

**Submission
No 93**

**INQUIRY INTO GOVERNMENT'S MANAGEMENT OF THE
POWERHOUSE MUSEUM AND OTHER MUSEUMS AND
CULTURAL PROJECTS IN NEW SOUTH WALES**

Name: Professor David Philip Miller

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From: Professor David Philip Miller, BSc, MA, PhD, FAHA, FRHistS

I write in response to the call for public submissions to the Select Committee on the Government's management of the Powerhouse Museum and other museums and cultural projects in New South Wales. I address specifically the terms of reference in 1 (a) (iii) and (iv), that is the risks to the collections involved in the move of the Powerhouse Museum to the Parramatta site and the impact of such a move on the heritage status of the Ultimo site.

The significance in the history of modern civilization of the Boulton & Watt Beam Engine currently housed in the Powerhouse Museum is impossible to overestimate. Much to my delight, in August 2019, in connection with the 200th anniversary of James Watt's death, my recent biography of Watt was launched next to the Engine. The Engine was in steam, and greatly admired by those attending who saw it within the lofty gallery near the Museum entrance that has housed it since 1988. Dating to 1785, it is the oldest surviving rotary steam engine of the sort that began to drive the mills, factories and public infrastructure of rapidly industrialising Britain from the 1780s and then in the rest of the world. Steam power did not disappear with later electrification: from the beginning, the electrification of modern societies depended upon the use of steam to drive machines producing rotary motion to generate electricity, and such processes remain crucial. There is a long, instructive continuity of technological development between the Engine and the power systems of the modern world. For this very profound reason the building of the Boulton & Watt Beam Engine into the fabric of the Powerhouse Museum in proximity to other large exhibits in the steam hall telling the story of our steam civilisation from the eighteenth century to more recent times, was a truly inspired move. As a collection, housed in that way, the Powerhouse Museum's steam collection is unique and invaluable.

The great heritage value of the Engine itself has been widely recognised. In 1986 the American Society of Mechanical Engineers named it as an International Historic Mechanical Engineering Landmark. The UK Institution of Mechanical Engineers has also trumpeted the Engine's great heritage value, and in 2011 its image was chosen to appear on the British £50 banknote along with the portraits of Boulton and Watt, celebrating the Industrial Revolution. The iconic status of the Engine itself is not in doubt. But now the heritage significance of the Engine, the other collections around it, and the building in which they are housed are inextricably linked. The 1988 Sulman Award given to Glendenning's Powerhouse Museum was, I believe, given partly for the realisation of this connectedness, physically, in design, and in historical symbolism.

The significance of the Engine, both in itself and in its current location and interpretive context, makes it crucial that we recognise the very great risks involved in moving it. Engines of this type were always built into the fabric of the buildings that housed them (which is one reason why few have survived) and the difficulties and dangers in moving them are considerable.

Those risks involve the integrity of the Engine itself but also the integrity, and heritage value, of the entire Powerhouse Museum site, including the 1899 Ultimo Tram Depot, now the Harwood Building.

To effectively destroy this marvellous combination of historic Engine, exciting collection of later stationary and locomotive steam devices, and appropriate housing in a repurposed power generation site would be a great tragedy. I'm incredulous that while the UK has demonstrated the value of steam heritage to its international tourism industry and global brand, the NSW Government, having sponsored the design and development of one the world's great installations and exhibitions about steam power and the industrial revolution, anchored by the Boulton & Watt Engine, is now seemingly intent on demolishing this great museum.

I urge you to recognise and assert the tremendous heritage value of the entire Powerhouse Museum site at Ultimo as an inspired, internationally admired, combination. In fact the value of that combination is so high the whole Powerhouse Museum, including the Galleria, Wran Building, Harwood Building and the steam collection should be listed on the State Heritage Register. To risk the move of the collections to Parramatta and to destroy the heritage value of the entire Powerhouse site at Ultimo would in my view be disastrous and I urge the Committee of Inquiry to so find.

Sincerely

David Philip Miller

(Note on author: I am Emeritus Professor of the History of Science and Technology at the University of New South Wales, a Fellow of the Australian Academy of Humanities, of the Royal Historical Society (UK), and an elected member of the Académie Internationale d'Histoire des Sciences (Paris). I have more than forty years of experience researching and teaching in that area of inquiry and am the author of numerous papers and books on the role of science and technology in the Industrial Revolution and in subsequent economic and social development. My most recent book is *The Life and Legend of James Watt: Collaboration, Natural Philosophy and the Improvement of the Steam Engine* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2019), which is a study of the life, work and reputation of one of the chief progenitors of the Boulton & Watt Beam Engine, that iconic item in the Powerhouse Museum collections).