

Rare silver ball images emerge from collection

Description



Vertigo? What vertigo? One of the rare images of the iconic silver ball water tower being erected at the Fletcher Jones factory in 1967 from the collection of engineer Ralph Jones. (Citation: [Ralph Jones Water Tower Submission and Business Papers](#), 2014.0112, Box 1, University of Melbourne Archives.)

Words: Carol Altmann

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #DC943C;"] R[/dropcap]are images of the Fletcher Jones silver ball water tower have emerged from the private collection of engineer **Ralph Jones** who designed and supervised the construction.

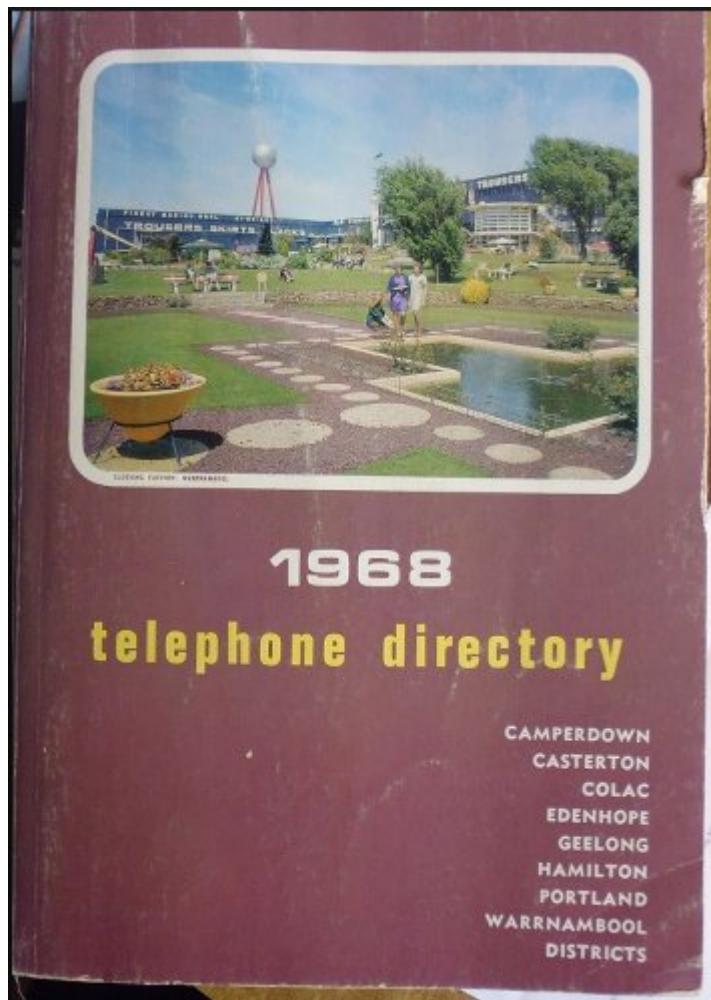
Bluestone Magazine has been privileged to gain access to the images courtesy of the [Melbourne University Archives](#) which has been archiving the story behind the iconic silver ball as part of the Ralph Jones Engineering Services collection.

[See all of the images here.](#)

MUV archivist **Melinda Barrie** said the collection – donated by Mr Jones, who is now aged in his late 80s and living in Melbourne – included detailed documents and correspondence from 1965-1967 when the silver ball was being built.

It also includes Mr Jones's submission to the 1975 Association of Consulting Engineers Australia -

Engineering Awards, where his firm hoped to win a prize for the silver ball that, as far as we know, is without peer in Australia. (Unfortunately, the ball missed out on an award).



The brand new water tower, red-legged and silver-topped, graced the cover of the local phone directory the year after it was assembled. Image from the Ralph Jones collection and reproduced courtesy of [Melbourne University Archives](#).

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #DC943C;"] T[/dropcap]he documents reveal that Mr Jones's inspiration for the ball's design came from US advertisements for water towers made by the Pittsburgh-Des Moines Steel Company, one of which included tripod legs.

The unique design was also borne of necessity because of the "poor mains water pressure" on the east side of Warrnambool at the time, Mr Jones wrote in his submission.

It also had to take into account potential earthquakes – given that the Fletcher Jones factory was in the middle of an area that in 1903 experienced two of the worst earthquakes in modern Australian history – and was built to withstand "moderate" earthquake loading.

With the Ralph Jones Engineering Collection [ready to view](#) at MUA, Melinda and her team are now turning their attention to a significant collection of photographs, documents, personal items and archival films donated by the family of Sir Fletcher.

The collection includes more than 3000 photographs – including many from the Warrnambool factory in the 70s, 80s and 90s – all of which will be cleaned and then 300 selected for digitalisation.

Melinda described the contemporary Fletcher Jones story as a vital part of documenting Victoria's manufacturing industry.

"We view it as very important, as it celebrates the narrative of manufacturing and retail in Victoria...and so many of those stories have been lost," she said.



Silver lining: Melbourne University Archive academics Melinda Barrie (centre) and Sophie Garrett (centre right) catch up with working party members Mark Rashleigh, Emma Charlton and Julie Eagles (right) – and some of the artwork that has been inspired by Fletcher Jones and the iconic silver ball. Image: Bluestone Magazine.

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #DC943C;"]M[/dropcap]eanwhile, in Warrnambool, moves are afoot to start documenting the local, personal stories around Fletcher Jones and Pleasant Hill.

A steering committee has come together with representatives from the [Save the Silver Ball and Fletchers Gardens](#) group, the Warrnambool Planning and Heritage Group, the Warrnambool Historical Society and [the F Project](#), with MUA also helping out.

The group has already secured \$5000 from the Gwen and Edna Jones Foundation (no relation to Fletcher), which will be used to record those stories considered a top priority because of people's age or health.

"The next step for us is to sit down and determine who these people are and to capture those stories now," said group convenor **Julie Eagles**.

The committee has applied for a further \$15,000 from the Public Records Office of Victoria for a much broader project similar to [the Silver Ball Screening Festival](#), where workshops are held to help people record their own FJ story, or that of someone they know.

"There is still such a strong connection between Warrnambool and the Fletcher Jones site, both as part of Warrnambool's history and part of our individual histories," Julie said.



The staff behind the name: the stories of everyday workers and those with a strong connection to the Fletcher Jones site will be recorded as part of a new project. Image: [Save the Silver Ball and Fletcher Jones Gardens](#).

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #DC943C;"]T[/dropcap]he individual projects of MUA and the local group may eventually lead to a collaborative exhibition or something similar in Warrnambool.

"Most of the people behind these great manufacturing stories want to see their stories out there and their work out there," Melinda said.

"It is also part of our mandate here at MUA to make our collections accessible to the people, otherwise, what is the point?"

Melinda said the combination of the Ralph Jones collection, the personal collection from Sir Fletcher's family and the work of the local steering committee would create a "well rounded archive" on one of Australia's iconic businesses.

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1. Archive

Tags

1. Emma Charlton
2. Fletcher Jones
3. history
4. Julie Eagles
5. Mark Rashleigh
6. Melbourne University Archives
7. Melinda Barrie
8. Ralph Jones
9. Save the Silver Ball and Fletcher Jones Gardens
10. Sophie Garrett
11. stories
12. The F Project
13. Warrnambool
14. Warrnambool Historical Society
15. Warrnambool Planning and Heritage Group

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