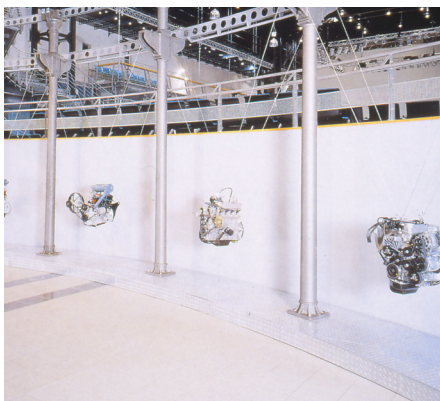


Memento Motori: museum age = motor age

DR ROB PILGRIM, THE PIONEER SETTLEMENT, SWAN HILL

Thoughts about the future inevitably lead to visions of futuristic cars or aerial transport. With each innovation in transport technologies a predecessor becomes a collectable. However, what transport collections could tell us about our history often gets lost on a crowded museum floor. Dr Rob Pilgrim makes a case for good story telling in our transport museums.



It can be argued that the twentieth century with all its complexities and confusions, was largely constructed by the development of increasingly efficient transport systems. Whether military or civilian; private or public; massed or individual; revolutions in the nature and efficiency of transport of goods, people and information continue to be major factors in the construction of contemporary society.

This may well be reflected in the fact that, after art galleries and local history museums, transport museums are probably the most prolific. Whether rail, maritime, military or motor the profusion of museums with transport at their core, is a reflection of the importance of the role of transport in contemporary life.

At the same time, the contemporary museum was developed in a parallel process which is almost certainly linked. Without the impact of private and massed transport to bring visitors to their doors, it is unimaginable that the numbers of museums would have risen to today's levels.

Interpreting the impact and nature of transport on society in museums is, however, not a simple thing. Transport is a process, and museums are rarely good at showing processes, especially not complex processes. Rather, museums exhibit objects as nodes along that process and, to a large extent, transport museums have singularly failed to bring to life the larger picture created by what is a network of nodes and links.

Many transport museums arise from roots in private collecting and reflect the desires and needs of an 'original' collector: they are often nostalgic storehouses of iconic objects.

Collecting in these institutions is rarely structured and logical; and any notional Collection Management Policy is based purely on availability and personal likes and dislikes.

This nostalgic focus on shiny toys is problematic given that they are so often very large—museums of maritime technology in particular suffer from this. To accrue a representative collection is very space intensive and very often that need for space results in objects being crammed together further exacerbating interpretive problems.

Top: The Atwell Wilson Transport Museum, Stockley Calne, UK. A typically crowded private museum. Below: The Škoda Auto Museum, Mladá Boleslav. A history of engines as art. Photos by Dr Rob Pilgrim.

As a result the exhibition and interpretation is almost invariably 'taxonomic: interpretation more akin to an art gallery—what is it called, who made it and when. Rarely is the question 'why?' asked: 'why this particular thing?'; what need in transport history was it designed to address?

Few museums with a transport focus examine the nitty gritty of transport, instead, from motor museums, through bus museums to railway museums and maritime museums, the story told is generally one of triumphant progress from a primitive past to the perfection of, not the present day but usually, a 'Golden Age'. For rail museums that Golden Age is generally one of steam; for the car enthusiast a more personal selection often reflecting the desires and needs of earliest contact with motoring.

Maritime museums are somewhat different having a much longer period of time to cover from the earliest river transport to today's container and passenger behemoths—here the Golden Age often predates the Steam Age of the Rail and Motor Age of the Road, but rather is embedded in that earlier technology of sail.

Whatever the motive power of the Golden Age, however, it is almost always depicted in a romantic vein—only one side of the coin is shown, the romance of steam, sail or early motoring denying the grime, filth and danger which accompanied it.

As a general rule then, transport museums usually fail in the basic role of the museum—storytelling. Instead they are often simply storehouses of large shiny objects that are used by visitors to tell their own stories; as hooks on which to hang their own tales of 'remember when...'

Dr Rob Pilgrim, Senior Curator, The Pioneer Settlement, Swan Hill. Rob's PhD—*The Blokemuseum—analyses the role and place of Motor Museums in society; and currently he interprets The Pioneer Settlement's transport collection—in context.*
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