

“The Great Fortuna Statue Massacre” Visit by John & Helen McEwen on 25 Feb 2008

Background – John McEwen

John McEwen repaired the Pompeii Fountain statue in the early 1970's after it was shot up by a National Serviceman with a .303 rifle sometime in the 1960's.

John came back to Fortuna on 25th Feb 2008 with his wife, Helen, to see his handiwork again.

John was a former teacher/lecturer in ceramics at BIT (Bendigo Institute of TAFE) in the 70's. He later became a farrier and a volunteer teacher/visitor to remote children in outback NSW. He is now retired.

The “Statue Massacre” Incident

The story told to the author of this Note (Pat Thwaites) was that the shooting incident happened in the early 1960's (1962-64). A bored (probably drunk) Nasho decided to liven up a dull weekend by using the statues around Fortuna Villa as target practice with his Army issue .303 rifle. Source of this rumour is unknown.

This story, however, does not mesh with the timeframes of Nasho's being present on the site. Peter Barrett believes that Nashos were here between 1950-1956 and then again from 1965-1972.

Stu Symonds stated that he believed that there were several statues around the Fountain at the time, but only one (the one on the Roman column) was an original statue from the Lansell era. He believes that several of these replica statues were also shot and destroyed.

Stu Symonds said that this timing would accord with the fact that the .303's were withdrawn from service before Vietnam and replaced with SLR's.

Stu remembers one statue that survived the “Great Statue Massacre”, the statue of a boy carrying a basket, which was known to go walk about from time to time. One such time, a soldier almost crashed his car on entering the grounds as he sought to avoid hitting a young boy who he thought was about to run in front of his car. It was the statue.

Repair of the Surviving Statue

John McEwen described how he came to be involved in the project. He was contacted by two military men (names unknown) in the early 70's (either 1971 or 1972). John did remember Eddie Esposito, but he doesn't believe that he was one of the two who contacted him.

He had never carried out a repair of that nature before, but his personal motto in relation to new work was “Never say no”. He would learn on the job.

The statue on the column, John says, was made from compressed cement. The statue was badly fragmented as a result of the shooting, with the front being mostly blown away. The statue's right shoulder was intact, the head was separate (but intact), and the front and left (raised) arm were destroyed. The base was badly fractured, but this damage may have occurred during removal from the plinth.

John described the repair process, saying that he had to make a metal armature (for the arm) and fix this to the remaining body. He then built a chicken-wire frame and pumped in cement material mixed with Plastibond adhesive.

John stated that Plastibond is still a product in use today, as he repaired another statue just recently with the same material.