

# Social Histories of Holden in Australia

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In 2013, Holden announced that it would cease manufacturing vehicles in Australia at the end of 2017, thus ending more than a century of automotive manufacture in this country. As South Australia's largest private employer for much of its life-span, and the linchpin of the state's manufacturing sector, Holden's announcement evoked grave concern for its workers and the hundreds of smaller component manufacturers and local businesses that figuratively and literally fed its factory and workforce. This story was repeated in Victoria, though to a lesser extent due to that state's greater economic diversity. The despair that marked the 'end of the line' at Holden risks overshadowing the remarkable history of this company and its workers who for many decades were so successful in building and selling vehicles. The role that workers, and the working-class communities in which they lived, played in Holden's business warrants thorough investigation, as does the efficacy of the company's attempts to help its workforce transition to new jobs.

Historians at the University of Adelaide (Jennifer Clark, Paul Sendziuk and Carolyn Collins) and Monash



Woman working on car seat springs, GMH Fishermen's Bend, 1953. Image courtesy National Archives of Australia, NAA A1200 L15480.



Migrant workers arriving at GMH Fishermen's Bend, 1955. Image courtesy National Archives of Australia, NAA A12111 1/1955/16/11.

University (Alistair Thomson and Graeme Davison) have accepted this challenge, and are investigating the making and breaking of Holden's manufacturing arm in Australia in the post-WW2 period. The team is focussing on the reciprocal relationship between the company, its employees, and the places where its factories were located and its workers lived. Whereas most histories of Holden (and histories of automotive manufacturing in general) focus on the mercurial careers of senior executives and the cars, this project puts manufacturing workers and places at the centre of the story. In particular, it seeks to understand:

- how the experience of working at Holden was mediated by gender, ethnicity, class, and generation
- how working at Holden impacted on family life and featured in strategies for security and social mobility
- how, within a tightly disciplined and regulated workplace, workers managed to 'make their mark' and developed unique sub-cultures within the workplace
- how technological innovation changed the nature of work
- how workers sought to protect their employment rights and conditions, and related to their bosses and the US-based parent company



Cars on the GMH assembly line, South Australia, 1964. Image courtesy National Archives of Australia, NAA A1200 L53446.

- how the location of Holden's manufacturing plants influenced the nature of its business, and how the company's decisions about where to locate its factories irrevocably changed the urban landscape and socio-demographic profile of Adelaide and Melbourne
- how Holden behaved as a 'corporate citizen' in the places where its workers lived and its factories were located, and, conversely, what these communities contributed to Holden's success
- how workers responded to previous periods of economic contraction, and
- how they interpreted the challenges facing automotive manufacturers in Australia in the 21<sup>st</sup> century
- how morale and production standards were maintained once it was announced that Holden's manufacturing plants would close
- how Holden sought to assist workers to transition to new employment, and whether its efforts have been successful
- how working for Holden is remembered and how those memories continue to impact on ex-Holden employees, their families and communities, and the wider society

Beginning in late 2019, the research team will conduct 100 in-depth interviews with former Holden employees. These will take approximately 12 months to complete. Most of the interviewees will be 'factory floor' workers, but design, engineering, and marketing employees will also be interviewed. The oral histories will be held and, depending on the access conditions specified by the interviewee, made publicly accessible by the National Library of Australia. This research will be complemented and supported by a critical examination of archival sources, particularly GM Holden's archive held by the State Library of South

Australia, and trade union records held mainly by the Noel Butlin Archives Centre in Canberra. The oral histories and the interpretative work will form the basis for a series of publications aimed at scholarly and general audiences, and exhibitions at the National Motor Museum and online. The project is supported by GM Holden, the National Library of Australia and the National Motor Museum. It has received generous funding from the Australia Research Council.

If you, or anyone you know, worked in some capacity in Holden's manufacturing operations between 1945 and 2017, please consider submitting an expression of interest to be interviewed for the project. Former Holden workers who are unable or unwilling to be interviewed can also submit written reflections of their time at Holden, or submit copies of photographs and other material related to their time in the workforce. Further details and an interview request form is available from the project website: <https://arts.adelaide.edu.au/holden-history/>. The research team can also be contacted via email: [holdenproject@adelaide.edu.au](mailto:holdenproject@adelaide.edu.au)



Cars on the GMH assembly line, South Australia, 1964. Image courtesy National Archives of Australia, NAA A1200 L53447