



## Douglas Shire Tramway Train Control Staff

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A Douglas Shire Tramway train control staff doesn't seem like a significant historical artefact as it sits in an ANGRMS (Australian Narrow Gauge Railway Museum Society) display case at Woodford. However it has a historical importance far beyond its size, as well as illustrating some of the problems facing the preservation of such items by a small museum.



The Douglas Shire Train Control Staff on the lower shelf of an ANGRMS display case.

### Background

Queensland had several tramways owned and operated by Local Government Authorities. Most were supplanted by road transport and closed from the 1930s. The majority were the same 1067 mm (3' 6") gauge as the Queensland Government Railways and used ex-QGR equipment; some were operated by QGR under contract.

The Douglas Shire Tramway was one of a small number which were built to narrower, typically 600 mm (2'), gauges. The tramway remained in operation until 1959 when it was sold to the Mossman Central Sugar Mill. In the later years its major role had been to transport bagged sugar from Mossman to Port Douglas for sea transport to Cairns and thence export. The major income source for the tramway was lost when bulk sugar began to be transported direct to Cairn by road and the tramway was sold to the Mill for the transport of cut cane.

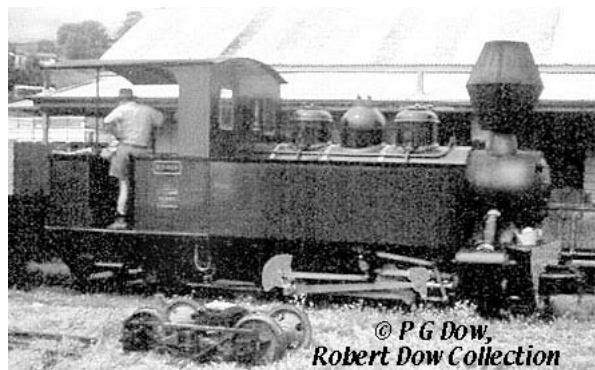
### The Train Control Staff

The Douglas Shire Tramway train control staff in the ANGRMS collection is a rare example of a

train control system used by a Shire Council Tramway. It is one of the very few objects that the Society has relating to the era of Shire Council Tramways and is in generally good sound condition suitable for display.



The staff was likely manufactured locally in Mossman and the carved inscriptions show evidence of a 'naïve' style with chisel or knife marks evident in many of the letters. Because of its size (about 600mm long) and the carved letters, it has good interpretive value. 'PERRY' carved on the staff refers to the locomotive 'R D Rex' built by Perry Engineering Company Ltd and now owned by the Society. There is very strong interpretive value in linking the staff to the locomotive and history of Shire Tramways.



R D Rex, 0-4-2 tank engine, Perry Engineering of Adelaide, b/n 7650-49-1 of 1949. Photo by P G Dow at Port Douglas 1954. R D Rex is now in the ANGRMS collection at Woodford.

The fact that the staff exists at all is evidence that a train control system was used. The staff system used was locomotive specific as evidenced by the name carved on the staff.

The staff is a tangible example of an era when all communities were striving for better communications with the outside world. In the late 1800s and early 1900s, this was typically by train or tramway. The commitment of a community to

this goal is demonstrated by way of funding its own tramway through its local council. The inscription 'SUGAR TRAIN ONLY' shows a changing role for the tramway from the passenger and general goods traffic of its earlier existence.



### Preservation 'Best Practice' for Examining and Assessing Artefacts

This section describes the proper procedure for examining and assessing artefacts, then assesses the train control staff.

**Examination:** A clear, dedicated workspace, big enough for the object and examining equipment is needed. In this case a table top would be suitable, provided it is covered with acid-free paper or washed calico. The area should be away from public and through traffic areas to avoid the object being disturbed during the process.

Good lighting is required to allow the object to be examined. Minimise the time of exposure as the light will be brighter than the recommended levels for display or storage. Use a torch as necessary to highlight areas to be inspected.

Tools include pencils and paperwork for recording findings, a tape measure, magnifying glass and camera. ANGRMS does not have an in-house Condition Report or Priority and Condition Assessment, thus industry-standard methods need to be adopted.

**Object Preparation:** An acclimatisation period (temperature and humidity) may be required if conditions are dramatically different between the examination area and the normal display or storage area. The open backed display case has the same conditions as the display room and neither area is air-conditioned or climate controlled, thus conditioning not considered necessary for this object.

The object will need to be transferred from the display area to the examination area. Pick up wearing cotton or surgical gloves, wrap in acid-free tissue or washed calico and place in padded container/box for transport.

**Deterioration:** There are no previous condition reports available and the full storage history of the object is unclear, but the object was apparently stored offsite for a number of years, then in ANGRMS' BLC wagon for a further period before being placed on display. The conditions in the BLC wagon are far from ideal as rust and

several holes in both the roof and floor area allow water to leak in. Despite these conditions the object appears to be in sound condition. Most obvious deterioration includes:

- Discolouration of the paint – probably caused by handling during use by train crew with greasy hands
- There is a surface crack on the front face. This appears to be a typical drying check in the timber and the in-ground dirt suggests that it may have originated early in the life of the staff. The object was originally used in Mossman in tropical North Queensland, and is now located in a temperate area, so the change in conditions (lower temperature and relative humidity) may have contributed to "opening up" of the crack.
- During cleaning, small balls of cobwebs were found in some of the carved letters which might indicate a lack of pest control.



- The chips in the paint are expected to have originated from the original use of the object as it would have been hung up on the loco by the iron loop.
- The iron handle has mild surface rusting but this appears stable, an indication of current relatively mild display conditions.

### Implications

Proper preservation procedures obviously pose problems for small museums. You may wonder at the seeming strictness of the procedures, given that artefacts are often in poor condition due to their working usage. As well, museums often don't have the resources to label exhibits or develop interpretive exhibits, let alone store artefacts under proper conditions.

However, the desire to preserve our industrial heritage requires an effort towards best practice to minimise further deterioration.