

Heritage Communities

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*(in)significance:
a discussion about values and valuing in
heritage*

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Heritage has many different groups of people involved. They have:

- **Different backgrounds**
- **Different motivations and agendas**
- **Different values**

So it is unlikely they will all have the same methods and approaches to heritage.

Talking with people working with large technology heritage I found three different dimensions/alignments to their approaches:

- **Participative vs detached approaches to heritage**
- **A focus on fun and creativity vs respect and history**
- **A sense of private rights vs public duties**

Participative approach:

People who see heritage as part of their own and their families' lives see it as part of their identity.

This heritage may be an object, a way of life, a set of skills or membership of a community.

Caring for this heritage means rediscovering and honouring parts of their own and their families' lives.

This gives them a very **participative approach**: their interactions with the heritage tend to be confident and physical. They see meaning — and history — as being re-created by their own actions, by “doing”.



Detached approach:

People who do not have a personal or family connection with the heritage they look after tend not to see it as part of their identity. They see themselves as stewards.

Stewardship has connotations of

- responsibility
- maintaining things for others rather than for oneself
- preserving an inheritance for the future (instead of “using up” a resource in the present)

This gives them a **detached approach**:

- intellectual
- respectful
- largely “hands-off”

But - time and cultural distance have severed their sense of direct personal connections with the heritage.

This flags two problems:

1. future generations can inherit objects from the past, but they can't inherit the personal meanings they carry.
2. without a sense of personal connection to drive interest and commitment, heritage is vulnerable to being forgotten and discarded

So can people create new personal connections to heritage??

If so - what can help them do this?

- **Owning their heritage**
- **Creating new things with their heritage**

The importance of owning heritage

You can't just do what you want with publicly owned heritage.

1. There is potential for damage:

- to the object, and therefore
- to the collecting institution's reputation

2. It is inappropriate to use it for personal gain, either

- financial gain, or
- deriving too much personal satisfaction and enjoyment from the object.

So private owners have much more freedom to play and take risks with their objects, and to make them accessible in exciting ways.



The pleasure of creating with heritage

A sense of ownership drives development of personal connections. But these connections are often not focused on the objects' historic service and function. They are much more about the new owners':

- personal tastes and interests
- circumstances and needs
- social grouping and bonds

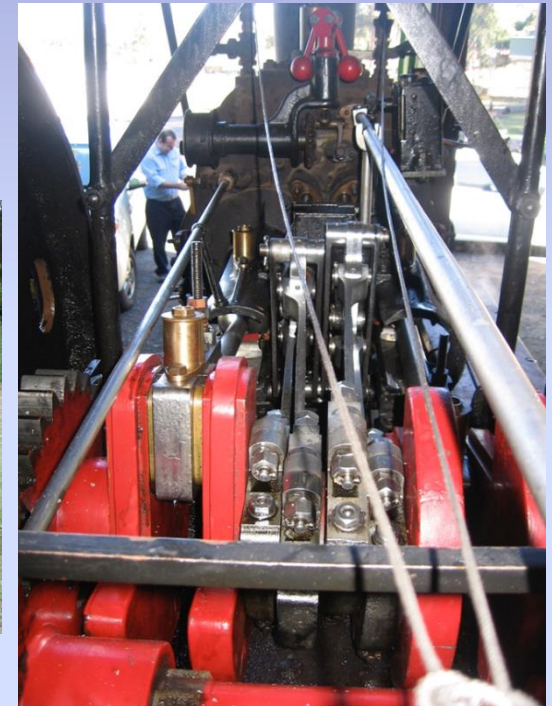


A Snoopy figurine shared by Les Bell and his grandsons



Car customisation expresses personal taste and style for both “doers” and “viewers”

Photo credit: Ursula Frederick 2013



Modern gears prevent deafness for a steam tractor aficionado

Vital, diverse, renewable heritage :

People with a detached, stewardship approach can see adaptive and creative uses of heritage as ignorant and destructive, but creative uses of heritage should not be confused with preservation or restoration of the historical meaning and identity of the object. They are a different activity, expressing different values. They are:

- using heritage as inspiration in the present, rather than as evidence of the past
- re-imagining heritage to reflect new times, new owners, new activities

The detached approach is good for facilitating heritage in the future:

- preserving accurate knowledge of historical detail for future generations to use in creating their own personal connections to heritage

The participative approach is good for maintaining heritage in the present:

- creating embodied knowledge
- creating a sense of empowerment
- creating a sense of empathy with people from the past

Different – and positive.

Acknowledgements

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Image of customised cars at Uraidla, SA, 2013 provided by Ursula Frederick. All other images were taken by the author.

References

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