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Inside Australia's biggest museum move in half a century



By [Linda Morris](#)

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It took two cranes, four years of planning and 50 people to ship one of NSW's historic locomotives 27 kilometres on a wintry Sydney night.

As part of what will be Australia's largest museum move in more than half a century, expected to cost more than \$6 million, the Powerhouse's star attraction, the Locomotive No 1, exited the Ultimo museum three weeks ago on a specialised frame and mechanical skates.



The Locomotive No 1 was displayed at the Powerhouse Museum Ultimo before closure. *CREDIT: DEAN SEWELL*

A cradle lifted it onto the back of a flatbed truck and trailer to make its way to the museum's Castle Hill storehouse via the M4 Motorway.

The locomotive that hauled NSW's first passenger train is among the largest and weightiest of the 3000-odd collection pieces that have been so far boxed, crated, catalogued and transported from their Harris Street home ahead of \$300 million renovations to start later this year.

The move is expected to be complete by the end of the month.

"The worst that could have happened was [the locomotive] couldn't fit out the door," Powerhouse's collection storage and logistics manager, Charm Watts said.



Destined for Albion Park: The Catalina Frigate Bird II was donated to the museum by the swashbuckling Australian aviator Captain P. J. Taylor. *CREDIT: DEAN SEWELL*

"That would have been disappointing. I measured it three times over the course of four years and then my colleagues all had a go at measuring recorded in multiple spreadsheets to be sure. "

Next to exit the Ultimo campus will be the [Catalina Frigate Bird II](#). Like the locomotive, it's been on display since the museum's opening in 1988, and was the centrepiece of the transport exhibition until the campus was shuttered in February.

Of all the items being moved, these two objects have caused the greatest concern both within and outside of the museum.

Former Powerhouse curators and trustees, and the Public Service Association are among those who believe that management and government put its priceless exhibits at unnecessary risk to prioritise convenience for builders. The fundamental principle of conservation management is to minimise all movements, they say.



Helen Johnson, Charm Watts and Alison Brennan discuss large Powerhouse items that will be transported from Pymont to Albion Park to make way for the renovations.*CREDIT: RENEE NOWYTARGER*

Watts said the objects had been moved with the greatest of care, using a matrix system of risk based on age, condition and environmental setting.

She knew of only one reported incident relating to minor paint flaking. A framed support for the locomotive did, however, “clip” a wall as it was being manoeuvred in place in Castle Hill, the museum later confirmed.

“The support was in place to protect and mitigate any damage to the object and that was the case,” a spokesperson said.

Powerhouse chief executive, Lisa Havilah, said there had been no damage to objects and the renovations were necessary and overdue.

Lifting the first of three collection railway engines “was a moment”, Watts said.

“We’ve been talking about it for so many years, and we came so close once,” she said. “It was almost disbelief after so much planning, and then it quickly shifted into this great sense of privilege to be able to be in that position with that object, to be entrusted with it. It keeps me going. They are beings to me.”

The Catalina is destined for the Historical Aircraft Restoration Society in Albion Park. Museum president, Bob De La Hunty, said a team of former engineers and pilots had with great care helped remove the wings of the historic flying Catalina in one piece from the fuselage, and dismantled engines, tail plane, and propeller ahead of its move.

Asbestos was found in its engine housing, but the material has since been isolated, and cleaned up.

For the next three years, the seabird will be parked in an indoor hangar in company with 80 other historic aircraft including the Super Constellation, the first passenger airliner operated by Qantas, which also flew Catalinas in Rose Bay.

The conservation plan for the Catalina includes monthly inspections and maintenance by Powerhouse staff. Environmental monitoring devices will be installed within and around the Catalina, the data designed to provide a baseline of the internal conditions of the hangar.

Despite the best endeavours of HARS members, former Powerhouse transport curator Andrew Grant said it was unacceptable that a museum object, deemed of national and global significance, was headed to an un-airconditioned hangar.

Meanwhile, the museum's Beechcraft Queen Air is awaiting timber housing which will hold it at an angle of 52 degrees so it can exit the museum.

The Boulton & Watt rotative steam engine, one of only two working models in the world, is likely to be kept in situ, in a protective container sprayed with a bulletproof and blast-proof coating, when works begin next year.