

All words, no funding, for the Fletcher Jones story



Just like old times: the Fletcher Jones gardens came to life at the recent spring picnic, under the watchful eye of the silver ball. The next challenge is to preserve the Fletcher Jones stories.

OPINION – Carol Altmann

If there was any doubt as to how much the Fletcher Jones Pleasant Hill site in Warrnambool means to locals, the recent spring picnic has laid it to rest.

Around 1500 people flocked to the gardens last weekend to wander among the market stalls, listen to the music, stretch out on the grass and – like so many thousands of children and adults before them – take pleasure in the many garden delights that Sir Fletcher Jones created in his factory grounds.

Cr Jacinta Ermacora has leapt on this huge wave of support [to announce today in the local newspaper](#) that she thought it was “time to tell the Fletcher Jones story”, and a meeting would be held shortly between all of the interested parties to work out how this could be done.

What Cr Ermacora failed to mention, or was not reported, was that the council was first asked to collect these stories way back in 2002, when it was a key recommendation in a report it [commissioned](#) into the future of the Fletcher Jones site.

What has been done by anyone on the council since then?

Absolutely nothing.



Thousands of stories make up the fabric of the Fletcher Jones story, which is still yet to be documented from a social history perspective. Image: Save the Silver Ball and Fletcher Jones Gardens Facebook page.

There is also a vast amount of precious Fletcher Jones memorabilia cast about Warrnambool, with some in History

House, some at The Artery, and some in people's private homes, that needs to be collated, assessed and preserved for future installations.

What has any council member done about that so far?

Absolutely nothing.

In the interim, as people age, and pass away, the stories are being lost and the memorabilia is getting harder to trace (and let's not forget that many items ended up in a skip bin when the site was first sold by the council in 2005, only to be retrieved by artists).

This is why a small group of people, led by **Julie Eagles** from the Warrnambool Planning and Heritage Group, has been asking the council for *months* whether there is any funding set aside in this year's budget to at least start the process of gathering these stories.

It was hard to get a clear reply.

Bluestone got a reply on Thursday and this is it in full:

"We have no funding specifically allocated to telling the story of Fletcher Jones in this year's budget.

However, the history of Fletcher Jones and other elements that tell the story of Warrnambool will be on the table when the time comes to look at public art as part of the city centre renewal.

Once we have the foundation stage of the renewal plan completed – which addresses issues including accessibility and mobility – we'll be engaging the community in a discussion on public art." – Nick Higgins, Manager Communications.

So how much funding is there for the Fletcher Jones story project?

Absolutely nothing.



The stories behind working for Fletcher Jones are yet to be captured.

By contrast, Melbourne University has already started work on collating and recording the business story behind Fletcher Jones and **Melinda Barrie**, [from this project](#), has shown a willingness to work with local groups to capture the local stories.

It is embarrassing, to say the least, that a Melbourne institution has been more motivated and excited by our local, contemporary history than our own council.

And by contrast to the council's inertia on what we might call the whole Fletcher Jones package – the stories, the site, the potential – last Sunday's picnic was a triumph of what can be done through hard work, passion and belief.

Not only did it showcase the magnificent efforts of resident gardener **Lex Caldwell** and his team of volunteers who have kept the gardens alive, but it was a celebration for all those other volunteers who believed that the best parts of this iconic site were worth saving.

Those who pressed hardest to keep Pleasant Hill on the public

radar – Julie Eagles, The F Project arts collective, us here at *Bluestone Magazine*, and the consequent [Save the Silver Ball and Fletchers Gardens Facebook page](#) started by Tonia Wilcox – all did so without any official backing.



The annual Christmas party picnic was a highlight of the Fletcher Jones calendar. Plans are afoot to bring them back again, albeit in a revised version. Image: Courtesy of Lost Warrnambool.

Similarly, the spring picnic was organised within weeks by The F Project/The Artery without a cent of funding and relied heavily on volunteers who pulled it all together – people like Dr Emma Charlton, Megan Nicolson, Des and Helen Bunyon, Ruby Richardson, Danielle O'Brien, the Factory Arts crew, Julie Eagles – the same names that keep coming up time after time and who continue to make exciting things happen around the city.

They don't sit around waiting for others to do something: they

just get on with it.

The F Project, for its efforts, made less than \$400 on the day from a raffle, but it was never about raising money. It was all about bringing life back to the gardens through the arts, but you can't keep expecting volunteers to do all the heavy lifting.

And so it is with the capturing of the Fletcher Jones stories.

The funding is there: it's just how the council chooses to spend it.

It recently found [\\$10,000 on short notice](#) for the Oddball movie, and [another \\$3 million](#) of state and council funds are about to be plunged into sound and light shows at Flagstaff Hill.

So unless Cr Ermacora can come to the meeting armed with a firm proposal for council funding, it is nothing more than hollow words on the back of very successful picnic and that – unlike a pair of Fletcher Jones' scissors on the factory floor – just won't cut it.