Sustaining Heritage in Large Organisations: Roads and Traffic Authority NSW

Maria Whipp, BSC(Hons) MTCP MPIA, Environmental Officer Planning and Heritage Roads and Traffic Authority NSW.

SUMMARY: The government wishes to retain items of the highest level of heritage significance on behalf of the NSW community, at the same time it must also ensure the safety of the travelling public and make best use of the public dollar. Negotiations over fine detail of the components of heritage items are being carried out between the NSW Heritage Office and the RTA as the RTA factors in the conservation of recognised heritage items into its asset management regime. The RTA is moving towards a greater mainstreaming of its environmental, including heritage, responsibilities and with that will come increased commitment from and training of staff who have heritage related decision making roles.

1. POLICIES
The RTA’s corporate commitment to environmental heritage is embodied in its Policy for the Management of Heritage Items, which is:

To ensure that the Authority identifies and takes appropriate action in relation to all heritage items which it affects; that the Authority identifies and manages all heritage items which it owns or for which it has care and control; and that the heritage significance of the Authority’s assets is established and maintained; in accordance with the requirements of relevant NSW and Federal legislation.

To achieve the objectives of this policy, the RTA has adopted strategies and actions which aim to:

1. identify and assess heritage assets it owns and/or controls
2. maintain a centralised information system for heritage assets
3. prepare appropriate conservation management documents for its heritage assets
4. manage, conserve and maintain its heritage assets within its Total Asset Management Program to conserve their heritage significance
5. make appropriate budgetary provision for heritage asset management
6. identify heritage items not in its ownership which would be affected by its activities
7. minimise the impact of its activities on these heritage items
8. enhance public appreciation of its activities and its heritage assets
9. provide information and training to assist its staff to understand and address heritage issues.

Letters from the NSW Heritage Office and the National Trust of Australia (NSW) in the early 1990’s reminded the RTA, and other State agencies, of the need to set up their Heritage and Conservation Registers. These are required under Section 170 of the Heritage Act 1977. The RTA Heritage Committee, which commenced in 1993 with several members of a former Heritage Bridges Committee, faced its first timber truss bridge issues in the proposed imminent demolition of Bibbenluke Bridge, a McDonald Timber Truss Bridge, in southern NSW. The questions raised by Heritage Office and National Trust representatives included:

How many McDonald timber truss bridges are in NSW? What condition is this bridge in compared to others like it? What is the heritage significance of this bridge compared to others like it? Although senior engineers knew the bridges intimately and the RTA had detailed records of the bridges, the information on the entire ‘population’ of a particular type of bridge was not in one place, and heritage significance had not been established. Demolition of Bibbenluke Bridge was put on hold until a study into the number of McDonald Timber Truss bridges was completed. The bridge was demolished once it could be established that it was a poor example of its kind, in poor condition and in an area where there was no community support for its retention. That exercise set in motion a larger study of the Heritage Significance of all Timber Truss Bridges in NSW, completed in 1998.

Figure 1: Timber Truss Bridge
By the late 1990’s the RTA also had a Thematic History (1996) which established the basis for identification of RTA heritage items as well as establishing level of heritage assessment. In addition, studies had been set up for RTA Controlled Timber Beam Bridges and pre 1930 metal bridges.

2. COMMITMENT OF MANAGEMENT
The Chief Executive of the RTA and the General Manager Infrastructure Maintenance, (the latter position Chairs the RTA Heritage Committee), have been supportive of the work of the RTA Heritage Committee. The Committee fulfils a valuable function by providing a forum for discussion of heritage issues and strategies related to the RTA. The issues surrounding conservation of timber truss bridges in particular are becoming more difficult as we delve into detailed maintenance and rehabilitation needs. In discussions with the Heritage Office engineers who are experts in timber bridges are introducing Heritage Office staff to the intricate details of replacing members, down to each stick in a bridge. Until there is a mutual understanding of each other’s needs, negotiations over what changes are reasonable and cost effective will continue to be time consuming.

Similar issues of maintenance and rehabilitation are emerging for the other bridge types and asset classes. However, timber truss bridges are a special case. At a certain change over point in the legislation, every item listed as having State heritage significance on a State agency Heritage and Conservation Register was automatically listed on the State Heritage Register. Twenty-eight RTA timber truss bridges were entered onto the SHR at that time. The emphases of the Heritage Act and the Heritage Office now came into play. The drafting of the Heritage Act and the Heritage Office staff have had to come to understand how heritage significance plays a role in the retention of a bridge or are simply asked to comply with arrangements which have been agreed between the two agencies. At this stage it has been agreed that a third party, a heritage engineer (often assisted by Engineers Australia in this process), will oversee major works agreed to in an approval from the Corporate area. It is hoped that by working in this consultative way the RTA may gain the acceptance of the Heritage Office for eventual delegation of powers from the Heritage Council for decisions on certain works, if not for all works on heritage structures under its control.

It is in addressing issues applying to major works on a bridge by bridge basis which point out where our next challenges lie. The continued commitment of RTA management to seeking sustainable outcomes has seen

3. GETTING THE MESSAGE/ POLICY THROUGH THE ORGANISATION
Representatives of the Heritage Office have been very supportive in helping the RTA understand its responsibilities to its heritage assets. However, Heritage Office staff have had to come to understand the realities of timber bridge maintenance. Timber in the bridges deteriorates and the bridges require a high proportion of elements to be replaced for the bridges to remain in operation. These bridges were designed to have elements in them replaced. Indeed, the evolutionary phases of the timber truss bridge demonstrate the various ways improvements were made in allowing that replacement of elements to be achieved safely. The RTA and its predecessors has maintained these bridges over their operational lives, and is the repository of generations of knowledge and expertise of their specific and operational requirements. The exercise in explaining our needs to the Heritage Office has had the added advantage of drawing out the skills of our Engineers in seeking solutions. For example, increasing loads requires increased strength beyond that available in timber. The use of laminates, composites or alternative materials can retain the general design and functionality of the bridge, at the same time keeping the bridge in service and retaining its heritage value.

If a commitment is not made at the corporate level then the message will not go through the organisation to where it must be applied. Many Bridge Maintenance Planners/ Engineers, while initially pointing out the cost of maintaining timber truss bridges and disagreeing with the retention of certain bridges, either come to understand how heritage significance plays a role in the retention of a bridge or are simply asked to comply with arrangements which have been agreed between the two agencies. At this stage it has been agreed that a third party, a heritage engineer (often assisted by Engineers Australia in this process), will oversee major works agreed to in an approval from the Corporate area. It is hoped that by working in this consultative way the RTA may gain the acceptance of the Heritage Office for eventual delegation of powers from the Heritage Council for decisions on certain works, if not for all works on heritage structures under its control.

In terms of heritage assets generally, RTA spreads the word on heritage responsibility in a number of ways. These include the RTA Heritage Guidelines, Aboriginal Heritage Guidelines, the Heritage and Conservation

Figure 2: Metal Truss bridge
Register and various internal directions and newsletters. This material is made available to staff and the community on the RTA website. On the website you can download material associated with the Heritage Appreciation Program and the RTA Oral History Program, the latter initiated with the assistance of Michael Clarke of Engineers Australia.

4. FUNDING ISSUES
Funding for heritage was initially in terms of funding the heritage studies in order to populate the Heritage and Conservation Register, that is, identifying and assessing the RTA’s heritage items. During the time these studies have occurred the environmental assessment undertaken on current projects has included heritage studies of broader areas of potential impact on heritage items - money spent here is more difficult to estimate. As we progressed through identifying heritage items in RTA ownership and control it was clear that many items of State heritage significance required immediate management control documents to assist day to day decision making. As a result the Sydney Harbour Bridge Conservation Management Plan was endorsed in 1998 and a revised plan is about to be commissioned. Other CMP’s have been drafted for the timber truss bridges. However, in the progression of their development, the need for a strategy to assist understanding of what is happening to all timber truss bridges in RTA care is seen as supplying a gap in knowledge. This strategy will form the basis for development of the RTA Heritage Asset Management Strategy.

Sustainable retention of the timber truss bridges is a current consideration for the RTA. The supply of old growth timber which has the required level of strength to support loadings and the longevity to avoid frequent maintenance is in short supply. Even selected logging of known individual trees can be hit and miss in terms of achieving the desired quality. The environmental issues surrounding logging of old growth forest must be weighed against retaining the cultural heritage values of these bridges. Various options are under discussion including the growing of plantations for specific use of perhaps a number of government authorities. In the meantime acceptance by heritage authorities is sought of the increased level of change which will be needed to these bridges to allow their use as road bridges to be retained. Adjusting funding systems in order to easily trace expenditure on heritage management may be needed in the future as accounting for sustainability in heritage and triple bottom line reporting gain momentum.

5. RESPONSIBILITY ISSUES – ESPECIALLY THOSE TO THE PUBLIC
The RTA cares for a large portfolio of heritage assets on behalf of the NSW government and the NSW community. As a developer agency the RTA is also responsible for heritage items upon which it is likely to have an impact, regardless of who owns those items. These responsibilities are reflected in the policy statement. In undertaking heritage assessments for populating the S170 Register or for individual projects, a massive amount of information is collected. This information is recognised as a valuable resource and several programs are in place to allow the information to be accessible. Details of the Heritage Appreciation Program and the Oral History Program are on the RTA website under ‘Environment’.

In caring for the State’s heritage assets under its control the RTA recognises the importance of making sustainable decisions. Completion of its S170 Register is a key phase in understanding the nature, significance and condition of its heritage assets. The management of those assets for the community will see the RTA facing decisions on their future. The Timber Truss Bridge Strategy has gone a long way towards identifying the likely issues. The revised Strategy addresses those issues at the detailed level of each bridge and will produce documentation to which staff with day to day management can refer in their decision making. The metal and concrete structures will have a management strategy which covers their care. They will not require the detailed attention of the Timber Truss bridges, due to their nature. Individual asset management strategies will also apply to property assets and movable heritage items and collections.

6. EXCITING THE ‘WORKERS’ AND EMPLOYEES
Generally, the most excitement created is when a heritage bridge is about to be demolished and, despite the planning, the environmental assessment, community consultation and justification for its removal, a late appeal is made for its retention. There is also even more excitement when there is potential for a breach of the Heritage Act. Perhaps this is not the ‘excitement’ intended here. However, it is instances such as these, which raise the importance of heritage to the community in the minds of staff. What may be seen initially as a nuisance factor, can be a difficult but necessary learning exercise.
After some years of effort, awareness of heritage issues has been raised within the RTA. It is recognised that we need to now go a step further in terms of directed training of staff in the use of the Heritage Guidelines, taking staff through procedures which will help them apply the requirements of the Heritage and Environmental Planning & Assessment Acts to their day-to-day challenges. There will always be those within the organisation with an affinity for ensuring heritage items are protected. We need to harness their enthusiasm.

As with application of the principles of environmental planning in the early 1980’s, I still find that the need for a Project Manager, invariably an Engineer, to ‘get on with the job’, to build that new bridge or build that new road can give rise to a position where the need to consider the environment generally (not just heritage) has an inherent nuisance value. The legislation ‘stick’ is still required along with constant reminders that there will be consequences, often to be played out in court, if proper consideration isn’t afforded to the environmental impacts, and in this case to heritage.

However, positive results are the best motivation. While the Heritage Office continues to push the RTA in recognising its responsibilities at an increasingly detailed level, we are achieving success in many individual projects, in the sphere of heritage appreciation and in development of asset strategy.

7. TRAINING AND UNDERSTANDING AT THE COAL FACE

In addressing heritage issues on a day-to-day basis asset managers, maintenance planners and environmental staff have advice available in sets of guidelines and Environmental Directions. Advice on the other end of a phone is also available from RTA environmental staff on policy and on more specific project related matters, such as how to apply for certain approvals, what information is required, how to engage a heritage specialist.

Every activity proposed by the RTA, from changing the number of operating lanes on a road, to installation of traffic lights, to major new sections of highway and town bypasses, is subject to detailed environmental assessment. Where heritage issues are identified, assessed and items subject to avoidance, change or removal, the flow through of responsibilities requires an induction of site personnel. Depending on the work, site personnel are supplied with site maps showing areas to be avoided and are advised of their responsibilities under both the Heritage and National Parks and Wildlife Acts if any objects are found.

Training of regional staff involved in environmental planning and assessment, project management, property and asset management, in their heritage responsibilities, has been conducted over the years. This needs to be delivered on a continuing basis as experienced staff leave and new staff take on their new responsibilities.

As mentioned earlier, there are two general areas of responsibility: first, caring for the heritage assets we own and second, ensuring minimal impact on heritage which might occur in the course of our activities.

8. WHERE TO FROM HERE?

The Chief Executive of the RTA has recently announced internal changes to the RTA to further mainstream environmental responsibilities. While environmental planning responsibilities are already well mainstreamed, the application of conditions arising from findings during the planning phase, the “follow through” is the focus of attention. As a component of the environment, heritage must be part of mainstreaming awareness of staff in their responsibilities. Training in those heritage responsibilities, delivering the message, will be stepped up and maintained, particularly as new staff and contractors are increasingly being used and corporate knowledge is reduced.

Negotiating the retention of heritage value to a point where questions are raised over replacement of individual bridge members has made engineering, heritage and planning professionals realise the depth of understanding required of the asset before being able to determine its future. We have concentrated on timber truss bridges because of the nature of the material and the age of those assets. Now that some mutual knowledge is being gained of operational requirements we need to concentrate on convincing the Heritage Office that RTA will incorporate care of heritage bridges into total asset management and that the RTA requires delegated authority to ensure heritage issues are accounted for while also ensuring that public safety remains paramount.

9. REFERENCES