

SOUTH AUSTRALIAN AVIATION MUSEUM

SIGNIFICANT AVIATION EVENTS

History of the South Australian Aviation Museum Inc

Part 2: Fifteen Years of Consolidation 1991 – 2005



View of the Mundy street premises, which had formerly been a flour mill.

The year 1991 saw the South Australian Aviation Museum¹ enter its eighth year of operation. Much had been achieved since humble beginnings at Glenelg in 1984, but the future was still precarious as the Museum site at Mundy Street, Port Adelaide, was only being occupied on a temporary basis.

Brian Houlson had assumed the Presidency late in 1990 and would serve for the next four years. Brian had a background as a land valuer and was well connected within both the South Australian business and government sectors. He also brought great determination and a natural skill for overcoming seemingly insurmountable obstacles. These qualities would serve the Museum well during his presidency.



Brian Houlson

Brian Houlson was assisted by a band of able volunteers who formed the management committee and served in various official positions including as secretary and treasurer. Among them were David Byrne, Jim Rogers and John Hillier, all of whom would have long-term associations with the Museum.

For some time, the Museum had been hoping to acquire the ex-ARDU C-47B Dakota A65-114, which had been withdrawn from RAAF use following an emergency landing at Edinburgh in 1986. June 1991 brought the happy news that an agreement for transferring the aircraft to the Museum had been reached. However, the cost was \$12,000 and the

¹ At this time the formal name was the South Australian Historical Aviation Museum. In 1995 the 'Historical' was dropped and the name became the South Australian Aviation Museum, as used at the time of writing (2019).

Museum had only a tenth of that amount budgeted! The transfer was deferred for six months to enable the funds to be raised.

Among fund raising ideas was the bottling of port. Props and Mags reported:

The bottling will be held in cooler weather and will probably assist members involved in keeping warm as I am certain that not all the product will find its way into the bottles when decanted.

Bottled as Dakota Port, the venture was a success and made a profit of \$916. It would be repeated in subsequent years, with other bottles being called Venom Port (1993), Anson Port (1994), Gypsy Port (1995), Canberra Port (1997), Wessex Port (1999) and Battle of Britain Port (2000).



Ex-ARDU DC-3 A65-114 delivered to Munday Street, January 1992.

To enable the Dakota purchase several members contributed loans. The aircraft was delivered to the Museum in January 1992, but only after one of the Museum walls was removed to bring it inside.

Another acquisition made in 1991 was a de Havilland Dove Mark V without engines or propellers. This was purchased from Victoria for \$3,000. Again, member loans helped make up this amount.

Late in 1991 the Museum appointed its first patron. He was Reg Rechner, a well-known aviation identity in Adelaide. Rechner was a former WWII RAF Blenheim pilot who had managed the local branch of TAA for some three decades until retirement in the 1970s. Brian Houlson commented that:

I cannot think of a higher compliment to the Museum than to have such a person as Mr Rechner as our Patron.



The ex-Bassair DH Dove, as collected by the Museum from Moorabbin, Victoria.

Sadly, Rechner's patronage would be brief as he died in 1993.

In 1992 the Museum received History Trust of SA funding to purchase a computer to enable a Museum inventory list to be maintained. Barry Williams supervised the installation of the machine and trained members in its use.



The wool store at Ocean Steamers Road which was a WWII Pentad aircraft hangar. The Port River is in the foreground.

At this time there was a need to vacate the temporary premises at Mundy Street, which was falling into disrepair and offered no room for growth. Fortunately, David Byrne and Jim Rogers located a vacant wool store in nearby Ocean Steamers Road, Port Adelaide². Remarkably, this site had its own aviation heritage as the building was a former WWII 'Pentad' aircraft hangar. These had been designed in 1943 for the Fleet Air Arm and were fully transportable all-steel

hangars. The Museum hangar had originally been used in Darwin and was among several sold for civilian use after the war.

Jim Rogers recalled:

Recognizing it for what it was, an aircraft hangar, the committee through our recommendation made every effort to get a foot in the door there.

In January 1993 the government gave formal approval to the move. However, such were the challenges involved, often involving government permissions, that it would be another three years before the site was ready for occupation as the building needed some renovations including the provision of toilets.

Museum restoration work continued at Mundy Street, with the C-47 receiving a new lining and carpet. The Anson restoration generated some controversy in respect to its proposed paint scheme: 'trainer yellow' being finally agreed upon.

Acquisitions during the year included an Ikara anti-submarine missile from the DSTO at Salisbury, a Wright Cyclone 2600 radial engine, a Pratt & Whitney 1340 radial engine (as used by Wirraways), additional Meteor parts from Mildura including a tail section and Orion parts including a Magnetic Anomaly Detector boom.

In early 1994 a replacement patron was found in Kym Bonython, a prominent South Australian identity who had flown with the RAAF in WWII.

² Also sometimes referred to as Honey Street, which bordered the site.

Meanwhile David Byrne had been successful in a Department of Arts grant application for funding of some \$37,000 for the fit out of the new premises. However, following a state election in December 1993 there was a change of government, which led to delays in the funding and connected approvals needed for the new premises.

Acquisitions during 1994 included a Moni motorised glider and the original Air Traffic Control radar from Adelaide airport. The latter was later sold for scrap given the estimated cost of restoration.



Anson display at Munday Street.

By 1995 a comprehensive plan for development of Ocean Steamers Road had been devised. The work involved the building of a meeting room, mezzanine floor, curator's store and reception area inside the hangar. Also needed was lighting, fire systems, toilets and a car park. However, the process was complicated by the need for permission from the Department of Marine & Harbours which owned the title to the site.

The Museum was also offered the chance to host the 1996 meeting of the national aviation museums conference. However, there was uncertainty over funding and the timing was bad with the imminent move to Ocean Steamers Road. The meeting was given to the Nowra Fleet Air Arm Museum to host instead.

In October of 1995 a six-person team travelled to Mildura to help dismantle a DC-3 at the former museum there. This was being transferred to Alice Springs and the South Australian Aviation Museum would receive valuable parts in exchange.

Also at this time, the DSTO agreed to hand over its large collection of rockets, missiles and associated artefacts. At the Annual General Meeting in November Jim Rogers was elected as the new President, while



Museum hangar at Ocean Steamers Road which commenced operations in 1996 although a formal opening was not held until March 1997.

Brian Houlson became Vice President.



Museum interior, Ocean Steamers Road.

The start of 1996 saw the move to the new premises finally commence. In January the aircraft, missiles and most other display items had been transferred. However, the move of all minor items and cleaning out of Mundy Street would not be completed until the end of the year. Likewise, a 'to-do' list at Ocean Steamers Road would take several months to be properly completed. Items on this list

included signage and toilets together with phone, security and fire systems.

The move enabled entry fees to be set at \$5 for adults, \$3 for pensioners and \$2 for children.

Donations included the Roy Martens memorabilia, which would be displayed as a whole exhibit. It was decided to trade our surplus Anson parts as a complete restoration project to Nowra Naval Museum in exchange for the Sea Venom and Jindivik. The Museum also took ownership of the Fairey Battle and Merlin engine from Stephen Nitschke in exchange for the Winjeel. It was felt the Winjeel had no direct association with South Australia, and the trade was agreed despite some members being in disagreement.

Towards the end of the year Brian Houlson once again resumed the Presidency.

Such was the work involved in the new premises that a formal opening ceremony was not held until 16th March 1997. The day was a huge success, and was presided over by Diana Laidlaw, MLC. A flypast was held by a Drover, Tiger Moth and two Cap 10 aircraft in a diamond formation followed by a RAAF



The Canberra on arrival at the Museum in 1997.

Dakota from ARDU. The engines were run and throughout the day an estimated 1,500 people visited the Museum.

In February a Canberra bomber was donated which had served at the Maralinga and Woomera test sites in the 1950s and 60s. It had been stored at Edinburgh for many years before being acquired by an aviation museum in Ballarat in 1985. A team led by Stephen Nitschke travelled to Ballarat to remove the wings from the aircraft to enable transport of the components back to Adelaide in a semi-trailer. The removal of the Canberra wings was enormously challenging due to their weight and the fact that the aircraft had been stored outdoors for many years and the wing bolts had corroded. Somehow the wings were removed: possibly the most difficult task ever taken on by the Museum.

Another acquisition during 1997 was a Blue Steel missile, as tested at Woomera, for \$500.

At the AGM that year David Byrne was elected President for the first time (he would serve for four years until 2001) and Brian Houlson resumed the Vice Presidency.

A great shock to the entire Museum community occurred on 29th October 1997 with the sudden death of Brian Houlson from a heart attack. During his nine years with the Museum as a volunteer he had served seven terms as President and one as Vice President. Houlson's leadership had been instrumental in successfully negotiating and then managing the move to Ocean Steamers Road.

A few days later David Byrne wrote an obituary which included the following:

Brian has provided the Museum with a solid foundation. It will not go backward but it may not go forward at the same pace without him. The Museum he did so much to create is now an integral part of the Port Adelaide and Adelaide tourist scene ... Today it is also a business, It is open 7 days a week, [and] has 20 plus regular volunteer workers, a turnover of \$100,000 and assets approaching \$1 million. Brian could be proud of this achievement.

He provided the Museum with inspiration, vision, leadership and good advice. But most of all to those of us who knew him well he offered true friendship. In an age where traditional values are questioned, and materialism seems to rule it is often only at the loss of someone like Brian that we appreciate the value of good friendship ... the Museum members will miss him immensely.

The year 1998 saw an emphasis on restoration work, with much completed in respect to the C-47, Canberra, Vampire and Sea Venom. In addition, Warren and Caroline Newson had been restoring the DH60 at their own property. This work had been completed to a very high standard, but with the couple moving to Queensland the aircraft was delivered to the Museum.

New acquisitions during the year were another Canberra from Mildura purchased for \$3,000 and a Wessex helicopter purchased from Nowra for \$5,000. Leaving the Museum was the Dove which was sold for \$2,500.



DH-60 and the newly acquired Wessex at Ocean Steamers Road, among other aircraft.

In the first week of October 1998 the world conference of the International Association of Transport Museums was held in Adelaide. This involved about 20 Curators and Directors of some of the worlds' major Aviation Museums. Additionally, the Australian Aviation Museums Association decided to hold its annual conference in Adelaide at the same time. The Museum was asked to assist with hosting the delegates. This was a great opportunity and to quote David Byrne:

Certainly by the time we have hosted them to a BBQ and run up the engines they will know who we are and where we are.

The event was a huge success and despite being slightly overwhelmed when hearing of \$30,000,000 budgets and \$15,000,000 expansion plans the proudly all-volunteer SAAM group managed to impress with their professionalism and high standards of presentation.

During this meeting the Director of the RAF Museum at Hendon became aware of the Museum's plans to restore the Fairey Battle. In March the following year Jim Rogers reciprocated the visit and was able to secure the donation of a pair of Battle wings, originally from a Canadian aircraft. Despite the \$5,000 cost of freight, the donation was readily agreed by the Museum, and the news made world headlines in the aviation media given that only a handful of Battles survive. Also at this time, a Battle tailplane was located in Tasmania (never acquired), while two canopies came from Canada the following year.

During 1999 advances were made on improving displays, which were partly funded with a History Trust Grant. This also funded a flight simulator in a replica Link Trainer cockpit. The Meteor and Sea Venom displays were completed, as was a diorama depicting the crash of the Chipmunk VH-UEK on Eyre Peninsula.

The Museum was connected to the internet for the first time, courtesy of Pieter Van Dyk's efforts. Work also commenced extending the mezzanine to house an art gallery.

In January 2000 the new millennium began with the welcome news that SAAM had been awarded Provisional Accreditation by the History Trust of SA, who had noted that:

... we were particularly impressed by the strong collegial atmosphere within the Committee, and the expertise within the Museum on technical matters,

particularly on the documentation of collections and the conservation and maintenance of historic aircraft and objects.

This put the Museum in an exclusive club, there being only five other accredited museums among volunteer organisations in South Australia. A bonus with the accreditation was a one-off \$5,000 grant.

However, the Museum minutes of March 2000 made first formal mention of “the bridge”. This was a planned bridge over the Port River which would utilise the Ocean Steamer’s Road site. It was now confirmed by government that the Museum would need to move once again. Under the direction of David Byrne, the Museum formulated a response which indicated the Museum wanted to remain in Port Adelaide to continue to fulfil the “Museum’s Precinct” concept. Further, a vacant site had been identified and the hangar could be dismantled and re-erected at the new location. In the meantime, new capital works at Ocean Steamer’s Road were put on hold.

The year saw the creation of a Museum library with an initial collection of 800 books, half of which had been donated by Alan Kilmier who became the inaugural librarian.

During 2000-2001 two trips were made to Woomera by Museum members to source artefacts related to the DSTO collection, including parts of a Blue Steel missile.

During the year an agreement was made with Langdon Badger for display of his iconic Spitfire VC A58-146 UP-O and an associated collection of memorabilia. The aircraft arrived in August 2001 and became a major drawcard for the Museum.



Langdon Badger's Spitfire VC display at Ocean Steamer's Road

Mid-2001 brought the welcome news that the Ocean Steamers Road site would not need to be vacated until 2003 and that the government would fund the move to the vacant site in Lipson Street. Towards the end of the year Pieter Van Dyk became President and would serve until 2008, a term which would include another move which would hopefully prove to be the Museum’s last!

In 2002 the Museum became involved in a Work for the Dole scheme, where it was paid to give work experience to the unemployed (\$1,600 per person). This proved to be valuable revenue and enabled the repair of the C-47 wings, work that was completed to a high standard (this later featured in an ABC documentary on the Work for the Dole scheme).

During the year a Nomad aircraft was acquired from Ballarat, albeit without engines, and a crashed Jindivik drone was recovered from Roxby Downs.

An engine run event held in July was the most successful to date, with over 450 visitors and some \$4,000 raised. At the 2002 Annual General Meeting John Hillier stepped down as Secretary after a stint of 13 years and took up the position of Treasurer³. On the financial front, total revenue for the year was \$37,411 with an accounting surplus of \$20,851.

Indeed, the financial health of the Museum continued to improve, with January 2003 providing the best ever monthly door takings of \$1,500. Among several grants received during the year was one from the History Trust which enabled the purchase of Mosaic software to help manage the Museum's collection.

Much preservation work continued during the year and some non-core items were traded elsewhere: a radar van went to the Military Vehicles Museum and a searchlight went to the AWM.



David Byrne addresses the 2003 AGM with a map of the new Lipson Street site.



July 2004 school visit, Ocean Steamers Road.

Several meetings were held during the year addressing the upcoming move. In April, a shed (current workshop) and many containers were allocated to enable temporary storage of items while awaiting the final move. The initial budget for the move was \$1.2 million but this had blown out to \$1.7 million. The Transport Department had wanted a 10 plus 10-year lease for the land but the Museum pushed for a 25 plus 25-year lease. By November the Museum had been notified that they

³ John Hillier has remained in this position until the time of writing in 2019 ... marking an extraordinary period of service as either secretary or treasurer since 1989!

should vacate the Ocean Steamers Road workshop by the end of January and to this end, many stillages and some containers were being sourced.

In October 2003, Alan Killmier located the Grosvenor Cup, which was one of the original trophies held by the Royal Aero Club of South Australia. It was on sale at an antique dealer's premises in Adelaide and was subsequently purchased for \$600, an amount partly raised through donations from former Aero Club members.

During 2003 there was a pick-up in membership numbers. New members included Paul and Nigel Daw, John Roberts and Wayne Lee, all of who would move into leadership roles in the Museum in the future. By the end of the following year there were 72 members in total.

The year 2004 was to be a landmark with the Museum moving to a permanent location.



Sign at the Lipson Street site forecasting an October 2005 opening date for the new premises, which would prove overly optimistic.

Fortunately, the January deadline to vacate Ocean Steamers Road was pushed back to a more realistic December. Many trailer loads of material were moved to Stephen Nitschke's country property north of Adelaide which became the "northern storage depot". Much rubbish was also disposed of.

During the year successful tenders were lodged for two Macchi fuselages

and engines to be acquired for a total of \$9,000. These were eventually collected from Wagga Wagga in December with various parts being sourced from other

locations.

February 2005 saw earthworks commence at Lipson Street for a new workshop and administration block – they would be completed by the middle of the year. A massive amount of work was subsequently undertaken by many members of the Museum. The Ocean Steamers Road site was closed to the public from 5 May. Late that month the process of moving 58 shipping containers to Lipson Street began.

In July the main hangar was dismantled, and the frames were moved to Lipson Street for re-erection.

Behind the scenes, the Museum was under financial pressure for this period of over six months with no admissions income. A grant of \$6,000 was received for: a compactus, photographic binders, fluorescent tubes for display cabinets, an Artlab conservation workshop and Mylar acid free plastic. In July the Museum was bequeathed the sum of \$30,000 from the estate of Merle Marten, which proved to be very good timing as the Museum was facing many unbudgeted costs in relation to the move.



*Hangar under construction at Lipson Street,
September 2005.*

This year 2005 also saw the resignation of Patron Kim Bonython, who would be missed.

The Museum would eventually re-open in March 2006 with a formal opening ceremony held on 20 May 2006.

Paul Divett & the SAAM History Group

2019

NB: Paul Divett did extensive research into SAAM's history over 2017-18 and his manuscript was extensively edited for readability. A copy of the long version is held in the SAAM archives.