

Submission  
No 31

## INQUIRY INTO MUSEUMS AND GALLERIES

**Organisation:** Lithgow Small Arms Factory Museum

**Date received:** 10 August 2016

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Lithgow Small Arms Factory Museum submission to the General Purpose Standing Committee No. 4 inquiry into the organisation, structure and funding of museums and galleries in New South Wales.

Our submission covers three main areas;

- (1) Australia's technological heritage
- (2) The problems facing a museum with firearms
- (3) Problems confronting local and regional museums

**a) NSW Government policy, funding and support for museums and galleries, museum and gallery buildings and heritage collections, including volunteer managed museums and museums managed by councils.**

Much of the state's technological heritage is held by volunteer groups and local councils.

The following would benefit:

- A comprehensive state register of every museum in NSW with a rating of overall collection significance and significant objects.
- Adequate funding for training of volunteers and others looking after significant collections (perhaps a scheme modelled on the 'small business bus' that travels to all parts of the state).
- A body that is able to advise and offer real help to museums with significant collections or objects that are under threat.

*The Lithgow area is strong in industrial heritage, once being known as the 'Birmingham of Australia' The industries which spawned the now historic monuments of an earlier time include the shale oil industry, Hoskins Iron and Steel Works, coal mining, gold mining, copper mining and smelting, tweed & woollen mills, Lithgow Pottery Works, breweries, brickworks, Cobb & Co coach building workshop, Zig Zag Railway, pioneer freezing & refrigeration works and the Small Arms Factory (SAF).*

*The SAF site, where the Lithgow Small Arms Factory Museum (LSAFM) is situated, is of national significance although official state and federal recognition are continually blocked by vested interests. The site is presently owned and operated by a foreign owned multi-national corporation and large parts of the site are in serious and imminent danger of demolition.*

**b) Potential funding impacts on museums and galleries affected by Council amalgamations.**

Not all council amalgamations are detrimental.

*In the case of Lithgow, Council was deemed 'fit for the future', but we believe we*

*would be better off had our council amalgamated. Lithgow Council traditionally is sports-oriented and we believe their approach to heritage and the museum sector lacks sympathy and competence. They now say they are in debt and will be cutting services but have not yet stated which services will be cut. We strongly suspect that the Museums Advisor program will be one of the cuts.*

**c) Opportunities to revitalise the structure, reach, and impact of museums and galleries, and their research and collecting priorities.**

Moving significant objects to large city museums makes them accessible to a much greater audience, but the historical site of the relic lends authenticity to its story that is not possible once it is removed from its site. The relics that are left show Australia's progression as an industrial nation. Many of the sites and the machinery are large and unwieldy, but they should be preserved. It is often left to small dedicated bands of volunteers with little or no resources, working against the ravages of time, and often without a succession plan. Perhaps larger museums could sew the seed of interest for visitors to explore further. On the other hand, specialist regional/outback museums should be assisted to raise their standards to match those of their city counterparts, albeit on a smaller scale. It is a great shame that this may well be the last generation to know Australia as a manufacturing country.

*The LSAFM is possibly the only museum of its type in the world that is situated on the original factory site. There is no doubt the site itself is considered "hallowed ground" by many visitors, especially those who have a Lithgow made rifle or used one. Those whose forbears worked at the Factory get the feeling they are in a place of personal significance.*

*The imposing sight of the old factory buildings behind the museum is considered by many visitors and museum volunteers to be an awe-inspiring and important part of the museum experience. Lithgow SAF was always at the cutting edge of technology. The "turn-key" contract to build the factory was a virtually unknown concept at the time. In fitting out the factory, the American contractor Pratt & Whitney, introduced the "American Method" or high precision mass production into Australia, thus pioneering this method of manufacturing in this nation. The museum's collection includes 21 extant machines from the original 1912 P&W contract that are currently held in storage for lack of a building to set up an operational display complete with overhead shafting and pulley system.*

*It is insulting to the Australian people that the very future of this museum, and this significant site are in the hands, and at the whim, of a foreign owned corporation who cares little for our heritage. Government, either State or Federal, must step in to secure and protect these nationally significant assets, especially as we celebrate the centenary of World War I. The plight of the factory*

*that supplied our soldiers, not only during that conflict, but all major conflicts, and the museum that commemorates the factory's endeavours are completely ignored.*

- d) Access to the collections of the MAAS, the Australian Museum and any other state collections held in trust for the people of NSW, and programs to promote physical and online access.**

The MAAS invaluable "Outreach" program allows loans of objects to regional museums, making their collection accessible to many more people. Firearms however, come under the jurisdiction of NSW Firearms Registry who fail to adequately differentiate between firearms in common use and those that are collector objects. The section on museums in the Firearms Act 1996 is not clear in its purpose and needs to be rewritten with clear intention and especially in consultation with the museum community.

*The MAAS has a large and varied firearms collection, virtually nothing of which is on public display. A few years ago LSAFM had on loan from MAAS a unique Australian made McCrudden light machine gun for around one year with the full knowledge of NSW Firearms Registry. Out of the blue Firearms Registry decided loans of firearms to other museums were not part of MAAS' "core business" and contravened the Firearms Act, completely ignoring the Outreach Program and the outward loan policy of MAAS. Although subsequent representation by LSAFM overturned the ruling, by that time we had already returned the McCrudden gun and replaced it with another display.*

State museums need to be transparent and accountable for de-accessioning collections and items donated to them in the past in good faith. Actions such as auctioning off whole collections cause future donors to be sceptical of the ethics of museums and "State collections held in trust for the people of NSW".

*Charles Melbourne Ward (Mel Ward) set up a museum of colonial firearms c.1943 in the grounds of the Hydro Majestic Hotel in Medlow Bath. Upon his death it was bequeathed to the Australian Museum who accepted the donation in 1966. In unforgivable circumstances, some years ago the collection was taken from the private museum that was displaying them on loan and was unceremoniously sold off at auction. The Ward Collection of firearms no longer exists.*

NSW Police Ballistics has had a very comprehensive reference library of firearms since 1936 with many duplicates and items that are never going to be used as a ballistics reference. These and duplicate firearms should be made available for museums. Bona-fide researchers should also be allowed access to this collection.

**e) Sale of the Powerhouse Museum site in Ultimo and its proposed move to Paramatta, and whether there are alternative strategies to support museum development.**

There are still those who remember the old Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences Sydney and who lament the “had to have” relocation of this fine museum that had stood in the CBD for over 130 years. Many saw the move to the Powerhouse Museum as a backward step, with many objects disappearing from public view. Now just 28 years later another move is under way with just the feasibility study alone costing in the order of ten million dollars!

We question whether it is the museum sector that wants this change, or if it is being done purely for economic and political reasons.

**h) The economic impact of museums and galleries on cultural tourism, and their role in supporting the visitor economy in Sydney and regional NSW.**

The decline in manufacturing and mining of natural resources are threatening the existence of many regional towns. An example of this is Kandos in the Central West of NSW. When the Kandos Cement Works closed down a few years ago the town was left with nothing but to reinvent itself as a tourist destination.

*The LSAFM is a specialist museum that proves to be a drawcard for over 6,500 people, and this number is growing yearly. Due to the Factory history and continuing interest in its products as collector items, the museum has a world-wide reputation and many visitors come from all over Australia and the world especially to visit it. These visitors spend a considerable amount making trips across the country or flying into Sydney then travelling to Lithgow, notwithstanding the benefits for the local economy, places along the way benefit as well. Museums with higher visitation contribute even more to the economy of NSW.*

**i) Any other related matters.**

**English, European and US models**

The National Trust in the UK run a scheme where visitors to historic sites pay a standard entry or a “Gift Aid” entry that includes a voluntary donation of at least 10% of entry fee that is put towards restoration and upkeep of the property. Included is a Gift Aid declaration form that allows the National Trust to claim an amount equalling 25% of the admission fee from the British Government.

From information by The American Museums Association, the majority of museums in USA are non-profit. Unlike many parts of the world where major museums are largely supported by the national government, US museums keep

their operations going by cobbling together a mosaic of funding sources – government, corporate, the private sector, and increasingly, from earned income and selling off assets. The largest share of museum operating revenue comes from donors in the private sector. This is defined as individuals, charities and philanthropic foundations, as well as corporate sponsors.

Unfortunately Australia is not renowned as a giving society.

In November 2015 the UNESCO General Conference adopted the text of a new standard setting instrument on the Protection and Promotion of Museums and Collections, their Diversity and their Role in Society. This certainly shows how museums are regarded in the world picture.

### **Issues in running a museum that collects and displays firearms**

Parts of the firearms regulations and act need to be rewritten with museums in mind. Past NSW firearms consultative committees have never had a representative for museums on the panel. This oversight needs to be corrected in any current or future committees as recommendations from the Committee can have an extremely detrimental effect on museums, and allow Government legislate laws that go against museum practices and their obligation and duty of care for their collections. Already in Australia, all Military run museums must permanently deactivate all of the firearms they hold. This should be seen as desecration of museum objects, and we do not believe any other class of museum object would be open to such destruction of its integrity.

*A few years ago a past consultative committee put forward a number of draconian measures directed at museums that would have slipped through had not LSAFM heard about it through one of the Committee members and fought to have them quashed.*

Concerning unregistered firearms in the Community, there should be an easy and consistent way for museums to register and legalise firearms that are handed in to them when donors wish to remain anonymous. By accepting and registering these firearms, museums are removing them from the streets.