophone needles in an RCA Victor box that says "His Master's Voice" with the dog who has his ear to the megaphone. In their package are some taps that people used to put on their shoes to make the sole last longer. There is a booklet from the Victorian Association of Mothers Clubs that may be significant as the Miners' Women's Auxiliary overlapped with the Mother's Club at Wonthaggi Primary School.



This is a treasure that makes the onlooker astonished and has left me smiling with wonder.

"It is so much fun. It's like Christmas," says Mark. "That band suit is amazing. It's the uniform they had three generation ago at least. It's got braid on the arms and on the hat, and the initials are inside the hatband so we may be able to figure out whose it was. Mum is fixing that up at home right now. I feel happy doing this. I just want to see these things survive and to learn the stories. My job is to document all of this, which means I have to learn everything about them, do a condition report before and after, tag them, find their story..."

In Mark Robertson we have a curator for our collection and we are very lucky.



Above are items Mark has salvaged and/or restored: Bicycle Tool Kit, Union Theatre Ticket Box, Sentimental & Powerful WWI token, Athletics Badge from 1924, Micky Mouse Cinema Prize, Wire Rim Glasses (gold); Straight Razors, one restored one still rusted as found - CRLondon