

Preparing the past for the future

Jennifer Edmonds, recipient of the Office of Rail Heritage's first Churchill Fellowship, packed her bags to research how other countries restore and maintain their rail history.

Perhaps Jennifer Edmonds was destined to dedicate her life to restoring ageing steam engines to their former glory.

Jennifer's award of a Churchill Fellowship allowed her to undertake a study tour of Europe and the United States to learn about rail heritage and restoration. Fellowships are awarded by the Churchill Trust and provide financial support for Australian citizens to travel overseas to study issues that cannot readily be studied here.

"[Rail heritage] is definitely a passion," she laughs. "My dad's interested in trains and he had three daughters. I was the eldest and the only one who shared his interest."

Jennifer, now an Objects Conservator with Sydney's Powerhouse Museum, recalls accompanying her father on weekends when he volunteered with a team that was operating a historical steam tram.

In 1993, not long after she had left school, and fuelled by fond memories, she volunteered to work on locomotive 3830. "I did it for two years and really enjoyed it. I felt I was making a contribution – preserving the state's history," she says.

As a volunteer, Jennifer worked under the supervision of Ross Goodman, Objects Conservator and Rolling Stock Manager at the Powerhouse Museum. When the museum advertised for an apprentice fitter and machinist in 1996, Jennifer applied.

"I was so excited when I got the job," she recalls. "There's a lot of satisfaction working with a team and there's such a great feeling of achievement when we've completed a project. Watching a steam locomotive come to life is a great experience."

Locomotive 3830 was completed in 1997, and Jennifer has now spent 10 years working on locomotive 3265, expected to be operational later this year.

Having committed to a career in rail heritage, Jennifer became aware that New South Wales was lagging behind European countries, the United Kingdom and the United States – hence her desire to win a Churchill Fellowship.

"I wanted to know what those countries were doing differently and what we could learn from them."

In July 2007, she set off for Meiningen Steam Locomotive Works in Germany, beginning a 14-week study tour of 39 museums, railways and facilities across Germany, Switzerland, France, the UK and the US.

"The Fellowship was absolutely brilliant," Jennifer says. "People gave up entire days to show me things. I learnt a lot about the nitty-gritty of restoration techniques and also about ways that volunteers are trained. I was treated like a celebrity everywhere I went and people were so warm and welcoming."

Highlights of the tour

California State Railroad Museum, Sacramento, United States Widely regarded as the best railway museum in America, it features 21 restored locomotives and railroad cars, some dating back to 1862, Jennifer says. "This was the best large museum I visited. It has an innovative layout and told their story really well. It's a warm and welcoming place for people to visit."

Le P'tit train de la Haute Somme (narrow-gauge railway), Froissy, France Froissy on the river Somme has a narrow-gauge railway and a restored train that was used to carry supplies to the front line in the Battle of the Somme. "This was the best small museum. It had very few objects but it was still such an exciting place."

West Somerset Railway, Williton, UK This railway operates using heritage steam and diesel locomotives, providing transport for the community as well as a leisure attraction for visitors. "They had just moved their turntable at a cost of £800,000 (A\$1.76 million), raising the money by running trains. I found that incredible; it wasn't from a government grant and it made me realise what's possible with good focus and dynamic leadership."

