

Fletcher Jones cross will light up again

Exclusive: The last illuminated cross on top of the Fletcher Jones silver ball in Warrnambool will light up again from next month – but not on top of the ball. (Image: Mitch Stansfield)

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.

Remembering the art of Robert Ullmann



The late Robert Ulmann was one of Warrnambool's best known artists – and one of the city's great characters – after making the south-west his home in 1969. Image: [Visit Warrnambool](#).

[dropcap style="color: #abccab;"] 0[/dropcap]ur [campaign to restore](#) the **Robert Ulmann** whale mural in Warrnambool has provided an opportunity to remember one of south-west Victoria's most prolific artists, who died 15 years ago this November.

Despite Robert's enormous contribution to the local art scene as a painter and sculptor during the 30 years that he lived in and around Warrnambool, it is quite difficult to find any formal, public recognition of his work, beyond that which he created himself.

This includes his [studio and gallery](#) overlooking the ocean on Hopkins Point Road, Warrnambool, which is still managed by his wife, **Helen** and daughter **Justine**, and was built after their Naringal property (and Robert's studio) was completely destroyed in the devastating Ash Wednesday fires of 1983.

It also includes Robert's contribution to Warrnambool's public artworks, which is arguably greater than any other single artist.

There are four Ulmann sculptures dotted in high-profile locations around Warrnambool and two privately commissioned murals that are also in very public spaces, but [a search of the Warrnambool Art Gallery website](#) reveals very little about the man or his work.

As an aside, do you know where to find the Ulmann sculptures and murals in Warrnambool?

[learn_more caption="Click here to find an Ulmann work:"] 1. Fletcher Jones Gardens, basalt sculpture, Memorial to Sir David Fletcher Jones.

2. Warrnambool breakwater, basalt sculpture, The Breakwater Centenary Sculpture.

3. Flagstaff Hill, lake side, The Lady in the Wind, Mt Gambier stone.

4. Warrnambool Art Gallery, exterior, The Australian Fur Seal, basalt sculpture

5. Bojangles Restaurant, Warrnambool, mural

6. Flaxman St milk bar, Warrnambool, mural [/learn_more]



The Breakwater Centenary Sculpture, Warrnambool, created by Ulmann in 1990.

[dropcap style="color: #abccab;"] R [/dropcap]obert, who was born in Switzerland, was a larger-than-life character who created an impression on all those he met, even if it was one of slight terror at the sight of what has been described as his “fierce” beard which would bob up and down during his highly animated way of talking.

His arrival in south-west Victoria in 1969 made the local news at the time and Warrnambool historian, **Jenny Fawcett**, has kept a copy of the clipping from *The Warrnambool Standard* in which it was reported that “an interesting personality” was visiting the district with his locally born wife, Helen (Goldstraw).

Robert, it said, “has had an adventurous life, painting and drawing his way through 21 countries,” that included Canada, where he first met Helen, who was working as a school teacher at Coppermine in the Canadian Arctic. It was here that

Robert worked closely with the Canadian first peoples, the Inuit.

The Ulmann's spent two years criss-crossing North and South America and then wended their way down through the Pacific Islands before finally reaching Australia. They settled in Naringal in 1972, having first spent a couple of years working in indigenous communities in the Northern Territory.

With all of that experience, and all of that adventure, no wonder Warrnambool – at times – would have struggled to contain a personality as large and dynamic as Robert's, but he came to call the seaside town his home.



The basalt "Memorial to Sir David Fletcher Jones", created by Ulmann in 1978 and part of the Fletcher Jones Gardens in Warrnambool.

[dropcap style="color: #abccab;"] A [/dropcap]uthor **Penny Olsen** dedicated her 2001 book, *Feather and Brush: Three Centuries of Australia Bird Art (2001)*, to Robert Ulmann, who passed away during its production. In it, she describes how

Robert worked “from nature, fast and with gusto”.

Robert loved to capture the energy of both animals and people as he saw them in the moment, not after the fact. It was not unusual to be talking to Robert and find that, halfway through a conversation, he would start sketching a portrait of you.

It was Robert’s passion for Australian wildlife, however, that won the hearts of so many of his followers.

He not only painted, sketched and photographed the beautiful creatures around him, he often invited them into his home which became a refuge for homeless and abandoned birds, mammals and marsupials.

In 1980, *The Age* newspaper ran a page 3 story about the Ulmann’s being the first people in Australia – and most likely the world – to hand-raise a baby echidna that developed a fondness for crawling up Robert’s trouser leg.

When asked why he loved to work on Australian animals, Robert told the reporter in typical style:

“You know why? They’re bloody hard to get hold of, specially the marsupials. They’re all nocturnal. That’s what makes the challenge...and people love furry things – specially the ladies.”

Robert died suddenly at the age of 71 on November 1, 1999.



A portion of the colourful – and cheeky – Mr Bojangles murals in the Bojangles restaurant, Warrnambool, painted by Ulmann in the 1980s.

[box type="bio"] **The Robert Ulmann studio is at 440 Hopkins Point Rd, Warrnambool ph: 03 5565 1444 or email: eubalena@westvic.com.au. Free entry.**[/box]

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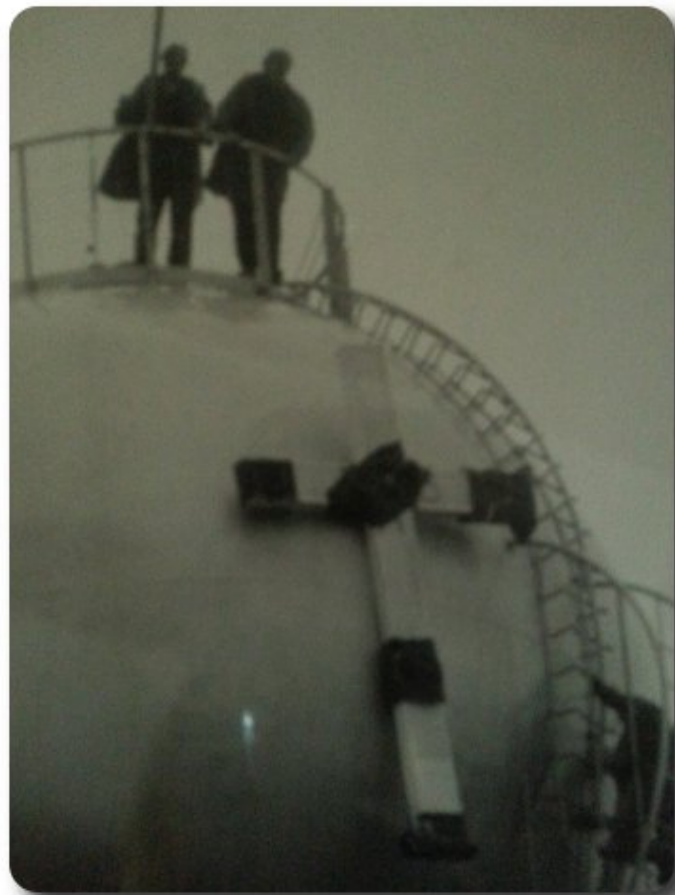
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Fletcher Jones cross came a cropper



Brian Fitzgibbon and Anthony Kelly winch the original Fletcher Jones cross up the silver ball for one of the last times. Image courtesy Amy Fitzgibbon.

[dropcap style="color: #a5cecd;"] T [/dropcap]he mystery of

the missing Fletcher Jones cross has been solved, and, unfortunately, the ending is not pretty.

As [we wrote](#) recently, the very first illuminated cross that sat on top of the Fletcher Jones silver ball water tower in Warrnambool every Christmas and Easter for about 20 years has not been seen since it was removed from the ball sometime in the 1980s.

The replacement cross – made of aluminium – has also since been replaced by a newer, more eco-friendly illuminated cross that no longer tops the silver ball, but the Warrnambool Uniting Church in Koroit St.

One of the few people who knew the first two crosses intimately was **Brian Fitzgibbon**, who worked at Fletcher Jones' for 15 years as a leading hand in the maintenance department.

"It was made of galvanised iron folded over, with fluorescent lightbulbs running up each of its sides, that were then covered in perspex: all of which made it very, very heavy," Brian said.

The cross, which was made by **Bill Lovell** and **Alan Beales**, was winched into place before each Christmas and left until after Easter, but one year things went awry.

"It was blowing an absolute gale, harder than it's even blowing today," Brian said.

Amid the atrocious conditions, the cross was hauled into place but, Brian now confesses, he forgot to fully secure one of the toggles that held the cross in place.

"So the wind is working away, working away, and the toggle is getting looser and looser and eventually the cross crashed completely on its side," he said.

The cross broke in half from the fall and was partly dangling over the side of the silver ball in a spectacle that was

apparently captured by the local newspaper, *The Warrnambool Standard*.

Unfortunately Brian can't remember the exact date that it happened, but he does remember the awful guilt at having not fully secured the toggle.

"I will admit it, I am the one to blame," he said.

The damaged cross was relegated to the skip bin and a new, aluminium cross – the one now in storage at the Warrnambool City Council depot – was hastily assembled to appease a very unhappy public.

"We modelled the new one on the star that they used to have at the Warrnambool Drive-In, which had lights all around the outside," Brian said.

"It was so, so much lighter and easier to handle."

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Missing: one old cross, last seen at FJs.



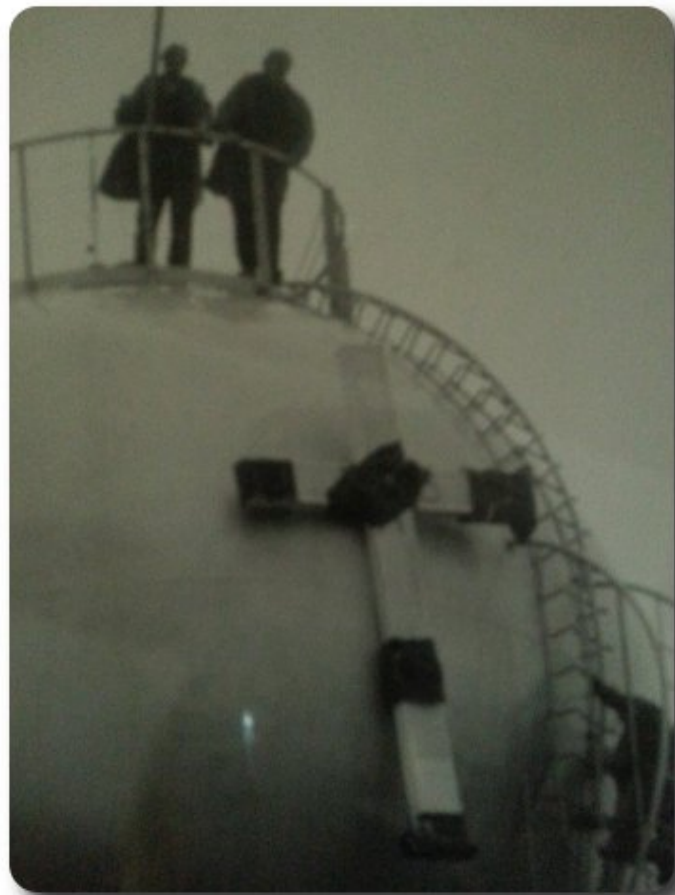
Retired: the second (and final) Fletcher Jones cross sits in council storage, having been replaced by a more modern cross that is erected on the Uniting Church. The whereabouts of the original FJ cross, first used in 1967, remains unknown*.

[dropcap style="color: #a02f2f;"] W [/dropcap]ith the former Fletcher Jones factory in Warrnambool [officially changing hands](#) last Thursday (19/6), there has been a renewed focus on tracking down the iconic, original fixtures in the hope that they can be returned to the site, including the very first FJ cross.

New owner, the Geelong-born, China-based businessman **Dean Montgomery**, has indicated his willingness to restore the garden furniture and features, including what we call 'The Man in the Pressed Pants', but who was formally known as 'the FJ man', who once stood so proudly in his pleats at the front of the property.

The man, unfortunately, is now a broken shell of his former self. What does remain, however, has been enough to inspire Mr Montgomery to consider commissioning an artist to rebuild his legs and restore him to his full glory.

Another iconic piece of the original factory that is proving harder to trace is the original Fletcher Jones illuminated cross that was winched up the silver ball water tower each Christmas (and removed after every Easter) to cast its comforting glow across the city.



Up she goes: this image is believed to show the original, much heavier cross being hoisted into position using a boat winch. Image courtesy Amy Fitzgibbon.

[dropcap style="color: #a02f2f;"] S [/dropcap]ir Fletcher Jones was a socialist Christian, or what might now be called a left-leaning Christian, who believed the cross would provide a gentle reminder of the role of Christ around an increasingly consumer-driven Christmas.

The cross was first erected when the silver ball was built in 1967 and, it is understood, was literally plugged into a powerpoint on top of the silver ball and ran off a timer.

At some time in the late 80s (nobody we spoke to was exactly sure when), this cross was replaced with a much lighter, aluminium structure that had light bulbs mounted along its sides.

This newer cross continued to be placed on the silver ball each year, right up until 2010 when the deteriorating condition of the ball made it unsafe.

In a now infamous move, the Warrnambool City Council (WCC) – who had taken over responsibility for the cross – found a new home for it on top of a west Warrnambool water tower, owned by Wannon Water.

The cross had barely been lit, however, before it was removed by Wannon Water [after a single complaint](#) by a resident, Graham Keith, who claimed that it was “religious advertising” on “public property”. (Mr Keith must have been apoplectic during all of those years that Sir Fletcher Jones and his family kept “advertising” their religious beliefs).



The second cross, with its somewhat antiquated light system, was relocated – briefly – to a water tower in west Warrnambool before a single complaint saw it removed in 2011. Image: Robin Sharrock, Herald-Sun newspaper.

[dropcap style="color: #a02f2f;"] A [/dropcap]fter a fierce backlash to the decision by Wannon Water to remove the 2.5m tall cross, the WCC found a new home for it on top of the Uniting Church, in Koroit St, not far from where Fletcher Jones once ran his clothing store, "The Man's Shop".

The cross, however, again proved to be a safety hazard due to its basic lighting system. This cross – the second FJ cross – was retired and placed in council storage and a new, smaller cross, with environmentally friendly LED lighting, was built for the church to use.

What became of the original 1967 cross, however, remains a mystery, despite our attempts to track it down*.

The Uniting Church has certainly had never seen it, and the WCC only have the second cross in storage.

WCC media spokesman **Nick Higgins** sent us the following words about the mystery:

"Our infrastructure chief thinks the wooden cross may have its origins in the 1960s. It's possible it was replaced with aluminium, not because it was rotten, but because aluminium was lighter and easier to install. But we don't know for certain – this was at a time when the council was not closely involved with FJs."

Perhaps a reader can help to fill in the gaps?*

* We now know the answer – [see story here](#).



The second Fletcher Jones cross shone like a beacon across the Warrnambool skyline for more than 25 years, after replacing the original cross that was first erected in 1967. Image: Courtesy Mitch Stansfield.

[box] Former Warrnambool City Council planner and [photography enthusiast](#) **Lisa Gervasoni** is one of the few people to photograph the cross on all three structures. Lisa no longer lives in Warrnambool (although she maintains close ties), but she kindly gave us permission to reproduce the three images below:[/box]





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