

# Running Australia's MOST HAUNTED PUB

A national website and a group of paranormal investigators have called the Hero of Waterloo Australia's 'most haunted pub.' But for long-time owner operator, Kazuko Nelson, it feels like home. By Craig Vaughan



It's hard enough to run a pub when all the regulars are human. But when you own and run Australia's most haunted pub, things can get very weird, very quickly.

In her 24 years at the Hero of Waterloo in The Rocks, owner and licensee Kazuko Nelson has seen just about everything.

Last month, a national website hired a medium and a paranormal investigator to spend the night in the 173-year-old hotel in the hope of recording some of its non-alcoholic spirits.

And recently a UK television series, Most Haunted, and a Melbourne-based Paranormal Investigation company hired out the pub for a full two weeks to hold recording sessions and seminars with paying guests from around Australia.

The Hero is a regular stop for ghost tours of The Rocks, a meeting place for mediums, and was once visited by a Buddhist Monk who took one look down the cellar stairs and said "she died down there."

But for Nelson the ghosts of the Hero of Waterloo are a comfort and a blessing.

"I have had so many experiences here over the years I think it's haunted, but I don't get chills or anything," said the petite Japanese native.

"The idea of ghosts brings a lot of people into the pub, which is good for the business and I believe that a lot of people enjoy the feeling that spirits are around them and part of their life.

"I'm very comfortable in the pub in the middle of the night on my own; I don't know why it's just a warm feeling.

"Many people walk into the pub and just say how friendly it feels, so it is a blessing."

## SMUGGLERS AND 'SHANGHAIED' SAILORS

One of the oldest pubs in the country, The Hero of Waterloo was built by convicts in 1843.

The hotel was a favourite haunt of crews from the whaling and sealing ships that docked at Millers Point as well as with colonial troops garrisoned nearby.

It was also a haven for rum smugglers, who used a secret tunnel that ran from the cellar directly to the wharf to smuggle their goods.

The tunnel also had another, more sinister use.

Whaling by the late 1860's was becoming an unpopular occupation.

As the number of whales started to decline and voyages became longer and less profitable, skippers struggling for crew began paying locals, and some publicans, to shanghai men from out of the pubs onto the ships.

At The Hero, unsuspecting drinkers would be slipped a "Mickey Finn," a drink laced with a drug, and dropped through a trapdoor into the cellar.

From there they were taken through the tunnel to waiting whale ships where they would wake up, far out to sea and forced to endure years of labour.

Many of those men never returned, either lost at sea or murdered. Some never made it out of the tunnels.

Nelson said she recently watched a paranormal investigator film and record in the cellar, where shackles still hang on the wall and you can still see the entrance to the tunnel and the outline of the trapdoor.

"She claimed a ghost called George, was at the entrance to the tunnel where he had died, stabbed in the chest," said Nelson.

"She was certain more than one sailor died in the tunnels, and that she recorded a voice saying 'hello', but that was the first I had heard of a George."

A ghost Nelson is more familiar with is that of Anne Kirkman.

Anne was the wife of Thomas Kirkman, an Irish convict transported to Australia in 1793 and the Hero's second licensee.

The story goes that in 1849 Anne was thrown down the cellar steps by her husband after she discovered that he was having an affair with a younger girl who was also pregnant with his child.

Nelson said her staff, and plenty of customers, have had encounters with the ghost of the former landlady.

"Many years ago, when I first started to work in the pub, my late husband Ivan told me that if someone runs screaming out of the women's toilets, don't worry," Nelson said.

"Since then many customers have run out of there and told me that when they looked in the mirror they saw a lady behind them, but when they turned around, no one was there."

"We had a Buddhist monk visit here once. He knew nothing about the history of the pub but he walked in, went to the landing above the cellar and said, 'she died under here.'"

## ANNE'S PIANO AND THE DUKE ROOM

Nelson said she often spends the night in the penthouse above the Hero of Waterloo.

She likes to hear the noise of the pub drift up through the timber floor, particularly in the years since her husband Ivan died.

But the noises weren't always comforting.

"Ivan and I would often stay in the apartment above the pub and at night when it was closed I would hear the sound of someone playing the piano," Nelson said.

"In the beginning I thought somebody was sneaking in and playing it, we put a camera on it overnight and watched, but nobody was there.

"Ivan, who brought the pub in 1988, said 'don't worry it's just Anne.' But we had to move the piano down to the cellar because it was happening so much I couldn't sleep.

"It has been down there for ten years now."

Nelson employs many university students and backpackers from England, Scotland and Wales.

She said one thing they all have in common is a fear of the upstairs function space, the Duke Room.

"They are very good workers, very hospitable and friendly, but they don't want to be in the Duke room alone," she said.

"Many tell me they feel someone, or something, touching or blowing on their necks, and they run out."



Nelson said she often hears phantom footsteps walking in and out of the room and that chairs around the dining table sometimes move overnight, usually towards the fireplace.

## NEW LIFE AT THE HERO

The area around the Hero of Waterloo's Lower Fort Street address is undergoing a period of great change.

With huge development around the corner at Barangaroo and the state government sell off of former housing commission terraces at Millers Point and The Rocks, the community is changing, and the Hero's patrons with it.

But Nelson said she and her late husband saved the Hero of Waterloo from development many times, because its history, ghosts and all, is what makes it a special place.

"I do not worry about what paranormal people tell me they saw, but I believe the staff and I know what I have experienced," Nelson said.

"But my most enjoyable time is when everyone leaves and the door closes and I sit in the corner of the bar," said Nelson.

"I think about the business and what I need to do, and I just get a feeling of great comfort. It is my most creative time."

"And if that is what the ghosts do for the pub, we should all have them."

