

# Introduction

Patrick Bertola and Bobbie Oliver

FROM 1904 TO 1994 the WA Government Railway Workshops were the largest industrial Workshops in the State with a workforce ranging from 2,000 to 3,500 people. Apart from manufacturing and repairing railway engines and rolling stock, the Workshops were at the centre of a network of railway centres around the State. During World War II workers manufactured munitions in a purpose-built Annexe, built boilers and other plant for defence vessels and played an important role in repair work for US submarines based at Fremantle. The Workshops trained scores of apprentices who graduated to trades in the railways and also served as a source of skilled labour for private capital in the State. The scale and diversity of the workforce meant the Workshops were a major site for the activity of several unions and a place where many union leaders and labour activists had their training.<sup>1</sup>

As the chapters of this book also reveal, the Workshops were a complex social and cultural milieu whose networks of relationships extended beyond the working day and the physical boundaries of the site, and that contributed to a considerable and diverse population in the local region. The unique links between the community and the Workshops existed in many ways, and are certainly evident in the extent and passion with which residents and workers in Midland and its surrounds felt, and continue to resent, the closure of the Workshops in 1994.

In 1998, members of the Perth Branch of the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History (ASSLH)—of which the authors were Executive members—initiated an oral history project to interview past-employees of the Workshops. From 2000 to 2004, the authors were involved as Chief Investigators of an Australian Research Council Grant, which together

with cash and in-kind grants from eleven industry partners generated \$560,000 for a project of collecting interviews, photographs and memorabilia from past employees, establishing an archive in the Battye Library in Perth, generating histories including this book, and encouraging scholarly research and publication among staff and undergraduate and graduate students at Curtin and Murdoch universities. As well, in order to make the Project's histories of the Workshops generally accessible, two Chief Investigators in Murdoch's Media School—Mia Lindgren and Brogan Bunt—developed a website, < <http://www.mcc.murdoch.edu.au/midland/> > and a DVD, titled *Midland Workshops Life*.

From its commencement, the Project was undergirded by the following principles:

1. The Project would be a collaboration between trained academic historians, union officials, and workers in all aspects of the industry, thereby drawing upon and adding to a rich tradition of community and popular history within the union movement.
2. The products of the Project (interviews, ephemera, documents, photographs) were intended to contribute to resources, and academic scholarship in fields of Labour History and industrial heritage by (a) the work produced by researchers on the Project and (b) setting up an archive, or contributing to existing archives, at the J.S. Battye Library of Western Australian History and the State Records Office of WA (SROWA).
3. In enabling the workers to tell their own stories, the Project would discover and record the daily experiences of the



employees and their families. Research using traditional sources would complement those personal accounts and encourage people to develop a broader historical consciousness about developments they have experienced.<sup>2</sup>

4. The material collected would be used in academic study and for educating the wider public about factory working conditions and processes, the skills required by tradespeople and the objects of their production, and about social aspects of the lives of factory workers and their families during the twentieth century.
5. Although employing some paid staff, the Project would be dependent upon the services of volunteers, who would be adequately trained and supported in their tasks of interviewing, transcribing tapes, learning conservation techniques and so forth. Thus, the Project would enskill members of the community.
6. The Project would be a vehicle for informed debate about the preservation of the Workshops site and of industrial heritage in general. In this way, researchers would collaborate outside the Project with others on work to preserve the physical fabric of the site, and to establish a Rail Heritage Centre in situ.

The Midland Railway Workshops site is currently managed by the Midland Redevelopment Authority (MRA), a government authority with a mandate to redevelop the area. That development was at first shaped by commercial considerations and by the Heritage Council

of WA assessments. The Council deemed the site as having heritage significance for the following reasons:

1. It represents the most significant example of an early twentieth century railway Workshop in Australia.
2. It was the most substantial single complex established by the WA Government at the beginning of the twentieth century.
3. As the main WAGR or Westrail Workshops, it played a major role in the State's economy and development, as well as in the daily life of Western Australians for 90 years. This role included training thousands of apprentices in a wide range of trades.
4. It contains a number of significant buildings (including the oldest building on site, which was demolished to make way for a road and is now in storage).
5. It contains a wide range of significant machinery, much of which remains operable, and collections of tools, equipment, furniture and fittings.<sup>3</sup>

Eight buildings have been identified as having exceptional heritage significance. These are the three main blocks, and additions such as the flagpole and the Peace Memorial; the Chief Mechanical Engineer's Office (currently occupied by TAFE); the Railway Institute Building (now occupied by the MRA); the Pattern Shop; the Power House; and the old Tarpaulin Shop. All of these buildings were constructed in 1904 and most were added to ca 1910–12. Other buildings, including the Foundry (1904,





The Interpretive Centre with the Workers' Wall section on the left-hand side of the photograph. One of the main Workshops blocks appears in the background.  
*Courtesy of Patrick Bertola*

1912), and the Time-Keeper's Office (1924), are regarded as being of 'considerable significance'.<sup>4</sup>

But what do such assessments actually mean, if anything, for the preservation of the site's history? Aside from the work of producing histories, resources and expanded historical understandings, from the outset of the Workshops History Project members have sought to engage with heritage assessments in order to expand the conception and representation of the site and its former occupants. They have applied their skills and historical knowledge to the processes of arguing for the recognition and representation of the Workshops' society and culture. In so doing they challenged those responsible for the development to ensure

that the outcomes were more than retention of some buildings and a passing acknowledgement of the historical significance of the site.

Of primary importance in that work at Midland were the Project's endeavours to obtain the support of government and local authorities. The local authority, the City of Swan, has always supported conserving the Workshops' history in some form, while acknowledging the conflicting demands of groups interested in developing the site's commercial and heritage potential. Not only did the City contribute cash to the Project, but it also supported related works in a great number of ways including through the work of its Local History Library service and by facilitating community forums to discuss development of the Workshops site.



At a State level, the support was not always positive. In 1998, after the oral history project was proposed, the ASSLH gained access to the site only after months of negotiation with the Liberal-National Coalition State Government, which had closed the Workshops four years previously. The Government was not sympathetic to the preservation of industrial heritage and exploration of labour history although the Project had begun to develop a positive working relationship with executives of the MRA. For example, in March 2000, just as the funded ARC project was commencing, the historic Munitions Annexe, an extension of Block 3—whose history is described in Linley Batterham's chapter—was demolished to make way for a road into the new Police Complex being built on the site. The Heritage Council had omitted the Annexe because of 'lack of information' about its significance and, despite ASSLH arguments, would not reconsider its decision and so the State's last intact building connected with munitions production in World War II was demolished.

The State ALP's election victory in February 2001 initiated changes in policy for the site. Because of Labor's industrial roots, and personal connections between the Workshops and some Caucus Members (including the then Premier, Geoff Gallop, whose uncle was a boilermaker at the Workshops), the new administration sent a clear message that priorities at the site would change. The MRA became a major partner and supporter of the Workshops History Project with Curtin and Murdoch universities, the City of Swan and nine other industry partners, in a successful application for a second ARC grant (2002–2004) to continue and disseminate our research. The first restored building on site, the

Railway Institute, became the MRA's headquarters, and in June 2002 was the venue for a State Rail Heritage Forum hosted by the Minister for Planning and Infrastructure, the Hon. Alannah McTiernan. The Forum brought together key interest groups, with labour history, machinery preservation and railway heritage perspectives. The Forum indicated the extent of support for a rail heritage centre on the Midland Workshops site and the extent to which the History Project staff were able to contribute to development of a strategy that outlined feasibility and funding options, to put before the State Government. The Project's Officer, Ric McCracken—who writes in Chapter 9 about cultures within the Workshops—prepared a paper that emphasised the need to address:

[The] active restoration of rolling stock and locos, working machinery indicative of the skills practised in the Workshops over the 90 year history of its operation, [and] an interpretative centre which collects and presents the oral histories of former employees, family members and the community with informative and interpretative ephemera and memorabilia, important and iconic areas of the site such as the peace memorial and gardens, the flagpole and the assembly area around it and other signifiers of activities [for example, grapevines].<sup>5</sup>

In 2003, the MRA funded Consultants to produce a Feasibility Study for a Rail Heritage Centre at the Workshops. Although this Study's recommendations were under consideration at the time of writing, the MRA has stated its vision for the site as being:



To create a distinctive place where educational, cultural and rail heritage facilities and activities co-exist and overlap in a unique way that recalls the past and looks to the future.<sup>6</sup>

This statement touches upon some of the areas of potential difficulty in realising that vision. Australia has had many industrial sites with fine buildings that have not been preserved. As Lucy Taksa points out in Chapter 12, many complex issues surround the preservation of industrial heritage sites. She explores how the tensions between 'de-industrialisation and redevelopment on the one hand, and support for industrial heritage on the other' affect the 'appreciation, conservation and adaptive re-use' of heritage sites.

The Project sought to address such difficulties by embarking on processes that were consultative and inclusive. The first principle of the Midland Railway Workshops History Project was 'a collaboration between trained academic historians, union officials, and workers in all aspects of the industry'. The importance of this type of collaboration cannot be over-stressed in a project that required strong community support. Past employees have brought to the Project not only an impressive range of skills and knowledge about process and machinery at the Workshops, but a fund of stories that re-create the human dimension of working there and create, insofar as it is possible to do so, histories from the points of view of ordinary working people. These accounts are evident in the subjects and in the references to interviews that abound throughout the chapters of this book—interviews generated by academic scholars working on the Project and by volunteers trained

as interviewers and transcribers in the course of the Project.

Through the Project, scholarly historians have contributed to the collaborative effort in other, important ways, including the work of researching and proposing models of written and visual history that identify the workers instead of celebrating their achievements in an anonymous and unacknowledged manner. One example at Midland, is the Workers' Wall Project, funded, organised and implemented by the MRA, that invited past employees to subscribe to individual bricks, on which their names were inscribed. These bricks were set into a series of walls, themselves impressive examples of industrial art work readily viewed from the street outside. Another example has been the development of an Interpretive Centre developed out of collaborations between the MRA, the Project, the Rail Heritage WA and Machinery Preservation Society and opened in May 2005. Located in the old Timekeeper's Office at the main entrance to the site, this Centre is staffed by a Co-ordinator and a number of volunteer guides, displays photographs, documents and ephemera donated by past employees, and allows visitors to access the Workshops' history as presented on the DVD and the website that have been developed in the course of the Project.

To many people, industrial landscapes are not aesthetically or intellectually attractive, and industrial and labour history have not inspired many Western Australian historians as a research topic. Prior to the commencement of this Project, scholars had almost completely ignored the Midland Workshops despite their being Perth's largest industrial site. In this sense, the historical balance is skewed and not surprisingly, as

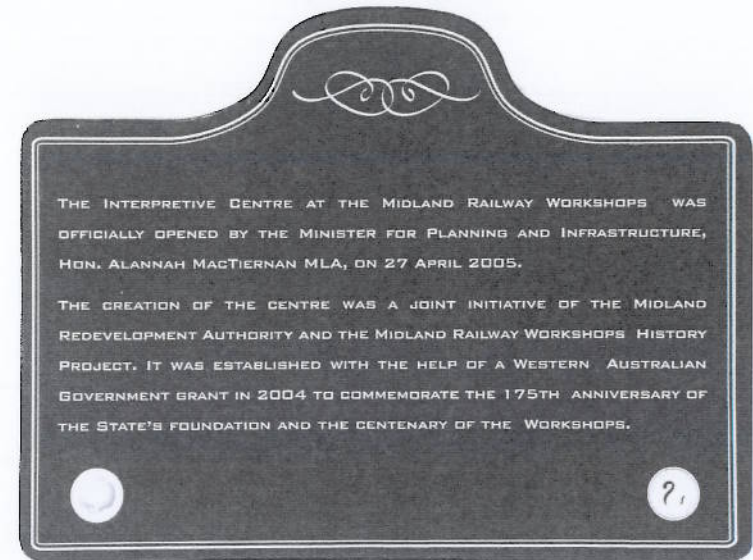




The former Timekeeper's Office located at the main entrance (for workers) to the Workshops. The office now houses the Interpretive Centre. *Courtesy of Patrick Bertola.*

in the case of the Shell Annexe the lack of easily accessible, published information has been to the site's detriment.

However, aside from ensuring a balanced historical account and representative heritage practice, the Project has had other purposes that are more generally expressed in the principles upon which the Project was established. These purposes lie in what some have defined as the purposes of history, especially those that have to do with a personal and social sense of history. Whether we are conscious of it or not, a sense of time and the past are central to our processes of making individual and social meaning: the sense of a personal identity based in family and forebears; an interaction between experience; a sense of what is possible and of the present or a future; the knowledge of others based on the revelation of our experiences; our existence in a world filled with evidence—human and material—of different ages; a collective sense of the past that permeates our interaction; and our developing sense of social identity. As much as anything, the Project is one to recover, legitimate and celebrate the history of the Workshops, its people, and its locale. Histories that exclude or fail to include (by omission or commission) that



Plaque 1/2: Plaque commemorating the opening of the Interpretive Centre in April 2005. *Courtesy of Patrick Bertola*

storehouse of experience have the potential to deny the legitimacy of the experience. Put another way, the collective memory of a significant group, or that which forms part of their tradition, is deficient to the extent that published history or heritage work does not include their experience. They are not included as actors in what is collectively seen as Western Australian history.

Thus, the elements of history's social utility, as embodied in the principles and work of the Project, have been of immediate relevance. The Project has demonstrated that in a very broad sense, the practice of history is a political activity—accounts of the past can and have been incorporated into social discourse, many of which have previously been exclusive, supportive of authority, bound to a particular ideological position, or the exercise of power. The Project's history making has had an oppositional role which has not only sought to fill the voids of silence that enabled the demolition of the Shell Annexe but also to give voice to and to preserve in the public domain the experiences of those who might otherwise be lost in time. We hope that, along with the work to preserve and interpret on the site, this collection goes some way to doing so.

<sup>1</sup> Kevin Barry has noted the importance of the Workshops in the historical development of labour in Western Australia, especially after World War II during the dispute surrounding the Australian Standard Garratt locomotive. See Kevin's article, 'Labor Divided: The Garratt Strike of 1946', *Papers in Labour History*, 17 (December 1996), pp. 46–67. In the same issue there is a short article that Paddy Troy wrote, apparently as an introduction to a piece that the Locomotive, Engine Drivers', Firemen's and Cleaners' Union (LEDFCU) proposed to publish from Kevin's Honours degree thesis: 'Thirty years on: Paddy Troy's perspective on the ASG strike', pp. 68–69.

<sup>2</sup> For discussion of the problems and possibilities of collective, working-class work to discover its history and develop social identity, see Jerry White, 'Beyond Autobiography', and Ken Worpole, 'A Ghostly Pavement: The Political Implications of Local Working Class History', both in Raphael Samuel (ed.), *People's History and Socialist Theory* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1981).

<sup>3</sup> Heritage and Conservation Professionals, *Draft Heritage Strategy, Midland Central Redevelopment Area*, prepared for the MRA, 2001, Strategy Paper No. 1, p. 2.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*, Strategy Paper No. 2, pp. 1–9.

<sup>5</sup> R McCracken., 'Planning for a State Rail Heritage Centre at the Midland Workshops', unpublished discussion paper, 2002.

<sup>6</sup> MRA, Concept Planning for State Railway Heritage Centre Tender Brief, 2003, p. 2.