

# ANDREW ALLEN'S PODCAST CONVERSATION WITH JEFF MCGILL ON 5 OCTOBER 2022

## All Things Fred

**AA** Hi everyone and thank you for listening to Curious Campbelltown. As Australia's most famous ghost Fisher's Ghost is such an integral part of Campbelltown's culture. It is always open to debate around the existence of ghosts and in Campbelltown's case if our Fred does haunt the place. But it can also unite us as we celebrate the old spectre. No better example of this than the Fisher's Ghost Festival held every November.

Now my special guest today is former local newspaper editor, author and great mate Jeff McGill. Today we will try to get to the bottom of why the legend continues to defy the test of time. Good morning Jeff and thank you for talking with me on Curious Campbelltown.

**JM** My pleasure Andrew.

**AA** Firstly I must congratulate you on the success of Rachel.

**JM** Thank you, it has been a bit of a roller coaster but that was just a book of my great great grandmother, a campfire tale that sort of turned into a book. It seems to be doing quite well.

**AA** It's done fantastically well and a fantastic read.

**JM** Thank you.

**AA** If you're like me you have always had a fascination for ghosts and with Fisher's Ghost I even had a fascination before I came to Campbelltown when I was child living down the south coast. So were you always fascinated with Fisher's Ghost as a child?

**JM** Kids love ghost stories and so I grew up with them in Campbelltown but when it really hit its stride for me was in the 1980s when I was a young reporter here and I loved every time the Fisher's Ghost season rolled around talking to the locals about their ghost sightings and their stories and their eerie bumps in the night sort of moments. But what really fascinated me was it's not like it's all over Campbelltown. All of these ghost sightings and bumps in the night moments were happening in that southern end of Queen Street area which was pretty much around Fred Fisher's old farm. So that intrigued me that it was so grouped.

One of my favourite stories was about a woman who contacted me who said that when she moved to Campbelltown in the early 60s I seem to recall she lived in a house which is pretty much where I think the Red Rooster thing is at Fisher's

Ghost Creek there now. It was a double storey house and one day they hadn't even heard of the Fisher's Ghost story they had just moved to Campbelltown and she heard a little boy up having a conversation with somebody. She went up and walked in and he was sitting there in an empty room and she said who are you talking to and he said Uncle Fred can't you see him. She said I thought he was just an imaginary friend until I heard the ghost story where it happened. So there's moments like that, they're just little throw away moments which make you laugh.

Gordon Fetterplace always used to tell me about eerie things happening at the old Fisher's Ghost Restaurant which was of course the old broken down Kendall Mill. He would have staff coming in because that was quite functioning, not an old ruin but a functioning restaurant back in the 90s. He would have staff come in who would suddenly find every painting in the building had been tilted sideways. A fire that had been put out that was suddenly reignited again, stuff like that they would always put down to Fred.

The Theatre Group always talking about the ghostly steps and they would always say oh it's just Fred when they would hear a noise when they would hear something like that.

The old Advertiser the Macarthur Advertiser was based in that white building opposite the McDonalds and they had the big printing presses out the back in those days, they have long since been demolished. I always remember the story that Colleen Pitchford used to tell about how all the printers were down there working there one night and most of the building was empty and they saw someone looking through a window through a doorway at them and they thought it was Norm Campbell the photographer taking the mickey. So they went in and they had enough of him making these faces so they went in and kicked open the door to find the room empty and no way in and no way out and all the printers apparently left the building and refused to go back in it was so realistic.

**AA** I know Colleen and I know she is not the sort of person .....

**5 mins**

**JM** That's right she's very businessman like and that sort of thing. She told that story but we had our own moment with that because later on The Advertiser moved up to the old Bank Building further up Queen Street and I hadn't sort of put two and two together at that time and it wasn't until Verlie Fowler told me that the fence line between it and Campbelltown Mall was the fence line between the Worrell and the Fisher properties. It was just down the back there that Fred was actually murdered. The blood was found on the fence posts and his body was dragged across to near where the child care centre is and that was where Fred was buried in the creek bank. When we moved into the building originally everyone was downstairs and upstairs was just empty and the only thing up there was the old piles of back copies. Because I am into that sort of thing I would often go up there and sit there in the silence and read through the back copies and double check things. One day I was sitting there just reading a story and I heard

a voice coming from the hallway outside like a high pitched sound I can't even replicate it, it was almost like a woman's voice but I thought it was somebody taking the mickey. I thought it was one of the photographers so I actually got up and jumped out and there was no-one there and this cold blast went through and all the pigeons were making a noise on the back veranda and I've got to tell you I got downstairs pretty quick. I told the editor at the time and he just laughed and he said I wouldn't tell that story too much because people will think you are mad. So he is the only person on earth who knew that happened apart from my wife. That editor shortly after left and we got a new editor and the building sort of changed and some of the creative service people who did all the advertising and things like that they came in and they were sitting where the editorial section had been and they came in on the weekend and I overheard them complaining really spookily because upstairs on the weekends they kept hearing this high pitched girl or woman's voice calling and they would go up there and there was no-one up there. When they described it, it was the same noise I had heard and that's what really freaked me out because I hadn't been saying. It's not like we'll get Jeff on this one, this was like the same experience I had had with someone completely different. I just added to the plethora of what the hell was that.

My favourite story was always the Deidre O'Dowd one where Gordon Fetterplace said to me in about 1989 or something and he said you have got to talk to Deidre O'Dowd. He said you were only a kid when this happened but back in the early 70s when the Campbelltown Picnic Races were held in the Appin area Deidre was the marketing promotions person for it and they had just down a whole lot of building work around the Fisher's Ghost Bridge and in the mud they had found an old wooden post from the original bridge. So she had it all cleaned up and a little plaque put on it and they renamed the Campbelltown City Cup the Fisher's Ghost Cup. They used it as the finishing post they erected it, that was the plan anyway. For four meetings in a row it gushed down rain every time the Fisher's Ghost Cup was going to be raced and then they decided no we are going to name it something else and of course the sun shone beautifully and everything. There is actually a front page photo that was taken on the local paper of Bobby McWilliam with a shovel digging the post up giving it back to Deidre saying no we don't want this anymore thank you. So Deidre took it home and stored it in her garage and then underwater pipes exploded under her house and she got a huge excess water bill. Then through Gordon Fetterplace she arranged for it to be donated to the Campbelltown Library and as soon as that happened there were all sorts of plumbing issues at Campbelltown Library and they had to do a whole lot of work around it. I think it has since settled in and it's got its nice home there but I think it's maybe because Fred was buried in a creek I don't know but water seems to have some sort of connection there according to the stories.

**AA** We're very proud of our post at the library. In fact every time we do a school tour we drag it out and sure enough it will rain. It's handy when it's drought time we can bring it out and sure enough it will help break the drought. So Fred continues with his weird ways.

**JM** We always attribute it to Fred and that's always said in a nice way. I think it's a nice inclusive thing. He's not some sort of horrible ghost that terrorises people, he is a cheeky ghost who puts smiles on people's faces and he's a bit of a stirrer.

**10 mins**

**AA** Isn't it funny how all those places that you described are all around that same southern end of Queen Street. Hardly an old building that doesn't have some sort of .....

**JM** I've lost count Andrew of the amount of people that have come up from that area and just said we've hear something knock in the night was that Fred. Where was Fred's farm? I'm sure there's also that cause and effect of people only seeing what they want to see, it's harmless it's good fun.

**AA** What about you, have you seen a ghost?

**JM** See one no, not seen one just that experience I had. I've got to say that shortly after that the editorial section moved up into that top section of the building and I worked there for the better part of a decade and then came back. I worked many nights there by myself and the only other person in the building would be a cleaner coming in sort of thing and I never had another experience.

**AA** So you just had experience but you haven't actually seen anything.

**JM** That was all temperature and noise nothing sight wise.

**AA** I have but that's another story that's why I'm such a believer when I was a child.

**JM** A ghost as in a representation of a person or a Casper sort of thing.

**AA** A representation of a person when I was about 9 or 10 so I guess that's why I'm a believer and I always wanted to know more and why Fred Fisher's Ghost fascinates me and experiences that you have had.

**JM** I have an open mind in the sense that I think there's stuff out there that we don't understand and will never understand and it's a bit like art to me. I'm sort of OK with it but not everything does have a rational explanation.

**AA** How do you feel about how we celebrate Fred? How the town celebrated it. Should we have a statue of Fred I know we were thinking about it.

**JM** This is a vexed issue. I've done many stories over this because there has been two or three pushes over the years to have a statue erected to Fred but the question is how do you make a tangible statue of something that was intangible. It's very very difficult in an artistic sense but more than that the old Norm Campbells and John Marsdens used to say don't do it because if Fred's not a big motor he works in the shadows so to speak and whatever happens Fred will stop that from happening. I can remember that it was under Jim Kremmer when he was Mayor and Jim is still around he lives in Tasmania now he is a friend of mine on Facebook and he's a grand old man now but Jim with the very best of intentions wanted some sort of statue or something and of course people pointed

out that shortly afterwards he lost his Mayorship and there's always a payback if you know what I mean.

Norm Campbell said that at the time something will happen to stop it, the company will go bankrupt or something and it's not going to happen. When you think about it Andrew it goes back to the movie on Fisher's Ghost that my wife did a lot of research on back in the 1980s. In fact I think that photo and info you've got there was sparked off the original research she did. She went to all the early archives, she's a bit of a movie buff. She pointed out that the Lottie Lyle, Raymond Longford that made that went broke shortly after the film was made. So Fred seems to like causing trouble and being a bit of a cheeky bugger. He doesn't mind the festival being named after him he's often shown that over the years but he is not a fan of I think statues and things like that. That's just my guesswork maybe some artist will come up with an absolutely brilliant concept but I don't think it can be a statue as in your traditional cast iron. It wouldn't work it would have to be something clever with lights and I don't know.

**AA** We can't have a Big Fred in Campbelltown.

**JM** A Big Fred no. Like I said if it was some sort of really creative light show. A month or two ago I was at the Northern Lights Exhibition at Campbelltown North where the teachers and kids put on this really really creative uses of lights with artworks and things so I don't think it is impossible but it would have to be the right artist coming up with a very clever idea, somebody more clever than I am that's for sure. I've never come across anything that I would sort of like that way.

**AA** It does divide the town a little bit doesn't it? I know some people get a bit weary of the Fisher's Ghost and the story. Do you ever get that way?

**15 mins**

**JM** I think it's just familiarity breeds contempt. You have got to remember the town that I grew up in was 30,000 people from Glenfield to Menangle Park and now it's closer to 200,000 so that is an awful lot of new people moving in and it's fresh for them. A lot of these people are wow I didn't know that so you've always got to allow .... I guess it's like a famous singer having to sign their best known hit for the hundredth millionth time well somebody is out there hearing it for the first time and thinking wow. So you have always got to keep that in mind because keep in mind that I did this for decades as the local editor and journo having to every Fisher's Ghost write the same old stories but we tried to find to find a different way Andrew. We had to come with every year a new concept for the Fisher's Ghost wrap we did the feature. One year for example we would just do something like get the local theatre group to re-enact and get an arty farty photo of the actors in the reflection in the creek waters you know sort of doing the murder scene. The next year it might be a focus on the fact that it was actually the Dharawal trackers who found the body so with Uncle Ivan's help we got a couple of young blokes there sort of to re-enact being the Aboriginal trackers and we got a picture of them tracking through the grass. So every year it was that different challenge to find something else and I was quite proud of the fact that I

looked back one year after ten years and every year we had a very different theme to it because there are lots of facets to the story. Whether it's just the ghost story itself, whether it's the pioneering. I can remember being really angry one festival when I was photographing it and I heard some yobbo when the Aboriginal people were coming past with such pride and embracing saying oh political correctness. It just made me feel tired all over. I said go and read the legend and you will find the role the Dharawal people played in the Fisher's Ghost Legend. So there is education needed out there at times because it is not just a ghost story. It is a story of Campbelltown and of the people in Campbelltown.

**AA** I think it's great that we are known for a ghost. It is no unique and people associate it with Campbelltown is a good thing. I think it is fantastic. Turning to the historical story I am just interested in your opinion on whether you think Worrall was guilty. I know he confessed right at the very end there just before the rope was put around because Fisher had so many enemies didn't he?

**JM** It was almost like who shot Mr Byrnes isn't it. There were a whole lot of different possible suspects there. I remember talking about this at length with Verlie Fowler when she wrote her early history on it. She actually went through the original historical records and the archives and she was the one who plotted it all on a map and everything. Verlie's contribution cannot be undersold she did a great job in the 80s and 90s and she was the one who I think was at the time seemed to me to be convinced there was more to it than just that particularly those people who were living in the hut at the time seemed to be pretty what you would call today a bad crowd falling in with a bad crowd. I used the line ups in the paper that if John Marsden was representing them Worrall would have got off. It seemed to me like they were looking for a fall guy and he was convenient but I don't think he acted alone. He may even have been covering up or was framed by the other people who were living in the hut at the time.

**AA** Byrne had a major issue and so did Booker.

**JM** I think he was a serial offender of offending people Fred. I don't think he was a saint by any stretch of the imagination.

**AA** What about the festival, how do you feel about the street festival? The street parade I mean. Should we have kept that going?

**JM** I've actually got a bit of a jury out on this thing because on one hand there is the traditionalist and the old town identity like so many people are think oh the nostalgia of it but on the other hand I do know the Council was having a lot of trouble getting enough floats and getting people. Some people are saying oh Council shouldn't be doing that and I feel like saying well when did you enter your float or when did you march in the parade.

## **20 mins**

The answer is inevitably no so it needs to be a community supported thing to be a community event. In other words the easy thing to say is the typical knee jerk reaction bloody Council shouldn't do that. But it's more complex than that. I've

hardly been an apologist for Campbelltown Council over the years and particularly my days as an opinion columnist but I will defend them on this case. I think Council has to the best of their ability tried to embrace and support this in as many ways as they can and that comes not only from observation but knowing many of the people who have been involved in this over the years and their intent. But when you've got five floats turning up it is very hard to have a colourful parade. In saying that there have some wonderful wonderful people over the years who have contributed some amazing floats. All those kids who would dress up as highland warriors and look at the St Pats girls coming down with their nurse's things and all that sort of thing and there have been some great contributions but how do you keep something that's been going for how many years since 1956 fresh. It's a big challenge and I would challenge anyone to come up with that. The easiest thing in the world is to have a whinge but to come up with a solution is not so easy. That's probably just tiredness coming out but I am so over the trolls out there who have a whinge about anything. That's where I am at, at the moment.

**AA** It must have been exciting when you were a kid though because I know it was big back in those days.

**JM** It was exciting in the 70s. I used to both cheer on as a little kid and march in it myself whether it was for scouts or whatever you know, I've done both. Then I came back as a reporter and then I came back as an editor and everyone knew that I carried a camera wherever I went so I was also the photographer. So I think I worked out once there was only a handful of Fisher's Ghost Festivals that I hadn't actually been at. I could count on one hand in my whole life. So I have seen a lot of them and they have ebbed and flowed and changed in quality over the years but you know it was difficult for me as a photographer for example when they changed it to the night time shots because it is a bit more difficult when things are going past you so quickly when you are relying on a flash and things like that to get the expressions but I respected the fact that Council was trying something different, they were mixing it up a little bit which is needed because you just can't keep on doing the same thing every single year and expect people to come out. You said before about people being sick to death of the story well again I wonder how many of the people have complained about the Festival parade being cancelled have actually attended, how many times have they attended in the last five years for example minus covid.

**AA** Are you happy with what Council has got planned?

**JM** I haven't had a deep look at it I must say Andrew I've been busy doing other things. I am sure that they will be doing the best they can because then again it's not just me going oh I'm covering Council I just know a lot of the people involved and they are good people.

**AA** So why do you think that the legend has stood the test of time? It's probably a difficult question to ask you straight off like that.

**JM** I think it's just a great spooky yarn. People love a ghost story and it is rooted in the truth there's documentary evidence there not so much for the ghost itself because I don't think the ghost started to appear certainly in a published pop culture sense until many decades after the actual event. There was no ghost reported in the initial newspaper reports and all this sort of thing, that came later. But certainly there was a very strong oral history and I am even fascinated by that fact of the origins of the festival itself because you had two things happening at the same time. You had on one hand Campbelltown wanted to create a festival to celebrate Campbelltown whereas Camden had the Festival of the Golden Fleece because of its links with the wool industry Campbelltown in 1956 was struggling to find a theme. They actually held a competition and believe it or not the winner of the competition was Campbelltown Commemorative Festival which I find myself falling asleep just saying the words. Somehow that won but it obviously didn't light a fuse of excitement because every year they changed the name in the late 50s. One year it was the Ambulance Festival because the aim was to build an Ambulance Station. Next year it was Back to Campbelltown, another year it was the Rose Festival or something I can't remember.

## **25 mins**

So on one thread you had Campbelltown Council desperately trying to find a theme while on the other hand you had a radio station in Sydney that started telling the story of Fisher's Ghost and it generated such an interest that literally thousands of people came out to Campbelltown on the anniversary of his death with cars lined up Appin Road for kilometres.

**AA** I've heard that story I find it totally fascinating. I was interviewing Norm Campbell and he told me a little about that. It's hard to believe.

**JM** John Marsden was there as a little boy this is about 1955/56 and this happened because the second year Apex got involved with barbeques and sausage sizzles and it became quite an event. So in one case you even find The Advertiser, The Campbelltown Ingleburn News at the time calling it a Fisher's Ghost Festival actually using those words. But no one believe it or not had yet put the two together and it wasn't really until Greg Percival at the end of the 50s became Mayor and he said well hang on here we are searching for a theme and we've got theme being handed to us on a platter and it went together. In saying that you have always got to be careful in naming names because if you listen to Fred or Barney or Jill and they will all tell you a different story about who was responsible normally with them as the saviour. But to my understanding even if Greg didn't come up with the initial spark he as Mayor certainly came up with we're going to do this. So the first Fisher's Ghost Festival of that name was held in 1960 with Greg as Mayor.

**AA** We have a lot to thank Greg Percival for don't we. There were a lot of decisions made, a lot of innovations and things he came up with.

**JM** He was a great man, we are sitting in the Greg Percival Library.

**AA** I just had that same thought.

**JM** I am biased he was a good friend of mine he was a mentor to me. Greg was a gentleman and a scholar in the true meaning of the word and he was only briefly Mayor funnily enough. He was only Mayor for about two years but he was a Councillor for about three and a half decades or whatever it was and in that time he was involved in so much and even as MLC in the 70s he was heavily involved with the Water Board. If you look in all the areas in the City of Campbelltown when it burst out of nothing in the 1970s and it fell short in so many areas from job generation to whatever but the one area that kept up brilliantly was sewerage. Campbelltown went from being mostly unsewered to completely sewerred in less than a decade. So Greg even had his fingerprints all over that. These are things that don't grab people's attention, it's not sexy, but Greg used to say to me that he got a thrill out of quietly driving around Campbelltown and thinking I had a hand in that, I changed that, I did that. Not that it ever made headlines but I've got to say now that I am a retired newspaper editor I feel the same way sometimes. I drive around thinking geez I remember police dragging me away there, threatened to be sued there and it's the hand you had in shaping the town you live in. I can now sympathise with his input. Greg always held very strong views about the Fisher's Ghost Festival and about what an important thing it was for Campbelltown and more so with Greg even though it veers off the topic a little bit here we even have our sister city relationship with Koshigaya and Koshigaya Park. That was still a touchy topic in the 80s. This is only 40 years after World War II. If you had your types who now occupy certain so called news programmes and things like that who are bloody hyping people up and what not, Greg was somebody who could have easily done that but he was a man who actually fought the Japanese in World War II and was a war veteran but he said no the only future is in friendship and understanding so he was at the absolute forefront of creating the sister city project and Koshigaya Park. Greg is somebody who we owe not only the Fisher's Ghost Festival but Koshigaya Park and a whole lot of things.

**AA** We certainly do, I agree. Well I've enjoyed chatting to you about Fisher's Ghost and I thank you for being part of Curious Campbelltown Podcast and I wish you all success in the future whichever project you are about to take on. I know there's plenty you've got in mind so I wish you good luck Jeff.

**JM** Thank you Andrew, my pleasure mate.