

Subject: Search Engine (National Railway Museum, York) [exhibition review]
Author: Stuart Burch, lecturer in museum studies, Nottingham Trent University
Source: *Museums Journal*, vol.108, no. 4, pp. 54-55, 2008
Note: This is the pre-print version prior to being edited by the journal

If you type the phrase 'search engine' into Google you come up with over 300 million hits. A search engine is a program that locates information in a database. It is also the clever title of the latest development at the National Railway Museum (NRM) in York.

Search Engine opened in December and had its official launch last month. It represents the first phase in the long process of bringing the museum's archive collection out from deep storage – all 180 tonnes of it. This includes 1.5 million photographs, 1 million engineering drawings and 2,000 artworks plus the archives of the museum itself both before and after its various collections were amalgamated to form NRM in 1975.

One of the best things about *Search Engine* is its location. The first glimpses you get are a couple of portholes in the wall of the Great Hall. By pressing a button the view into the stores is revealed. An accompanying interpretation panel entitled 'Active Archive' explains the goal of *Search Engine*: 'to bring the secrets of the archives out into the public domain'.

Search Engine is actually located directly above these stores, on a balcony overlooking the Great Hall.

The first thing the visitor sees is a small exhibition entitled 'What's in Store'. It features examples of the types of things that will gradually start to become available via *Search Engine*. The straightforward display is thankfully devoid of costly interactives which would have only drawn attention away from the fascinating selection of paintings, books, letters, photographs, posters and journals.

The first object on display comes as a bit of shock. 'Nice painting, but where's the train?' I wondered as I looked at Claude Buckle's lively depiction of a boat race off the coast at Ryde. All too often labels next to paintings are an uninformative distraction. But not this one. It told me exactly where to find the train: for in the middle distance, ploughing through the painted waves, is a railway ferry.

After looking at this painting I consulted the *Public Catalogue Foundation's* volume for North Yorkshire available on one of the open shelves. There I found out that Britain's railway companies were once 'the largest operator of docks and wharves in the world' – and that explains why NRM has so much maritime art in its collection.

This discovery is presumably exactly the sort of thing that *Search Engine* is designed for. The decision to begin the inaugural exhibition with Buckle's painting *Racing off Ryde* is therefore a smart one. *Search Engine* is just like that railway ferry in the painting: a big container with all sorts of train-related things hidden inside waiting to be unloaded.

These secrets include the objects bequeathed to NRM by the sound engineer and railway enthusiast, Peter Handford who died last November. Some of them feature in the 'What's in Store' exhibition, such as a photograph of Handford recording steam engines as they puffed past. These were sold on vinyl LPs, examples of which are on show. They and other noises (including an important oral history archive) should soon become available to be ordered from the store and listened to in *Search*

Engine's sound booths. Alongside them are larger glass cubicles with desks for people who want to research with less distraction from the hubbub coming from the Great Hall below.

But the Great Hall is likely to come as a welcome diversion. When the busy researcher gets tired she can look down and see iconic railway engines clustered around the huge turntable. As I sat writing this review there was a demonstration of how the turntable works, to the delight of countless children. Perhaps one day one of them will grow up to write the definitive history of the railway turntable using documents from the archive.

Fully accessioning all the objects in NRM's archive will take many years. And the vital importance of documentation is emphasised in another object on display. It is a drawing for a passenger carriage from the 1860s. The label alongside says that it has been in the collection for over 100 years. But no one knows what it actually represents or who drew it. This underlines the role of *Search Engine*: by encouraging people to use its archives it will surely be just a matter of time before some enthusiast discovers the provenance of the sketch and feeds that information back into *Search Engine*. This will help others in their research – and so it goes on.

With this in mind, the decision to call it *Search Engine* strikes me as brilliant. I became even more convinced of this whilst leafing through Alan Jackson's *The Railway Dictionary* (2000). It reveals that 'Searchers' was an old name given to railway workers who went through the carriages at the end of the day looking for lost property or damage. Maybe some of the things they found ended up in NRM's archive and are waiting to be discovered by the 'Searchers' of the 21st century?

NRM is a copybook example of a museum that strives to provide access to as many objects as possible, to as many people as possible. *Search Engine* is the archival equivalent of *The Warehouse*, NRM's fantastic open storage collection on the other side of the Great Hall. Together they represent NRM's self-declared attempt to challenge 'the perception that museums all have reserve collections locked away with no practical use to the public.'

Looking down from *Search Engine* at the hoards of children on half-term holiday in search of Thomas the Tank Engine made me appreciate that NRM caters just as much for them as it does the most hardcore of train enthusiasts wanting to research some very particular aspect of railway history.

This wholehearted approach to access combined with great collections, free entrance and enthusiastic, helpful staff means that NRM promises to live up to the slogan of Indiana Harbor Belt Railroad that I found in *Dow's Dictionary of Railway Quotations*: 'Proud past, bright future'.

Facts

Search Engine – cost £4m

The partners included:

- Heritage Lottery Fund (£995,000)
- Higher Education Funding Council for England (c.£1.5 million)
- Department of Culture Media and Sport
- The University of York