South Australia's X-Files: Part 2 - the Somerton Man mystery and the secrets of Adelaide's tunnels

By: Lynton Grace

THE mystery of the Somerton Man — the well-dressed body of a man found propped up against a sea wall at Somerton beach in 1948 — may involve anything from Cold War-era Soviet spies to a double-agent's love child.

Or just the simple case of a spurned lover who never got to see his sixteen-month-old son and died on a beach.

What it does include is poison, indecipherable codes and ancient Persian poetry. And a still unidentified dead man.

There is much unknown about the case of the Somerton Man.

The concrete facts are few. Here's what we know.

He arrived in Adelaide by train on November 30, 1948.

He leaves his suitcase at the Adelaide railway station, buys a train ticket to Henley Beach.
but then takes the bus to St Leonards (a now-forgotten suburb near Glenelg).

His actions during the next few hours are unknown, but they were his last — he’s found dead on Somerton beach, propped up against a seawall at 6.45am on December 1. He is only five minutes’ walk away from Jo Thomson’s house in Moseley St, Glenelg.

In his pockets are the used bus ticket, the unused rail ticket, two combs, chewing gum, cigarettes, and matches. Intriguingly, a half-smoked cigarette was balanced on his shirt collar, suggesting he died quietly — or was placed there after his death.

The labels have been cut from his clothing.

At a post-mortem, the pathologist calls it an unnatural death. A suspected exotic poison, but no trace was found.

On January 14, 1949, an unclaimed suitcase believed to be his is found in Adelaide Railway Station’s cloakroom.

Many of the labels were removed from the clothing in the suitcase and the jacket he wore had a front gusset and stitching used only on garments made in the US.

From here, the mystery just deepens. On April 1949, police find a tiny piece of rolled-up paper with the words “Tamam Shud”, meaning “finished” in Persian, sewn into the dead man’s trouser pocket. The words were printed and appeared to be torn from a copy of The Rubaiyat by Persian poet Omar Khayyam.

A Glenelg doctor comes forward with a rare copy of The Rubaiyat — it had been thrown into his car, which was ostensibly parked in Jetty Rd, Glenelg, on the night of November 30.

Ultra-violet light on the book’s back page turns up more mystery — undeciphered codes in the back, which appeared to read:
This led to claims the man could have been an assassinated Soviet spy.

That’s getting away from the facts, of course, but wait … there’s more.

A phone number in the back of the book is Jo Thomson’s. She claims she gave her copy of The Rubaiyat away to an Alfred Boxall and initially identified the man as Boxall.

Boxall turns up alive. With his intact copy of The Rubaiyat.

Jo, who was to be married, and died in 2007, told police she didn’t know who the Somerton Man was.
Her daughter, Kate Thomson, says she accepts her mother was a Soviet spy who may have had a hand in the murder of the Somerton Man.

“She had a dark side, a very strong dark side,” Kate told 60 Minutes last year.

What’s more, Jo also had a son, Robin, to another man. Robin’s former wife Roma Egan and their daughter, Rachel, believe Robin — who has died — may be the progeny of the Somerton Man and Jo Thomson.

In June 1949, a coronial inquest is unable to determine cause of death and an open finding is delivered. The man is buried at West Tce Cemetery.

In October 2011, University of Adelaide professor Derek Abbott asked Attorney-General John Rau to allow the Somerton Man’s remains to be exhumed for DNA testing.

His request was denied.

For Prof Abbott, the simpler explanation is the one most likely one.

“Everyone loves the spy angle but I can’t find any evidence whatsoever,” he said.

“You can access old ASIO records through the national archives — and we have done a run on the nurse’s names and Alf Boxall — and nothing comes up.

“Everything in that era is now out in the open. It just doesn’t stack up as a spy thing.”

Even the codes don’t appear to be actual World War II codes, he says.

“We’ve analysed that statistically over and over using computer software, they match the first letters of English words.

“It doesn’t appear to have the structure of a secret code and isn’t structured in the way World War II codes were constructed.”
He discounts the torn labels as a sign the man was a spy

“Is that all they've got? If you look at the whole package, the spy idea loses momentum.

“There's nothing in her timeline to suggest (Jo Thomson) went off spy training somewhere, she didn't leave the country.”

So how did the man die, if it wasn't murder?

“The inquest believed it was unnatural and likely a poison — but in those days, if you didn't know the cause, you'd put it down to a poison, that's what pathologists trained in the Victorian era did.

“Today, you might look at the possibility the guy asphyxiated. He was found lying in an awkward position, his head against wall.”

The other part of the mystery is The Rubaiyat — the Somerton Man's copy is now missing, apparently lost by police in the early 1950s.

“Plus, we have never found another copy of the exact edition of The Rubaiyat that the Somerton Man had. Just other similar editions.”

So what was that book of poetry? Here's a sample:

“A Book of Verses underneath the Bough,
A Jug of Wine, a Loaf of Bread — and Thou
Beside me singing in the Wilderness —
Oh, Wilderness were Paradise now!”
Around the time of Valentine's Day, sales of copies of *The Rubaiyat* increase, second-hand books sellers have told Prof Abbott, who now sees the book as a sort of “seize the day” offer for star-crossed lovers.

“They're trying to woo someone, it's giving them the book, and saying, 'live for now, come and date me — for tomorrow we die'.”

"When Jo Thomson was interviewed by police she was asked what type of poetry it was. In her own words, 'it is love poetry'.

Or was it just a poetry book they liked?"

---

**UNSOLVED**

---

**ADELAIDE TUNNELS**

ARE there tunnels under the city? The short answer is yes, but not as many as you'd think.

The idea of tunnels under Adelaide's CBD has fascinated many, leading to longstanding rumours of passages beneath the city that link up Adelaide's older buildings.
It's thoughts of dank, dark, clandestine passageways allowing people to scuttle unseen from building to building that see the rumours grow.

These days the tunnels that did exist are either filled in or beautified, sanitised and … well, almost boring.

And the supposedly secret tunnel network never actually existed in the first place.

According to SA historian Deb Morgan, who used to work for the State Heritage Unit and wrote a paper on some of Adelaide's tunnels, many passages started out as basements or cellars built beneath city buildings, which had walls removed — for example, the cellars under the Lion Hotel.

“Most houses had cellars and it’s a short step from digging a cellar to tunnelling through to another one,” she said.

“Tunnelling itself was nothing special — SA was founded on miners and mining skills, so digging a tunnel would have been a piece of cake for many of the miners and engineers of the 19th century and early 20th.

“You’d just have to ask why they would bother to dig a tunnel under a road — if they could just walk across at ground level.”

Ayers House has cellars, and so do historical homes in North Adelaide — some of which were originally underground living areas, tunnels connecting the homes with old servants’ quarters or as security against attacks.

Most of the rumours started from the two tunnels that do exist — the several passages and rooms under the old Treasury Building on Flinders St, now the Adina Hotel, and a long-disused railway line that runs diagonally under King William Rd.

What there is, or was:

- Air raid shelters at the northern end of Victoria Square during World War 2
- A tunnel that once connected the Torrens building with the Old Treasury Building, but is now filled in
- Several existing passages under the Old Treasury Building
- A tunnel under King William Rd, which was turned into partially underground railway line linking the old Adelaide railway station to where the Jubilee Exhibition Building on North Tce used to be (now the University of Adelaide)
- Underground cells beneath the Sir Samuel Way Building courthouse, which are now unsafe and no longer accessible
- Service tunnels under the Royal Adelaide Hospital
- “Tunnels”, which were probably storage bays, exposed during work on railway station platforms in the 1970s and may not have been underground when they were built

What probably never existed, or there’s no evidence for:

- A tunnel linking the Adelaide Post Office with the Old Treasury Building
- A tunnel linking Parliament House and Government House (for secret meetings between the Governor and MPs)
• A tunnel linking the basement of Old Parliament House with the railway station (rumoured to allow politicians to escape the rain)

• A tunnel extending all the way under North Tce to Pulteney St or even Frome Rd, with a railway line that linked to other North Tce businesses via secondary tunnels and underground station platforms

• A tunnel linking Ayers House (which once had nurses’ quarters) with the RAH

The best place to see tunnels under Adelaide are the ones under the Adina. It on Franklin St, which is in the city’s oldest building — the Old Treasury Building.

Inside the old Cabinet room, in that heritage-listed building, history was made — for example, the decision to give women the vote.

Underneath it are passageways linking up different sections of the building. The wide, well-lit tunnels — complete with fire extinguishers and fire alarms — are now hired out for functions such as wedding or parties.

Coal, then gold bullion, was stored there during the gold rush in the 1850s in what were then Treasury Vaults, according to National Trust volunteer Grant Morgan, who has been hosting tours through the tunnels for more than a decade.

The gold was smelted down in another room that no longer exists and turned into coins because of a shortage of currency in SA.

“So many miners had gone to Victoria to try to make their fortune,” Mr Morgan said.

“And with the risks of bushrangers involved in coming back with gold, the government
organised supervised trips to and from the gold fields.”

Known as the Adelaide pound, about 24,000 of the gold coins were made and stored in the tunnels.

“It was about the size of a 10c piece — they were strictly illegal, but were used as unofficial currency for some years until the gold rush had subsided,” Mr Morgan said.

One underground room still contains a furnace that dates back to the 1860s. It was used for lithography — to speed up the process of mapmaking. The lands title office was in the building at the time.

Next to it are the two glass window shutters standing open around a block of concrete in the wall.

It’s a filled-in tunnel that Mr Morgan suggests may have been the start of a passage leading under the street to the post office.

This tunnel has long been rumoured to exist — but Deb Morgan said she’s never found evidence it was real.

The room also contains a well under the floorboards — covered, but not filled in.

Another blocked-off tunnel under the Adina, hidden in an alcove that now houses a large airconditioning unit, once led to the Torrens Building, which was on the eastern side of Victoria Square and housed government offices.

It’s a strange sight — blocks of stone centuries old next to modern technology.

This was probably the only passage that linked two buildings underground — but was filled in when the Adina took over the building, Mr Morgan said.

“I had taken people on tours through it until the hotel came along,” he said.

“But the hotel didn’t want to be responsible for tunnels that didn’t bring income.

“I’d love to still be able to bring people through it — it is a bit sad.”

The other significant tunnel in Adelaide’s underground history was last seen in 1973.

It started life as a small crossing under King William Rd about 1840 to allow cattle and soldiers’ horses to avoid what’s now King William Rd when grazing them.

Then, in the 1887, it was turned into a railway spur line, starting at the old Adelaide railway station on the corner of North Tce and King William Rd and running under the road.

It ran behind Government House and to where the Jubilee Exhibition Building and Exhibition Oval used to be — until it was demolished in the 1960s for University of Adelaide buildings.

The railway and tunnel was closed in 1928 but again saw light in 1973, when a section of it was rediscovered during excavations for the Festival Centre.

Ms Morgan said the city council at the time believed the bluestone-line tunnel, which was 15 feet wide and about 30 feet long, would have made a “grand addition and counterpoint to the modern architectural form of the new Festival Centre … while allowing patrons to cross the road in safety”.

But the cost escalated to as much as $140,000 and the project was abandoned — “laughably cheap” now, according to Margaret Anderson, the CEO of History SA.

For Ms Anderson, the tunnels could be as interesting as the fascination people have with them.

They are a remarkably persistent urban myth – it keeps popping up. People have a fascination with what you can’t see.”

The tunnel has now been backfilled with quarry rubble.

Grant Morgan said the romance of tunnels under cities is what nurtures their continuing myth.

“The rumours seem to be very common when you talk about tunnels — people get romantic ideas from movies such as The Third Man.

“Tunnels create these legends — people always ask me if there are ghosts. I can’t promise them ghosts.”

Deb Morgan said the stories of extensive tunnels under the city may have also sprung from the gold bullion stored under the old Treasury Building, and the need to securely transfer valuable goods and government documents between locations.

“I think that would be overkill really — Adelaide was not exactly a wild west town at the time,” she said. “People just like the idea of a mystery, something hidden from view and the possibility of secret goings-on.”

SOLVED