

They still call Longreach Home

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Creation of the Qantas Founders Outback Museum

The creation of the Qantas Founders Outback Museum had its origins in a public meeting held at Longreach in 1988 when the original hangar built by the Queensland and Northern Territory Aerial Service in 1922 became available for public use. The importance of this building to Australia's aviation heritage is succinctly recorded in the statement of significance prepared by the conservation architects Allom Lovell Marquis-Kyle:

The hangar has great cultural significance for its association with the founding of the airline Qantas, now a major international airline and Australia's national carrier. The building is an evocative symbol of the early, more modest days of the airline in the 1920s when its activities were largely centered around this building. It is not often that the beginnings of a great international enterprise can be pinpointed to a particular place. In the case of Qantas it is possible and the hangar at Longreach is that place. [1]

The late Jo Shannon, a local grazier and committed member of the Longreach community, saw an opportunity in the recently vacated Longreach hangar to create a cultural facility able to promote and encourage innovation. Fired by the inspiring beginnings of Qantas, when a simple commitment by a few individuals to a new technology led to the creation of a great company, Jo Shannon encouraged the adoption of two principles for the new project:

- Honour the people involved in the foundation and operation of Qantas in its early days, commemorate their achievement in establishing an aerial outback passenger service in the era of pioneer aviation.
- Challenge the youth of today in the hopes that they may emulate both the conduct and the achievement of the founders of Qantas. [2]

Jo Shannon was committed to the story and its potential to empower, with the museum being a communication technique, rather than an end in itself. Though untutored in the ideology of contemporary museums, Shannon would have instinctively identified with the views of the American Association of State and Local History concerning the value of history in the community:

History serves us in many ways. It can inspire us with stories of exemplary lives or caution us with tales of human folly and wickedness. History can inform and educate us by providing the context and perspective that allows us to make thoughtful decisions about the future. And history has the power to delight and enrich us, enlarging and intensifying the experience of being alive. [3]

Like many other members of his committee, Jo Shannon believed that the story of two ex World War I flyers, Hudson Fysh, and Paul J. McGinness, engineer Arthur Baird and grazier/financier Fergus McMaster created a small aviation company in outback Queensland could, eighty years later, resonate with new generations seeking to invent their own future.

Stage 1 & Stage 2

Within four years of the first public meeting, sufficient resources had been generated to create the Qantas Founders Outback Museum in the original hangar. Developed with considerable

ingenuity, assistance from Qantas and help from a specialised display firm, the existing museum has successfully operated for eight years. It has averaged between 25,000 and 30,000 visitors per year. During this development and management phase, the Longreach based committee obtained two powerful supporters, John Spence Thomas, a Brisbane based partner of the management group, Gibson Associates and Captain Warwick Tainton, a long serving Qantas pilot and company heritage coordinator.

The nature of the museum, its story and the individuals involved made it inevitable that the initial project was deemed only as Stage 1. The Queensland Museum was commissioned in 1992 to prepare a functional brief for a second stage and in 1994 Noel Robinson Design won an architectural competition to design a new museum building. This structure was to be triangular in shape and have two levels. It was designed to accommodate three aircraft, with the replica Avro 504K, the first plane acquired by Qantas, acting as the centrepiece.

Simultaneously, considerable energy was committed to identifying the benefits of an expanded facility, not only to Qantas but to the Longreach community. Spearheaded by Captain Warwick Tainton, a document was produced which canvassed a number of topics including the role and function of the facility, the availability of aircraft and the long term future of a Qantas Museum in Longreach. The report^[4] also made the observation that there was a strong argument for a Qantas Museum to be located at Mascot Sydney, the long-term operational home of the airline.

Without sufficient funding these arguments were academic and it was fortunate that a strategic opportunity arose in 1998 with the emergence of Commonwealth Federation Funding and the state-based Queensland Heritage Trails Network. With a plan in place, a team at the ready and a great story to tell, it is not surprising that some six million dollars was made available by State and Commonwealth agencies to fund the project. There were however certain key conditions that had to be fulfilled prior to the funds becoming available. These were:

- That the existing plans be reviewed by an external consultant
- That future developments would not compromise the historical integrity of the hangar

To satisfy these requirements the Qantas Founders Outback Museum contracted a team comprising the author (who at that time was working for Museum Studies Consulting, University of Sydney) and Peter Freeman of Peter Freeman Architects. The subsequent review process concentrated on four key issues:

- A review of the existing conservation plan for the hangar and the development of a conservation approach for the building
- The suitability of the Stage 2 building design developed by Robinson Design
- A site analysis
- Preparation of a revised architectural brief should that be deemed appropriate^[5]

A New Set of Criteria

Following an analysis of the 1994 documentation the consultant team reached three critical conclusions that encouraged the redesign of the building to a new set of criteria:

1. Size – the consultants believed the size of the building should be increased by approximately 500m² in order to ‘future proof’ the museum in terms of collection growth and to ensure the facility was financially viable, with adequate provision made for both income generating spaces and public programme areas.
2. Form – the consultants argued the form of the building should draw inspiration from the locality and or the theme of aviation. It was further argued that the building must be on one level and should embrace the ‘long life, loose fit’ building design philosophy.

3. Location – the building should be in alignment with the airstrip and existing support buildings, with the main face of the museum being as close as possible to the tarmac. The consultants also stressed the need to ensure that disruption to traditional views of the Qantas Hangar was minimised, with every respect also being paid to preserving the existing curtilage.

In light of these observations the Board of the Qantas Founders Outback Museum made the decision to instruct the project architects to develop a new scheme that took into consideration the views of the consultants. The subsequent architectural plan produced by Robinson Design^[6] was reflective of the identified issues while also taking into consideration requirements of the Queensland Heritage Trails Network with respect to energy management and passive climate control. Following finalisation of the architectural design, tenders were let for its construction and the Queensland firm, Watpac, was selected on a fixed price contract basis.^[7]

Nearly three million dollars was set aside for the design and construction of exhibits along with the internal fit out of the building. A Brisbane based consortium, Interpretative Solutions, was awarded the contract to undertake this work. Museum Planning Services Australia was appointed to source and obtain exhibition material to complement and strengthen the existing QFOM collection. Due to open in April 2002, Stage 2 of the Qantas Founders Outback Museum will focus on the first ten years of Qantas when it was based at Longreach.^[8] The content of the permanent exhibits, which will cover approximately 1600m² will focus on four key themes:

- Creating Qantas
- Australian virtues
- Australian Horizons
- Creating futures

To ensure the interpretive objectives of the museum are met, every effort is being made by the design consultants to encourage visitors to explore the technology of early commercial flying in Western Queensland, and more importantly, the personalities of the 'founders', Fysh, McGinness, Baird and McMaster. In the final analysis, the Board of the Qantas Founders Outback Museum is seeking to communicate the individual human qualities they believe led to the success of Qantas; perseverance, hard work, self-belief, business acumen, technical innovation and... good fortune.

Telling the Qantas Story

The subsequent approach to telling the Qantas story has been shaped by the skills and background of the consortium commissioned to undertake the interior fitout, Interpretative Solutions. Three major skill sets are represented in the group - interior design, multi media production and writing. Their task has been to establish an appropriate narrative for the exhibitions, and within that framework, create an engaging environment through which visitors pass. In this context, objects, photographs, film and other media are used as illustrative tools.

This 'story board' approach reflects a number of realities in this project:

- The absence of a substantial Qantas collection
- The nature of the brief and the philosophy of the Board - 'We are more than a museum'
- The predisposition of the design team
- A commercial imperative that requires the museum to be financially successful
- A long term staffing strategy that assumes a lean management team, with museum-specific staffing being limited to a curator and education officer

These elements support the idea that facilities such as the Qantas Founders Outback Museum are essentially a hybrid of both tourist attraction and museum. Indeed, on a world scale the facility has a great deal in common with 'independent museums' in the UK, which sprang up in the 1970s and 1980s. These new museums were often based on former industrial sites and managed by not-for-profit companies or local authorities. The most famous of this type of facility is Ironbridge Gorge.

In their successful submission for the project, Interpretative Solutions identified the following key stories:

1. The Way We Were

As an interpretative device this storyline is designed to explore the society in which Qantas formed. A key point is to remind the visitors that the arrival of World War I flyers in Western Queensland in 1919, could be compared to the impact astronauts would have made if they too had descended on towns such as Longreach a generation later.

2. Outback Country

Life in Outback Western Queensland was and remains larger than life. A desire to overcome extreme hardship, isolation and the harshness of the environment was a major force in promoting aviation as a civilising agent for the region. While obviously an extremely expensive means of transport in the 1920s, all could appreciate the enormous benefit of aviation to people who needed urgent medical attention. Local doctors in Longreach, Winton and Camooweal, such as Michod and Arrata, quickly seized on the benefit of having aircraft available locally.

3. Aviation Then

This section will explore the precarious nature of early aviation and a general public scepticism to flying. The bravado of the first Qantas passenger, Alexander Kennedy, a grazier in his 80s was much appreciated by Hudson Fysh, Paul McGinness and other early staff. His statement 'be damned to the doubters' as he climbed on board the Avro was duly recorded and subsequently repeated to fearful potential passengers.

4. Meet the Originals

Aviation historians may agree to disagree but the Qantas Founders Outback Museum argues the foundation of Qantas was built primarily on the hardwork, enthusiasm, foresight and talent of Paul McGinness, Hudson Fysh, Fergus McMaster and Arthur Baird. This section of the display will seek to explore their personalities and aptitudes. The study of the lives of 'great men' for public edification has a long tradition.

5. The Big Trip

Promoted as truly heroic in the popular press at the time, the trip by Fysh and McGinness in a Model T Ford to survey an air route through Western Queensland and the Northern Territory is part of the Qantas folk lore. While not diminishing the difficulty of this exercise, there were a number of other companies and individuals similarly commissioned to identify routes that aircraft could follow, safe in the knowledge that landing strips were available at regular intervals. In the context of this museum, the "Big Trip" will be used to reinforce to visitors the vastness of the country and the difficulty of moving around.

6. Getting off the Ground

The establishment of the Company in 1920 and its subsequent development over the following years required an array of commercial and political initiatives including the

identification of shareholders, skilful financial management, a fight for political recognition for aviation and the provision of government subsidies for both passengers and airmail. The availability of the Sir Hudson Fysh collection in the Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales in Sydney will enable this story to come alive through the use of original documents.

7. Characters and Heroes

Qantas could not have developed without a cavalcade of pilots who flew long and lonely routes, engineers who serviced the aircraft, and other support staff. The museum will provide an opportunity to honour the contribution of these people such as Tapp, Donaldson, Templeton, Brain, Moody and Wigglesworth who created a distinct Qantas culture and many of whom remained with the company well into World War II and beyond.

8. Who owns Qantas?

The Qantas Founders Outback Museum is mindful that the Qantas story is not simply a Longreach story but rather one of Western Queensland. While reputedly Qantas was conceived in Cammoweal, born in Winton and nurtured in Longreach, the central point is that Qantas could not have developed without the support of Western Queensland as a whole. Without passengers and political support the airline would have perished like so many others.

9. Wings to the World

The relocation of the Qantas head office from Longreach to Brisbane in 1930 heralded the beginning of a certain 'golden age', symbolised by the Flying Boat flights to London and other destinations. This final section of the museum will seek to highlight the growth of the company and its emergence as a pre-eminent symbol of Australia on the world stage. Development of this story will also enable the museum to trace subsequent developments such as the role of Qantas in World War II in its temporary and travelling exhibition galleries.

Conclusion

My experience as the project curator has been both stimulating and frustrating, and suggests that much of the Qantas story remains hidden, in terms of artefacts. With the notable exceptions of the Sir Hudson Fysh Collection and the Qantas Historical Collection, most material remains in private collections. Many surviving items of Qantas history are essentially family heirlooms, and understandably, their owners are reluctant to make objects available. Descendants are very proud of their family association with Qantas and are keen to see 'their' history told. Opinions differ concerning the relative contributions made by individuals, with some seeing in the museum an opportunity to balance the large shadow cast by that prolific writer, Hudson Fysh.

It is anticipated some 250 items will eventually be placed on display, ranging from the log book of the Avro to 1930s promotional literature. This material will be interleaved with a strong multi media and graphic presentation which will draw heavily on material unearthed by members of the museum Board over the last ten years. It is to be hoped that the new displays will stimulate further donations of material that will strengthen the role of the Qantas Founders Outback Museum as an appropriate repository of the unique history of Qantas.

A completed Stage 2 of the Qantas Founders Outback Museum will form an important element in the Queensland Heritage Trails Network. Combined with other re-invigorated history museums, the facility should become a vibrant attraction in Western Queensland that will help to satisfy an ever expanding need of Australians to understand their identity and what may be achievable in the future. Stories and story telling do matter indeed.

[1] Allom Lovell Marquis-Kyle Pty Ltd, Architects, *The Qantas Hangar, Longreach, A conservation management plan for the Department of Transport and Communications*, 1993.

[2] Gibson Associates, Management Consultants, *Qantas Founders Outback Museum, Business and Marketing Plans, Financial Projections Report*, Internal Report, 1998

[3] American Association for State and Local History, *The Gift of History*, 2000

[4] Tainton W., *A plan for Qantas Heritage Preservation Programme and Qantas Museum*, 1994

[5] Internal briefing documents prepared by Gibson and Associates.

[6] The company has recently become part of a larger international design group, Design Inc.

[7] Construction of the building shell was eventually set at \$4.5 million.

[8] Qantas transferred to Archerfield, Brisbane in 1930.
