

# More Than Just Locomotives: Re-discovering Working Lives at the Midland Railway Workshops

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## Abstract

For many people the words 'railway workshops' conjure up images of steam locomotives. The traditional representation of the locomotive under full steam, accompanied by appropriate sound effects, is hard to dispel in the public imagination. Next, railway workshops might invoke imagery of grand Victorian-style factory buildings — the fabric of the place. But their significance is more than the architectural, it is what took place within the walls. In the decade since the WA Government Railway Workshops at Midland were closed, considerable progress has been made in conserving the site and preserving its history. A five-year Australian Research Council (ARC) funded grant project, completed in 2004, has yielded books, scholarly papers, electronic media, and oral and documentary archives. Yet one of the major challenges just beginning is interpreting the workers' stories, yielded by this material, on the workshops site while redevelopment occurs. In the context of the Midland Railway Workshops, this paper discusses some of the challenges of interpreting and re-telling the stories of the workers who operated the complex machines that built the great engines, rolling stock and a myriad other items within those grand, red-brick Victorian buildings that still grace the site — although the men and most of the locomotives and other machines are long gone.

## Introduction

If asked what image the words 'railway workshops' conjured up, many people would probably say a steam locomotive. The image of the locomotive under full steam, accompanied by appropriate sound effects, is hard to dispel in the public imagination. Next, 'railway workshops' might invoke images of grand Victorian-style factory buildings — the 'fabric' of the place. Yet, in the words of singer-songwriter, Bernard Carney (2004; a song written for the project (2000) and performed on a number of occasions), 'It's more than just the buildings, it's what they did inside'.

In the decade since the WA Government Railway Workshops at Midland were closed, considerable progress has been made in conserving the site and preserving its history. A five-year ARC-funded grant project, completed in 2004, has yielded books, scholarly papers, electronic media, and oral and documentary archives. Yet one of the major challenges just beginning is interpreting the workers' stories, yielded by this material, on the site while redevelopment occurs. In the context of the Midland Railway Workshops, this paper discusses some of the challenges of interpreting and re-telling the stories of the workers who operated the complex machines that built the great engines, rolling stock and myriad other items within those grand, red-brick Victorian buildings that still grace the site — although the men and most of the locomotives and other machines are long gone.

In March 1993, the newly elected, non-Labor State Government of Premier Richard Court announced a decision to close the Midland Government Railway Workshops. At their peak in the 1950s, the Workshops had been Western Australia's biggest industrial employer, with just over three thousand employees, including 557 apprentices. The Workshops closed on 4 March 1994 and for several years, as the site was stripped of any useful machinery, the magnificent buildings stood idle, and various interested parties argued about what to do with them. Meanwhile, much of the State's heavy manufacturing went interstate as private firms revealed their lack of capacity to take over the Workshops' role that they had so greedily coveted while these were still operational. The ulterior motives of the government and private industry are a recurring theme in interviews conducted with past employees a decade after the closure was announced. For example, Patrick Gayton (2003), a pattern maker, who was not particularly pro-union, stated that his reaction to the Workshops closure was anger. 'I still am [angry] because I've been a worker all my life. It provided work, it put food on the table. It provided apprenticeships for the youngsters ... [I was] particularly [angry] with [Premier] Court.' Peter Carty (2002: 32) put it more strongly when he claimed:

The Government used the thing against us — and the Chamber of Commerce — that the government work can't compete against private industry because they're taking private industry work away; that's the sort of thing that was fronted up to us.

In 1998, members of the Perth Branch of the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History (ASSLH) responded to an impassioned plea from men who had worked at the Workshops to collect the history before the place was demolished. What was particularly significant was the type of history that past employees wanted labour historians to collect. They did not talk of the technology, or about locomotives. Nor did they see the Workshops as the site where some particularly famous engine was built — although this may partly have been because no Western Australian locomotive has gained the profile of *Mallard* or the *Flying Scotsman* or even 3801 — *The Newcastle Flyer*. Instead, these workers requested that the ASSLH interview the workers and collect their stories — including their skills, of which they were very proud; but essentially the stories of their struggles with the management; their terrible working conditions; their sense of humour; their anecdotes; the 'characters', and the ways they bent and broke the rules (ASSLH 1998).

In the decade or more since the WA Government Railway Workshops at Midland were closed, considerable progress has been made in conserving the site and preserving its history. The decision to retain many of the buildings was facilitated by the State branch of the ALP coming into government in 2001. Apart from Labor's connections with the Workshops as a large

industrial, unionised work place, the uncle of the then WA Premier, Dr Geoff Gallop, had worked there as a boilermaker, eventually becoming a foreman. Furthermore, the people of Midland, assisted by the ASSLH (Perth branch), were making it clear that they wanted public facilities, including a rail heritage centre, on the site. The executive summary of the Draft Concept Plan stated that 1878 submissions were received in response to the proposed redevelopment plan for the Workshops site, launched on 22 August 2000 with a three-month period for public responses. 'Of these, 1,809 were identical form letters relating to a request for a working rail based museum' (Midland Redevelopment Authority (MRA) 2000: 1).

In April 2004, the refurbished Timekeeper's Office was opened as an Interpretive Centre, and the neighbouring Workers' Wall constructed, with each brick bearing the name of a Workshops' employee. The Wall was an MRA-organised project, in which members of the public purchased bricks for themselves or friends or relatives who had been employed at the site. Dr Lucy Taksa, of the University of New South Wales, initiated the concept by bringing the Workers Wall in the Steam Museum at Swindon (UK) to the MRA's attention and suggested that something similar might be attempted at Midland, to commemorate past employees. Having adopted the idea, the MRA produced a structure that far exceeds the original in artistry and prominence (images of the wall may be seen at MRA n.d.).

With colleagues from Curtin and Murdoch Universities, the author was successful in obtaining two ARC Linkage grants over a five-year period, ending in December 2004, to set up a project which yielded books, scholarly papers, electronic material, and oral, photographic and documentary archives (Bertola & Oliver 2006; Lindgren 2005; Bunt n.d.; 'Radio Projects: Westrail Workshops' n.d.). Collections of taped interviews, documents and photographs at the State Record Office of WA, the J.S. Battye Library of Western Australia and the Local Studies Collection at the Midland Public Library, are some of the major outcomes of the project. Some of the electronic media, photographs and ephemera collected by the project may be viewed on site at the Midland Workshops Interpretive Centre, which is open to visitors several days a week. Yet one of the major challenges associated with this project is only just beginning: interpreting the workers' stories, yielded by this material, on the workshops site while redevelopment occurs. Some of these stories are divisive, telling of poor working conditions, industrial struggle and class relationships. As posited elsewhere, in relation to museums, these are not always the stories that are put on public display (Oliver 2003a; Oliver & Reeves, 2003b).

To illustrate this point, this paper will examine three aspects of the Workshops that have been revealed in collecting the workers' stories, and conclude by discussing some of the challenges that arise when including these aspects — so real to the people who worked there, and yet so often ignored by 'interpreters' — in a re-interpretation of the site for development purposes, including the 'adaptive re-use' of major buildings.

## What the stories told

Firstly, there was the *atmosphere* of the place. Interviewees described the Workshops as being 'like Dante's inferno', 'hot', 'smokey' and 'full of dust'; 'loud ... always machines and squealing and banging [noises]', with chemical hazards and asbestos fibres ever present (Hagarty 2001, p. 28; Hicks 2002: 8).

Workers suffered eye injuries caused by metal or wood splinters; some endured noise levels so great they developed tinnitus (Moir 2002). Although there were relatively few injuries deemed serious enough to warrant referring the patient to a doctor, this may have been due partly to the culture of the place, where workers made light of injuries and scorned the use of safety gear until legislation enforced it (Manning 2002; Oliver 2003b: 250-1). Figures from the Chief Mechanical Engineer's Annual Reports, indicate that, while 'minor' injuries suffered by workers ranged from approximately 3000 per year in 1937-41, to around 5000 in 1942, and maintained this level until the mid 1960s, injuries serious enough to warrant the worker being 'sent home' or 'sent to a doctor', numbered only a few hundred each year (for example: the highest total of 'serious injuries' recorded between 1937 and 1972 was 790 in 1966 (Oliver n.d.). Old Boilermakers would joke about the industrial deafness that they were left with for the rest of their lives — and deadly asbestos fibres that often blew like snow across the site and even into the grounds of the local primary school (see Bertola 2006 for a detailed discussion of the health issues faced by workers at the site).

According to official records, there were twenty-three fatalities in a seventy-year period from 1903 to 1973. As yet no comparative study has been undertaken to ascertain how this fatality rate compares with similar factories for the era, but it would appear to be fairly low, considering the hazards of the workplace and the lack of safety equipment. There are problems, however, as the records do not always concur with the recollections of past employees. Neil McDougall, a fitter who began his training in 1961, could 'remember several men being killed in there'. In particular he remembered an accident, recalled by several other workers, where 'something went wrong' with the slotting machine in the Machine Shop. The operator 'put his head under the slotter' to ascertain why it had stopped, and it came down suddenly and 'smashed his head like a walnut' (McDougall 2002: 15). McDougall also mentioned 'one of my apprentices' (that is, an apprentice fitter), 'falling off the side of a locomotive, and, well, he didn't come back to work. He died that night'. The records show that the only fatality recorded in the 1960s did indeed, involve a shunting locomotive, but the employee was listed as being G.A. Kenworthy, a Car Builder — not a fitter; whereas the slotting machine accident, which killed apprentice B. Humphrey, occurred on 25 March 1957, while McDougall was still at school (*Chief Mechanical Engineer's Annual Reports* 1967: 24 & 1957: 22). Another accident that was vivid in the collective memory occurred in the foundry, when a blockage caused hot metal to spew out the bottom of the cupola, across the floor where men were working, resulting in one fatality, moulder's assistant A.H. Green who died of burns some days afterwards. Several others were seriously injured (information compiled from *Chief Mechanical Engineer's Annual Reports*: Table of Fatalities that occurred 1903-73, held by the author).

A major challenge in interpreting the Workshops site, therefore, is to depict the realities of not only the hazards and the lack of safety equipment but also the culture that made men fear being labelled a 'sissy' more than enduring severe, unalleviated physical pain from a mutilated finger or some other 'minor' injury. The Workshops History Project collected considerable photographic evidence showing the lack of safety equipment. A 1950s photograph, taken in an area of the foundry known as the paddock, for example, showed that the protective gear worn by the workers manipulating blocks of hot metal was

limited to leather gloves and aprons. Most workers wore only their own clothes and footwear, topped by a greasy felt hat. Even with the help of images such as these, however, it is very hard to convey what the place was like, because the visual image is not accompanied by movement and audio, but even when these elements are present, as in training films of the era (clips of which can be accessed on the websites referred to in the bibliography), it is impossible to reproduce the type, and especially the level, of noise. The Steam Museum at Swindon has attempted to reproduce the sounds of the working factory but, of course, any display which reproduced sounds at anything approaching the decibels that railway workshops employees endured, would contravene modern health regulations. To use an example that would be familiar to rail enthusiasts, the comparison is similar to watching videos of locomotives instead of seeing, hearing and smelling a working engine under steam or diesel power.

Secondly, there are the *traditions* of the place. Every factory has its initiation ceremonies, but one which may have been unique to Midland was the Peanut King. For over forty years from the late 1930s until at least the end of the 1970s, this elaborate initiation ceremony was practised in the various shops on the site. The 'Peanut King' rite was held just before the Workshops closed down for the annual two-week Christmas break, and it involved the first year apprentices who had not been employed there the previous Christmas. Knowledge of this 'secret' ceremony has been preserved in snapshots taken by various workers in different shops and by descriptions of the ceremonies.

According to one version, the older apprentices would persuade the new apprentices to ask the tradesmen for promises of donations to a non-existent Christmas 'peanut' fund to buy treats for a workers' Christmas party. On 'peanut day', the boy who had gained the most 'pledges', was led to a platform erected against an empty locomotive tender or wagon, in which lurked unseen, a group of older apprentices armed with sloppy lagging, old tins of oil, and other waste. A master of ceremonies was appointed and a large crowd gathered to hear him read out lists of promised donations, which they cheered or booed according to the amount pledged. The din was so great that nobody heard any noises coming from the apprentices behind the platform and concealed in the tender. In the middle of this performance, all the gathered filth and garbage was poured over the side of the tender onto the unfortunate 'Peanut' below. When they ran out of ammunition, a large fire hose was turned on those who had not fled. After this there was a fight for the hose, which became a free-for-all, with the hose and the remaining garbage as weaponry. When the fight for the hose began, the assembled crowd of adults would melt away and leave the apprentice mob to fight it out. Over the years, however, the ceremony became more elaborate and varied from one shop to another. The Project is fortunate to have a range of images and taped descriptions of the 'Peanut King' — which may well be unique to Midland Workshops (see, for example, Cadwallader 2002: in this interview, Cadwallader refers to a number of snapshots, which he took of the ceremonies outside the foundry in the 1950s).

The last example to be discussed in this paper is that of translating the experience of the Workshops' closure — and, in particular, of the actual day when the workers learned that the Workshops were going to be closed. In my spoken conference paper, I provided images taken from news footage, and

combined these with the voice of Dave Hicks, one of the union officials whose job it was to break the news to the workers that they would be losing their jobs. Hicks spoke about these events when he was being interviewed for the Workshops History Project, some years after the event, but was clear that the memory remained painful (Hicks 2001). In particular, he recalled men in mid or later life, who had expected to end their working days at the Workshops, being robbed of the security that had been the hallmark of a trade in the railways. The shocked disbelief evident in their faces was captured by the cameras of the media and shown on the television news that night (some of these images may be viewed online, see Bunt n.d.: places (flagpole)). The closure was extremely divisive and many workers retain deep bitterness, as discussed below.

Some of the stories that historians must tell in order to keep faith with the reality of the past, and consequently the interpretations of particular sites, are extremely divisive; none are more so than the closure of the Workshops. The 'soft option' is either to tell it as a story of 'inevitability' — the age of large industrial workshops had gone by the 1990s, and so it was inevitable, indeed, a sign of 'progress' that the Workshops would close. It was just a matter of *when*, rather than *if*. That version satisfies the developers, who deal in upbeat, positive images, but historians have a professional obligation to ensure that they not dealing out 'sanitised' and selective history that tells only part of the story.

Another version of the closure story, with a harder edge to it, is that it was really the fault of the trade unions, who, by becoming 'too demanding', priced the Workshops out of the market. The place was just not competitive in an age of economic rationalism. This story offends the very people who wanted the workers' stories told in the first place — and is not more accurate than the first one. The other 'soft option' may appeal to the unions, but it, too, tells only part of the story. The Workshops were an efficient and competent outfit that were closed down by a union-busting, anti-Labor State government.

The story the Project has sought to tell has elements of all of these accounts, but, more importantly, tells of the redundancies, the suicides, the depression and the impact on Midland — always a struggling, working class town. Peter Carty (2002 &c. 2005), a boilermaker, who has since been diagnosed with asbestosis, graphically represents the anguish reflected by so many workers:

They sacked all these bloody people ... they [didn't] debrief you. If you've been trained up to that and you're good at what you're doing [and] they don't debrief you, meaning that, okay, this is going to happen and that's going happen. All those clever bastards, you know. How do you tell thousands of blokes that? They just shut the gate. 'There you go. Bad luck.' ... Some blokes never got a job again — never got a job again — never ever — and can't understand why they could never get a job again because they had always worked. Lined up, did their job faithfully. 'I never did anything wrong' [was their reaction] ... One particular bloke, I grew up with him [and] he gives me his money and says, 'You're a grandfather' and he went home and shot himself. Some blokes drunk [sic] themselves to death. Other blokes went home and beat their kids and all sorts of things because it was so — 'what do I do?'. It was like coming out of the army or an army area now. They weren't debriefed. If they shut a place down now they start to farm out easy, if you've been in a position a long time. They didn't do that.

Some ways of telling this story have already been attempted; others are still in the making. The following is an example. In March 2004, the Midland Redevelopment Authority celebrated the centenary of the Workshops opening in 1904 — but had not planned anything to acknowledge that a decade had passed since the closure in March 1994. Workshops History Project Coordinator, Ric McCracken, decided to stage an exhibition on 4 March, the tenth anniversary of the closure. Susan Hall, a Curtin Graduate Diploma student working with McCracken, put together an exhibition of powerful images and artefacts relating to the closure. The display included a table and chairs, where visitors could sit and chat or look at the various objects, and a book where they could write their reactions to the exhibition and to the closure. Five hundred people passed through the exhibition in the three days that it was up, and many of the comments reflected the residual bitterness that many still felt about the Workshops closing. (The author assisted as a volunteer in staffing this exhibition and was the curator's University supervisor for the project.)

Exhibitions are one way of interpreting part of the Workshops experience; another is in the design of refurbished buildings. The design on the window blinds of the Interpretive Centre is a photographic image of figures of hundreds of men leaving the Workshops at the end of the day. The Timekeepers Office at the Main Gate, where the Interpretive Centre is located, was where the workers collected or deposited their metal identity discs at the beginning and end of the day. The design on the blinds was one way of conveying the size of a workforce of 2-3000 people, and the life and movement associated with a large industrial work site filling up and emptying every day.

**Conclusion**

What then is the significance of studying the lives of these people? Does it matter if, a generation hence, while the products of their hands remain, the stories of their lives are lost? Historians believe that it matters a great deal. When we lose these stories, we lose part of the history of our society. Beyond helping us to explore the experience of working in a large industrial workplace in Midland, Western Australia, knowledge of these lives — their skills, their work practices, their customs, their working conditions — enables us to make contrasts and comparisons with workers elsewhere. The closure of railway workshops and rail infrastructure occurred all over the former British Empire from the 1960s onward. In Britain, the action of the Government Minister responsible for closing one-third of railway lines and major railway workshops, such as Swindon, ceasing operations, became known as the 'Beeching Axe' and profoundly affected many lives. Similar experiences occurred around the world, with Australia and New Zealand experiencing closures in the 1980s and 1990s, but little is known of the extent of the social cost to individuals or communities.

One could read the bitterness in the lines of the anonymous (n.d.) author of a web site devoted to the Addington Railway Workshops at Christchurch (closed in 1991 and since demolished), when he wrote that the Workshops were 'torn down because of the prevailing New Right doctrine at the time'. Incidentally, this web site has since disappeared. A similar bitterness and bewilderment was reflected in the faces of the men at Midland, when they listened to the announcement of the closure of their workplace.

Lives separated by thousands of kilometres of distance were

bound by the common experience of working 'in the railways'. Just how much is similar and how much is unique to each particular worksite has not yet been ascertained, for there is so much still to learn. Making the knowledge accessible to both scholars and the interested public, as well as maintaining the integrity of the workers' stories, remains a major challenge.

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