

TAMWORTH POWERSTATION MUSEUM SIGNIFICANCE ASSESSMENT REPORT Crozier Schutt Associates, August 2010

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

We have assessed the Tamworth Powerstation Museum's collection in terms of the criteria established for significance assessments under the National Library's Community Heritage Grant significance assessment program, and have found the following:

Primary criteria

Historic significance

The collection of the Tamworth Powerstation Museum is nationally significant for its documentation of the first installation of municipal electric street lighting in Australia and the later history of electrical power in Tamworth, and for its documentation of the development of electrical technology more generally, particularly in electrical appliances and lighting. Key items include:

- the two 1896 Fowler steam engines
- the Crompton voltmeter and ammeter from the 1888 power station

Artistic or aesthetic significance

The collection is primarily historical and technical in nature but its considerable collection of appliances and other consumer items is nationally significant and documents trends in the design of such objects. Items of design or craftsmanship interest include:

- Toaster, Landers Frary & Co., Connecticut, USA , 1922
- Electric jug, GEC Australia, Rapid, 1921
- Rotafridge, Malley's, Australia, 1950
- Refrigerator, pedal-opening, GEC Australia, 1936
- Fan, oscillating louvre, Webley & Scott, patent 1950
- Vacuum cleaner, Hoover Constellation, c.1960
- Bulb heater, Dowsing, 1911

Scientific or research significance

The collection is nationally significant in scientific and research terms both because of its historic significance noted above and because of the many applications of electrical technology represented in its collections. Key items include:

- the Fowler steam engines
- the Crompton dynamos (though not original they demonstrate clearly the technology of 1888)
- the potential and current indicators from the 1888 power station.

Social or spiritual significance

The story of Tamworth's pioneering role in the history of electricity in Australia is an important one for Tamworth as well as for the country. The Tamworth Powerstation Museum is the only museum which tells the story of Tamworth's role in the development of the Australian electricity industry. It was the first museum in Australia devoted to the history of electrical power and remains the most comprehensive. The location of the events of 1888 in Tamworth makes the Museum's collection of considerable local significance.

Comparative criteria

Provenance

The provenance of the site and buildings is well documented. While gift agreements are now in use for collection items and new donations are accompanied by donor interviews, the exact provenance of many smaller items collected in the early days of the Museum is not known, though most items collected came from the region covered by the power station. An exception to this is the lamp collection, much of which was accumulated through exchanges with NSW collector Mr ANF ("Fin") Stewart. The source of larger items is better documented.

Rarity or representativeness

The collection is clearly representative of the development of the electricity industry in Tamworth and of the beginnings of municipal power generation and distribution in Australia. In its broader focus, it is also representative of the development of electrical technology in Australia, and in this sense is nationally significant. Since most of the collection comes from the Tamworth district (and is therefore locally significant), it also offers Tamworth as a case study in the adoption of electrical technology in Australia. Key representative items include:

- the telegraph collection
- the lamp collection
- the electric jug collection
- the electric lawn mower collection
- the electric heater collection

More broadly, the collection includes strong representation of a range of appliances, such as toasters, kettles, vacuum cleaners, irons and fans, as well as technical equipment such as test instruments, meters, cables, installation fittings and materials. The collection includes a number of rare items significant in the history of electricity in Australia, such as

- The Edison "street tube" – the only other known examples are held by the Queensland Museum, the Queensland Energy Museum and the Edison Museum in the US.
- The only known Type C4, 75hp Belliss and Morcom steam engine still to be seen in Australia, of five originally imported
- The Siemens paper tape embossing Morse telegraph register, c.1850, one of only four known in Australia
- The Smiths synchro master frequency control clock used in the 1922 Tamworth power station to keep the community's electric clocks on time.
- Archival records relating to the administrative history of the 1888 municipal lighting system are also clearly rare and significant.

However, the most significant items in the collection in terms of their rarity are the two 1896 Fowler steam engines, which are nationally significant both as examples of steam technology and for their role in interpreting the generation of power by Australia's first municipal power station.

Condition or completeness

The bulk of the collection is on display and is in displayable condition and complete. While some items have been restored to working order, their original appearance has generally not been altered, except in the case of some of the larger pieces of machinery, such as the Fowler engines and the 1934 Belliss and Morcom engine, which were rescued from many years of neglect and restored.

Interpretive capacity

The Museum has a number of important stories to tell, most notably the role of Tamworth as a pioneer in the development of municipal electricity supply and distribution, and as a model for other towns in the installation of their own electric lighting systems.

The collection also documents the development of electrical appliances in Australia. The Museum's collection of light bulbs provides an excellent basis for the interpretation of the evolution of domestic and industrial lighting, and is supported by its arc and gas lights which document the history of the illumination of public spaces. The nationally significant ELMA collection (from Australia's only manufacturer of electric light bulbs and still to be processed) should add considerably to the Museum's ability to document this aspect of electrical technology in Australia.

The Museum's archives hold significant records (such as the Council rates book and the Borough Clerk's letter book) relating to the introduction and later management of electrical street lighting in Tamworth, as well as on the careers of pioneers of the electrical industry such as O.W. Brain, first engineer to take charge of the Tamworth Power Station, in 1889. At the same time, the Museum's photographic collection provides valuable context for a number of the stories which can be told through the objects.

The Museum has produced a number of its own publications on themes related to the introduction of electric street lighting in Tamworth, and on broader aspects of the history of electrical technology.