

AUSTRALIAN GARDEN HISTORY SOCIETY
NATIONAL ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION
NORTHERN NSW BRANCH



Photo by Kim Woods Rabbidge

Interviewees:	BILL AND CHRISTINE SWAN
Interviewer:	LIZ CHAPPELL
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INTERVIEW WITH BILL SWAN AT BYRON STATION, INVERELL ON
WEDNESDAY 14TH JUNE, 2017

This is an oral interview with Bill Swan at Byron Station, Inverell. Bill will be speaking with Liz Chappell for the Australian Garden History Society (AGHS) of the Northern NSW Branch. Bill Oates and Graham Wilson also present.

02.02

So I suppose the best place for us to start is at the beginning. Now it wasn't the Swans who first settled at Byron was it? Your family came a little later?

My family came quite a bit later. The first settlement was the MacIntyre family who were from the Hunter Valley. They came into this area because the initiatives that the MacIntyres showed to Cunningham when he came over the mountain ranges saved him virtually weeks of travel when he came north, going up into the Darling Downs area. So, they saved him a lot of time showing him his stock and showing the track over. So Cunningham forged ahead, picked up a month because of the MacIntyres and then most probably people realise the route that Cunningham took, which he crossed Gwydir roundabout the Bingara area, went right through, west of Inverell but not a long way west of Inverell, through to Yetman up into the Darling Downs and then back, very close to the same track on the way back but he did meet up with Peter MacIntyre, again in the Hunter Valley on his property down there and told him about this country. He said if I was you I would head up there and select some country and I will tell you where there is a good block. I mean this is paraphrasing it I suppose but to give you a bit of a rough idea.

We are talking about 1838 at this point?

1836 I think it would have been because Byron was actually selected according to the Government Gazette and records in 1837 as a settlement in the name of MacIntyre. Byron, according to what we're told, as I say I'm not expert, that was the date it was settled where historians have looked up records. The first settlement was two miles either side of the MacIntyre River, running from approximately Brady's Plains to the Bukkulla. And that was the first registered area settled. Stories about why was it called Byron? Byron the poet was probably well known in the period. But my father said it wasn't Byron the poet, it was a fellow called Peter Byron, in charge of the horses with Cunningham. And anyway, when he was just west of Byron one night the horses got away so he headed out and tracked them down and he tracked them down and found them on the river, on what is now known as the MacIntyre River at Byron as it is today. And so that's how Byron is supposed to have got its name. Now whether that's right or not, the only thing that substantiates that a little bit, is that Peter Byron's family did settle or live in the Guyra area and there's records of that. So that family stayed in the north-west. So, Peter Byron, according to Dad, that's how Byron got its name. And so the MacIntyres after Cunningham gave them the story came up and took up that parcel of land.

And then the Swans? Did you tell me it was about 1920?

No, 1915. After that there were MacIntyres and Byron was owned by different people, without sort of looking up, until the major owner I suppose was in 1890s, was George Cruickshank. Now George Cruickshank was the local member, he had no family, no children, married, no children. But he had sisters and one thing and another and he lived at Byron. He did have country I think in that Forbes area too but he was the local member, very involved in many things in the district. There's a plaque at Inverell District Hospital, well he was the main person who pushed to get the first hospital in the town. He was involved in other things, there's the Byron Arcade for instance that's in Inverell and has recently been restored. He built that, it was built in 1904. The Inverell Club, before the Inverell Club was built on the site where it is at the moment and it was built as a club, one of the few buildings in Australia I think that was built as a club. A lot of old buildings have been formed into clubs but he financed the first club, it wasn't on that site but he financed the building of the first men's club in Inverell. He died and the estate was then sold and it was called the Byron Estate at that stage. And that was in 1906 and there are quite a few details. I've got the original advertisement of all the blocks, how many blocks there were and where they were and the historical society have researched and found who bought blocks. My grandfather bought the homestead block plus two or three other blocks. They were generally fairly small blocks, there was something like 130-140 blocks altogether. So that was the estate. Byron was sold up. It's a wonderful ad where you've got terms to buy the land and records of what was produced off the land and dairy farms, yields of crops. I can show you that.

No doubt Bill and Graham will get a copy of that.

I'm sure they will. So that's that. My grandfather bought the homestead and without going into it, he came from the Ashford area, a place called Frasers Creek. Shall I tell you anything about that?

Yes, by all means, we have plenty of time.

He bought, they went broke in Victoria, they settled in Coleraine in the 1860s, like many of them in that area. And then the family dispersed and his side of the family came north to Inverell district with uncles, a couple of uncles, they were Fletchers and there are still Fletchers about the New England even today and they settled at Frasers Creek. And in the 1902 drought, hard times for everyone on the land, and as the story goes owed a local stock and station agent quite a lot of money I suppose but he sold his half share of Frasers Creek to the stock and station agent, whose name was John Sinclair, the father of the famous Sinclair brothers. And then from that he bought Byron and that's the best move he ever made in his life I'd say when he bought Byron. So that's how we were established in 1906 and from there, well we're still here.

Now the homestead was of course, or the earliest part of the homestead was here before then?

08.34

Yes, that's right, that was built and added to by the Cruickshank family in the 1890s and then prior to that, according to the National Trust, it appears as if it was built not a long while after they settled, not just here but on the flat not far from here, it's only a kilometre down to where the original huts and things. And then they built this house. The National Trust from what research they can find, and it's pretty hard to get really good records of it, but they say 1840s.

Now can you describe for the tape what the original part of the house looks like? Is it the part that we're sitting in now?

Yes it is. It's the centre part of the house which is basically the same as when it was built and we have photos taken in 1890 showing the front of the house. So you can see then when my grandfather bought it he made probably the major alteration he made is the fact that he put a bay window into the main bedroom of the house which was probably a lounge room then and added a wing on another section which is that section we're looking at now. And that room there which is a bedroom now was the classroom, it was used as the school room. It's got a special floor in it so the kids played in there. So that was an addition. Since then, then the Cruickshanks added what's called the billiard room on the southern side of the main building and then Christine and I added. The billiard room was a very dark room, it had a big bay window one end and it was starting to fall down, fall out so instead of just pulling that down and putting, we added a section onto that so that it opened up that whole area which we call lounge and dining room and billiard room now sort of put together with a bathroom and another verandah that gave the bedroom down that end of the house, instead of walking 100 yards from one end of the house to the other to get to the bathroom and that opened that up in a big way, and you can tell, plenty of light. It was hardly ever used when we were kids, it was always shut up because it was just too dark. Even when our kids were young, there were two young lasses who used to babysit out here but they were never game to go into that room if we left them here at night. The doors were always closed and they sat by the fires in other parts of the house. And they said to us one day, years later, we thought you might have had an old aunty that lived out there and we weren't game to disturb them. So that's how quiet it was. But when we added to it we added to it so the doors matched all the original doors, the windows matched the original windows. So it looks the part. Unless you looked and you saw the photos that were taken in the 1890s and you see a photo taken now, or even in 1906, you can see the extension.

Now, all of the house of course is in weatherboard. Was that timber from the property?

Don't know, really don't know that for sure, the only part that's brick is the billiard room which was added to in the 1890s by the Cruickshanks.

And the chimneys.

And the chimneys. Well the chimneys . . . well they were part of the original so I suppose the bricks and things in the chimneys were the original bricks that were made on the place and all the timbers were all pitch sawn timber, obviously the old home-made nails which you can see in the timber there, shingles on the roof and the shingles are still there, underneath the iron and the irons been replaced and the shingles are still underneath that. Which was a study in itself when they've taken photos; they've taken the tin off and looked at the structure. I've forgotten now but it's written down. I wanted to find out how many shingles went to every square metre of roof and it's amazing how many, the overlap is about 75% of every shingle. And the number of shingles that came off the roof; in one section that we didn't put them back on for different reasons. But I kept all the shingles and gave them to the village, the pioneer village so they could use them in there. But to be quite honest I'm not sure whether they ever used them or they were wood chipped or whatever.

So, they would be iron bark shingles?

No, they say they're iron bark but there's a timber here that in the original yards that are in the 1890 photo and they're old yards then and I said they must be iron bark and one old fellow that was out here said there was a timber that grew all around it was a type of gum but the red gum timber these days is considered pretty ordinary timber for buildings. But I've kept all of the timber that you could keep out of those yards and, apart from the narrow bits that have been morticed into uprights, it's as solid as the day they were put up there. But he said no, they're not iron bark, they're something else. And I was a bit of kid when he told me, this fellow that turned up here one day, he was well into his 80s, Darby, and I will tell you his name later on, it just escapes me, but his father and his name is written on all the photos in there was the manager here at the time and he had so many stories that he can tell us about the bird life, the dingos, you mentioned dingos and the story about how they chased the dingos home and how they used to pull the stirrup iron off and chase the dingo down and swing the stirrup iron on the end of the leather. Just stories, he could remember the bird life, the plovers and things that used to run about the sandy pits and things.

So, you're talking the beginning of the 20th Century?

Heath was his name. Darby Heath.

15.40

Yes, and that's the same period as you have those wonderful old photographs?

That's right, that's right because there are the names on the back of them that the Cruickshank family sent out to us. There was a Hargraves in it and different ones like that. What those old fellows could remember and tell you about, the yards, he could tell us about the yards, there were two cottages side by side that shared a chimney. A different family lived in one and one lived in the other. Yards and he said that yard over there, that's the anti-yard, that's where the stallions were. And it had very high timber walls around it and I said stallions

must have been hard to handle, would they get out? And he said no, no young Bill, you couldn't have the ladies seeing a stallion serving the mares. So, you had to have the high wall so they couldn't be seen. Little stories like that.

Fantastic.

Even what happened in towns, in the town. He'd say, go to town on Saturday, you'd meet up with your friends, ladies would go to town on Saturday and they'd walk the streets in their finery and talk and then at about 4 o'clock they'd all disappear and go to houses for their tea and he said all the men would meet on the riverbank where the town is at the moment and it was a very main crossing where they came from New South Wales into Queensland and that's where they crossed and I said what did you do, drink grog? And he said, oh very little, very little. He said basically we did two things, he said we recited a lot of poetry and we boxed, he said we always had a boxing ring and so you could box or you could recite poetry. And I said how would you get two things so different?

But the poetry comes as a surprise for bushmen.

Well it is, and I said what did you do and he said I did both and he said I've still got poems that I wrote and recited which he gave me which I've still got of course.

Were they British poems or Australian?

No, no poems he's written, particularly one about where his brother went off to the First World War and he described how he went off and his mother waved him goodbye. And how he used to box and where they'd box and little things like that. And you know about the animals. No, they were all just plain good story poems

Isn't that amazing.

And you know I've got those out there. Anyway, he lived in Sydney but we tried to keep in touch with him but a young fellow doing architecture at university decided he wanted to research Byron so fortunately I was able to give, I think it was Punchbowl where this fellow lived, and they met up and from that he drew plans of the old home.

Oh wonderful.

And he could tell him. I mean I can remember quite a lot of it but it's a bit like telling people where the tennis court, the old brick tennis court is, and people wouldn't accept that that was a tennis court but I had a photo here fortunately that was taken in the 1890s where there are two ladies standing on the court in their finery with their tennis rackets in their hands.

So it was the Cruickshanks that built the brick tennis court?

I think it would have had to have been the Cruickshanks, yes. The people before, there was a McGregor I think, I would have to go back and a couple of other families that had it for a small time, the country changed then a bit because Bannockburn Station which is a well-known part of this was part of Byron too at one stage and Byron, the original settlement I'm told, the places that join Byron were Myall Creek, Gunnee and then there was Byron and then there was King's Plains. They sort of met together at Bukkulla on the northern side, they were all part of the original ones. Today Inverell Station joins, comes down onto our boundary now, but Inverell Station really never came onto the river, they went up the Swanbrook and selected country up there.

Right, were they originally taken up at about the same time as Byron or were they actually taken off the original Byron?

No, it was the original Byron but it was only in the narrow bit where it came down to the Swanbrook. And it was gazetted I think in, I can be corrected on this but the closest I'm told by research people, it was gazetted and taken up by Peter Campbell in 1845 or 1846 so it's about 10 years after Byron. And he came into the area, the Campbell and Body story is a wonderful story too, the family and how they settled and not many people own country, one family own country as long as they own country, and that's Inverell Station. Campbells married Bodys who were Strathbogie and Jindabyne where they came from, the Bodys came from Jindabyne. But Campbell was sent up here with men to manage Byron and that was his job but like any fellow that's going to get ahead he progressively developed country for himself which is why it evidently runs up the Swanbrook rather than around the river which was already spoken for by the MacIntyres. And that was probably nine or ten years from what I'm told after MacIntyre originally settled here so Campbell managed Byron until he was substantial and went on and developed his own country.

22.50

For the sake of the record could you describe the country a little bit as it is now, the soil type and the climate?

Well Byron itself was 72,000 acres or whatever it was when it was subdivided but that's shown more clearly and accurately on the advertisement for the place. At the moment Byron is just under 1,800 acres, if I can speak acres. Then probably it's virtually all basalt, 80% of it is probably river flats, alluvial river flats. There's a little bit of lighter country on it where the old woolshed was established. So that's what it was and I've added to it by buying a couple of small farms around, it was probably only about 1,100 acres of it left in my father's time and we've added to that but we've added country that was part of Byron. I've bought 3,000 acres that virtually adjoins Byron which is west of Byron, runs up the Rob Roy Gully, apart from getting away from buying Paradise and Carinya

So you and your sister grew up here, that's correct?

Yes.

And you didn't have a school here or a school room here in the house at that stage?

No actually during the war we lived here as kids and then when Dad went away we moved into a cottage in town and we went to school from the cottage in town. And this place was virtually looked after by Archie Sinclair. How he managed to do that with all the country the Sinclair brothers owned, Waterloo, Collemungel, Woolcarol(?), Arthurshare (?), they were the biggest. Just as an aside when John Sinclair bought my grandfather out of Fraser's Creek that's where they started and they went from that to being the biggest old terms, PP Board rate payers in NSW. That's how big they were and that's how much country they owned. And so that was virtually in two generations. There were four brothers, Archie Sinclair, Sir Colin Sinclair, Jack Sinclair and Duncan Sinclair. They all married but Jack Sinclair was the only one that had any children and he had a son and a daughter, Ian and Pam.

That's Ian who was our MP for so long?

No, no, no relation. No connection. Ian lived at Waterloo, they owned Waterloo too and so then they went from that within the next two generations and come about from developing very quickly. But I wouldn't even say that but I would say the basic reason for the demise was only one of them had children and probate. Probate wiped them out.

As it did a lot of old families.

I mean you pay probate on thousands of acres and then the next brother died and you did it again.

Yes, and if you had deaths in close sequence.

And AML&F were one of the major financiers of it and they took over properties. But what they did and how, the stories associated with the Sinclairs. . . I've got so many. Archie Sinclair who married Dad's sister Isabel. Archie and Dad were very, very close friends to the extent that I think they spoke to each other every night when Dad was at home after the war. And Archie was an extraordinary man, an extraordinary man, he was a very large man and obviously a very, very wealthy man but a very generous man and a very funny man. But he liked the grog. There are so many stories but I won't record. But they are so interesting to hear what he did and how people treated him. One I can relate reflects very well on him. A fellow, when Gunnee, it was sold, parts of it were sold and a fellow, a neighbour, near neighbour, Archie put in a boundary gate and this fellow objected to the boundary gate being put in between the two places so he challenged Archie. He challenged him about why he put a gate in there without saying. Just because you're a Sinclair and one thing and another and think you can come around here. And Archie said to him have you got any firewood on your place and he said, it's all been knocked down, one thing and another. And Archie said well there's plenty in that back paddock joining you on Gunnee, he said I put the gate in there, you're welcome to it.

That's a perfect solution isn't it?

Yes, well those were the sort of things that you remember and think about.

Can you take me back to growing up here with your sister? You came back after the war? You were still primary school age then?

Yes, we started school when we were living in town, went to Ross Hill. Then came back here but we still went to town and we used to ride our bikes from here to the Ashford Road which is only 3 kilometres. And then we would catch the bus. Put our bikes under the trees there and then catch the bus to town and go to school. And then we'd walk from the school down to get the bus home. The bus didn't always drop you at the school, probably dropped at what is called the old Central Hotel, that was sort of the bus stop then and you'd walk up the hill and went to school and then after school you'd walk down over the bridge, well the goat track then, which was a short cut, waited there until they got all the – it was a public bus – got the heavy drinkers out of the bar and all shared the bus. And the bus was operated by a family that had been in the district for many years before, the Coggans, Jimmy Coggan he was the bus driver. He would drive all the way to Ashford and back up again the next day. So we went to school there and then we were at home so while we went to school in town, there was no organised sport on the weekends, it just didn't happen in those days so you didn't take part in anything particular but we always had our horses and we swam a lot and I had a little skiffy sort of a boat that I could put in the river which I spent a lot of time in the river, we all did, and you'd push it into the banks and your dogs would hop onto the front and away you'd go and then you'd pull into a bank and then jump. And we played tennis.

On the brick court?

No, by that stage this other court at the front of the house. The brick court, being just made out of bricks, had become, you got a very irregular bounce out there and my mother soon fixed that court and she was a very keen and very good tennis player and she soon had some trees growing on the old tennis court. So, we played a lot of tennis and then as we grew up on the weekends our entertainment as kids was going to other places. This weekend everyone would come and play tennis here, neighbours from around about and the following weekends they'd go to Burma or to MacIntyre Park or whatever the other around Inverell. So we played with all the other kids and did our own things. And Inverell Station was another one when it was managed by Jack McColl in those days and his wife Margaret McColl who was a very good tennis player. So that was Sunday, Sunday entertainment for the parents and the kids of course because there was always something different at another property whether it was a creek, tadpoles or bird tracks or whatever.

32.29

Now it's probably a foolish question to ask a teenage boy a question of the garden but do you have any recall of the garden around Byron when you were youngster then?

Yes, it's enlarged of course and the trees have grown but my mother was a very keen gardener but the water supply to the garden was windmills from the river so erratic to say the least. But a good job it was because it was a push mower job and you know, I think of the things she did. I mean she used to roll the court if she had to. A big old concrete roller and she'd push the mower. I can remember coming home.

When you say a push mower, just for record one of those little cylinder mowers?

Yes, it was only about a foot wide and she'd push it backwards and forwards as the blades chopped it.

And how large an area was she mowing?

There's probably, it wouldn't be a big area but a big area to push a mower over. And I can remember coming home one day and Dad had bought a motor mower, Atco was the model, where you started up a petrol engine and put her into gear and away you went. So that changed, all of a sudden, the Victa is recorded as being change grass into lawn I think was the expression used and so that made a difference to the mowing of the lawns. I'm not a hoarder but I'm not good at selling old things and I've still got that Atco mower in the shed.

Now spelling A-T-C-O?

A-C-T-O.¹

Thank you, it's probably one of the very few in captivity still.

Probably is and I'm sure it's still out there, which leads me back to something else. When we were kids here there was no power, there were only kerosene lights, kerosene fridge, kerosene lamps, the old ones with the globe light on them, heating, hot water heating came from the kitchen stove and the laundry had the concrete tubs and the hopper. The ironing was done with the irons that sat on the stove.

Mrs Potts.

Yes, you had a handle that clicked into them. I've still got those. And then Dad put in a 32-volt lighting plant. I'm feeling ashamed to say that that's in a shed out there and the old motor and the board and everything, the batteries have all gone, but that's still out in the shed. But I should go back a little bit further.

¹ ATCO mower: <https://www.atco.co.uk/about-atco#:~:text=It%20has%20been%20over%20100,delivering%20outstanding%20quality%20and%20performance>. Accessed 5 June, 2024

What was here prior to the war and when my grandparents were here, they had a gas lighting system so there was gas piped through the house and they had the little gas lights.

That would have been very innovative.

Well it was I think and it was run with carbine gas and the carbine gas, you need someone to explain this to you, but the carbine gas was where you drop water onto carbine to turn into gas that was pushed through the house and what turned the carbine plant you had to have a tower and you wound these weights up the tower and they slowly came down and drove it. Again, I'll say the original carbine gas producer is still here, it's never put in a shed, the basic outside part of it is still there. And I do know, I tried to research it a bit and the only person, this is going back a lot of years because I can go back a fair few years now unfortunately but Forbes Robertson-Cunninghame, they had one of these and I went and asked him about that. Now whether it's still there or not was at Caberfeigh, it's owned by the Skippers now.

Oh well the old house at Caberfeigh burnt down.

So, it's probably gone. But I'm sure, I went and met with Forbes one day to see if I could find a bit out how it all worked. I did find out a little bit but I'm not mechanically minded really but I can remember because we climbed the tower and you wound the weights up and we were threatened not to touch it. And basically, that's what it is, you wound the weights up and they slowly came down and pulled the pulleys and one thing and another turned and produced the gas.

We'll have a look at that later.

Well I hope we can see it because of the trees growing around it.

Now speaking of the trees was it your grandmother who planted these trees or do you think they were here earlier?

Well a lot of them were here, not the ones you see now apart from the old pepper tree out the back which was here and is in an old, one of the old photos. But most of the trees, Christine would be better at telling you this, but the original photos taken in the 1890s had the pine trees and there were three big pine trees at the front of house, just outside of the hedge there and one here just beside the house.

Now radiata pines.

No, a lot bigger...you'll have to ask the experts about that (birds in the background). We had to cut that one down close the house because it's was real threat. If it blew over it could wipe out a wing of house. We cut that down and where we're sitting now on the verandah I think I would say it's attractive, it's good in the sun and we spend a lot of time here. Before when that tree was there we got none of this because it was all shade.

You wouldn't get any of your lovely morning sun.

You don't get any of that so we gauged this verandah in and it's a place at this time of the year, if anyone wants to build a house in this area they want to come out here with a compass and find out which way this house is settled because without a doubt that is absolutely the right angle to get the sun at the right time. Half past 9 in the morning and to middle of winter. You're protected from anything from the south to the west and you've got the sun. So basically, the bones of the garden she put together. What's interesting is Christine said she used to persevere with plants. Christine's very good too and she understands all that where I don't.

Well we'll have a good garden yarn later on.

I think that's the thing to do.

Now the layout, I think Christine said to me the driveway used to come a different direction?

40.20

It did, the driveway came in so you could drive to the front of the house. So, I'll point out the gate to you, that's basically where the gate is. The garden extends well before that. You drove up the drive as it goes past the front of the house, did a loop around and then back out. There was the drive then because we've got a photo of my grandparents sitting in a new Austin car at the front steps of the house where they drove in. Someone must have driven it in because when you bought a car in those days, whenever it was, 1907 or whatever, part of the deal if you bought a new car was they taught you to drive it. So, John Swan went to town, learnt to drive the car, made the arrangements to drive it back home again so everyone on Byron just about went up to the main road where he turned in through the gate past the cattle yards to come down to the house. To get that far he had to drive across the river twice, one at the Red Rock crossing as we call it today, back of the cemetery and then the next one the Byron crossing which was adjacent. Anyway, everyone was waiting for him to come up, the gates open, for him to swing in through the gate and he missed the gate by about four panels of fences, cleaned up all the fences, everyone cheered and he never drove again. He'd sooner get in the horse and buggy and drive to town then drive that. So that's a bit of an aside, about how you feel when you get old and you're not mechanical. But he, yeah.

So that was your grandfather?

That was my grandfather, John Swan.

Your father would have grown up here as well?

He grew up here and then he did go away to school but only for a bit over a year, probably nearly two years. And then they couldn't afford to send him

again. He went to Scots in Sydney and finished up there in I think it's about 1920 which gives a long association with Scots.

That's where you went as well?

I went there, Ben went there, his three sons have gone there and one of them is still there. All Ben's sons have finished. Our daughter has a son there and another son to come and our other daughter has got two younger ones, may go to Scots, may not, but that's to be decided. So, by the time Susannah's son leaves Scots we would have had an association with Scots for at least 100 years.

Isn't that remarkable? Very few families can claim that.

No well they can't at Scots because, I went to a reunion where you put down what grandchildren you had at Scots and at the time we had four there and the main speaker on the day was introduced with having more grandsons there than anyone else. He was the main speaker, very good, very interesting. The only thing that was wrong, we had four there at the same time, not that that mattered. So that's the association. And the other thing, going back that far, I've got an old hatband here that was given to me by my uncle, Uncle Archie Sinclair, because he went there. It was one of the original hatbands and there's a photo, and we took a long time to track it down the date, but it was the original hatband and there's a photo of the Scots prefects in 1910 and they've got their boaters, because we all wore boaters then, you can see the original hatband.

How remarkable.

I've offered it to Scots but no one's very interested so I didn't give it to them and I've still got it.

Well perhaps one day one of your grandsons will be a worthy recipient?

Well if it's the only one in existence, there's every chance it is, Scots has been going for, I think they're celebrating 125 years next year.

So that's a little bit longer than TAS. I think TAS was 1895 in Armidale.

Yes, very close. I mean Kings has been going longer and anyway that's when they settled at Bellevue Hill. So, you know if no one is terribly interested and if they're not terribly interested I don't want to be a nuisance.

So after school, after Scots, you came back here to the farm, living with your parents?

I couldn't get back here quick enough and I came back and I stayed for 12 months and my father, was of wonderful stock, placid, old bill. You know he was so well liked, even tempered and everything else. But Dad and I didn't get on terribly well because I was probably, temperament wise I probably took after my mother and so I wanted to do things and Dad didn't and so it wasn't going

to work. And so I got a chance, I was offered a job at Hazeldean with the Litchfields so I couldn't get down there quick enough.

With the fine wool?

Well not so much fine wool, they were always a broader type wool but very old, they celebrated their 165 years there about 2 or 3 years ago at a dinner which was, I got an invitation to go there, it was just so good. I loved Hazeldean, I loved the people that were there, the jackaroos, everything associated with it, it was just, and the learning, I mean they did so much research for the wool industry, for the cattle industry and you were a part of all that. The weighing of fleeces, the measuring of the wools, types of wool. They were just, how they existed as a family and still do exist after 165 years. Anyway, I was very privileged to be the guest speaker.

At their reunion dinner?

So many things you can recall that happened to you there and people were so interested. It brought back memories, even while I'm talking to you now, people listen and oh remember when we did this, remember when we did this, remember and there were a couple of sad things. One of the fellows I jackarooed with and he was killed soon afterwards but he'd only just married and it turned out his wife was pregnant so she had a son and anyway.

So, we're talking 1950s?

Yes, late 1950s, so anyway. And one of the things as a result of me speaking at that time, I got a letter from the son.

The son whose father was killed?

Yes he was killed. So I could pass some things onto him. He was living and running a...he had a restaurant in London, word got back to him.

Yeah, oh that's special.

So those sorts of things make history worthwhile, the stories, because you can talk about them very generally.

Well, that is a special experience.

It was.

And then you came back here and met Christine.

I wanted to stay longer and I had a job there that, obviously was suiting me and it was suiting them but circumstances arose where I had to come home which I did. And Dad wasn't very well so anyway I came back to Byron.

49.17

And so you were living here at the homestead?

Living in a cottage when we came home and then some years later, not too good on years but then Christine and I married but I was living in the house with Mum and Dad. Dad was in hospital a lot of the time and then we lived in, there was an old bag cottage, it's still there at the moment so I got to work and I sort of renovated that and made a house of it.

Now why a bag cottage?

Well, all that was in the cottage, there was no bathroom or kitchen or anything like that, it was just in those days there was no bulk handling of grain, everything was in bags and that's where we kept all the bags.

Oh right, yes.

So anyway, I set to work and over a period did all the things that you've got to do if you're going to bring a new bride in, like putting a septic tank in, did all the plumbing and painted it all, lined places that weren't lined and then got a builder out to do up, put two rooms together and make a kitchen.

And that was up towards the cattle yards?

That's at the back of the cattle yards. And that's still there now, we have always kept it, it's rented. There's always been someone living in it which is important no matter, as long as they look after it. We've had a few young people there who've gone onto marry and then gone onto the next one and you know a good friend of mine married and had nowhere to go so that was his wedding present. 12 months in what we call Sid's cottage because there was an old pensioner lived in it before we moved into it and it was pretty rough I'll admit it, this old Sid Ponder was his name. He used to do a bit of gardening here and he lived in the cottage.

I was going to ask you that, whether your mother had help with the garden?

Yes he used to come down, once or twice, great old Pommy deserter from the British army.

But a good gardener?

Well he used to, yeah, he'd dig where you told him to dig, I think that's probably, he and Mum got on very well because he was a great old fellow. He'd go to town, he had a horse and sulky, go to town and he drank a lot of grog but when he went to town with his horse and sulky, he'd drive up the main street, tie the horse under the shade and then he decided he wanted to get on the grog so he'd drive home, feed his horse and then he'd walk back to town. Come home drunk about two days later. But he always made sure his horse was fed and watered and left out until he got home.

Oh, every consideration for the horse.

Sid, oh he was a funny old fellow but he was a great old mate of Mum's. But then when he couldn't work we had another old, I bought another block of country that had an old cottage on it so we did that up and put furniture in there and he lived there for the rest of his life in the old cottage because he couldn't work or anything. He used to get a taxi fellow, a taxi to Inverell he used to use and once a week we organised that he would come up, pick him up, take him to town and then bring him back home again later on. So, it went on, with a flagon over his shoulder.

Can you paint me a bit of a word picture of what the garden was like in your mother's time?

Yes, I'd say there were always shrubs they were well kept and the edges of the lawn, it was a great thing, you would cut around the edges of the lawn so the edge of the lawn was always neat. There were no soldiers she used to call them, you've got to get over here and get rid of these soldiers which were old grass coming up to your edges which probably everything still does. So, basic things she did we could handle, keep the weeds off the old brick tennis court. In the early days the old tennis court still had the tennis net around, the old.

The brick one?

The brick one. And that was pulled down and that changed, a double garage was put in there and the cars parked actually on one end of the tennis court. And I suppose she just toiled away at it, kept it neat. It was far from, I mean if you had a full-time gardener, you had a water supply that was more than a windmill supply, I mean I think she had the ability, the courage and the tenacity to make it a very smart garden.

And your sister was married in the garden, was that right?

Oh, test me, yes, she probably was.

I might have got that wrong.

Well our daughter she was married and Jack was married, that's the extended garden, what we call the wedding garden even to this day, she was married there, that's the bit outside through the gate where it goes down there.

That would be a lot more recent of course.

Yes, that would probably be 30 odd years ago. Our other daughter, Susannah, was married in Sydney. So Jack was married here. Toni, Toni she's older than I am, not much, a couple of years older than I am. She's 81.

And I guess you'd say two things that teenage boys aren't particularly interested in are weddings and gardens.

That's very true.

So it's a pretty hard question isn't it?

Yes, well it is, I mean, a lot of those things, I suppose I knew, a lot of things are very clear to me of what happened and they keep coming back. One thing leads to another and leads to another but closer to today not too flash.

We all have gaps like this. But if I can take you back to when you came back here after school, you would have had sheep here as well at that stage?

56.16

Mainly sheep, just sheep, virtually no cattle. But we had another place at Ashford, it was a wether place called Yambagunyah where we ran wethers, rough traprock country but great wether country and fine wool country. We used to run it from here and there was a cottage on the place and I kept a horse down there so I could drive down, we had a second-hand FJ Holden ute and so I could drive down there and stay a couple of nights and drench or whatever it is with the dogs and at shearing time as we progressed we used to truck the sheep, we didn't have a shearing shed on the place, a couple of years we shored on a neighbour's place but that was time used driving to the neighbour's place and back again. I'm sure they didn't mind but I used to truck them from Yambagunyah to here which is probably, wouldn't be 40 kilometres but pretty ordinary track up through Bukkulla and we used to, we shored quite a few sheep in that time so the shearing was two shearers, shearing went on long enough so we could backload, brought up some woollies and then we'd send shornies back.

That makes sense because I was wondering why for 40 kilometres you didn't walk them and bring them all in one lot.

Well then you'd have to look after them right through the whole period here. I did that with cattle where I brought cattle up that I walked up, I used to walk them from Yambagunya to Bukkulla and I put them in the Bukkulla station yards overnight and then I'd walk them the rest of the way home, which was two fairly good walks, even with cattle. But I wouldn't do it with sheep, too many hassles with dogs on the road, I still hate having the dog on the road and moving stock. We moved stock from here quite often, only cattle, from here to Byron siding which is almost a laneway all the way across which is just over the hill there. So, we do move cattle backwards and forwards quite a lot but we do have to cross a main road because today it's all bikes.

Look it's alarming. We have to take cattle across the New England Highway, or we did before John had the other part leased. And we used to move sheep across there, nearly all of them every shearing would have to come across to the homestead. It wasn't the traffic that you get now though.

No well on the outskirts of Inverell, half past 8 to half past 9 you almost need traffic lights. We'd have to have special signs up as we crossed the stock because they come onto the bridge and they spook a bit and if one runs away and the dog goes after them, the fellows flying late to work and I'm always so relieved once they get across the bitumen, once they cross they just go virtually straight into the other place, either Palaroo or Byron siding.

But the river flats would have always been cropped.

Yes, they were. We used to run sheep on them on, lucerne at one stage. I mean the first crop was grown on Byron in 1852 and that's in Mrs Ross' reminiscences, the book that she wrote. And she recorded that.

That's Mrs Ross from Balaclava?

No, the Ross store, the main store in Inverell.

They may be the same family, there was Colin Ross who set up the store in Inverell and then he took up land at Matheson.

Balaclava?

Yes. Same one?

I better not comment, I'm not too sure. I'm not sure that it is, it could be but it was certainly Ross's store that set up on what was part of Byron in those days, where Inverell is now. But the original township that was surveyed is the township, is called the town of Byron which is just down the river from here and it was on Byron and it's still there, still surveyed and there's still blocks there.

Really. And it's part of Byron today?

No it isn't, it's part of one of the other blocks. So that's where powers that be wanted Inverell to be, the town of Byron. I mean there would have been a lot of cottages and things around Byron Station at the time but it didn't change, that's where the drays and everything came across the river and they camped on the river and that's where Colin Ross set up his store and that's one of the main suburbs, the high part of the town is called Ross Hill these days, Ross Hill school. But the other thing I didn't mention talking about old Darby Heath when he was describing the river and what they did on it, he said it was a magnificent place for fruit. He said people came from all other the south and one thing and another, ate their fruit, threw the stones out and he said the fruit trees were just incredible on that flat, it was called the Green Swamp in those days, it was covered with these fruit trees. And he said magnificent fruit because no fruit fly.

So that would be stone fruit, apples?

Yes anything that grew, get away from the frost a bit, not on the river but there are places very close to the river just out of town on the hill that you'll see from

the front of Byron here, called Fletchers Seat and I bought the top of that hill and it's totally flat. You can see for miles from up there and they used to grow stone fruits up on top of that hill and they'd be out of the frost.

You would have had an orchard here on Byron in the early days?

Yes of a sort and you can see in one of the old photos where they've got a picket fence around it on the flat between the house and the river. After the War we did have market gardener here, grew vegetables here on the flat and there was a pump down there that they could irrigate with. Herb Morris and Arthur Newman were the two fellows that grew them. Herb Morris of the Morris family have still got a fruit shop in Inverell. And when we were kids wonderful memories of what they did, they farmed with an old horse, can't remember her name but an old mare that used to plod along. Anyway, like buying a new car they bought a new horse, Baldie, I can remember Baldie very well.

Draught horse?

Draught horse to cultivate all the country where they sewed their carrots and cauliflowers and anything they grew. Big start. They started Baldie off and they'd hitch him up and away Baldie went and instead of slow steps, slow steps from the old mare, 'get up Baldie' and of course Baldie got up alright and away he went and I can still see Arthur Newman trying to pull him up. Pull, Pull! and Dad yelled out to him, say something to him Arthur. 'Whoa' and he stopped dead.

He was trained.

He was trained. By then of course half an acre of cauliflower gone [both laugh]. They had an old, I can't remember, I think it was probably an old Dodge ute they used to load up with boxes of stuff to take to the stores in town.

So would that be just the local?

Yes, just local, yes, just local.

Because in Glen Innes they had the freezing works for vegetables but that's into the '50s and '60s I think.

Yes, well that's probably right because they did have a freezing works in town, bacon factory too they had in Inverell and people invested in that and I've still got an old share certificate because my grandfather bought shares in the bacon factory which is in the book out there. So, they were fresh, straight to town, straight into the store.

Because it's obviously such wonderful country down there on the river flat and the garden would be basalt as well of course.

Yes, but it's running into that lighter stony country and that's why the house is still standing I suppose because of the foundations. All those flats from the

major floods that were here that were covered by flood water going right back towards the Ashford range.

And it's incredible how they knew what the flood level would be when they built these old places isn't it?

1.05.51

Well that's right, I suppose take levels. I mean the original, where they settled originally on the flat obviously that flooded. There's still a little bit of foundation stone river gravel built up down there. It's incredible how things last. I mean there was a jump, two jumps built there, horse jumps that were put up there and Dad said well they've got to stay there because the light horse had this big sports event once a year called the Prince of Wales Cup, with all the troops from all around challenge for it and they had it here one year and the jumps that were put up, the competition in that, funny stories involved.

So you're talking about a period between the First and Second World Wars?

That's right, so in the late '20s, early '30s I suppose. And that's when they used to camp, have the camp at the Armidale Showground, the Glen Innes Showground or Gostwyck, whatever. And the photos that I've got of them competing down there, horses galloping up, I think there were six in whatever they call it, I've forgotten the term they use. Six horsemen and they all gallop up to a certain spot, five of the horsemen dismounted with their guns and the sixth fellow galloped off leading their horses, so he's got own horse and five others to take them back out of gunshot range. And then when the shooting was over you had to gallop back, leading the horses again and the fellows who had been fighting had to jump back on the horses and then race back.

So, it was obviously very important that they had their own horses. I mean I know in the First World War they took their horses from here.

They did, and so they had to have horses. Dad said he'd never seen so many of these horses galloping around the flat in his life because full gallop, managing six horses, getting back there, fellows trying to get back on them because he said there were horses everywhere. They had to jump, they had to go over two jumps on the way down and I think there was another on the way back.

Phenomenal.

A good story. And then one of the major cups they were competing for was called the Gunyawarra Line(?) Cup which was donated by the MacKay family who owned Gunyawarra, Warialda at the time. Anyway, it's still on the mantelpiece in the living room. There have been times when I've intended to give it to someone and the MacKay sisters were out here, Sunday lunch or something one day, and they knew it was here and I said well what do you think I should do with it. And they said you've probably kept it safe for 60 years why

don't you keep it a bit longer. So it's still there. But some of the other Light Horse stuff I did give to some enthusiastic people and never got it back.

They have a Light Horse Museum do they not? Is it in Tamworth?

I think it is yes. I think they do.

Because this was all a great area, I mean the Chauvel brothers from around Tenterfield/Tabulam.

Oh yes, great stories.

Is there anything I haven't asked you about the garden?

Oh the garden, I'm not really sure.

I'll get Christine about that later.

End of interview: 1 hour, 9 minutes, 35 seconds