

“Flaggy” at a \$15 million crossroad



Warrnambool's Flagstaff Hill is at a crossroads and requires a long-term commitment of \$15million to prosper. Image: letsgotravelaustralia.com

OPINION

With all the excitement [around the sale of the Warrnambool Fletcher Jones site](#), important details on the future of another prominent site in the city – Flagstaff Hill Maritime Village – have slipped by virtually unnoticed.

But despite the distractions, we *do* need to talk about Flagstaff Hill – or “Flaggy” as it is called by those closest to the action – because unlike the FJ site, which was privately owned, this one is costing *us* money.

At the moment, the Warrnambool City Council is absorbing an annual deficit of around \$500,000 for the 40-year-old Flagstaff Hill Maritime Museum due to falling visitor numbers that have tumbled from 80,000-plus a year to below 60,000. As I [have written before](#), the village needs *at least* 80,000 visitors a year to break even.

While profit is not everything when it comes to community assets, something significant needs to be done to turn things around, or – it has now been confirmed – **the site will cost the council (ie. ratepayers) almost \$9 million in “losses” over the next 20 years.**

It is crunch time and the crunch is that almost \$15 million must be spent in the next three years on Flagstaff Hill to make any real difference to its future.

This is the conclusion reached by consultants, [Coffey Sport and Leisure](#), who were paid \$90,000 to prepare a masterplan that mapped out how to turn the site around and whose final report was recently made [public](#).



The masterplan includes images of what a new interactive discovery centre might look like at Flagstaff Hill.

The masterplan set out a number of scenarios – from do nothing, which would eventually see the site close – through to an all bells-and-whistles affair that would cost almost \$26 million.

The report ultimately recommended a middle ground that would cost \$14.8 million over three years and, potentially, turn the site into a profitable venture by doubling the number of visitors over the next 20 years.

The “middle ground” plan includes broadening the whole theme of the centre to the Great Southern Ocean (which, to some extent, has already begun); building a new, sexy interactive discovery centre that captures the stories of the Great Southern Ocean (from indigenous history, to whales, to shipwrecks); upgrading the existing sound and light shows; giving *free* access to the colonial village; adding another cafe and introducing food/wine events; and linking the whole site up with Lake Pertobe and Cannon Hill.

To make it happen, the council would need to chip in 25% of the total cost – ie. around \$4 million – and the remainder come from state and federal funds, which, given the harsh cuts within the last Federal Budget, would be difficult.

The most important point, however, is that the report makes it clear that this plan is the very least that is required if Flagstaff Hill is to remain relevant and viable.

In other words, unless we are able to find almost \$15 million in combined ratepayer and taxpayer funds, we are pretty much wasting our time and delaying the inevitable.



Another image from the masterplan report that shows how Flagstaff Hill might improve its displays which were described as “uninspiring and static”.

The council knows this, but it also knows that trying to find

a spare million or two in its budget right now is almost impossible.

As a result, it [recently agreed](#) to contribute \$500,000 in 2014-15, and another \$500,000 the following financial year toward a \$3 million upgrade of the very-dated *Shipwrecked* sound and laser night show, plus some other minor improvements. It hopes the state and federal governments will at least chip in another \$2 million between them.

It is a Band-Aid on an oozing knee, but the council somewhat optimistically hopes that this will lift visitors to its night show by 30%.

I say optimistically, because sound and light shows were a big deal in 2002 – when *Shipwrecked* began – but people now have access to such technology in their own lounge rooms and will expect something pretty special.

Still, it is a start, but the conversation that still needs to be had is whether the community wishes to see up to \$15 million spent on the site over the next three years.



Cashed up private investors like Dean Montgomery, who recently bought the Fletcher Jones site, may prove critical to the long-term survival of Flagstaff Hill.

The council sought public feedback on the masterplan last year, and while the 145 people who responded said they wanted to see Flagstaff Hill continue, it is only now being laid out in black and white as to what funds will be required to make that happen in any robust way.

Indeed, the total cost of the long-term plan is rarely mentioned at all, but instead its is framed as a “staged development”. (There was certainly no mention of \$14.8 million in the council’s most [recent media release](#) on the issue.)

There is also regular reference to the council seeking private investment for the site, in the hope that – once again – a cashed up white knight will come and save the day for Warrnambool.

Unfortunately a **Dean Montgomery** only comes along once in a blue moon and he has grabbed hold of the Fletcher Jones site where, unlike Flagstaff Hill, the conversation became very public, very frank and, ultimately, very productive.

So, do we spend \$15 million on Flagstaff Hill in the next three years to turn its fortunes around, or not?

Over to you.

Motor museum to revive Fletcher Jones site



The new owner of the Fletcher Jones site, Dean Montgomery, is in Warrnambool for a couple of days to check out his purchase and to chat with locals about their ideas. He has also arrived with a few of his own.

OPINION

[dropcap style="color: #a5cecd;"] I [/dropcap]t has been a long time since there has been a feeling of genuine excitement around a project in Warrnambool, but the new owner of the former Fletcher Jones factory, **Dean Montgomery**, is about to change all that.

Dean, who is based in China but who grew up in a working class family in Geelong, took some time out today (26/5) to have

lunch with *Bluestone Magazine* and the two key players in the [grassroots campaign](#) to save the best of the FJ site, **Tonia Wilcox** and **Julie Eagles**.

Although it was not planned as an official interview, and hence I am writing this as an Opinion piece rather than a story with quotes from Dean, he was quite happy to sketch out his very broad brush plans for the derelict factory and revealed that a key component will be **setting up a classy motor museum in the eastern end**.

Did you hear that? A museum. How absolutely magnificent and not only is this just the sort of usage that *Bluestone* has [always argued](#) would be perfect for such a large and high-profile site, it will provide a much-needed shot in the arm to Warrnambool's tourism appeal.

Dean is a self-confessed motor enthusiast – and so why wouldn't he take this opportunity to create his own giant garage in an industrial space? – but don't be fearful that this will be a museum full of bogan cars and hot rods. Having spent a couple of hours chatting with him today, it is clear that he has much more class than that.



Plans for a classic car motor museum in the former Fletcher Jones site has the potential to open up a new tourism market for Warrnambool, just as the National Motor Museum in Birdwood has done in the Adelaide Hills (pictured above).

[dropcap style="color: #a5cecd;"] W hile it is very early days, with so much to be done, such a museum has the capacity to again put Warrnambool on the map as a must-visit destination, just like the [Birdwood National Motor Museum](#) has done in the Adelaide Hills.

It will provide an incentive for tourists on the Great Ocean Road to keep driving beyond Port Campbell rather than cutting up through Timboon, as so many now do, to reconnect with the Princes Highway back to Melbourne.

My head is already running away with ideas, as it tends to do, for an annual classic car rally along the Great Ocean Road that would start at the T&G building in Geelong (which Dean and his brother own and have restored), and finish at the Fletcher Jones site in Warrnambool.

Warrnambool has a strong classic car culture (I can still remember the customised panel van shows held at the Warrnambool Drive-In in the 70s) and, from what I can see, there is no large-scale, up-market, classy car museum anywhere else in Victoria.

What a fantastic opportunity and even though I can't tell the difference between an EH and EJ Holden, I would much rather see a car museum on the site than a hardware store.



The stars have aligned for the Fletcher Jones silver ball and the future is again looking bright. Image courtesy of Andrew Kirkham, [A&E Photography](#).

[dropcap style="color: #a5cecd;"] D [/dropcap]ean, who is a

self-made millionaire from manufacturing commercial kitchen equipment (everything from stainless steel benches to chef aprons, glassware and crockery), also has plans for a cafe within the FJ site and has made a very public commitment to keeping (and restoring) the iconic silver ball and gardens.

Indeed from how Dean was talking today, he is not planning to pull down anything, but rather to repair and restore what is there – including removing the asbestos that has, for some strange reason, always been held up as an insurmountable obstacle.

Dean doesn't talk about obstacles: he talks about opportunities. He doesn't appear to fret about "red tape", but talks about finding a way through it.

This is how he has, to date, been able to take on projects such as the T&G building in Geelong and the Leura Hotel in Camperdown (be sure to stop and take a peek in the window next time you are passing through).

For those who had written the FJ site off, it is a reminder of what positive, creative thinking can do. For those who always believed in its potential – like the 600-plus people in the [Save the Silver Ball and Fletchers Gardens](#) group – it is a dream come true.

Warrnambool has a beating heart again, and it is round, silver and sitting on top of three red legs.

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A quiet hero who flies like an eagle



[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #DC943C;"] T
[/dropcap]wo very inspiring and uplifting things have happened around Warrnambool in the past few weeks and a woman by the name of **Julie Eagles** has been at the centre of both.

Julie, pictured left, with **Alice Ugle**, was one of the key organisers of the hugely successful [150th anniversary celebrations](#) of the Framlingham Aboriginal Reserve that last month saw hundreds of people enjoy a day of Koori culture, history and pride in a community that is only 30km from Warrnambool, but which many people had never visited before.

The anniversary event changed all that and Julie, together with Alice and the rest of the organising team, artists, musicians, volunteers and supporters, created something very special that people are still talking about – and hope is repeated, if perhaps on a smaller scale.

Running alongside the Framlingham event has been Julie's ongoing volunteer work as a community campaigner to save Warrnambool's heritage, including the Fletcher Jones silver ball and the best of the former factory site.

[dropcap style="color: #dc943c;"] J [/dropcap]ulie, as part of the **Warrnambool Planning and Heritage Group** and more recently the [Save the Silverball and Fletcher Jones Gardens](#) group, has lobbied for [more than two years](#) to see positive steps taken toward saving this site and, last week, it was finally sold to a developer who, it appears, is sympathetic to its heritage.

At the very least, Julie has been pivotal in ensuring the heritage aspects of the FJ site are now front and centre of the public discussion and many eyes are watching to see what unfolds: quite an achievement after 10 years of buck-passing over the landmark.

To be an agitator in a regional city is not easy, but Julie manages to educate, motivate and empower people toward taking a stand by stating the simple facts and offering alternative

ideas.

For this, and her sheer determination to keep fighting, she is our Quiet Hero.

[box] Julie will receive a coffee and cake voucher from [Rocksalt](#), Port Fairy, and we have another coffee and cake voucher for Alice Ugle from [The Pavilion](#), Warrnambool. Thankyou to Rocksalt (Bronwyn and Sarah) and The Pavilion (Mary-Ellen and Jon) for supporting our quiet heroes.[/box]



[box type="bio"] If you know somebody who you think is deserving of a Quiet Hero, please email us at editor@bluestonemagazine.com.au[/box]

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A different way of doing things



Up it goes: The Fletcher Jones silver ball (sans silver) is hoisted into position in 1967 with campaigner Julie Eagles' sister watching the action.

OPINION

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #A02F2F;"]T[/dropcap]oday marks the beginning of a new chapter in the life of the former Fletcher Jones factory and iconic silver ball, with confirmation that it has been sold for about \$1 million to a man by the name of **Dean Montgomery**.

I say a new chapter, because Dean – even at face value – appears to be a person who does things very differently to what Warrnambool is used to in that he doesn't see heritage as an obstacle, but as an asset.

We know this because he is already involved with restoring and renovating the historic Leura Hotel in Camperdown. We also know this because, even more incredibly, Dean joined the grassroots campaign, [Save the Silver Ball and Fletcher Jones Gardens](#) which is being driven via Facebook, prior to the announcement of the sale. He even posted a wonderful photograph of the ball that he was given by the volunteer groundsman at Pleasant Hill, **Lex Caldwell**.

This doesn't sound like a man who is about to bring in the bulldozers and knock the whole thing down to replace it with apartments or "big box" retail like that which dominates the outskirts of Warrnambool.

Indeed, in 2011, Dean was quoted in the [local Camperdown newspaper](#) as saying: "We're (he and his brother) both passionate about heritage buildings and restoring them, it's what we do."



The new owner of the former Fletcher Jones factory, Dean Montgomery, who is passionate about history.
Image: Camperdown Chronicle.

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #A02F2F;"]D[/dropcap]ean, to my mind, represents a generational change for how things can be done in Warrnambool, where a developer with a vision and the funds works *with* the community to create something special, and enduring, on what is one of the most prominent and important sites in the city.

This doesn't mean the whole derelict building will be preserved (nobody expected or wanted that), but it does mean that an iconic landmark that is so special to the community will be retained. Word has it that Dean already has cranes organised to start tidying up the ball.

That all of this is happening is testament to how grassroots activism can work when people unite for a common cause, and the Save the Silver Ball campaign has united people.

Living in Tasmania for about six years taught me everything I know about the ability of ordinary people to fight for something they loved, even if they were told that they were being unrealistic, out-of-touch or nostalgic at the expense of progress.

The people who fought, and continue to fight, for Tasmania's precious native forests have had everything thrown at them, including physical violence, yet they keep going because they know the battle is worth it. Native forests cannot be replaced simply by planting more trees: each forest is unique.



The Weld Angel (aka Allana Beltran) became a potent symbol of the campaign to save the Weld Valley in Tasmania from being logged. Image: Matthew Newton/Tasmanian Times.

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #A02F2F;"] A
[/dropcap]mong the bravest of those fighting for Tasmania's forests was a woman called **Allana Beltran** who became the potent symbol of the anti-logging movement after dressing as an angel, decorated with cockatoo feathers and a long white

curtain, and hoisting herself high among the trees in the Weld Valley, in southern Tasmania, where she sat poised on a tripod in silent protest.

“The Weld Angel”, so beautifully captured by freelance photographer **Matthew Newton** who’s image went around the world, provided an evocative reminder of what would be lost if the value of everything in the world was measured only by economics.

In Warrnambool, the Fletcher Jones silver ball has proven to be a Weld Angel: a galvanising symbol of what is irreplaceable and worth preserving.

More than 600 people fell in behind the campaign on Facebook to share their memories, photographs and ideas about how to preserve a unique part of the skyline and landscape.



An early image of the silver ball that was posted to the Save the Silver Ball page by new owner, Dean Montgomery.

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #A02F2F;"] B
[/dropcap]ehind the scenes, campaigners **Julie Eagles** and **Tonia Wilcox** – among others – met with the powers that be, agitated, asked questions, wrote reports, emailed, filmed, phoned, photographed and held gatherings at the Warrnambool Hotel to thrash out how to keep the ball in the air. (And *Bluestone Magazine* was right behind them.)

Of course there were the critics and doubters who said it was all too hard (for whom?) and would cost too much (compared to what?) and that it would be so much easier to just knock it all down and start over again, just like in the Tasmanian forests.

But some people think – and act – very differently and **Dean Montgomery** looks like one of those people.

A new chapter is not only starting for Fletcher Jones, but for the whole city.

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Imagine the skyline without the silver ball?

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #A02F2F;"] A [/dropcap]bove is a small tribute to the hard-working team behind the [Save the Silver Ball and Fletcher Jones Gardens campaign](#) who, today (8/5), have seen a reward for their efforts.

The purchase of the former Fletcher Jones Factory by businessman **Dean Montgomery** – a member of the Save the Silver Ball Facebook page – has provided hope that the ball will be preserved. Dean is a believer that history should be treasured and he has already shown that he is a man of action, not just words, by upgrading the Leura Hotel in Camperdown.

Today is the first step in what we hope is a new chapter in the life of the iconic ball.

Just imagine what the skyline would be like without it?



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