

# Management of the Water Corporation's Historical Collection

Leyla Allerton

Sarah Douglas

UWA School of Design

The University of Western Australia

Perry Beor

CEED Client: Water Corporation

## Abstract

*The Water Corporation owns a large collection of historical artefacts - decommissioned assets ranging in size from hand-held tools to large engines and pump sets. Their current storage site is earmarked for disposal and as such, the collection will have to be relocated. The aim of this project is to catalogue the collection in its entirety, before developing a plan which overviews ongoing storage requirements in accordance with Government guidelines and good conservation practices. Research around the collection will inform the identification of unique artefacts which hold value as records of past corporate practices and contribute to the broader social history of Western Australia. It will also lead to recommendations for the disposal of any objects which are deemed unnecessary to the collection. At the conclusion of the project, there is the opportunity to curate an exhibition of objects from the collection to go on display at the Water Corporation offices.*

## 1. Introduction

Over the past 30 years, the Water Corporation has accumulated a collection of historical artefacts; approximately 300 decommissioned assets which range in size from hand-held tools to large motors and pump sets. The storage location of this collection - a building at a metropolitan reservoir site - is set to be disposed of and consequently the collection needs to be relocated. The principal aim of this project is to catalogue the entire collection, in turn creating a comprehensive database of object records, before developing a general strategy for its relocation. Research into industry standard practices of managing and caring for collections of historical material have informed the cataloguing process as well as recommendations for the ongoing storage, use and preservation of the collection.

Prior to the undertaking of this project, limited work had been done to catalogue these objects and from a conservation point-of-view, the collection was being stored in unfavourable conditions. We had access to an inventory made by a senior member of Water Corporation about 30 years ago, which lists 170 objects from the collection and includes accession numbers, descriptions, dimensions, relevant dates, and some other contextualising notes.

Considering the Water Corporation's crucial role in the history of Western Australia, it is important to preserve this collection; not only does it hold value as a record of past corporate practices, but it also contributes to the broader history of life in Western Australia.

## **2. Process**

### **2.1 Background Research**

The project began with an investigation into the industry standard practices and methods of cataloguing and caring for collections. In terms of practical methods for cataloguing, a survey of contemporary collections of cultural and historical material highlighted that most commonly, collection databases are — or are in the process of becoming — entirely digital. Digital databases and object records are rapidly replacing physical methods of archiving and documenting. Rather than managing and storing hard-copy records, museums and galleries today favour computer software which can more efficiently store collection data and foster better conservation practices.

An overview published by Museums and Galleries of New South Wales (MGNSW) summarises the key features of Collection Management systems being used by leading collecting institutions in Australia. A Collection Management system (CMS) is computer software used to create, access, and organise object records in a collection database. Each system profiled in the MGNSW factsheet differs slightly in its structure and capabilities and caters for collections of varying types and sizes. It was necessary to research each of these systems and assess which would be most suitable for the Water Corporation, considering such factors as the size of their collection, the expertise available for cataloguing activities and the ongoing goals of collection management. There were also logistical factors to take into consideration such as compatibility with existing systems and hardware at Water Corporation.

With all of this in mind, two of the CMS's listed in the MGNSW factsheet were trialled as potential options: Collections MOSAiC and Filemaker Pro. Collections MOSAiC is a popular CMS designed in Western Australia, used by collections such as the Fremantle Prison. The second option, Filemaker Pro, is a database application which allows users to design their own interface. Ultimately, Filemaker Pro was the favourable option. Seeing as MOSAiC is geared towards larger collections, the program was more complex, and its capabilities seemed superfluous to the Water Corporation's needs.

Another area of research was the question of assessing historical significance. Certain objects would hold greater value not only as records of past engineering practices, but as artefacts in the broader, social history of Western Australia. It was within the scope of this project to assess the worth of individual objects based on their uniqueness and significance. 'Significance', as explained in Russell and Winkworth (2009), refers to the values and meanings that objects hold and how these can vary between people and communities. All of this would have to be considered when deciding which objects to preserve and which to dispose of.



**Figure 1** A fire hydrant (left) with an old ID tag still attached and a temperature meter (right) with a new tag displaying the accession number.

## 2.2 Site Work to Catalogue the Collection

During a two-week period of site work, everything in storage was catalogued and entered into a preliminary Excel spreadsheet. In order to systematically tackle the accumulation of varied objects, it was necessary to establish a systematic workflow. The process involved identifying, re-tagging, and photographing each object before placing them into storage boxes. In some cases, objects still had old ID tags attached which were used to cross-reference them against the existing inventory. Approximately one-third of the total collection was listed in this original inventory and had previously been given accession numbers beginning 80, 82 and 83 to correspond with the year of accession.

Most of the objects, however, had not been accounted for in any existing records. These objects were all identified, given new accession numbers with prefix 22 — corresponding with the current year — and appended to a new spreadsheet. Smaller objects were placed into archival storage boxes and removed to a temporary storage location while larger and heavy objects such as engines, electrical switchboards and cast-iron machinery remain in the shed and will require coordination of a team of staff to remove. Data was also collected from other sites and offices where some historical objects had been put on display.

## 2.3 Designing and Implementing the CMS

Filemaker Pro allows the user to control and customise every element of the database, hence the interface can be as simple or as complex as required. The main priority when designing the database was to ensure that it would be straightforward to use, so that anyone from Water Corporation with any level of experience would be able to navigate the catalogue, export information and add to records.

When designing the object record form, the basic structure was modelled after other systems such as MOSAiC but distilled to its most relevant parts. Separate ‘tabs’ were created for different aspects of the record including basic details, significance, storage location and condition. In each tab, text can be entered into the form and placeholders allow for external

files to be attached to an object record. Importantly, the CMS can host any form of research which demonstrates provenance and illuminates an object’s history; photographs, condition reports, statements of significance and so on. The user can switch between layouts to view an individual object record or multiple records in a spreadsheet (Figure 2).

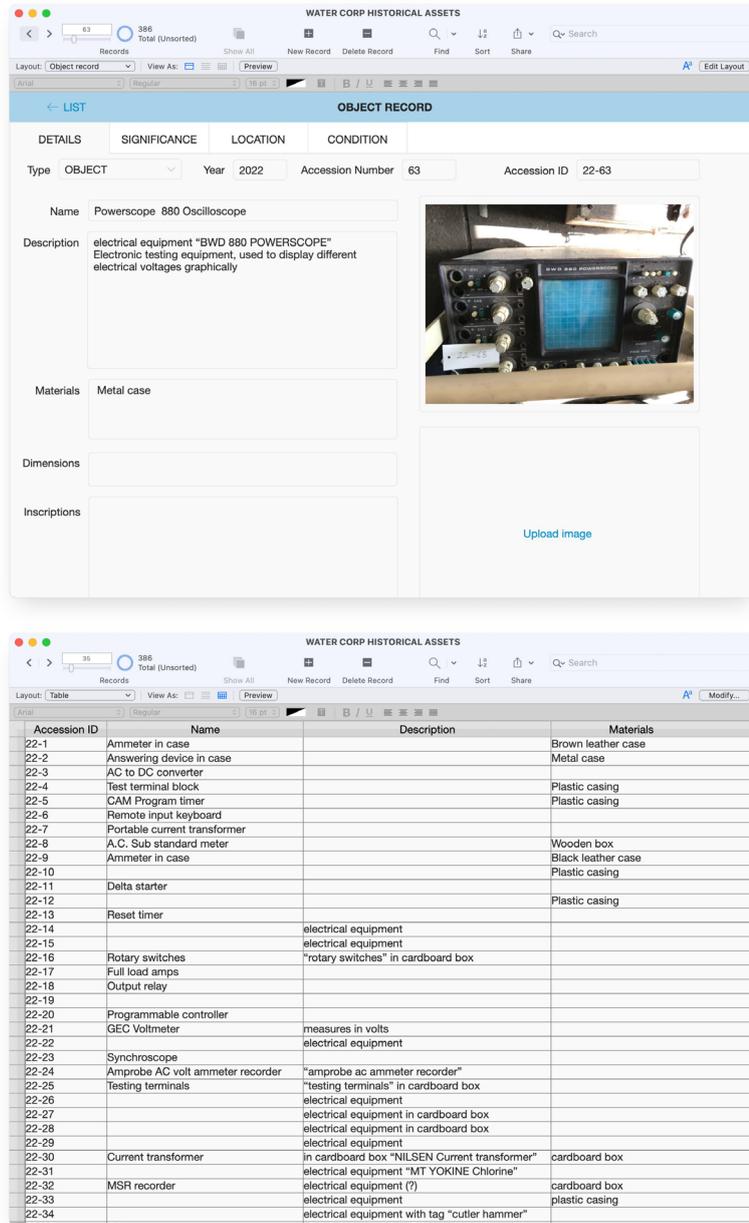


Figure 2 The object record and table layouts in Filemaker Pro.

Up until this point, all data had been stored in separate spreadsheets which needed to be consolidated within the new CMS. A major advantage of using Filemaker Pro is the ability to import and export records. All the data collected on site was easily imported from the Excel spreadsheet and automatically reconfigured into the Filemaker database.

## 2.4 Curating a Display

It was within the scope of this project to plan an exhibition consisting of objects from the collection. A curated selection of objects has been chosen based on their aesthetic and historical

value, with the intention of having them restored and put on display in a designated space at the Water Corporation offices.

The display will include some smaller tools such as a hand-held, clip-on voltmeter, which can provide a tactile experience. Certain objects may be accompanied by original advertising posters which were unearthed during the project; this supporting material helps to convey contextualising information and adds visual appeal (Figure 3).



Figure 3 A voltmeter from the collection and an original advertisement from 1948.

Other objects chosen for the exhibition include a government issue bicycle which was used by staff when conducting their “weekly rounds” of pump stations; an above ground fire hydrant from the early 1900’s; and an assemblage of keys for various sites with their original tags which were hand-made by apprentices.

### 3. Outcomes

The newly implemented Collection Management system will provide an invaluable source of information for staff at Water Corporation to refer to when planning future projects, whilst also ensuring that these historical artefacts are being adequately managed and preserved. It will be useful when making decisions for the relocation, storage, and disposal of objects. For example, the search and filter functions can be used to group similar objects together and compare their uniqueness. Using a CMS will also facilitate good conservation practice; accessing the collection remotely will reduce unnecessary handling of objects.

There is also the potential for researchers looking for engineering heritage or Western Australian history to gain access to the collection data. Artefacts can be loaned out or put on display, while their location is tracked in the CMS.

### 4. Conclusions and Future Work

The task of cataloguing and maintaining a historical collection is an ongoing project. The catalogue will need to be maintained by staff at Water Corporation who will append new items to the database and update records as the collection expands. There are still more objects on

display in the offices or in other various storage locations which have not yet been added to the database.

The task of making significance assessments and physically relocating the collection is still a work in progress. Recommendations will be made for the means of transporting and storing collection items, as well as the ideal environmental conditions of the new storage location from a conservation point-of-view.

## 5. Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge my supervisor, Sarah Douglas, and my client mentor, Perry Beor, for their enthusiastic support and assistance throughout the course of this project. I would also like to extend my gratitude to Ionat Zurr, Vladimir Todorovic, Paul Boyé for all their helpful feedback as well as the administration team at UWA School of Design for their help in making this project happen. Furthermore, I acknowledge everyone who has contributed their stories and knowledge of collection items - you have significantly enhanced my research.

## 6. References

- Australian Heritage Council. (2009). *Guidelines for the Assessment of Places for the National Heritage List* [PDF]. Commonwealth of Australia. <https://www.awe.gov.au/parks-heritage/heritage/ahc/publications/nhl-guidelines>
- Australian Museums and Galleries Association Victoria. (2021). *Small Museums Cataloguing Manual* (5th ed.). AMaGA Victoria.
- Heritage Act 2018* (WA). [https://www.legislation.wa.gov.au/legislation/statutes.nsf/law\\_a147195.html](https://www.legislation.wa.gov.au/legislation/statutes.nsf/law_a147195.html)
- Heritage Collections Council. (1998). *Handling, Transportations, Storage and Display* [PDF]. Commonwealth of Australia. [https://aiccm.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Handling\\_Storage\\_transport\\_Display.pdf](https://aiccm.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Handling_Storage_transport_Display.pdf)
- Heritage Collections Council. (1998). *Managing Collections* [PDF]. Commonwealth of Australia. [https://aiccm.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/4\\_managing\\_collections.pdf](https://aiccm.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/4_managing_collections.pdf)
- Heritage Council of Western Australia. (2020). *Management and Conservation of State Government Heritage Assets*. Perth WA
- Museums and Galleries of NSW. How to: Collection Management Systems [PDF]. [https://mgnsw.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/how-to\\_collection-management-systems.pdf](https://mgnsw.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/how-to_collection-management-systems.pdf)
- Museums and Galleries of NSW. Fact Sheet: Deaccession and disposal [PDF]. [https://mgnsw.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/fact\\_sheet\\_deaccession\\_and\\_disposal.pdf](https://mgnsw.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/fact_sheet_deaccession_and_disposal.pdf)
- Russell, R & Winnkworth K. (2009). *Significance 2.0: a guide to assessing the significance of collections* (2nd ed.).
- The Ministry for the Arts. (2015). *Australian Best Practice Guide to Collecting Cultural Material*. Commonwealth of Australia
- Western Australian Museum. *Significance* Retrieved April 9 from <https://museum.wa.gov.au/research/development-service/significance>