Hope new picture holds key to identifying Somerton Man, Lynton Grace reports

Nursing a mysterious secret

THE history of a central player in one of South Australia’s great mysteries — the unidentified Somerton Man — can be revealed for the first time.

And the Somerton Man’s teeth and calf muscles may be the key in solving a big part of the puzzle — whether he fathered a child with an Adelaide nurse.

University of Adelaide professor Derek Abbott has commissioned a new picture of Jessica Thomson, the nurse the unknown man tried to visit the day before he was found dead on Somerton Beach in 1948. She was also known as Jessy.

He’s hoping the new picture will prompt people who knew Jo Thomson — as she was better known — to contact him as he tries to piece together the mystery.

The well-dressed man, found propped up against seawall at 6:45am on November 30, 1948, has never been identified.

An inquest found he died from unnatural causes, theorising it was an unknown poison. It was a common finding in those days when no other cause of death was evident.

The mystery has fascinated South Australia ever since, especially because of still-unbroken codes connected to a book of Persian poetry thrown into the back of a Glenelg doctor’s car.

It has led to theories he was a spy, or a double agent, and that he was killed by someone — and that Mrs Thomson was also possibly a spy.

The Somerton Man had a piece of paper torn from the book secreted in a pocket, and Jessica Thomson’s phone number was written in its back.

Mrs Thomson, who died in 2007 and was known as Jo for much of her life, always denied knowing the Somerton Man.

Prof Abbott, who has investigated the case for years, hopes someone will recognise the nurse.

He said he now feels comfortable revealing what he’s learnt about Mrs Thomson after her family appeared last year on 60 Minutes.

The family told 60 Minutes they believed Mrs Thomson and the Somerton Man had an affair and a child — renowned ballet dancer Robin Thomson.

“In 2002, she started telling people she was the nurse in the case but denied she knew the Somerton Man. She had a son, and it was just at the right time to have been fathered by the Somerton Man,” Prof Abbott said.

Prof Abbott, who has pushed for the Somerton Man to be exhumed for DNA tests that could be compared to the DNA of Robin’s daughter, said there are two key genetic reasons he believes Robin may be the progeny of the pair — his teeth and his ears.

“It’s not just the timing — the son has an unusual dental configuration in that his canine teeth were next to his middle teeth,” Prof Abbott said.”

“While he might have been a dancer — and it turns out the man’s possible son became a ballet dancer with the Australian Ballet and the Royal New Zealand Ballet.”

Even their ears have similarities.

Determining if Robin was their son is a key to working out who the Somerton Man was, he said.

“It’s not about the fact she had a son out of wedlock. It tells you the Somerton Man had to be in a certain time and place when Robin was conceived, which places him in Sydney — where Jo Thomson was training to be a nurse — then known by her maiden name as Jess Harkness. You can then look passenger logs of ships and trains pre-1946 to nail his location down is an important part of the timeline.”

The Somerton Man was last seen alive lying on Somerton Beach the evening before he died, only a five-minute walk from where Jo Thomson lived in Moseley Street.

You can contact Prof Abbott at the University of Adelaide or Google his name.

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