

WELLINGTON CABLE CAR MUSEUM

Historic cable car crosses the Rimutakas

November 2004



Grip Car 3 on the way to the Wheelwright Shop, Gladstone

Photo: Mark Coote

In what has been described as one of the most important conservation projects of a historic transport vehicle in this country, one of Wellington's original cable cars is being restored to its former glory.

The hundred-year-old Grip Car 3 will make the journey over the Rimutaka Hill on November 24 - on the back of a truck - to The Wheelwright Shop, Gladstone. Its conservation and restoration is expected to take about six months, by which time an extension to the Wellington Cable Car Museum should be well underway. This extension will house the restored car and provide space for improved visitor facilities and access.

"This is an exciting project as it will allow the display of a significant historic vehicle that formed a vital part of Wellington's social history," says John Gilberthorpe, chief executive of the Wellington Museums Trust (which manages the museum). He says that tenders have been called for the building extension and work is expected to begin after the museum's busy summer season.

Grip Car 3 will be fully restored to c1905, the year after it was built and just three years after the cable car route was opened. By contrast, the grip car currently on display at the museum has been restored to 1978, the last year of operation of the original cable car system.

The restoration project is being managed for the trust by heritage transport expert Colin Perfect, who prepared a detailed conservation report on the cable car and located The Wheelwright Shop for the restoration work. Colin, a registered architect, is a foundation member of the Rail Heritage Trust.

The entire project (which includes the building extension) has attracted funding from the Wellington City Council, the New Zealand Community Trust and the Lotteries Commission Environment and Heritage Committee. It has also received a grant under The Minister of Tourism's Tourism Facilities Grants Programme, which was set up to develop nationally significant tourism facilities that enhance international visitors' understanding and enjoyment of New Zealand.

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The Wheelwright Shop, Gladstone

The Wheelwright Shop is operated by Greg Lang and his wife Ali. A traditional wheel and carriage works, it has a proven track record in building, restoring and conserving early transportation.

Greg has undertaken other restoration work for local museums and has built carriages for movies such as *The Last Samurai* and *The Lord of the Rings*. He carried out much of his training in the UK (where he obtained a City & Guilds Qualification in wheelwrighting and carriage building) and where he worked mainly on gypsy caravans.

The couple has been in business in New Zealand for the last ten years, most of that time in the Wairarapa where Greg says there is a great pool of talent - not to mention good access to exotic timbers for restoration work. Timbers such as oak are traditionally used for wheel spokes, ash for the carriage framework and fellows (the timber round the outside of the wheel), and elm for the wheel hubs. Greg has also been experimenting with some native timbers, including puriri and tawa, while kauri is often used for the paneling.

Grip Car 3

The three cable cars in the museum collection, which include Grip Car 3 as well as a car currently on display, are owned by the Wellington City Council and managed by the Wellington Museums Trust. Grip Car 3 is significant in that coachbuilders Rouse and Hurrell constructed it in Wellington, whereas the other two were built in Dunedin. It was used on the cable car route from the early 1900s right through until 1975.

The wooden car has been deteriorating in its current location (in secure storage at the Karori Bus Depot) and restoration and storage in a more suitable environment is considered to be essential for its long-term preservation. Grip Car 3 will be fully restored to c1905, the year after it was built and just three years after the cable car route was opened. By contrast, the grip car currently on display has been restored to 1978, the last year of operation of the original cable car system.

About the Wellington Cable Car Museum

This museum was opened in December 2000 and is the second busiest museum in Wellington after Te Papa. It was established after the Wellington City Council agreed to fund work to stabilise, conserve and refurbish the original cable car winding house (which has a Category Two classification from the New Zealand Historic Places Trust) as a museum. The Wellington Museums Trust was commissioned to develop and operate this new facility.

The museum supports a working cable car system – the only one in the country and an iconic image for the Capital – as well as providing information about an essential part of New Zealand's early social history. It houses a collection of national significance, with the focal exhibit being a restored 1901 cable car which was used on the cable car route until 1978 and which has been restored to that period. The

lower floor houses the original winding gear used to haul the cable cars up the incline, now restored to working order.

The redevelopment and restoration project

The Wellington Museums Trust initiated this project for the museum due to its overwhelming success as a visitor destination and its current space constraints. When the museum was first proposed, estimated visitor numbers were 90,000 people annually. However, just on 200,000 people visited the museum in the year to February 2004.

The clear floor space of the museum is currently around 200 square metres (less than an average house) and some of that is down a steep flight of stairs. The museum has no disabled access to the downstairs winding room, no public toilet facilities and no room to host tour groups or educational groups.

The building extension will provide room to display the restored grip car as well as provide more space for audiovisual facilities and an interpretative area on the Botanic Gardens and Wellington attractions generally. Museum access will be greatly improved by the inclusion of an internal lift and new staircase to the lower level, where the original cable car winding gear is on display.

About the Wellington Museums Trust

The Wellington Museums Trust was established in 1995 by the Wellington City Council and manages the Museum of Wellington City & Sea, City Gallery Wellington, Capital E, Colonial Cottage Museum, New Zealand Cricket Museum (jointly with the New Zealand Cricket Museum Trust) and the Wellington Cable Car Museum.

The Trust has established a proud record for itself in the development and operation of high quality visitor attractions, both for local residents and for national and international visitors. It currently attracts more than 600,000 visitors per year to its activities.

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