

The Sports Heritage Jigsaw

MARGARET BIRTLEY, MELBOURNE CRICKET CLUB

Margaret Birtley outlines the advantages of complementary collections and online collaboration to make the most of distributed collections such as sports heritage, across far-flung borders.

The National Sports Museum (NSM) exhibition *Ashes to Ashes* focussed on cricketing clashes between Australia and England from 1861 through to the 2010/11 Test. We were proudly able to illustrate each encounter with an item drawn from collections held at the Melbourne Cricket Club, including archives, ephemera, equipment, uniforms, photographs and even jewellery. In other words, we presented historical evidence of eighty matches across a period of 150 years, without needing to borrow from other collections – a rare experience in the museum world.

More usually, museums become aware of the complementary strengths of other museums and collections, and help their visitors to discover other pieces of each thematic 'jigsaw' across many distributed collections, nation-wide. Thus, people wanting information on an Australian Test cricketer can find items not only at the MCG, but also at other stadiums, with cricket's peak bodies, at the player's club(s), with the cricketer (and his or her family), and also at the International Cricket Hall of Fame (incorporating The Bradman Museum) at Bowral, NSW. For strong collections relating to Victoria's two great Easter sporting competitions – the Stawell Gift, and the surfing carnival at Bells Beach – the visitor should start at the Stawell Gift Hall of Fame and at the Surf World Museum in Torquay, but should be alert to the fact that there may be other relevant items located elsewhere.

The material evidence of sporting heritage is clearly part of the distributed national collection. I believe it is important for significant objects to be retained close to their original context



Below: The British and Australian sports ministers chose the NSM's display of Olympic relay torches as the background for their announcement of an Olympic wager on 17 March. The Helsinki torch—part of a distributed international collection—is represented in its absence by a black silhouette just above Minister Kate Lundy's right shoulder.

wherever possible. I therefore don't think it's necessary or appropriate for the NSM to try to acquire 'every Brownlow Medal ever' or every VFL/AFL Premiership Cup. Naturally, the NSM is thrilled to have some of these trophies on display, but we don't need all of them! Much better for families and clubs to hold the evidence of their own history and heritage while they can. The NSM is pleased, of course, to be offered donations when the time is right.

The Australian Government has just announced an investment of \$2.6 million so that Netball Australia can establish a permanent home in Melbourne for Australia's leading female sport. This will include a comprehensive exhibition of Australian netball and its proud history. What will that mean for the NSM's existing display about netball? Hopefully, the NSM and Netball Australia will continue to collaborate so that visitors at either location can learn more about netball heritage. We might jointly create a 'museum without walls' for netball—a register of related objects held in different locations. This might generate a physical trail for tourists to follow, and an authoritative set of hyperlinks for the online explorer.

In the online environment, much has been achieved by websites that enable aggregation of disparate information, such as the Collections Australian Network, eHive and Trove. Digital technology provides powerful tools that can help 'join the dots' between scattered objects and thus contribute to our understanding of single stories and broader themes. The Rugby Moments website – created via eHive in conjunction with the 2011 World Cup – encourages museums and collectors to showcase

their rugby memorabilia, and allows users of the website to tag or describe the items online so as to enrich the ways in which other users can find and appreciate that memorabilia. Online documentation bridges generation gaps, bringing together the technical skills of younger people with the historical knowledge of older generations – as was achieved through the *Now and Then* community heritage wiki project in Mallala, launched in 2009.

Distributed collections can be appreciated on an international stage as well as locally. Consider, for example, the torches used in the relay that was an innovation at the 1936 Olympic summer games, and has since become a tradition. Our Faster, Higher, Stronger gallery displays a torch from all except one (Helsinki 1952) of the summer relays. If a Helsinki torch existed in another Australian museum, we'd be thrilled to promote its availability there, and would encourage patrons to 'view every torch' by visiting both museums. The Sports Museum of Finland is currently undertaking a project to describe all of the surviving 1952 torches. As things stand, the Helsinki torch that's closest to Australia is probably the one held by the Olympic Museum in Lausanne. Any reader able to provide a Helsinki torch to save Australians travelling quite that far is invited to contact the author.

Margaret Birtley, General Manager Heritage and Tourism, Melbourne Cricket Club. The National Sports Museum is located at Gate 3 of the Melbourne Cricket Ground: www.nsm.org.au
You can contact Margaret Birtley at: margaretb@mcc.org.au