

Museum reviews

Exhibiting transport history

With this issue the *Journal of Transport History* embarks upon what is hoped will be a continuing series of full-length reviews of transport museums and exhibitions. In a way it is strange that the journal has taken so long to move in this direction. One of the founding editors, Jack Simmons, was passionate in his advocacy of museums as a means of informal education in transport history. His *Transport Museums in Britain and Western Europe* (1970) was for long the standard – indeed, the only – full-length critical work in English on the subject. Parts of it were adumbrated in the journal in the 1960s, but no one else took up the challenge of reviewing exhibitions regularly. In retrospect this failure was all the more disappointing because it meant that the journal, always catholic in its willingness to embrace audiences apart from the obvious one of professional academic historians, missed an opportunity to work closely with the rapidly expanding world of museums. Historians were denied the chance of being alerted to displays of particular interest, exhibitors lost the benefits of constructive criticism.

Now is the time to try again. The success of this section will depend in no small measure on the willingness of the journal's readers, and others, to undertake the sometimes arduous but usually enjoyable task of reviewing. It is my hope that the journal will be able to offer a critique of new museums or exhibitions not long after they open. In the case of temporary exhibitions this becomes something of a priority, for obvious reasons. And, while new museums may not be opening at quite the rate of a few years

ago, the task of assessing the existing stock of exhibitions is a substantial one in its own right. Some transport displays have already been noticed in other learned journals, but even so there may well be a case for revisiting them in the light of renewals, revisions and visitors' changing expectations.

What, then, is required of reviewers? Ability and willingness to engage critically with a display's themes and evidence by drawing on the relevant historiography, naturally. But another prerequisite is a sense of what it is that museums are trying to achieve in terms of communicating with a wide and varied public, as is a recognition that in any good museum ideas always outstrip the resources available to put them into practice. Acknowledging these factors allows the reviewer to come to a fair judgement on the effectiveness of the presentation in terms of its intended audience. Often an exhibition's audience will be readily apparent even if the reviewer does not belong to the target group. But this is not always so, and it is one reason why I recommend that whenever possible reviewers enter a dialogue with an exhibition's creators as part of the review process.

Since space here is limited I can do no better than recommend that anyone interested in learning more about the purpose and methodology of museum reviews turns to Bernard S. Finn's model article 'Exhibit reviews – twenty years after' (*Technology and Culture* 30, 4, 1989, pp. 993–1003). Should anyone be interested in the practical task of reviewing they are invited to contact me.

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Plate 1 The magnificent glazed frontage of Milestones' award-winning building

Plate 2 A costumed demonstrator explains how the Tasker traction engine of 1923 works



Milestones: charming, not challenging

Milestones, Hampshire's Living History Museum, Leisure Park, Churchill Way West, Basingstoke, Hants. RG21 6YR. Phone 01256 477 766; website www.milestones-museum.com

Milestones, Hampshire's Living History Museum, opened in Basingstoke in November 2000. It is a joint project between Hampshire County Council and Basingstoke and Deane Borough Council. Hampshire County Council Museums Service's object was to find a permanent and appropriate home for its transport, industrial and domestic collections. In the most up-to-date museum thinking these are now called social history collections.

Milestones is impressive. It is housed in a very large space indeed, sunk into the ground and covered by a train-shed type roof. From ground level visitors descend by lift or stairs 10 m or so to the floor of the museum. Here the suspension of disbelief begins. The museum is arranged in a number of themed areas in which visitors are invited to explore for themselves the objects and stories they contain. The first looks at the firm of Tasker's of Andover, manufacturers of heavy plant such as agricultural and road engines. Visitors quickly become accustomed to the interpretive vocabulary that is to follow. It comprises a mix of talking figures, graphic panels, laminated information booklets and costumed interpreters. There is also the option of a free sound wand, upon which too much emphasis is placed. The visitor who chooses not to use it will be denied a great deal of intellectual access. However, indirect interpretive methods are more potent. Milestones relies heavily on detailed reconstructions of lost parts of Hampshire's built environment into which objects are carefully insinuated.

The long-lost Winchester Chesil railway station has been reconstructed, complete with small coal yard. The station building houses a static model of the station as it was in Great Western Railway days. Many visitors to whom Winchester Chesil is now only the name

of a car park were intrigued to find out how the site was once a railway station, pointing out the few landscape features that still exist. Questions such as how the GWR came to have a branch line in deepest London & South Western territory appear to go unanswered.

The reconstructed buildings demand close inspection. A feel of the brickwork and plaster confirms that they are real – Milestones is no shrine to MDF. Salvaged parts of demolished buildings, such as windows and floors, have been used to the extent where it is possible for visitors to recognise the reconstruction from memories of the prototype. One visitor looked disapprovingly into her sound wand. The anonymous voice had told her that one of the reconstructed buildings was based on a prototype from Leigh on Sea. 'It isn't,' she exclaimed loudly. The visitor could remember the original from Lee on Solent. Similar name, but a very different location.

Naturally, shopfronts feature prominently in Milestones. A shop reconstruction is friend to both curator and interpreter. It allows vast amounts of the collection to be displayed in an environment that enables the visitor to explore many types of form and function, often under the umbrella of nostalgia. But only up to a point. Bicknell's vacuum cleaner shop gives little clue to the social history of the vacuum cleaner. Whilst visitors can see and compare many types of appliance, it is difficult to gain any sense of the beginnings of their mass use, how much an appliance cost relative to buying power, who was excluded from using them, the structural factors, such as domestic electricity, that needed to be in place before a customer could consider purchasing one. If not actually misleading, this kind of object-rich display can raise points of confusion.

Demonstrations form part of Milestones' interpretive armoury. An engineering workshop is laid out complete with semi-portable steam engine and line-shaft-driven machine tools. This is a refreshing example of powerful indirect interpretation. Too often the means of industrial motive power are displayed remote from the machinery they were

intended to drive, with the engines reduced to the status of industrial sculpture. Here the process is clearly laid out, reminding us that the gleaming machines of the steam fair showground were built to be abused in the dirt of industrial and agricultural surroundings. As is always the issue with demonstrations, it is not possible to provide all visitors with this facility all the time. Some will not only miss the chance to see the workshop in action but the welcome opportunity to ask questions of a real human being.

Visitors sit in the immense reconstructed Thornycroft workshop and experience an audio-visual presentation. It features an actor playing the role of Thornycroft himself and offers a very full history of this Basingstoke-based commercial vehicle manufacturer. It is good to see that the presentation has subtitles and that Thornycroft appears to have no qualms about recounting the firm's progress after his death. The Thornycroft display highlights Milestones' many successes but also its weaknesses.

The museum provides an exceptional level of physical access to the museum service's collections; it is certainly object-rich. It scores very high in terms of visitor

services, and architecturally the building in which the museum is housed is stunning. But, taken as a whole, Milestones is unchallenging. It does not appear to have been part of the project developers' brief to question assumptions about transport, industry and social history or to open too many alternative or conflicting interpretive avenues. The displays are in no way particularly innovative, technically or intellectually, and one can trace a clear museological line back to Kirkgate in York Castle Museum. In short, the displays at Milestones concentrate more on the objects than on what they meant to the people who used them or made them.

Milestones has been finished to a high standard, the 'feel' is good, and it would be difficult to come away not having enjoyed the experience. Don't expect Milestones to be a cutting-edge example of what a museum could be in the early twenty-first century, but do expect to spend at least two or three hours exploring the vast amount it has to offer.

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