



NEWSLETTER

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www.fitzroyhistorysociety.org.au

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PLANNED RESEARCH PROPOSAL FOR FITZROY HISTORY SOCIETY MEMBERS

PERSONALITIES OF FITZROY

The FHS is commencing a project to find and document past personalities of Fitzroy from early times up to 1970's. This project is an extension to previous research projects that FHS has established for members, such as 'Brunswick Street, Lost and Found' and 'North Fitzroy - Half Drowned or Half Baked'.

This research project, in 2022, 'Personalities of Fitzroy', will add to this collection.

Any member of the society can nominate individuals who show diversity of people living and or working in Fitzroy. Contributions towards local industry, local business proprietors, the arts and generally interesting and unique characters are best included where their stories have not necessarily been told. We do not wish to repeat information found in other places e.g., The Australian Dictionary of Biography.

We plan to produce our own publication for hard copy and digitally for inclusion on the FHS website.

Any member is invited to make suggestions and may choose to undertake the research and write up individuals' stories or alternatively forward the named personality to the research working group. The research group will meet monthly to discuss ideas and research.

HOW TO GET INVOLVED?

If you have any suggestions, ideas or wish to join the Research Group, please email:

info@fitzroyhistorysociety.org.au

WRITTEN BY MEG LEE,
FHS COMMITTEE

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

The Fitzroy History Society acknowledges the Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung people as the Traditional Owners and true sovereigns of the land now known as Yarra. We also acknowledge the significant contributions made by other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to life in Yarra. We pay our respects to Elders from all nations - and to their Elders past, present and emerging.

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

Over 50 members attended the Fitzroy History Society Annual General Meeting on 7 December 2021 at the Rose Hotel, Fitzroy.

This was one of our best turnouts for an AGM and many of the attendees also stayed on for dinner afterwards.



Photo by Mike Moore



Photo by Andy Lanskis

After various formalities Andy Lanskis introduced all to the revised website for the FHS and went through the dramatic changes that have made the website much more user friendly and much more popular. The society thanked Tom O'Dea for his great work in the redesign.

Our guest speaker for the evening was Dr Julie Cliff AO who talked about her great great grandparents start in Fitzroy in 1860s. As an epidemiologist Julie contrasted the approach to pandemics in the late 19th and early 20th century versus today.

Committee Members were all re-elected - please see page 3 for details of the Committee for 2022.



Photo by Mike Moore

WRITTEN BY SIMON ARMSTRONG, FHS COMMITTEE

WHAT'S IN THE HISTORY OF A CHAIR?

This is no ordinary chair -it is the original Speaker's chair from the People's House of Parliament, the House of Representatives and is symbolic of the important constitutional and political functions of the Speaker.

If you are standing on the corner of Gertrude Street and George Street, you are standing very near to where the chair was crafted. Charles Johnston and Co had his manufacturing workshop here and the signage is still intact at 186 Gertrude Street.

John Hawkins, furniture historian and antiques dealer says that this 'seat of power' ought to be on display as part of the Museum of Australian Democracy in the old Parliament House Canberra. It was auctioned by Leonard Joel in early 2021 with price expected to be between \$300,000 to \$500,000. The final price or the purchaser is unknown.

The chair is made from Australian Blackwood (Acacia Melanoxydon) and is richly carved, most likely with designs taken from the Charles Pasley, Commissioner of Public Works Victoria designs for the first parliament seating. The chair was



originally taken by the family of the deceased speaker as a perquisite of office as was the custom of the day. The Speaker died on duty. The photo shows the chair as it was at last auction.

Most Australians would recognise the current speakers chair in Old Parliament House, but this is a faithful replica of the Speaker's Chair of House of Commons at Westminster, London.

WRITTEN BY MEG LEE, FHS COMMITTEE

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Andy Lanskis, Website Manager and Tom O'Dea have worked to restore the Oral History Project to the FHS website.

The Project was the combined efforts of eight members of the FHS who collected interviews in 2015 under the title 'The Life and Times of Fitzroy from the 1950s'. Together, Marion Glanville, Alison Hart, Meryl Hyde (deceased), Meg Lee, Mary Lewis, Tony Knox (photography), Hilary McPhee, Rosa Simonelli, Marijana Vanevski and Peter Woods produced 23 audio files, transcripts and portraits.

FHS website under 'Publications'.

FHS COMMITTEE 2022

President -Peter Woods

Treasurer/Membership - Brendan Mitchell

Secretary - Simon Armstrong

Editor - Rachel Axton

Website Manager - Andy Lanskis

Social - Peter Heading &

Jennifer McKeagney

Members: Mike Moore, Meg Lee & Lina Favrin

Member of City of Yarra Heritage Committee -
Terry Nott

FITZROY: A BOND OF LOVE

150 & 151 WESTGARTH STREET

In 1900 the blocks on Westgarth Street between Gore and George Streets were marshy and empty, but by 1915, George Currie is living at the single house (# 150). It is sold (Oct 1915) as land of 30 ft x 85ft with the house: a new, brick and weatherboard villa containing 6 rooms, pantry, bathroom, wash house, electric light, stable and buggy shed.

To this house comes Bessie and Jack Atkinson in 1926, and a love of Fitzroy begins. This story is from FHS member Jeff Atkinson:

This is the story of a typical working class couple, Bessie and Jack Atkinson, who were born, grew up and lived most of their adult lives in the inner suburbs of Melbourne. The two studio photos featured here were taken at the time of their wedding in 1912, when Bessie was 21 and Jack 24 years old.

John Stephen Atkinson, known as Jack, was born on 27 January 1888, the sixth of seven children in a working class family in Richmond, an inner suburb of Melbourne. The family lived in a small single-fronted terrace house at 85 Green Street, Richmond. It was actually Jack's maternal grandparent's house, which meant that there were three generations living in it. For a number of years in the late 1880s when Jack was small there would have been four or five adults and six or seven children living in the house.



Bessie Atkinson, 1912



Jack Atkinson, 1912

All photos are supplied by Jeff Atkinson.

One of the stories that Jack used to tell of his childhood is that he sold newspapers in the streets of the city. Some of his relatives had a news-stand near Flinders Street station, and he worked in the street nearby selling papers to passers-by. He used to say that the State Premier of the time, Sir Thomas Bent, always bought his newspaper from him (outside Young and Jacksons?).

In 1901 when he was 13, the household at Green Street dispersed, for reasons we do not know, and Jack's family went to live in nearby Dover Street. Two years later in 1903, he lost both his father and his grandfather with whom he lived. Both of them died in that same year. In the years that followed the family moved constantly from one address to another, but always within that same part of Richmond. The constant moves may have been because they had difficulty paying the rent.

In 1912, when he was 24, Jack married a girl from Collingwood named Bessie Alison Fitches. He was at the time working as a cellar hand in one of Melbourne's breweries (we do not know which one).

Bessie was born in October 1891 in O'Grady Street, Clifton Hill. In her early years, the family moved around Clifton Hill and North Fitzroy but settled in Keele Street Collingwood, near Smith St and remained there for nearly 40 years. Her father operated a horse and cart, which he kept in a stable in the small back yard. At the time of her marriage, Bessie was working, possibly in a nearby clothing factory. The wedding was on 2 Nov 1912 at Keele Street. This was one month after her 21st birthday. One of the stories that Jack used to tell of their early days, was of the two of them going down to Victoria Market on a Friday night to buy fresh crayfish, which in those days was quite cheap, and eating it on the way home to Collingwood on the cable-tram.



Photo of Jack, Bessie & Len in the backyard at 596 Smith St, Collingwood (c. 1920)



Jack Atkinson out the front of 150 Westgarth Street, likely 1939-1941

After they were married, Jack and Bessie went to live at 596 Smith St, Collingwood, close to Keele St. A year later their only child Leonard John (known as Lennie and later just Len) was born in Dec 1913. This was one year before the outbreak of the First World War. The War was a worrying time as each had a brother who had signed up and was serving in the trenches in Europe. Fortunately both survived and eventually returned home, although Bessie's brother Albert came home missing one leg.

In the 1920s Lennie went to the Gold Street State School, Clifton Hill. He also started learning violin, a sign of his parent's social aspirations. In 1926 they purchased 150 Westgarth St. This was a free-standing weatherboard and stucco house built around the turn of the century, with a picket fence and hedge in the front. According to Len, there was at one stage a small board on the fence advertising

what was on that week at the local cinema. In return for the use of their fence, the family was given free tickets to see the movies.

Young Lennie completed Grade 6 at Gold St Primary School and then went to Melbourne Boys High School - which had just moved from its original site in Spring Street in the city to a new campus in South Yarra. In fact Lennie was in the first intake at the South Yarra campus in 1927.

In the early years of his marriage, Jack continued to work in the brewery, but at some stage he became a wharf labourer. He was working on the wharves during the Depression of the 1930s, which was a tough time to be reliant on such an insecure form of employment. Bessie did part-time waitressing with a catering company called O'Briens, and at one stage worked in the Members' dining room at one of the major racecourses. On one occasion, so the family story goes, she waited on the Duke and Duchess of York who were in Australia in 1927 to open the new Parliament House in Canberra. She was also apparently involved in some catering at Sunbury associated with the 1934 Eucharistic Congress. At some stage in the 1920s or 1930s she had some sort of a breakdown and for a short while was in a mental hospital.

Len married in 1941. It was around this time or 1940 that Jack had a serious accident on the wharves and is hospitalised. He was not able to work again and lived on an invalid pension.

Despite living on a pension and part-time waitressing, Jack and Bessie were apparently reasonably well off financially. In 1945 they were still living at 150 Westgarth Street, but soon after, they built themselves a new home (in Clifton Hill?) and moved there. However they were not happy in



Len Atkinson, sitting on the porch of 150 Westgarth (c. late 1930s)

the new place and only stayed for three or four years. By 1950 they were back in Westgarth Street, at number 151, across the road from their old place.

Like most of their contemporaries, they liked the occasional glass of 'ale', as Bessie called it, which they used to collect in a billy-can from the local pub. Presumably this was cheaper than buying it in bottles. Jack was a heavy smoker, and in the 1950s he had several heart attacks, almost killing him. After one serious attack, he gave up smoking altogether – from two packets a day to zero.

In the early 1960s, when they were both in their 70s, Bessie had a job as the after-hours cleaner at the offices of the Ormiston company on the corner of Smith St and Queens Parade. Jack used to go along and help her. They also used to do the cooking together, and he used to read the newspaper to her.



Jack sitting on the front steps at Upwey (c.1964-1965)

By this stage they were getting on in years, and Jack's heart attacks and Bessie's occasional emotional instability meant they were vulnerable living by themselves. There was pressure from Len and his family for them to move out of the house in Westgarth St and to come and live with him in Upwey (Dandenong Ranges). Jack resisted this to the last, but eventually in 1963 or 1964 he gave in, and they left Fitzroy for good and moved to Upwey. The money from the sale of their house was used to build an extension along the back of Len's house at Upwey in which they lived. It was a tremendous social upheaval for a couple who had lived all their lives in the inner suburbs to find themselves out on the urban fringe, sharing a house with another family, even if it was their son's family. The photo above shows Jack sitting on the front steps at Upwey.

Not long after the move, in Aug 1965, Jack came down with a bad case of influenza and was taken to hospital in Ferntree Gully. No one believed him when he said that this was the end for him, that he was not coming home – but so it proved. He seemed to have lost the will to live, and on 25 August 1965 Jack died in the hospital, aged 77. He is buried in the Ferntree Gully Cemetery.

Bessie lived on in Upwey for many years, but her final years were in an old people's home in St Kilda – where she died on 14 May 1975, aged 83. She is buried with Jack in the Ferntree Gully Cemetery.

In July 1976, only 14 months after Bessie died, Len, who suffered all his life from high blood pressure, also died suddenly of a heart attack in the back garden at Upwey.



Four generations. Taken in 1973 in an old peoples' home in St Kilda. From left to right: Len, his grandson Paul, son Jeff, and Bessie, in the bed.

WRITTEN BY JEFF ATKINSON, FHS MEMBER

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Fitzroy History Society is on Facebook and Instagram, so for more great information about the history of Fitzroy, follow us!

Facebook: **Fitzroy History Society**

Instagram: **@fitzroyhistorysociety**

COMMUNITY ANNOUNCEMENTS

We are happy to share community announcements that align with the preservation of Fitzroy and its history.