



Conservator Sarah Babister conducts an inspection of Phar Lap from inside his protective glass panel at Melbourne Museum, while preparator Kym Haines watches.

PICTURE: SIF

No horsing around when preserving Phar Lap exhibit

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A TEAM of highly trained experts working overtime to keep a prized racehorse in peak condition is a staple in any stable. The difference with this champion chestnut is that he has been dead for eight decades.

On Wednesday night shortly after Melbourne Museum closed, a team of conservators and preparators set about removing a glass panel from Phar Lap's sealed case.

It was only the second time in 12 years that the famous racehorse's mounted hide has been exposed to the critical eyes of the museum's conservators, who were on hand to conduct a detailed inspection inside the case.

Melbourne Museum manager Brett Dunlop said while the museum was climate controlled – with the temperature set at 20 degrees and humidity at 50 to 55 per cent – checks roughly every five years were vital to ensure long-term preservation.

This is particularly the case with organic materials such as animal hide, which also require low-lighting to prevent fading.

"He's still a rich chestnut colour and if he was subjected to bright light there would be a chance of fading," he said. "But he's a magnificent specimen, he's really the best piece of taxidermy I have seen."

The champion racehorse was assessed for signs indicating a change in his condition, including detached hair and opening seams. His glass eyes and har-

ness were also checked and adjusted.

"The same way an art conservator would go over an old oil painting centimetre by centimetre, our conservators looked at all parts of Phar Lap and to assess his condition and compile a report," Mr Dunlop said.

Mounted on a hollow steel frame covered with paper and plaster, the hide weighing up to 120 kilograms has been on display since 1933.

By far the museum's most popular exhibit, more than 500,000 people visited Phar Lap last financial year, with the famous chestnut also boasting his own Facebook page with over 14,000 likes.

The New Zealand-born, Australian-trained thoroughbred became a household name

in the early depression years on the back of a string of wins. Between September 1929 and March 1932, Phar Lap ran 41 races over a variety of distances. He won 36 of them, including the 1930 Melbourne Cup and two Cox Plates.

A source of national pride in grim economic times, Phar Lap's mysterious death in the United States in 1932 was met with overwhelming national grief. He was taxidermied in New York over four-and-a-half months as several institutions in Australia and New Zealand scrambled to get a piece of him.

While his hide went to Melbourne Museum, his skeleton ended up at the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa and his heart went to the National Museum of Australia.

The cause of Phar Lap's death has long been debated with causes ranging from poisoning to bacterial infection. In 2006, scientists working at the Australian Synchrotron concluded it was almost certain Phar Lap was poisoned hours before he died.

This was backed up in June 2008, when the Melbourne Museum released findings from an investigation which analysed six hairs from Phar Lap's mane. High resolution X-rays were used to detect arsenic in an attempt to differentiate between arsenic which had entered the hair cells via the bloodstream and arsenic infused to the hair cells by the taxidermy process. The results showed in the 30 to 40 hours before Phar Lap's death, the horse ingested a massive dose of arsenic.