

## **From Black to Light and Back Again Hard to Tell Stories at the New Zealand Police Museum**

The New Zealand Police Museum houses an extraordinary collection of more than 100,000 objects that reflect the rich history of the New Zealand Police. Through our criminal evidence and police social history collections we tell stories which aren't told anywhere else; Police stories and New Zealand stories.

While the collection is unique it also has its challenges; the 'black', or forensic collection, has been managed in various ways since the museum was established in 1908. The museum was based on the '[Black Museum](#)' at Scotland Yard; its purpose was to act as an educational collection for police. A sea change occurred when the museum opened to the public in 1996; the museum was made public friendly and many of the 'black' objects were not included in the museum displays. There were, however, notable exceptions; the hanging rope used in Mt Eden Prison in the 1920s and a large display of firearms. However, there were inconsistencies in how these objects were interpreted. Some were identified as criminal evidence and some were not.

The most recent incarnation of the museum was completed in 2009 when there was a re-development of the public galleries. The re-development was part of a wider project which renewed the museum's mission. The new focus of the public galleries was to tell the real life stories of policing in New Zealand with an emphasis on police as everyday people, positive police stories, community policing and, significantly, the reintroduction of 'black' objects. The most significant change in thinking was around the 'black' objects; objects were selected and placed within a context of thematic interpretation.

We display objects from the criminal evidence collection within their context; telling their stories rather than displaying them as 'curiosities'. When interpreting objects for the public we talk about how important the objects' stories are, how they give an object its meaning. Why do we collect objects other than for what they tell us about people, an event, a time or ourselves? Police often say "we're a people organisation", as are we; we tell peoples' stories.

The new exhibitions do not shy away from hard to tell stories. Exhibitions include criminal evidence collection objects relating to abortion, drugs, domestic violence, capital punishment, assault, murder, victim identification, serious crash and criminal investigations. These are challenging subjects and we are constantly renegotiating the balance between the reality of policing in New Zealand and what is appropriate for public display. The main challenge lies in the fact that what is okay for one person is not okay for another. Each visitor comes with their own unique set of experiences, associations and ideas which mean their reactions vary tremendously; while one person is upset by abortion equipment, another is upset by the car crash and another by the hanging rope because they lost a loved one to suicide.

Just as our adult audience is diverse, so too is our youth audience. Half of our visitors are children and while our young audiences bring other challenges the content of our museum can also be an advantage. Unlike other museums we do not suffer from a lack of interest from teenagers; most teens are highly engaged with the content and this has become a real advantage in our work with at risk youth.

The New Zealand Police Museum, like other police, forensic and medical museums worldwide, holds challenging objects with stories that are hard to tell. The collection is a direct reflection of the work police do and, therefore, a reflection of the extremes of human behaviour; good and bad. It is a social history collection through a police lens. Our challenge is to tell these hard stories and keep asking the hard questions; what collection objects are too "black"? What can and what cannot be displayed? If it's not for the public then how do we ensure it's relevant to police? When is it too soon to put an object on display? Ultimately, while the collection and its stories are challenging what we are trying to communicate is the extraordinary work police do to make our communities feel and be safe.

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