**Address by Colonel Sir Alfred N Kemsley, KBE, CMG, MSM, ED, to Melbourne Legacy
on 22nd January 1980.**

On Tuesday, 22nd January 1980, the Chairman of the Shrine of Trustees, Colonel Sir Alfred N Kemsley, KBE, CMG, MSM, ED, addressed Melbourne Legacy as Guest Speaker.

The Chairman was introduced by the President of Melbourne Legacy, Mr W R Mehan, who concluded by extending Legacy’s congratulations to the Chairman on being made a Knight Commander of the British Empire in the New Year’s Honours List.

The Chairman received a long, standing ovation by one of the largest assemblies seen at a Melbourne Legacy luncheon.

Set out below is the Chairman’s address which relates to the early history of the Memorial.

“Mr President and fellow Legatees,

Thank you very much for that ovation. I think I’ll remember that for the rest of my days.

Gentlemen, I wanted if I may, in my capacity not only as a Legatee since 1923 but in my present capacity as Chairman of the Trustees of the Shrine and at a request of the Anzac Day Observance Committee, to say something to you about the history of that monument which is not at all well known. I want at first to begin if I may in telling you young fellows that it arises out of the fact that out of a very small population in Victoria in 1914 and from then on until 1918, 116,000 volunteers from Victoria went overseas to serve Victoria and Australia. 18,000 volunteers did not come back – that is, one in five did not come home. There would be no household in Victoria which was not in some way directly involved in casualties in health or other such result of war.

That is the situation which you fellows would not understand as we who were privileged to come back and be available to carry on. Because of the sense of national loyalty, the sense of national responsibility to those who had volunteered in all that service, and in the knowledge that hardly any man went away was not wounded or made ill because of the nations efforts in various fields of battle, there was still in 1920 a very considerable feeling of the sense of loss and that something should be done that they be remembered. It began in the Melbourne City Council itself where a resolution was submitted in 1921 by Lord Mayor Swanson through his Councillors that he should have their authority to call together a meeting of the metropolitan municipalities and other prominent citizens with a view to take some action so that the memory of those conflicts should be properly remembered. I need to leave a lot out to tell you the full story, and so I’ll progress to say that arising out of that meeting Committees were formed for various purposes, and, in 1922, the Committee of experts after inspecting 20 sites altogether as appropriate for a war memorial selected the site where the Shrine now stands. The decision having been made that it had to be non-utilitarian, a world competition was held amongst ex-servicemen who had not necessarily only served for Australia but any British Ex-servicemen were invited amongst the architects to submit proposals for a Memorial. They were told that a maximum figure of £250,000 would be available for it and they were given all the details of the site so that they would have the two essential factors to enable them to enter effectively into the competition.

There were 83 entrants and the one selected in December 1923, was the Shrine of Remembrance designed by two Melbourne ex-servicemen – Philip Hudson and Jim Wardrop. The names of Hudson and Wardrop, and Ussher as it later was, being the architectural firms to whom the honour was granted.

The principal interesting factors which dominated the decision apart from the architectural standards was the view that the war had been fought to save democracy from tranny and it was began in Greece. The successful design was basically a Greek design and these factors, together with the provision of the Eye of Light within the scheme, where the determining elements on which they won the competition. Bear in mind that at that time it was just at the end of 1919 and it was on the suggestion of an Australian that King George decreed that there would be two minutes silence on the 11th November every year throughout the British Commonwealth in honour of those men who had died and sacrificed in war. That feature being so beautifully incorporated into the design was a determining factor with those who had to make the decision.

In January, 1924, the accepted design and the 82 other designs were exhibited and the Committee of the Day decided that it would be desirable for the newspapers in Melbourne to have an opportunity to have a proper look at the accepted design before publication date which was nominated as the 21st January, 1924. A request was made to the editors if they would all honour the obligation not to publish the date. Four days before, however, the Age did publish it and therein begins the whole story of the Shrine of Remembrance’s problems.

The same night the Herald was able to come out, having had a week to look at the Memorial, and say in the headlines ‘It was the opinion of many that the Shrine of Remembrance embodies little or nothing of the spirit of Australia’. That did not please some of us, it did not please me, and by the 21st January, the public display had been on for some time for all the public to see it and, generally speaking, nearly everybody seemed to be favourably disposed towards it. There were others, naturally, who thought well of one or two other designs. But I have to emphasise that it had the full backing at the time of the Executive of the Returned Services League. As a result of the Herald having been defeated by the Age in breaking this traditional agreement that there should be an honoured date for publication, the Herald then embarked on a vicious campaign. They continued along the line of their leading article on the first night and they maintained this pressure almost daily in the press.

They managed to persuade or was otherwise able to influence a man named Lucas who had been awarded second prize, or he was able to influence the Herald to make a great fuss about his design and say how much better it was than the Shrine.

In my mind, and I have said this many times publicly and I say it again today, that it was not exactly playing the game on the part of Mr Lucas. The Age and the Argus were very influential in pressing the support of the Shrine but by no means upholding as much of a campaign as the Herald persisted on right through. This continued on, Gentlemen, from 1924 to 1926 and amongst the different suggestions which the Herald sponsored on behalf of cranks and others were that there should be a Roman obelisk, an arch of triumph across Princess Bridge, a hospital, to which I took the liberty of replying that to have just a 200 bed hospital endowed for all time a million Pounds was needed.

That settled the hospital story especially as I remember adding on the end of it – ‘Would somebody please tell me where those who want to lay a wreath would lay it at a hospital.’ Homes for widows was recommended, a tower with carillon bells, and Premier Allan at that time said that there ought to be an arch across Princes Bridge with tea rooms on the top of it. There was 10,000 acre national parks advocated, an Eiffel tower at the Exhibition, a tablet on Mt. Donna Buang, the great ocean road should be built (which it subsequently was), a scientific laboratory, a cenotaph and finally the proposal for an Anzac Square which was to demolish the then Whitehart Hotel and the Imperial Hotel at the top of Bourke Street. It was proposed to open all of that area out, acquire the properties and make it into a park in front of Parliament House, thereby enabling Parliament House have the benefit of being a memorial to those who had died. I have got some thoughts on that.

Well we made a real fight about it in Legacy, and at this stage the Argus and the Age had taken things very badly and felt rather pushed out because the War Memorial Committee itself had lost some of its strength, and the fight had been left almost entirely to the Herald which really pushed for the Anzac Square scheme. Some of us were able to use political influence to make sure that before they went any further they had a costing taken out, which was subsequently taken out by the City Valuer of Melbourne, the Senior Valuer in Victoria and the third one nominated by the Institute of Valuers. They produced an answer that the value was going to cost about £5 million to do what was proposed and then they were not satisfied in their own recommendation. You’ve also got to bear in mind the political instability at that time. Gentlemen, in those four years, we had Lawson, Peacock, Prendergast, Allan, Hogan, Macpherson, Hogan again, and Argyle as Premiers. That was the situation which the Committee of this Club, which I have had the honour of being its Chairman, had fought for the Shrine of Remembrance through those years against the Herald campaign and against all this damn nonsense. We had a political instability not previously known and has not happened since in Victoria so that we were not able to really register the view which Melbourne Legacy was pressing alone in favour of this memorial.

On 6th July 1926, the famous Sir John Gellibrand, our patron and the instigator of the idea under which we meet today, was addressing our Club then in the Victoria Palace and at the conclusion of the very interesting address indeed by Sir John, and with this matter at its height about Anzac Square, he suggested at the end of his speech that we should get behind it. This was too much for me, Gentlemen, and I broke all the rules of Legacy that day, and I stood up and demanded from the President who had given his support to it without asking anybody, that a meeting of members of Legacy be called before his endorsement of that proposal be given. Donovan Joynt got up and seconded it and we had two other fellows who spoke and we held up the meeting. Then the General Meeting was called, of course, and as a result we decided unanimously in this Club, on the support of the Committee that had worked so hard, that we were going to stand of the Shrine of Remembrance and we would continue to fight. As a result of that, it enlivened the Age and enlivened the Argus and we managed to get a lot of support.

But the resolution which was moved at the Special Meeting of members by Joynt and seconded by me, and this is the thing that I am leading to at the finish, reads as follows – ‘That Melbourne Legacy Club representative of returned soldiers in business whilst welcoming Anzac Square as a City improvement, cannot support it as a War Memorial and affirms that support for the Shrine of Remembrance in the Domain as the only Memorial worthy of Victoria’s unparallel efforts in the Great War.’ At that meeting we had only one dissention.

From that moment, Gentlemen, Melbourne Legacy was committed and the fight went on. We went around and spoke in picture theatres, RSL sub-branches and we began to convert a branch here and a branch there. We really conducted a campaign, in which only two of my colleagues, Frank Doolan and Rex Hall, who were involved in that Committee are here today and I am very sad to say tat they, Donovan Joynt and I are the only four left of the Committee who started and maintained that fight till the end. The Herald renewed its attack and the Returned Services League still went for Anzac Square scheme at that stage. To their disgrace in my view.

Our committee was later developed up from Joynt, Doolan, Hall, Savage, Sermon, Blackett and myself who were principle members of the Committee. Regrettably, most of them are gone.

We really put up a campaign and we managed to get some odd letters into the Age and the Argus from time to time, and gradually as we went along they came along a little more enthusiastically an din 1927 there was another development which finally resolved it. That was when the Duke of York came to Melbourne and the RSL was invited by the State Government, Argyle’s Government, to see whether they would like to entertain a lot of VC winners and use Anzac House for special welcome for the Duke of York. This was a very interesting development, so my colleagues and I formed deputation to Sir John Monash who we knew were going to be the speaker at this function and we knew that 22 VC winners were going to attend it with Joynt acting as their Chairman. I got Joynt to make sure that the VC winners would stand by us at this meeting if we could persuade Sir John Monash to do what we wanted. So we went along to Sir John, at which I was Chairman, and we asked him for the second time if he would use his speech as a resounding board at that meeting. If he would undertake to say that he was a supporter of the Shrine, we would undertake to fill that meeting in such a way and a secret way that we would have a standing ovation before he finished what he wanted to say.

Sir John was very much impressed but he took the view that as Head of the State Electricity Commission, and with the State Government situation precarious, he felt some diffidence about doing it and he would not give us a promise. We did do what I have said, I sat in one lot of row of seats, Joynt was with the VC winners and Doolan sat with another row and Hall with another. All around that hall we planted members of our Committee and other Legatees – all who were members of the League and had the right to be at the meeting. But we got there early, and we got into the right seats, and as Sir John arrived Joynt had already got all his VC fellows lined up so they would stand up on his suggestion. They were in the front, of course. Sir John did conclude his fixed speech and then did come on and make a very important pronouncement about how much he felt along the lines of that resolution I have told you, and he used that as a basis.

Gentlemen, he never finished saying what he wanted to say. The VC winners were on their feet, the rest of us throughout the hall were on our feet and there was such an acclamation that we would not sit down and we really kept that place under control. That was the finish of the meeting.

At the next meeting of the RSL annual gathering of the members of the RSL Executives, Monash was again to be the speaker, and he thought that it would be a good idea if we sent Joynt along and that he might be able to persuade the then President of the RSL to permit Joynt to address the meeting. And this happened, after all, how could they refuse Sir John. So Joynt really let himself loose on the RSL fellows that day and that meeting reversed the attitude of the RSL and from then on they were back where they should never have been away from, and they have supported us very much ever since.

Now that’s the way in which we won the war – a real war. This really silenced the Herald and did enliven the Age and the Argus a good deal and we pushed them along with every excuse we could get. Ted Doyle, a Legatee, was the Chief of Staff with the Argus and we obtained a lot of support.

Now Gentlemen, as a result of all those things, Melbourne Legacy then placed in its rules, which all of you have got in your pockets I hope, a rule relating to the Shrine of Remembrance which reads – ‘Melbourne Legacy is to foster proper reverence for and appreciation of the significance of the Shrine of Remembrance’. And Gentlemen, you are going to be asked to do it.

In 1927, Armistice Day came along and the Committee had sufficient comforting feelings having collected £20,000 from the Melbourne City Council, £15,000 in advance from the State Government. That was enough for us to get a foundation stone laid which was undertaken in 1927 on Remembrance Day by Lord Somers. That was how the Shrine started.

In November 1927, I was invited to be a member of the War Memorial Committee. From then on the construction was pushed along pretty fast and it was a big job. In 1933, the Committee which had been raising all the money for the Shrine and so on, was converted by a Government Act into a Trust and the Shrine of Remembrance Trust Act passed in December 1933.

On 11th November 1934, the Shrine was completed and dedicated by the Duke of Gloucester. In the records of the Committee for raising money it is officially recorded that the success of raising the money for this Memorial and having it built is to the credit of the Legacy Clubs of Victoria. It is so officially recorded.

In 1938, I was appointed a member of the Trust, on the death of Sir John Swanson, and I of course have been there ever since. All of this story which I have had to reduce very much from a lot of interesting, amusing and upsetting details, is an indication of what a few really determined fellows can achieve if they have got an objective, which is the right objective. The Trustees have recently invited our good friend and Legatee, Bill Russell, to do the research work necessary for all of the story of this to be officially and historically recorded in the Victorian records and into a book for the Shrine of Trustees to be able to sell at a cost of $5 per copy.

It will be available here in another month or so and I expect every one of you fellows to buy one and sell them too. It is a complete story. Bill Russell has done a magnificent job of research into this, including the numbers of copies of the Herald he had to look through over 4 years to make sure of his facts in regard to the troubles we gave the Herald administration and to be able to balance that up with the comments that were being made from time to time, by the other papers. He has done a fantastic job of work on this, which you would expect from Bill Russell anyhow, and as I have said, the Trustees should have the book available shortly.

Gentlemen, Legacy’s contribution needs no further emphasis from me. The rules that are there for us to observe, need no further pressure from me I am sure.

The Shrine in its statuary symbolises patriotism, sacrifice, justice and peace and the feature on the top of the Shrine of the stepped dome represents Glory – there is no suggestion of praise of war about the Memorial in any aspect of it. It is completely a Shrine of Remembrance – what it as intended to be. We have reached the stage now, I say with emotion, if I may, that there are only 23 of us World War I fellows still left in Melbourne Legacy, and one-half of those unfortunately, Gentlemen, could not be brought here even in wheelchairs. So we are not very strong now. Out of all that work that we did, all that we have achieved, is the Shrine. It is the reason why I have given the title to my address – ‘From failing hands, Gentlemen, to you we throw the torch, be yours to hold it high’.

President W R Mehan response:-

Legatee Kemsley, you can tell from the studied interest and from the reception you had at the conclusion of your address, that everybody here is totally behind you and behind every word you said. It must be a great delight to you to know that this fascinating story, this hard battle of yours that you fought with others is going to be recorded permanently in a book by Legatee Bill Russell. I think further that what you had to say should be recorded permanently and fortunately we have taken a tape of your address today. I know that this sympathetic audience today are the right people to hear this story but there are also plenty of people outside this room that ought to know it and to agree to it just as much as we do in here.

Thank you very much Sir Alfred for your most fascinating and well presented address and for the very great effort you have put into presenting it to us.