On 9 May 1901 the Allinga arrived at Fremantle, bringing a new religious and social order to Western Australia (WA). Among her passengers were two bearded Victorians, Solomon and Samuel Richard Fisher, the sons of James Cowley Morgan Fisher, otherwise known as 'The Nunawading Messiah', the leader of a Victorian millenarian sect, the Church of the Firstborn. The purpose of their journey was to choose a locality where members could settle as a community in order to practise their peculiar faith and social customs.

Fisher’s community was one of a handful of historical communes in Australia that had a religious motivation for its foundation. Secular and humanist communes have proliferated, but only a few were strictly religious in their emphasis. They included Herrnhut, Hill Plain and Holy City in Victoria; The Manor in New South Wales; and, as we shall see here, New Jerusalem, established by the Firstborn at Wickepin, WA. The emergence of the Firstborn sect in Victoria in the 1860s has been described elsewhere. This paper discusses the motives for its move west in the early-twentieth century, and examines the special character (much commented upon at the time) of the community it established at Wickepin.

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1 Bill Metcalf was Established Writer-in-Residence at the Katherine Susannah Prichard Writers Centre in Perth in 2002. Guy Featherstone is an independent researcher. The authors acknowledge and thank the staff of Battye Library and the State Records Office, Perth; the State Library of Tasmania, Hobart; the genealogist, Loreley Morling; and Fisher’s descendants, Heather Flint, Jenny Hemley and Ron Ebsary.


James Cowley Morgan Fisher's origins are unclear. His own version, reported in newspapers in 1871, was that he migrated to Adelaide with his parents. Aged fourteen, he ran away to sea and then deserted the *Esperanza* for the Victorian goldfields in 1852, before marrying and settling at Nunawading. The certificate of his marriage in 1858 names Robert Fisher, magistrate, as his father, and his wife Sarah, née Cowley, as his mother. Recent research indicates that the man known as James Cowley Morgan Fisher was the fifth son of Robert Cowley and Sarah (née Morgan) who was named James Cowley when born on 27 November 1831 in Nailsworth, Gloucestershire. The Cowley family migrated on the *Charles Kerr* to Adelaide in 1840. On 20 July 1850, nineteen year old James Cowley married Louisa Phillips, a widow in her late twenties. Four months later, James was living in a brothel when he was arrested and later convicted of uttering three forged cheques for £40. He was transported to Van Diemen’s Land for ten years, working in a probation gang until November 1851, when he was assigned to a free settler, John Swan, a merchant of Newtown Road, Hobart. He absconded on 6 October 1852 and escaped to Melbourne on the *Esperanza*, where he hid his identity by assuming the surname Fisher (that of his paternal grandmother) and later adding the forename Morgan (his mother’s maiden name).

On 7 July 1853, eight months after absconding, ‘James Cowley Fisher’, although still married to Louisa in Adelaide, married Caroline Chamberlain in the Congregational Church, Prahran, Melbourne. One of his brothers was called Joseph Fisher Cowley, so James had derived this new name by simply reversing that of his brother. Caroline died on 9 September 1855 after giving birth to two children who also died. James next married Emma Pickis Kefford on 8 June 1858, at Christ Church, Hawthorn, using the full name of James Cowley Morgan Fisher. By this time he lived in Nunawading, twenty kilometres east of Melbourne, and earned his living as a carter, charcoal burner and farmer. This marriage brought Fisher into contact with an obscure Victorian sect, ‘The New Church of the Firstborn’, which had been established by his new mother-in-law, Emma Kefford. She was an extraordinary woman ‘with great gifts in the way of preaching’, and

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4 Argus, 10 July 1871, p. 5. This incorrect version is repeated in the entry in the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Vol. 2, Melbourne, 1972, p. 172.

was supposedly a follower of the theology of Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772).6 Under his mother-in-law’s influence, a vision of seven angels and revelations made directly to him by Jesus Christ, Fisher underwent a dramatic religious conversion. By 1861 he was leader of this sect. Based on the religious principles and practices inherited from his mother-in-law, who died in 1867, and from divine messages, he developed this sect into what he called the ‘Church of the Firstborn’, which by the early 1870s claimed about one hundred followers, some of whom remained faithful until Fisher’s death.7

Fisher’s espoused faith was an eclectic mixture. According to an 1871 report, the Firstborn believed:

in the first and second advent of Christ; in the restoration of the House of Israel; in the lost ten tribes now inalienably mixed by intermarriage with the Gentiles, gathered together again by the spirit of God; in the immaculate conception of Christ by the Virgin Mary; in salvation through Jesus Christ; in Jesus Christ being the minister of circumcision; and in other points of belief common to the evangelical Protestant churches.8

Many of Fisher’s beliefs were derived from the Christian Israelism of John Wroe (1783–1863), of England, who claimed that the lost ten tribes were destined to become ‘the elect’. When they became aware of their destiny and identity, the world would end. Wroe acknowledged the Jewish origin of these teachings and observed a code of conduct governing diet, dress, sexual behaviour, circumcision of males, family relations, Sabbath observance, and abstinence from tobacco and alcohol. Wroe had a worldwide following and frequently travelled to gain converts, coming to Australia numerous times between 1843 and 1862, until, on his last Australian tour, he had an accident and died in Melbourne on 5 February 1863.9

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6 Argus, 10 July 1871, p. 5. The use of the term ‘Swedenborgian’ to describe Emma’s beliefs might have indicated an association with the New Church in London before her migration, or was simply a label used to describe her spiritual and visionary experiences.
7 Western Mail, 26 August 1905, p. 5; Age, 19 June 1871, p. 3.
8 Argus, 10 July 1871, p. 5.
Figure 1: James Cowley Morgan Fisher, 1905. This, the only known surviving image of Fisher in his later years, sits oddly with his status as a successful middle-class businessman, suggesting the charismatic leader deteriorated rapidly in his old age. But probably his odd appearance is more a product of poor photography, given that four years later he was well enough to marry a 19 year old bride. Photo courtesy of Heather Flint.
Fisher became an avid follower of Wroe’s Christian Israelites and, after Wroe’s death, sought unsuccessfully to assume Wroe’s position. Fisher prophesied that Christ’s second coming would be an age when the Holy Spirit would be ‘poured out upon chosen instruments’, such as the Firstborn. Fisher’s faith included acceptance of (or flirtations with) spiritualism, mesmerism and freemasonry, all of which manifested Swedenborgian views about the relationship between the physical and spiritual worlds, purification and regeneration. Fisher saw signposts to ‘the wonders of the coming millennium’, and practised faith-healing by anointing with oil.\(^{10}\)

The physical appearance of Firstborn members suggested they were Jewish converts. Like the Christian Israelites, men were unshaven and their uncut hair was gathered at the back of the neck. They wore linen garments (ephods) to services, although this practice was not remarked on in WA. In 1871 their services were described as being similar to Wesleyan, consisting of a hymn from the Swedenborgian New Church hymnal, a prayer, readings from the Bible and a sermon in which Fisher displayed his eloquence and knowledge of Scripture. The sect held monthly new moon meetings, based on the Jewish lunar calendar, and sometimes members interpreted dreams and experienced prophetic visions in church. Firstborn members endowed their leader with charisma and extraordinary gifts. A contemporary who was attempting to supplant Fisher as leader, John Bignell, suggested that the sinister power of mesmerism was employed: ‘He has a strong electro-biological power’.\(^{11}\)

A spirit of sharing, fellowship and intense community was fostered through services and social gatherings. Their cohesiveness is evident in the family and neighbourhood connections between most members. The sect’s rural character meant that day-to-day familiarity sustained relationships and avoided social contamination from an urban setting. Members who later moved to WA all had farming backgrounds and many had ties to the Firstborn dating from the 1860s. But in 1871, the community’s cohesion and privacy was seriously

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\(^{10}\) Argus, 10 July 1871, p. 5; Age, 6 July 1871, p. 3; Featherstone, op. cit.

\(^{11}\) Daily Telegraph, 13 July 1871, p. 3, and 19 July 1871, p. 3; Age, 28 June 1871, p. 3, 6 July 1871, p. 5, and 27 September 1871, p. 5; Argus, 10 July 1871, p. 5; Narrogin Advocate, 6 May 1905, p. 2, and 18 October 1905, p. 2; Narrogin Observer, 26 January 1906, p. 3; anon., 20 June 1904, WAA 12, Acc 1497, item 3131/07, State Records of Western Australia (hereafter SROWA). See M. Barkun, _Disaster and the Millennium_, New Haven, 1974, p. 88, for discussion of the links between charismatic leaders and their followers.
threatened when Fisher and his sect were embroiled in a public scandal. Fisher's failure to save a child's life through faith healing led to civil action by the disgruntled father to recover £34 from Fisher, who had supposedly claimed to be Christ 'with divine power to heal all diseases, whether of body or soul'. The press coverage (which included accusations of polygamy, discussed below) brought notoriety and infamy. Despite lampooning by the press, and the assignation of the pejorative title, 'The Nunawading Messiah', Fisher remained a free man, his escaped-convict past remaining unnoticed. Their chapel at Nunawading was used by those living nearby and at Bayswater, where Fisher had selected about 120 acres in 1875 and to which he and his family moved in 1877. In 1888, in order to provide for his family, Fisher, with his sons Solomon and David and nephew Immanuel Rintel, selected additional land at Jindivik (90 km south-east of Melbourne) and there attracted new followers. Two other sons, Samuel Richard and John, remained at Bayswater. Fisher's sect was thus split into two geographically separate camps, threatening their cohesiveness. Furthermore, the growth of 'Marvellous Melbourne' meant that Nunawading faced suburbanisation. The 1890s economic depression, Fisher's advancing age, and threats to their collective identity from too-near neighbours prompted them to seek a remote setting where group loyalty could be more easily maintained.

It is common for charismatic leaders, particularly those with utopian and/or millenarian orientations, to lead their followers on pilgrimages to escape conventional society and to establish themselves anew in a remote location. In Australia, this pattern was established in 1853 by Johann Krumnow who led 'Herrnhut' communards from Geelong to western Victoria. Twenty-three years later Maria Heller led her 'Hill Plain' communards on a similar 500 km trek across Victoria. In 1893–4, William Lane led several hundred followers half way around the world to establish 'New Australia' in Paraguay. While Fisher and his followers were planning to migrate from Victoria, Matti Kurikka was leading seventy followers from Finland to establish their utopian 'Kalevan Kansa' in north Queensland. Fisher's decision to move his

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12 Age, Argus, and Daily Telegraph, 10 July 1871.
group across the continent was a predictable ploy to extend the group’s life and ensure the leader’s power.  

The WA colonial government attracted newcomers through a generous policy of land alienation. Settlers could select up to one thousand acres at ten shillings per acre, with the cost spread over twenty years. Free homestead blocks of up to sixty acres were also offered, although farmers had to meet residence and improvement conditions. Thence Fisher sent his two sons, Solomon (aged thirty-nine) and Samuel Richard (thirty-one), to locate a large area of rich arable land on which the entire community could settle and practise their faith unhindered. Solomon and Samuel toured the newly-opened land along the railway from Albany to Katanning, accepting help from a ‘land-guide’ provided by the Lands Department. They chose the Yarling Creek locality, in the Wickepin Agricultural Area, 40 km east of Narrogin, their nearest township on the railway. The name Wickepin was derived from the Aboriginal name Wikabing that applied to a spring in the area. Opened for selection in 1893, the area was said to have excellent land ‘suited for cereals and fruit’, and there was an abundance of fresh water easily obtained from springs,-soaks and shallow bores, such that there was ‘practically no fear in regard to a water famine during the summer months’. The Firstborn settlers claimed in 1905 that they held ‘the very best land in the State’.

Solomon and Samuel Fisher returned to Victoria to inform their father’s followers and prepare to move west. There was no legal provision for communal property title in WA, so each man had to apply for land on adjoining blocks. William Butler and Charles Peters (both related to Fisher through marriage), who had come to WA with Solomon and Samuel, negotiated with the Lands Department and signed applications on behalf of their colleagues in Victoria. The new settlers arrived in WA over several months with small groups coming once their affairs in Victoria were settled. In some cases families were split, with males embarking first before being joined by wives and children. Fisher arrived in WA in early 1902. Staying in Narrogin, he applied for additional land for himself and his followers, before

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moving to Wickepin. The community celebrated their 'Foundation Day' on 29 September 1902, the feast day of St Michael the Archangel, the helper of 'the Chosen People'. Obviously pleased with this new land, Fisher returned to Victoria to auction off his stock, implements and household effects, after which he and his household returned to WA early in 1903.15

At first, Fisher and his followers worked together to build simple huts and to clear their rich flats along Yarling Creek. They shared livestock and farm equipment, and although each family lived on its own block, work was undertaken on a collective basis.16 Having sold most of their property in Victoria, they brought an estimated £5,000 to invest, a fortune for the time, enabling them to 'build substantial homesteads, purchase and acquire the Newest and Most Modern Appliances necessary for farming purposes, and otherwise make their homes comfortable'.17 The first significant building they erected was New Jerusalem Hall, used as a community church, school and social centre. It had a wooden frame covered with galvanised iron. It was unlined with a timber floor, had four windows, and was about eight by seven metres, and almost four metres high, with a porch.18 While under construction in January 1904, a local newspaper remarked: 'The Christian Israelites … are very busy just now with the erection of their synagogue. Although they lead us in the van of progress, we admire them for their indomitable spirit and pluck'.19

Fisher's community was known to many outsiders as 'The Jewish Settlement', although members preferred 'New Jerusalem', a label commonly employed by other utopian and millenarian sects. It was the title given to that blissful city, described in Revelation 21, that was to descend from the heavens at the conclusion of the battle of Armageddon and where Christ and his saints would rule the world for a 1,000 years of peace, prosperity and harmony. The Firstborn saw themselves as preparing for this paradise and showing the way forward for all humanity. The Narrogin Advocate took a great interest in the 'Christianised Jews', informing its readers that members held

15 Narrogin Advocate, 6 October 1904, p. 3; West Gippsland Express, 6 November 1902, p. 3.
16 Narrogin Observer, 2 September 1905, pp. 1-2; West Australian, 31 August 1905, p. 3; Narrogin Advocate, 2 September 1905, p. 3.
17 Western Mail, 26 August 1905, p. 5.
18 W. Kennedy to Inspector General of Schools, 20 June 1904, WAA 12, Acc 1497, Item 3131/07, SROWA.
19 Narrogin Advocate, 3 February 1904, p. 3.
beliefs akin to those of the Christian Israelites, and correctly noting that they were different from 'a similar body in Victoria'.

In 1905, the 70 or so members of New Jerusalem were described as being 'one large happy family', and family ties certainly dominated the membership. The patriarch's family, including five of his married children (Solomon, Samuel, John, Sara Joyner and Julia Swinbank) with their spouses and children, and an unmarried daughter, Mina, formed the largest group. A granddaughter, Carol Butler (née Joyner) and her husband, William, also joined the settlement. Immanuel Rintel, Fisher's wife's nephew, came with his wife and three children, and his four sisters — two of whom were married with five children. The matriarch of this latter group, Jessie Rintel (sister to Fisher's legal wife, Emma) also came. She had been a widow since 1898, when her long-estranged husband, Hyam, had died. She was reputed to have been Fisher's second wife for over thirty years, and he the father of her children.

Others with family connections included James Middleton, Fisher's neighbour at Jindivik, who moved to WA in July 1902 and married Mina, Fisher's youngest daughter. Samuel Peters (stonemason), accompanied by his wife and unmarried son Charles (farmer) also came from Jindivik. Their daughter, Bertha, had married John Fisher in 1899 while Charles married Zillah Rintel in 1911. Few New Jerusalem members lacked familial links to Fishers or Rintels. One was Hobah Judiah Noble who had worked for Samuel Fisher and joined the sect through his father, John, who had been a believer since the 1860s. Hobah and Samuel, together with George Richter and Henry Joyner and his son, James, came from the Bayswater wing of the sect. Other families who might have been connected with, or were at least very friendly with New Jerusalem, are Bergin, Boyes, McCracken and Zinkler. The number of families identified approximates the numbers given in the local press, ranging from eighteen to twenty-two.

Other selectors in the Wickepin area participated in the New Jerusalem community, some marrying in, perhaps through acceptance of the faith or perhaps only because of proximity. For example, in

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20 Ibid., and 6 May 1905, p. 2. The correct name, Church of the Firstborn, was scarcely used; the only instance noted was in the Narrogin Observer, 26 January 1906, p. 3.
21 Narrogin Advocate, 6 May 1905, p. 2; Western Mail, 26 August 1905, p. 5; and Narrogin Observer, 2 September 1905, p. 2.
22 Applications for land, WAS 2280, Cons 5870, Item 48, SROWA; Narrogin Advocate, 6 October 1904, p. 3, and 7 October 1905, p. 2; Narrogin Observer, 26 January 1906, p. 2, and 30 November 1907, p. 3; Western Mail, 26 August 1905, p. 5.

By all indications, New Jerusalem was a relatively prosperous community. In 1905, only three years after settling, members were cultivating about 300 hectares and had ringbarked much of their remaining 4,000 hectares for grazing. Charles May, Chief Inspector of Lands, reported that ‘neat slab dwellings’ had been erected, and admired how ‘each holder works his land entirely on his own account;

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they all, however, work in unity, i.e., if one requires assistance in building, fencing, or clearing, the others help'. The *Narrogin Advocate* thought their accomplishments 'a splendid illustration of what may be done by systematic and modern methods, and on every side the result of perseverance and hard toil is plainly seen'.

New Jerusalem members grew excellent vegetables such as cabbages, cauliflowers, rhubarb, peas, turnips and potatoes, and started planting fruit trees and lucerne. Their herds of cattle and horses were increasing and water was plentiful. The WA Director of Agriculture, Charles Chaplin, said that 'in all his travels he had never met a community of people like this before, but from what he had heard and seen of the "Jewish settlement", the State could do with many more such communities'. Chaplin believed that New Jerusalem 'deserves encouragement for the State requires thousands of their class'. New Jerusalem was thus touted as a modern agricultural showpiece of what could be achieved in the wheat-belt.

In January 1906, New Jerusalem was visited by WA's Minister for Lands (Newton Moore), Director of Agriculture (Charles Chaplin), Surveyor General (Harold Johnston), local member of parliament (George Cowcher), and several Agricultural Society members and reporters, all of whom stayed overnight. Moore (soon to become Premier) was 'very much impressed with the New Jerusalem settlement … they have made commendable progress, and there is every indication of the members becoming prosperous settlers'. The visitors observed that 'a spirit of co-operation and mutual help permeates the whole community and governs all its actions. While communism is entirely absent, the settlement might nevertheless be described as one large family, in which the stronger help the weaker'. They were impressed with the social conditions, and with the regularity of the settlement — the 'homesteads each surrounded by an orchard and garden, stand[ing] near to and in view of one another' — and they admired 'the bright and happy faces of the settlers and the healthy appearance of the children'. The 'whole scene presents a picture of close settlement rarely seen in WA'.

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25 *Narrogin Advocate*, 7 October 1905, p. 2.
28 *West Australian*, 15 January 1906, p. 5.
Similarly, in 1906 the Narrogin Observer commended the ‘spirit of fraternity which goes far to render their lives enjoyable even in the loneliness of their situation’. Though ‘in some respects a communistic spirit pervades the settlement’, this did not extend ‘beyond the general advancement of the social, moral, industrial and political well-being of the community’. It was reported that members were growing excellent crops of wheat and oats, plus producing butter and beef, all for export, and the young fruit trees showed promise. Members were using modern farm equipment such as reapers, often imported from the USA, and were a model of progressive farm husbandry. The reporter visited J. C. M. Fisher, ‘the patriarch of the settlement’, and ‘a very pleasant half-hour was spent in listening to the wonderful flow of language which proceeded from the old gentleman’s lips’.\footnote{Narrogin Observer, 20 January 1906, p. 5.}

In 1907 the Premier, Newton Booth, again visited and opined that New Jerusalem was ‘evidence of what could be accomplished by mutual help and co-operation, and he would like to see the farmers of
the State generally following similar principles'. The Minister for Agriculture, James Mitchell, in 1908, described the 'Jewish Settlement' as 'this famous industrial community'. An on-going economic problem — the need to transport all produce and supplies 40 km to and from the railway at Narrogin — was corrected in February 1909 when a branch railway opened to Wickepin. It became much easier for New Jerusalem's farm produce to reach markets, farm inputs became cheaper, and the community became more closely connected to the outside world — exactly the problem that had motivated them to abandon Victoria a decade earlier.30

Within the community, Fisher's power as patriarch was officially unchallenged, although, as he aged, control gradually shifted to his sons, Solomon, Samuel and John Fisher. New Jerusalem members took part in local and regional politics and Solomon, in particular, who became a Justice of the Peace, developed a high profile with central roles in the School Board, Board of Health, District Roads Board, and the Farmers' and Settlers' Association.31 A reporter observed that 'in political matters they style themselves Democratic Liberals. At election times they all meet in their hall and decide whom to vote for, their united vote being given to the person approved of'. The Narrogin Advocate was also impressed by how 'the political situation, amongst other topics, was discussed' at New Jerusalem, and how 'the settlers were just as conversant with the happenings of the world as those living in or near cities'.32

No primary documents remain to explain their religious beliefs and practices at this time, but an account in the Western Mail in 1905 adds a little to what had been earlier noted by the Victorian press:

Although called Jews ... they believe in Christianity as well. The founder of this New Jerusalem religion ... was a Jew, but claims to have been the subject of revelations made to him by Jesus Christ and visions of angels. He claims to have seen seven angels in his yard one day at Nunawading, Victoria. This was 30 odd years ago. Mr

30 Ibid., 2 November 1907, p. 2, 30 November 1907, p. 3, and 11 July 1908, p. 4, 13 February 1909, p. 3.
31 S.R. Fisher to Secretary, Narrogin School Committee, 19 October 1903, PR 8679/WIC 14; Summary of Local Board of Health Minutes, Monograph PR8679/WIC 3; Wickepin District Roads Board Minutes, 29 May 1909, WASH, Con 1670, Item 1, SROWA; Wickepin Argus, 10 January 1918, p. 2.
32 Western Mail, 26 August 1905, p. 5; Narrogin Advocate, 7 October 1905, p. 2.
Fisher declares he can prophesy similar to the prophets of olden times ... "Thus the true religion of God has been sleeping for the last 1,800 years, but now it is going to bud forth with fresh vigour and in time will bring forth among men the full of virtue and righteousness." Mr Fisher prophesises that Jews, Christians and all mankind will be united in one fold of love and happiness. "Such is the religion I am inspired to teach".33

As noted, the faith that the New Jerusalem settlers brought with them from Victoria was an amalgam of Jewish and Christian beliefs, as expounded by John Wroe and the Christian Israelites, filtered through the idiosyncratic mind of Fisher. Photographs appearing in the Western Mail suggest that some practices relating to dress (uncut hair, beards) had been abandoned, while the description of the service (above)

33 Western Mail, 26 August 1905, p. 5.
indicates that a more orthodox ritual had evolved. A granddaughter, Emma McCall, interviewed in 1966, described the worship as being Methodist in style.\textsuperscript{34} One of Fisher's great-granddaughters recalls 'a watered-down version' of this religion from when she was a child:

Dad was very religious and knew his Bible from cover to cover although he had never set foot inside a conventional church in his life. They didn't eat meat of any animal which wasn't cleft of foot and chewed its cud, only fish with scales and grain eating birds.\textsuperscript{35}

At Wickepin, as at their earlier Victorian settlement, the faith of the settlers was expressed through a warm and close sense of community. To outsiders they appeared 'a happy, contented people', and their settlement 'reflected the deepest spirit of concord and Christian charity, coupled with a harmonious relationship which was unique in the history of group settlements'. In 1905 the editor of the \textit{Narrogin Advocate} observed a monthly social gathering at the community hall at which 'the young folks indulge to their heart's content in dancing and other indoor amusements. As many as 30 couples took to the floor to dance to the music of a violin, accordion and flute'.\textsuperscript{36} Further indication of the social life of the sect was given in the following account of a picnic held to celebrate the second anniversary of the founding of the settlement:

... everyone in and around the district attended. Two travellers from Narrogin who happened to be passing were cordially invited and spent a most enjoyable afternoon. After the pic-nic the whole company adjourned to Mrs Peter's residence, where an impromptu concert and dance was speedily arranged. Songs were rendered in splendid style by Misses Fisher (2) and Rintel, and Mesdames Peters and Swinbank. Messrs Bergin, Peters and Swinbank also contributed. The music was supplied by Messrs. Fisher and McCracken, whilst Mrs Peters made a model hostess. After spending a really enjoyable time, the party broke up at 1 a.m.\textsuperscript{37}

\textsuperscript{34} D. Duke, 'The Nunawading Messiah', \textit{Papers Read before the Box Hill City Historical Society}, 1, 1964-8, p. 68.
\textsuperscript{35} Heather Flint, pers. comm. with Bill Metcalf, 21 November 1996.
\textsuperscript{36} \textit{Western Mail}, 26 August 1905, p. 5; \textit{Wickepin Argus}, 26 January 1924, p. 3; \textit{Narrogin Advocate}, 18 October 1905, p. 1.
\textsuperscript{37} \textit{Narrogin Advocate}, 6 October 1904, p. 3.
New Jerusalem opened its own school on 26 July 1904, with a 22 year-old Roman Catholic, Teresa Toal, as teacher, and with fifteen children present. For the first two years, this school operated from the community hall, which was described as 'spacious, well-ventilated, lofty and well-lighted' but was cold and draughty in winter, and hot in summer. The toilets were 'roughly constructed. The boy's closet has no urinal trough or bucket, and though it faces the weather side has no door'. School had to be cancelled for a day every new moon when religious events took precedence. A brick school with living quarters was built by the state government, and opened on 4 September 1906, though requests for a 'large bell' were bureaucratically rebuffed by the Education Department, because 'the Department does not supply large bells to small schools'. Claire Holland, aged 40, took over as teacher in mid 1907, and was then replaced by Jacob Olley, aged 64, in January 1911. In October 1912 this school closed and the New Jerusalem children had to attend school in Wickepin.

There were also stories about New Jerusalem which painted a less rosy picture, although these sensationalised more than informed. An anonymous file held in the State Library of Western Australia refers to the many uncomplimentary 'tales' surrounding 'this fraternity' and its leader, 'especially regarding his dealing with the females .... Submission to his kissing and fondling was allegedly a duty required of the ladies of the fraternity'. In particular, there were persistent allegations that the leader followed a polygamous lifestyle. These first arose during the 1871 trial in Victoria at which Hyam Rintel testified that his wife, Jessie, had been taken away from him by Fisher, who 'coolly told me he had a revelation that I was to give up my wife to him'; the result being that 'not one of the four children she has now is mine'. Jessie Rintel was the sister of Fisher's wife, Emma, both living with him until their deaths. John Bignell was reported as saying that 'Fisher declares that he himself has the spirit of David ... and David had a large number of wives and concubines'. Bignell named the women with whom Fisher lived as his wife Emma and two of her

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38 Teresa Toal, 26 July 1904, WAA 12, Acc 1497, Item 3131/07, SROWA.
39 Wallace Clubb, 12 June 1905, WAA 12, Acc 1497, Item 3131/07, SROWA.
40 Teresa Toal, 5 September 1906, WAA 12, Acc 1497, Item 3131/07 SROWA; Chief Inspector of Schools, undated, WAA 12, Acc 1497, Item 3131/07, SROWA.
41 C. Holland, 13 July 1907, WAA 12, Acc 1497, Item 3131/07, SROWA; The Education Circular, Western Australia, Vol. 13, February 1911, p. 212 and Vol. 14, February 1912, p. 192; Wickepin Argus, 10 October 1912, p. 3.
42 Anon., 'Jewish or Hebrew Fraternity'. Monograph, PR8679/WIC 6, 1, State Library of Western Australia.
sisters, Jessie Rintel and Mina Kefford. Bignell claimed that Fisher sought the fourth sister, Rhoda Wakefield, to make his household complete.43

Another writer in the Age explained that 'While men who were yet young in the faith were only allowed one wife, those who were more advanced might have several'. Fisher, it was reported, 'lives with three women, who are sisters ... There is a fourth sister who is married. Fisher says he is bound to have her too, and that her husband will die when he wills it'. One of Fisher's neighbours, asked if Fisher ever dined with him, replied 'Yes; him and perhaps a couple of his wives, with their children'. The Argus reported another neighbour as saying, 'I knew of another of Fisher's sisters-in-law [Mina Kefford] who had a child at Fisher's house. She was single. ... Fisher said she must not be married, for he was bound to have four women living with him. He said that girl's child was not his, but he wished it had been'.44

These allegations, aired in the Melbourne press in 1871, followed Fisher to Jindivik in the 1880s when a neighbour wrote that the patriarch and his followers 'were supposed to have come from the Mormons', a sure indication that polygamy was suspected.45 Fisher's descendants, including a great-granddaughter, Heather Flint, who was raised in the faith, corroborate these assertions. She recalls 'a certain amount of hushed talk' about Fisher's wives:

On one occasion mother did say to me that great-grandfather had more than one wife, which was allowed in his religion. I remember one time, my Mum trying to explain, to my questions, the relationships of the family. I remember her saying that it was believed acceptable for some men to have extra wives through their religion.46

43 Age, 28 June 1871, p. 3, and 12 July 1871, p. 3; Heather Flint, pers. comm. with Bill Metcalf, 14 April 1997.
44 Age, 19 June 1871, p. 3, and 10 July 1871, p. 3; Argus, 10 July 1871, p. 6. Mina's child was either Emma Kefford, born 1869, or Ada Kefford, born 1871. The Melbourne Punch, 13 July 1871, p. 9, satirised Fisher's polygamy: a reporter 'had a long talk' with 35 of his wives (the rest were busy). 'They said there was no doubt about his being an extraordinary man, and I did not contradict them'.
Ron Ebsary, Fisher’s great-grandson, reports that Fisher, whom his mother referred to as ‘an old rascal’, had only two sons by his first wife, Emma, but that he also had another son, John, and six daughters:

I don’t know who their mothers were. I think he had 3 wives and 3 or 4 concubines because I used to have these aunts and I used to try to “marry them up” but I couldn’t understand it. I had so many aunts. They were all Fishers but we didn’t know where they came from.\(^\text{47}\)

But while Fisher was apparently a polygamist, his sons and daughters and other members lived monogamously, and the practice of polygamy at New Jerusalem disappeared with Fisher’s death.\(^\text{48}\)

Emma Pickis Fisher, Fisher’s legal wife for 52 years and the registered mother of his eight children, died at New Jerusalem of ‘cardiac failure’ on 14 May 1910. She was buried in Wickepin Cemetery, her husband conducting the service under the rites of the Church of the Firstborn. By this time Fisher, who had suffered serious head injuries in an accident, was described as being ‘a bit queer’. Then aged seventy-nine, Fisher ignored his second wife of forty years, Jessie Rintel, and took up with Ruth Mahala Rintel, her eighteen year-old granddaughter. To escape local censure, James and Ruth eloped to Melbourne where they married on 7 December 1910. Showing their displeasure, not one family member attended their wedding.\(^\text{49}\) Years later, Charles Papworth, a distant cousin of Ruth, recalled meeting ‘the “Messiah”’ on this occasion. ‘He used to quote scripture and talk of his “powers” at the dinner table, and then in the evenings after tea he would sit in the arm chair with his bride on his knee’.\(^\text{50}\)

Part of the opposition to this marriage was the suspicion that Ruth Mahala Rintel was really Fisher’s granddaughter. This was because her grandmother’s husband, Hyam Rintel, had earlier testified that all of his wife’s children were Fisher’s. This is now impossible to confirm but it appears that while Fisher might have been the father of the rest of Jessie Rintel’s children, he was probably not the father of Immanuel, Ruth’s father.\(^\text{51}\) The newly married couple returned to New Jerusalem

\(^{47}\) Ron Ebsary, pers. comm. with Bill Metcalf, 20 September 2002. Mina Kefford, the unmarried sister of Fisher’s wife, might have been John Fisher’s mother.

\(^{48}\) Heather Flint, pers. comm. with Bill Metcalf, 9 July 2002.


\(^{50}\) Age, 8 July 1933, p. 19.

\(^{51}\) Australasian Post, 23 June 1983, p. 51; Age, 12 July 1871, p. 3.
where they lived in Fisher’s house, although it is unclear whether Jessie Rintel, his new wife’s grandmother, remained or moved out. Later events suggest that there was embarrassment and ill-will over their patriarch’s new marriage. Ron Ebsary remembers how his mother, a contemporary of Ruth, was disgusted with this marriage and told him that Ruth had only married Fisher ‘for his money. It was her mother that pushed her into the marriage’.  

James Cowley Morgan Fisher, aged 81, died of ‘apoplexy and cardiac failure’ on 20 January 1913 at his New Jerusalem home, and was buried by Reverend Cook, Church of England, the following day in Wickepin Cemetery. Charles Richter, one of Fisher’s devotees, is reported to ‘have sat on Rabbi Fisher’s grave for three days and nights to be there to welcome him, as Fisher declared he would rise from the grave as Christ had done’. Fisher’s will stated that he owed Jessie Rintel, his alternative wife, £700 which must be repaid from his estate. After his death this was successfully disputed although the grounds are unclear. The estate, valued at £1,503 and including Fisher’s own farm, went to his young wife, Ruth Mahala Fisher, with her grandmother getting nothing. This reflected, and contributed to, the ill-will within the community.

By the time of Fisher’s death, New Jerusalem was less of an isolated religious group and more a progressive farming settlement, with leadership provided by Solomon and Samuel Richard Fisher. The arrival of the railway and their leader’s senility more or less coincided. New Jerusalem continued as a farming community but it became ever more part of the prosperous Wickepin community rather than an isolated sect. Members built a brick community centre but most social events soon moved into Wickepin and included a wider range of participants. New Jerusalem members started attending local churches; members intermarried with outsiders; and the religious zeal of the early settlers became but a part of folklore.

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A century ago, an observer described Yarling Creek and New Jerusalem’s land as being almost a Garden of Eden. ‘Water is to be obtained almost anywhere ... the value of the area cannot be over-

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Although the land continues to produce a range of cereal crops, Yarling Creek is today sadly degraded and salt-scalded because of over-clearing. Remnants remain of New Jerusalem houses, including Fisher's, with its underground cellar. Ron Ebsary recalls playing in that cellar as a boy and finding a metal trunk full of old papers and photographs, which have since disappeared. Bricks mark out the schoolhouse and second community centre, but nothing remains of the original hall. Although one direct descendant of Fisher, Jenny Hemley, still lives and farms in the area, most local people, when interviewed in 2002, knew little about New Jerusalem.

James Cowley Morgan Fisher was a charismatic religious leader, a larger-than-life character whose story is almost difficult to believe. He can be profitably compared to Johann Friedrich Krumnow, founder and patriarch of Herrnhut commune. Both men sought to create utopia, an isolated community where they could practice their idiosyncratic religious and social ways free from interference. Neither group survived long after the death of their leader. In Victoria, New Jerusalem was surrounded by non-believers and suffered the consequences. By the time they reached the isolation of Wickepin, their leader was over seventy and much of his youthful zeal had gone. Nevertheless, New Jerusalem flourished as an intentional community until its leader's death, after which it merged with the wider community. The arrival of the railway spelt the death-knell of their isolation but guaranteed the development of the modern Wickepin. No monuments or plaques show where the New Jerusalem community buildings or other cultural sites were located. James Cowley Morgan Fisher's grave lies unmarked, as does that of his wife, Emma, and most of the other early pioneers.

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54 Narrogin Advocate, 7 October 1905, p. 2.
56 Metcalf and Huf, op. cit.