

# PLOD ESSAY

## Recent Acquisitions by Mark Robertson

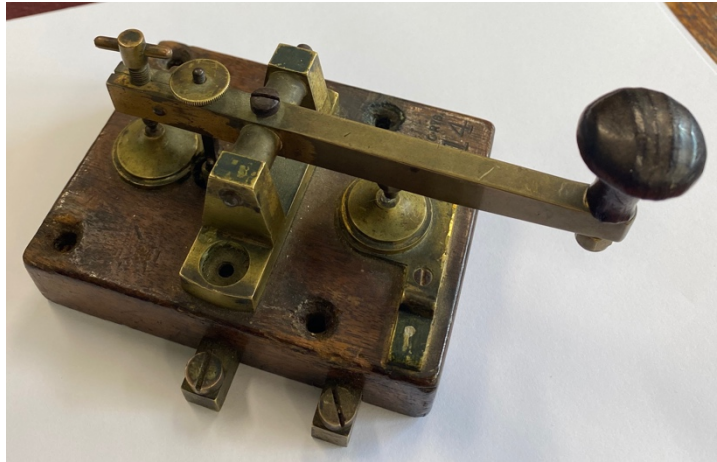
The Wonthaggi & District Historical Society is fortunate to be gifted a wide variety of objects to add to its extensive and diverse collection held in the Railway Station Museum. All the donations are interesting, especially if there is a story or provenance available to go with them.

Things that come to us have usually been once beloved or valued or are reminders of painful but important memories that have perhaps been forgotten. Often, when they find their way to the museum, they are in less than pristine condition. They have possibly been left in cupboards and drawers or away in attics or corners of sheds waiting to be re-discovered after decades of neglect have masked their value. Once the dust has been brushed away from a tool, for instance, a degree of wear and tear or “character,” as I like to describe it, becomes visible. Tools and utensils especially will often display the mark of a user’s hand and when I am beginning to clean a newly acquired item, it is important that I do not remove such history but carefully conserve the marks that give the object value and meaning.

Sometimes, but not always, the previous owner of an object is known, but other times a degree of detective work is required to elucidate its true meaning and history. I will use some recent acquisitions I have been working on to illustrate the stories we discover from seemingly ordinary objects:

### 1. The Morse Telegraph Key:

This item was donated by Aussie Copeland. It is constructed from brass, steel and hardwood (possibly redgum or jarrah). This item has no maker’s mark visible, however, it is stamped **VR 14** on the timber base which identifies it as Victorian Railways issue, thus dating it as post Federation. I suppose it could be described as a precursor of the computer



mouse in that it transmits information in a binary code of dots and dashes to the outside world, but in this case, via telegraph wires. Our Railway Station still has the original telegraph pole visible outside for everyone to see. This Morse Code key was in relatively good condition when received, being built like the proverbial brick outhouse. However, mounting holes had been filled with putty at some stage but fortunately it was still relatively soft and easily removed without damaging the varnish on the wood. My mantra when conserving items is to “remove what should not be there, as gently as possible.”

I showed the telegraph key to our resident morse code expert, Vin Tuddenham, ex-Wonthaggi Post Master, who pronounced it a beauty and apart from a slightly loose thread on the finger knob (rectified with an appropriate brass nut), it is now ready for another century of use. It will probably come in handy when the internet falls apart again requiring only a battery and a couple of wires to work – elegant simplicity. It is great to be able to get the “good oil” from people who spent their careers using these tools. Thanks, Vin.

2. **Tenor Horn & Mouthpiece:** “Good oil” played a part in this next donated object. Along



with another local guru, our collection has contained an old tenor horn made of brass housed in the museum theatre display cabinet. It is thought to have been played by Arthur Constable in the Wonthaggi Citizens Band and

donated many years ago, but more research is required to confirm this. The horn was manufactured by Boosey & Co. of Regent Street, London. It is a wonderful concoction of

tapered brass tubes, soldered joints and beautiful engravings of lillies (see below). It is probably about 100 years old. For years it was unplayable due to stuck valves and a missing mouthpiece. I decided that its expert craftsmanship deserved better. Luckily, local Brass Band Legend, Don Edwards, attended most of our summer talks this year and so I asked him if he could possibly track down an old mouthpiece for the horn. The very next day he walked into the museum with his own tenor horn mouthpiece! This had been played at many great events since the mid-sixties when Don arrived in town with his family to teach Plumbing at the Tech School. On top of that he introduced generations of new



Band Members to the world of brass music and this mouthpiece was the conduit.

The obvious next step was to get the old horn into playable condition. It took many hours of gentle coaxing to free-up the valves and sliding joints. Two of the valves’ springs were missing – likely having been borrowed in order to keep another instrument going – and I had no idea of the proper lubricants to use. Of course, I asked Don for advice and soon he generously supplied a brand new set of Yamaha valve springs along with a tube of “Blue Juice” valve lubricant and “Conn NP 3” slide lubricant... nothing but the finest for the old horn. Don donated his expertise and the materials to the society, and it was wonderful to share this little project with him. All that is left for him to do is give it a toot!

3. **Industrial Lampshades – Cyclone Forgings:** As part of the Railway Platform upgrade, I have been keeping my eye out for appropriate fittings and fixtures to bring the Railway Station back to its old glory. The old incandescent globes and shades are past their best and will not be suitable or energy efficient for the new upgrade although every effort is being made to maintain the original features of the space.

Amazingly, Nathan Leversha had three workshop lamps in his shed. They had been rescued from the old forge room at Cyclone Forgings, where he undertook a toolmaker apprenticeship. Cyclone Forgings was one of the industries attracted to Wonthaggi by the far-thinking Borough Council in the 1960's, so as to provide future employment for miners as coal mining ran down. Much later most of the factory was demolished to make way for the original Bunnings store with the rear section still producing quality tools. The sound of the forge no longer reverberates throughout the town as it did in the 60's and 70's, a distinctive sound of our past, along with the mine whistle.



The old forge building put up quite a fight during demolition, the massive concrete foundations of the power hammer proving especially resilient. Fred Webb had supplied the cement during the construction of the Cyclone forge building. Apparently, there was insufficient supply available locally, so the ever-resourceful Fred had concrete shipped over from Tasmania.

The lampshades Nathan saved from Cyclone had hung from the roof of the old building and were witness to the noise and sparks and sweats there for decades. They would have been sent to the tip or bulldozed had they not been saved. They were manufactured from steel with a green and white enamel coating, same as the classic enamel mug and plate – the voluptuous shape of the lamps would have been produced by the metal spinner, another dying art of skilled steel workers. (You can still see this skill/art on display at Sovereign Hill in Ballarat where they make pans for slushing gold from river sludge.) The lampshades would have been fired in a kiln to produce the vitreous enamel.

All that the shades required after seventy years of service was a bit of a clean. They are beautiful; they exude industrial chic and would fetch a pretty penny for interior decorators outfitting an expensive house or a trendy restaurant. Their classic, no nonsense looks are sought after and will do us proud on the renovated platform.

Unfortunately, the globes are missing from these lamps, but the originals would chew through expensive electricity at an alarming rate and so they will be replaced with modern LED floodlamps, demurely tucked away inside the shades – sometimes the new way is better than the old...

Amazingly, when I went to AWM Electrical Wholesalers to enquire about globes, they saw the lamps and donated globes to the cause. Many thanks to Frank and Anthony and Nathan. We now have some classic lighting for the platform – cost equals bugger all; value equals priceless! And the old lamps can enjoy a new and useful life several hundred metres from their last life!

**So, there!** We have three old objects, made potentially useful again for the coming decades with minimal restoration, waste and retaining as much of their original character as possible. All thanks to the quality and skillsets of the manufacturers, original users, and the priceless assistance of our local Wonthaggi experts – they are the real treasures in our midst. The objects cannot speak, but their stories are fascinating.