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How to deaccession a Mills bomb

State Library Victoria's Pictures Collection was originally known as the Historical Collection. This explains both the initial H before each item's individual accession number and the former presence in the collection of militaria, a whaler's sealskin boot, a full-sized Cobb & Co. coach and an Egyptian mummy case. The last of these, having at one time been forgotten, was discovered by Museum staff during an evacuation of the rafters, prior to the Museum's move to its current site, in the Carlton Gardens.

The collection's name was changed to the Picture Collection when the first of three picture librarians was appointed, despite some opposition from people with long connections to the collection. Sadly, the new name (which eventually became today's Pictures Collection) and narrower format-based policy meant that the lithographic printing press from Troedel & Co., which had printed some of the most important posters in Australia, was deemed an unsuitable addition, despite the Library's holding almost the entire 19th- and early-20th-century commercial printing archive of the company.

In the 1970s, the Picture, Australian Manuscripts, and Rare Books collections were located at the top of the stairs in what was known as the La Trobe Library building (see opposite), accessed from La Trobe Street. This was not the ideal position for the unique and rare collections recording the pictorial and written histories of Victoria. The roof leaked frequently, because seagulls would carry food onto it, scavenged from the front lawn, and



La Trobe Library (foreground). The Picture Collection was located at top right. Les Gorrie Photography, Taken 12:50 from top of RMIT Art School, photograph: gelatin silver, 1964, H28135

it would block the drains and cause overflows. Lack of maintenance was a continual problem, the insufficient budget then allocated to the Library being inadequate to cover even the basics. Such a state of affairs will be difficult for today's Library users and staff to imagine; budgets have grown, there is infrastructure today where once there was very little, and the Library has undergone two extensive renovations and now occupies a whole city block. It is bright and inviting, and the roof is assumed not to leak.

When the La Trobe Library opened, in 1957, the fittings in the Picture Collection were state of the art for the time: sliding racks for framed works and a compactus to hold bulkier items awaiting cataloguing and storing. However, the collection had grown steadily, and room for adequate conservation storage was quite limited.

With appointment of a new director, Leah Mann, in 1989, things began

to look rosier. Two infill buildings, the north-east and north-west wings, were planned and funded, and the rare collections were scheduled to move into the new north-east wing upon completion, in 1992. Moving the collections was a huge task, and the Picture Collection staff worked hard to prepare each item for boxing and storage.

Objects kept in the central, non-moveable part of the compactus were those yet to be accessioned; their provenance might be uncertain or their future location problematic. Some of the objects were relics of the Boer War or World War I. These included blocks of chocolate in tins, a biscuit or two, a Sam Browne belt and a curiously shaped object rather like a round pineapple.

The staff knew that this last object was a Mills bomb, the well-known hand grenade used in the battlefields of Europe during the 1914–18 war. Naturally, they assumed it had been immobilised, but in a burst of pre-moving energy, some felt that they should make sure. They telephoned Victoria Barracks in St Kilda Road, asking for advice. They were told that two soldiers would drive up and inspect the object. When they informed the soldier on the phone that it was almost impossible to park in La Trobe Street outside the Library, he said, 'We don't usually have any trouble at all parking in the city'. This turned out to be true. Two uniformed soldiers arrived in an armoured personnel carrier emblazoned with insignia and left it right outside the La Trobe Street entrance, under a prominently displayed 'No parking' sign.

The lift to the Picture Collection, on the fourth floor, was, as usual, out of order – maintenance problems. So the soldiers stamped up the marble steps, boots ringing. When they saw the compactus bay's odd-shaped object, they reared back a bit in surprise. But after inspecting the grenade, they said they *thought* it had been defused but would need to take it away to make sure. Handling it rather gingerly, they placed it in a square, padded container, stamped back down the stairs, got into their park-anywhere personnel carrier and returned to the barracks.

Some days later, a telephone call to the barracks confirmed that, while the army's bomb experts had assumed the grenade was already defused, they thought it best to make sure; so they had exploded it. It was easily one of the quickest resolutions of a potential storage problem the Library had witnessed.