Australian Garden History Society

National Oral History Collection

Northern NSW Branch

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Interviewee:	**Owen Glendower Croft**
	First of five interviews
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Please note that this is an edited version of a 5 hour+ interview. Please contact AGHS Office to access the full recordings and transcriptions.

1st interview of 5

This interview is being recorded as part of a series for the Australian Garden History Society's National Oral History Project. My name is John Maurer and it is an interview with Sir Owen Croft and is recorded in St Leonard's, NSW on Monday, 23rd April 2018. This is interview one of a series.

Owen, for the recording, can you give me your full name please?

00.30

Owen Glendower Croft.

Your date of birth?

1932.

That will make you ...

86, this week.

This week! Well, happy birthday for when your birthday is. [laughter] **Owen, we talked about a number of things that we could discuss, and gardens and Australia's Open Garden Scheme were the things that you mentioned, and my understanding is that the Northern NSW sub-branch of the Sydney branch, actually started at Salisbury Court, your home?**

Yes. I was the first Chairman and my wife was the first Secretary. [laughter]

How did it get started; what was the impetus?

Just general chat, I suppose. Lynne Walker would be part of it, Doug Moffatt was another one. There were about 6 or 8 of us and we were throwing things around.

Doug was from Invergowrie.

Yes. So, we ... I suppose just general conversation. It was the end of the Open Garden Scheme, and that was the impetus.

Oh, the finishing of the Australia's Open Garden Scheme ...

Yes, they had just more or less, folded up. Lynne, having been tied up with it, and Sally being tied up with it, that was part of how the conversations must have started.

Your late wife, Sally, and Lynne Walker were ...

I think they were the key, and Doug Moffatt, certainly. I just got dragged along for the ride. [laughter].

That means that you went to quite a number of gardens around the New England and the North West and even maybe further afield?

Well, Sally was Chair of the garden selectors of the Open Garden Scheme, so we travelled from Newcastle to the Queensland border, up the coast, up to the tablelands and out to the west. The territory started at Orange and all points north. Nearly every opening of an area, we would go and spend a couple of days there. I remember seeing a hell of a lot of gardens. [laughter]

Well, that's interesting given the range that you actually covered. Now, Salisbury Court, your family property, was part of the Open Garden Scheme as well.

Yes, we opened it 6 or 8 times, all seasons eventually.

Even winter?

Even winter, yes, because we've got big old trees, hedges and things like that. And Sally very deliberately planted old-style plants. She pushed that very hard, right from the beginning. That gave us the opportunity to open at different times.

What are the things that did best at Salisbury Court?

Can I just say that everything that survived at Salisbury will survive anywhere [laughter]. Very frost-hardy stuff and a lot of the old-fashioned ... I'm not good on this side because I don't really know. I should have brought the list that Sally had, there is one there, which is what she has planted. It was quite deliberate too, to go back to the older ones because we knew they'd survive. Salisbury is very cold.

Now you mentioned in a previous conversation that you can recall the temperature getting down to as low as minus 8 Fahrenheit.

Fahrenheit.

Which is the rough equivalent of minus 13 Celsius.

Yes, so it was the coldest winter ever recorded, and a long winter. There were lots of places where there was ice two-feet thick. [indistinct] My brothers were skating on a billabong in the front of the house.

A billabong being a part of a creek system?

Yeah. It was quite unique. It's now closed off but to have a billabong in the high country was quite unusual, and this one is. We put a bank around it to lift it up a bit but still it is an ephemeral lagoon, I suppose.

So, very cold temperatures, very long dry spells and some particularly hot temperatures in the summertime.

[Sighs] I don't suppose we have very much really high temperature. I don't remember the summers being oppressive. When you are in New England, we were far enough up to not to have 30; 30 degrees nowadays would be getting close, 33, 34 degrees is really hot.

And a bit more bearable because it made ...

Yep, it's very bearable because we would knock off when it was hot.

And cooler nights as well.

Cooler nights always. Very cool.

Now, you started gardening yourself when you were quite young.

Yeah, I got dragged into it I suppose. [laughs] I was the eldest of the family. Mum had quite a big garden, it was ... no water obviously, a lot of lawn. She had a big rock garden. There were a few hedges, big vegetable garden — Dad had. Only a hand mower and if the grass got out of hand I'd just use a scythe.

6:42

A hand mower being a push mower?

A push mower. I must have been strong. [laughs] It was a ... big area. It always had to be mown, my memory of it.

I imagine it wouldn't have been watered too.

No water, no.

No supplementary water?

No supplementary water. I think there was a well, but I don't remember Dad having watered the vegetable garden even.

Now, on this property were there windmills that pumped to higher tanks, which gave pressure both for the house or for any hoses that might have been used?

Salisbury and Karuah, where we were. No, there were only tanks around the house.

Just rainwater tanks?

Just rainwater tanks. We didn't have electricity, none of those sort of things. Until 1947 I'd never switched a light except for when I was in town.

00.07.53

When did Salisbury Court get purchased?

The original part of Salisbury was taken up by ... taken up by 1835 was the original settlement.

Very early!

Yeah, so it was very early and that run originally started with Wollun and went right through to Armidale.

So that's north of Walcha?

Yeah, north of Walcha, not very far north in actual fact. it's about 15-16 kms south of Uralla right through to Armidale. It was all the one run. Then they sold off, presumably the run. Salisbury and Terrible Vale were sold off and they were taken up around 1836 or '37. And then the Salisbury portion ... McKenzie, who had it at that stage, went broke with the drought in '38 or '39 and Marsh took over then.

And Marsh is your direct ancestor?

Yeah, Matthew Henry Marsh is my great, great grandfather and his brother. My two great, great grandparents bought Salisbury homestead. It's quite unique ...

Great, great grandparents?

The house itself, when was that built?

It started Boxing Day, as far as I know, 1844. Matthew came out in 1840, admitted to the bar in Sydney but didn't practice, became the first Magistrate in New England. I think because Law was too crowded.

Too much competition.

When he went to ... he took over Salisbury, which was about 30-odd thousand acres. The next move, by 1842, would be to Booralong which was, to my knowledge is about 100,000 acres. He was the first man to ride from where Stanthorpe is now to Warwick (first white man). It must have been a drought, I think. He went up to settle, to Warwick because Leslie family had moved up ... they'd brought sheep up along the western side. The Leslies had married two of MacArthur girls. That's where they got their flock from.

John MacArthur family?

Yeah. So he went ... John or his brother, I'm not sure ... he went up there. It must have been a drought I think because he came back to Stanthorpe basically. I think it was green there, it was a bit drier. And he took up 250,000 acres in one slab. If you look at the Queensland border it comes in a straight line then has a wiggle in it and comes around.

Yes. That follows one of the rivers doesn't it?

It's the top of the Clarence. The catchment is actually on Maryland Station, in behind ... over the border because when Queensland became a separate State the western boundary of Maryland was the Queensland border. It ran along the range, right through, as Sally used to say ... because Matthew had a lot to do with Queensland becoming a separate State ... 'Just keep the old bugger out of Queensland.'

[laughter]

Yeah, well, we all have our views. By 1843 he had 400,000 acres under his control.

That's an enormous amount of land.

Yeah. Most of it was rubbish. He was a very bad picker of land. Salisbury's the only good place.

12:04

So, what's the soil like at Salisbury.

It's a very fine granite, a lot of it. A lot of ironstone. No basalt, I think. Very good sheep country. Always was, always will be. Not really cattle country. But it became one of the big breeding places for the rest of the State. So, by 1844 he went back to England ... he was always in a hurry, this bloke, he really was ... he caught a ship, sailed back to England, got married, came straight back. He was back by the end of 1844. Eliza Merewether, his wife. We've got one of her diaries, for one year, when she first arrived and she was saying that the ... she and Matt walked up to the site of the new house, and that was Boxing Day ... just before Christmas in 1844.

This was the site of the new house that's Salisbury Court.

That was finished by ... 1847 it was finished. It's a big house, 90-odd foot frontage for four rooms.

And what's it's construction?

Stone. Random rubble I think is the best way of describing it. The stone was cut by using fire and water. There are no signs of chisel marks on any of the granite.

How does fire and water work?

They chip a line across a boulder and they put a fire on it and then they pour cold water [he makes a noise of stone cracking]

This was granite.

Yeah, it's granite. All from the place, most of it from probably within three or four hundred yards of the house. And then there's pit-sawed timber all through. It's still got a shingle roof underneath the iron.

Would that be hardwood timber?

Yes, they're all stringybark shingles cut ... We know that the timber was pit-sawed down on where Mirani's place is now, there's still a pit there.

That's toward Walcha?

Yeah. A journey probably in those days. In fact, it was part of Salisbury's — the Uralla Shire/Walcha Shire boundary is the back end of Salisbury's ... Mirani homestead [indistinct] shearing shed sort of thing, in Uralla. [laughter] So it was all shingled and all the architraves, things like that were cedar. Big slabs of cedar too, not just boards. The walls are about 18 inches/two-feet thick right through. And all the architraves on the doors is one sheet of cedar about two inches thick. The cedar in the house is probably worth more than the property. [laughs]

Were those architraves milled?

I don't know what ... I've been trying to find out where the cedar came from. The doors and windows, and all those sort of things, were certainly probably made in Maitland, where all the artisans were, but the rest of it we don't know. I've talked to a family called Chapman, who had one of the original big mills in Port Macquarie, and they've got no record. My family said it could have come from down the Hunter. But who knows. There was no road to Port Macquarie before the house was built, it was a track but they may have got it ... there's lots of cedar east of us, there's cedar everywhere.

When did Oxley go through?

About 1830.

So not long before ...

No, not very long, very early ... I mean these are the very early days. When somebody went past or went somewhere else, I don't know. It never had trees Salisbury Plains was Salisbury Plains]

So, Oxley went from west to east.

He went from Tamworth through to Walcha and then went east from there

Down over the falls.

Down over the falls, yeah. An interesting comment in his ... it was open woodland, it wasn't heavy scrub as everybody thinks. You read any of the Aboriginal books that I have you'd think it was the greatest estate on earth. Most of the timber was on the ridge and then they burnt down on top. So, you didn't have much vegetation at all.

Yes.

There was no understorey, everybody went on about this understorey, but it wasn't there because it was burnt. Except on the ridges.

17:15

So the Aboriginals burning it ...

Kept the timber down. Take a good example, Pilliga scrub, which is now three times as big as it was when white man came because they stopped burning it. That's why they should be getting all the gas out there. [laughter] Useless country.

Well that's probably one of the reasons that probably the scrub has fire because of the understorey there.

Yeah, yeah, the understorey right through there. Not very big timber either. When they get a fire, they really get a fire.

It would burn for a long time.

I think who is it wrote the book [Eric Rolls]... he said it's three times as big as what it was. The country is very poor.

Just getting back to Salisbury Court and the beginning of the Garden History Society. Do you recall how many people were involved in the northern ... the breakaway group?

There were about 8 of us.

Right.

I don't think there were more. We've got them in a book. Bill's got that now.

Bill Oates, the co-Chair.

So, it's all ... he's got ... I found them only recently, gave him the whole lot. And the Treasury reports. However, it's all recorded. Fortunately. And hasn't been lost.

Yes. And that's kept at the UNE ...

At the Heritage Centre. That's all there. I don't think ... no, I can't remember who the others were off hand.

Now, my understanding is that there must be at least 60, perhaps approaching 70 members in northern New South Wales. Was there a steady growth of membership?

Oh, it's been very steady in these parts, obviously, it wasn't much. But once it got going it built up itself and then, of course, once the rose garden became a part of it ...

This is the heritage rose garden at Saumarez.

... the heritage rose garden at Saumarez, that's really given it more impetus.

Now, my memory is that that began in 2013.

Yes, that's about right.

The Garden History Society conference was in October 2013. I think that's when you turned the first sods.

I think that's where we got the money from to start it. [laughter] Basically.

Yes. So, what impact did the heritage rose garden have in terms of membership and involvement of people?

I think it's had a very big one. It's widened our group but it's also brought people who, for all sorts of reasons, didn't like Saumarez, or in the case of the big rose garden So, we've got other people come in but we've had ... we've got a couple of members who came from Sydney and have moved up there who have been membersthe Garden History down here and they've moved in, and there's a steady build up. Everybody was scared, I think, that it was going to be such a monster to manage, in actual fact there was hardly any work to be done on it. Quite incredible. We've just finished the last of the mulching on the first part. Now we know what we should do we'll mulch much heavier in the new part. We'll be doing the whole thing this year and after that we'll go around get a few weeds, dead head and prune. I mean, there's a lot of work but it's not going to be any huge ... in fact I have ... I take over Saumarez garden.

I understand that Lynne Walker's husband, Richard Bird, has provided what I think he calls torpedo hoes for market gardens.

Really?

You've used them.

I've used them. Another chap from some village where I am, takes me around, and we got one each. And I use it at home but ... We went right through the whole garden in under two hours. And weeded the whole lot with these things. They're brilliant.

That's quite remarkable.

They really are, the gavel part and it's either a push or a pull.

This is quite different to ...

Different to anything I've used.

... standard hoe.

Yeah.

It's a thin metal ...

Thin metal blade ...

With a curve.

Yes, it's shaped ... it's nearly oval, I suppose, but sharp on all four sides. And it really is, for that garden ... so much mulch, there's not much stuff coming through.

Now the blade of this torpedo hoes effectively is horizontal, isn't it.

Yeah.

And it's a matter of pushing it forward.

Just pushing and pulling, yeah. And it's light, it's so easy. The two of us sailed out and did all that ... we'd been spraying on the new part ... [indistinct] and we went right through in a couple of hours.

And it works on the decomposed gravel parts as well.

Oh yeah. It's brilliant, yeah. I mean, an hour a week, for one man would be to weed it.

Well, that really is remarkable.

And that's the incredible part. I mean, the main thing ...for looking after the roses and understorey, but there's not going to be as much work as the volunteers were expecting, certainly not as much as I was.

23:09

Now the, what, couple of dozen people, between 18 and two dozen people go to regular working bees, monthly working bees?

Yeah, not always the same ones though. There are a few ... the few are old hard heads. Brian Duff and I go on odd times to do a bit of [indistinct] without the ... we can get the barrow we want.

[laughter]

So we did a lot of the heavy mulching.

Yes.

If we are fit enough.

So what sort of mulch do you use?

Wood chips. I think elm tree fell down so that's all went into it. And the Council provide a lot of stuff so that's not going to be a major problem. I don't know how long it'll last. Probably for about 10 years because we're putting about 6 inches of mulch on.

Yes.

So, it should last a long time. There's not much weed coming through.

Is there any nitrogen draw down given that it's wood chip?

Not by the way the roses are growing.

[laughter]

I mean, they're incredible. I don't how long since you've been down but sometimes you have trouble walking down there there's so much growth coming out.

It's been fifteen months since I've been down there.

Well, it's grown out of all proportion so there's going to have a very hard prune this coming season. But that won't trouble us. Most of it can be done ... ten people can probably do it in two days.

Now, my understanding is that the soil in the heritage rose garden is basalt.

Yeah. That's correct. It was the original orchard for Saumarez. It's been drained. So they are actually drains in it, earthenware pipes about three feet down. By the Whites, Joe White did it. And they brought soil in from Ebor by the horse and dray.

This would have been in the 1880s, 1890s. A bit earlier.

No, it would have been in the 1900s.

Ah, OK, yes.

Once they got the place into order then they started to have people coming in.

Pre-World War One?

Oh yeah. It was in the early 1900s. The story is that they actually dug it all up, took it outside, shook the rocks out and brought it back, but whether that's right or not ... But it's the most beautiful soil, and deep. And they put an automatic watering system in, which I don't think they should turn on too often 'cause roses don't need too much water.

That's right.

And went with mulching. I mean once you've rid of those damn lamb's ears. Because they planted lamb's ears initially

As a border.

As a border and they took off and instead of being nice little low things they were two feet high. And we spent, oh ... I know Brian and I spent at least two weeks digging this damn stuff out. Trailer loads and trailers loads and trailer loads coming out of those damned lamb's ears[indistinct].

I guess it's a good illustration of how good the basalt soil is.

Oh, it's brilliant. I haven't had to feed anything yet and I don't think I will. But the roses go back two or three feet. Pure basalt, what else do they need? It's going to be spectacular anyway. The new part will really complement it.

It's been said that the heritage rose garden is probably one of the most significant projects that the Garden History Society anywhere in Australia has taken on. Do you ...

I don't know who planted the one in Tasmania, on the Archer property. So, I don't know who planted that one. There's another one south of Melbourne where the sewerage farm is. There's a big old house ... there's another one there. They've used grass round the roses, ... Werribee House. But the rest, there would be some Council ones. Toowoomba is a Council one. I'm not sure where else there are. But no, the first one done by [indistinct]. The potential was huge for selling cuttings. Our daughter went looking at the roses for making product to sell through the shop.

They were mainly off rugosas, I imagine.

Yeah, yeah. She was digging [indistinct] there in vast numbers, that's the way ... years ago, years ago. And now that Saumarez looks as though they're going to get big money to expand the facilities everywhere and their shops have increased. You can get a good deal, cuttings from the roses 'cause it's a collection simply unsurpassed.

Well having the vast majority of cultivar groups represented in the garden, makes it really quite unique.

Yeah. Yeah, it does. It really is a unique ... very exciting.

So, the fact that Australia's Open Gardens Scheme folded, the Garden History Society started up ... this is one garden but there are obviously a lot of other very significant gardens in the Tablelands.

29:25

Yes, there are huge numbers of big gardens and small gardens. There's always been a region for gardening. My memory is going back to a place like Wongwibinda.

Now, that's northeast of Armidale.

No, it's ... well it's east anyway. A little bit north, the Wright family built it. I mean, I remember that as a garden and I remember Dyamberin, one which had been [indistinct, noise of something clicking]. One particular fruit grew there that used to

grow on the coast because it was on the edge of the gorge, because they've got the warmth there.

Yes.

I could grow lemon, things like that.

So some of those can be quite frosty.

Oh yeah, and that place was very cold, could be very cold ... but because of the climate coming up out of the gorge country and they could do other things.

Yes.

Wongwibinda's got some magnificent trees planted there. The original Wright family came here. That's a significant garden, which we haven't dealt with yet. Which will be dealt with sometime soon. And then within town, my grandmother built a magnificent garden at a place called Canowindra. She planted the whole thing out of basalt too basically the rock walls everywhere. She was very ... used a lot of gelignite. They always reckoned the whole of Armidale would shake and that's how they know Alice was in her garden.

Where's Canowindra located?

Up in the top near roundabout.

On the northern side.

On the northern side.

It's a very big ...

I went there this week and it was horrifying. It's had three or four different owners. I have photos taken, which I showed to the present owners so they could have a look, but . . .

Your grandmother was there for some time?

Yes, they built the house about '94 and she was there till the war, 1945.

Can you describe the garden?

Well, it's on basalt. It had a lot of stone walls right around, which my uncle built, I believe. There was a circular centre with a cemented stone wall right round it about two foot high, and inside were more rock gardens and there was a fishpond. In those days there were no gravel paths, they were all soil paths. They were ... somebody had to do an awful lot of weeding and raking and rolling. And then outside there were more rock walls for the vegetable gardens. She had a lot of ... grape arbour. There was a grape arbour, which was about 20-30 yards long with a particular variety of grapes on it. Very big vegetable garden. I used to pick ... when the asparagus

season was on I'd go and pick a four-gallon drum full of asparagus every few days. And they'd tie them in bundles, and I've never eaten asparagus beyond the first inch of the stalk. [laughter] I mean, those stalks ... you just threw them away.

Now, the grapes that were grown, some of them were for table grapes?

They were all table grapes. We've got one grape at Salisbury survived from that garden. The rest were ... I would have no memory of ... I used to eat the last lot, but they all perished. This is a white grape that we've rescued from my uncle. We got a cutting from him.

Do you know the name of it?

No. No. We've got grapevines at Salisbury going back to 1844 so ... the old Isabella

Yes.

... and we've still got that. Same plants are still growing so ... No, I don't what any of these other ones were. She had a couple of persimmon trees, I remember being up there. One of them's still there. Huge fig tree, gooseberries. There was a very big walnut tree; all these are gone except the persimmon. There was a big orchard as well.

Growing things like ...

One I remember was an almond, a couple of almonds, a lot of plums, apple, peaches, all that sort of stuff. They had a bit of farming. Gran had an old family who ... the McGuire family, who worked for her. She was the cook, [hand?] shall we say. I can still remember the kitchen exactly as it was. She'd make bread, all these sort of things. Big kitchen. And the house hasn't changed a lot but they've made additions to it, use of the buildings. Part of the house is nearly intact. They were tickled pink with these photos that I've got because they actually show the furniture and so on.

Yes.

Some of the pieces are still there. But it's changed forever. It's just about refurbished again so they can put it back where they were.

How much land does Canowindra have now?

I think they've got 20 acres. Pretty wild. There was a gorge, a narrow gully, full of blackberry in those days. The land hasn't been developed down below the house at all. They pruned the ... they lopped all the trees so the view over Armidale that was there ...

Looking to the south ...

But those trees [swishing noise], up again now. She had a lot of succulents, I can remember succulents everywhere. Rob Pearce, who bought it from one of the next

neighbour. He used to ring up and say, 'What was under this pile of stones?' I can remember these succulents growing in large quantities. There was quite a bit of lawn.

Just going back to the fruit trees. Was it the habit of preserving some of those fruits when they were available ...

Yes, I think my grandmother certainly did it. So, I've inherited it ... I've just bottled 30-odd bottles of preserves this year.

What have you been bottling?

Vacola. I started off with cherries and now we're moving to stoned fruit. I've just finished tomatoes. What else did I do? I don't do vegetables. Too risky as far as I'm concerned. They are a risk [indistinct] at higher temperatures.

37:00

So, it is the Vacola system that my daughter uses. I bottle the seasonal fruits, she takes them off and makes the jams and stuff, which she sells.

Are you doing the preserving at Salisbury?

No, I'm doing it in my unit.

Are you really?

Yes. Well, the new Vacola is so easy. It only takes five big bottles, it took 8 before. You just put the bottles in there after you fill them, fill it up with water, turn the power on and an hour later take it out. So easy.

The hard work that used to be ...

Well, you had to watch the temperature the whole time, the damn things on the stove. It was a monster of a business. So easy. I can have another lot ready ... you know, cherries and things like that. I can have them ready for the next [indistinct]. So, I can do three lots in an afternoon.

Oh, that's quite remarkable.

Yeah, I'm the last of a dying breed, I think. [laughter] But it's such a magnificent way to store fruit. Particularly in the winter time, you don't have to ... it doesn't lose it's taste, I don't put sugar in. It's in the bottle and it's ready if you want it if somebody comes. I use it now, if I get asked out to dinner, I take my bottle of fruit. [laughter] I get a lot of Brownie points.

Bring a bottle ... you probably get a lot of invitations.

Well, I'm certainly getting some. [laughter] But it's ... oh, it's fun. I enjoy it. Some people would find it tedious, but it just suits me ... my temperament. It fills in time.

Yes. Owen, you've lived in New England pretty much all of your life.

Other than five years in Sydney.

Yes.

Lived there, went to school there, we got married there. Yeah, so I've been there for a long time.

Yes. And you and Sally gardened there.

Yes, Sally was the gardener, I was ... I did the hard work. She had the brains; I thought I knew a bit about garden, but I don't. [laughter] We used to have lots of conversations, but she was the brains.

Well, I guess all of us start off totally ignorant as far as gardens are concerned and then you pick up bits along the way.

You pick up bits. I worked for Gran Weaver at Canowindra. I was too young then. But then when I was at TAS she had a place in Falconer Street, we used to spend every Sunday ... about three of us would go up there and work for a couple of hours, three hours and we'd got a large meal and we'd go to sleep for the afternoon.

[laughter]

But she got a new garden out of it.

Better than boarding school.

Yeah, yeah. So great for us and great for her.

Yes, yes

So, I've been caught up in gardens, whether I like it or not. My knowledge of plants is poor. I know what's a weed and what's not — that's about the best way of describing me. But I like weeding, so it's not a hassle.

Well, the fact that you and your colleague Brian go out, sometimes surreptitiously, to the heritage rose garden at Saumarez means that you obviously enjoy it.

We thoroughly enjoy it, you're right. Brian needs a bit more exercise. 'Cause every Friday we go down to Salisbury or to McCrossins Mill in Uralla we go do the garden there in the morning then we go up to Salisbury. Trisha gives us lunch and we work two or three hours, have afternoon tea, get a doggie bag and go home.

[laughter]

So we're still in gardening all the time.

Tape 1 ends: 41.08

Extract Recording 2

51.55

The uni (University of New England) became autonomous in the 1950s.

Yeah.

'56, '54?

Yeah, something like that. About the time I came back, and that gave Armidale a huge impetus. Because when I left school in '49, there were 7,000 people in Armidale and hardly a tree. Armidale was very barren, except in the parks there were no trees. Alwyn Jones started planting trees and you can't find a house now. That's the big change.

Now, a chap by the name of Curtis was part of that as well, wasn't he?

Yeah, well the Curtises had a big emporium next to the Imperial, wasn't it? Near the post office, that was the Curtis building. Their house was where the big motel is up up the highway on the left-hand side.

Cotswold.

Cotswold, that was a Curtis house and the next one was a Curtis house.

E**ynsford.**

Oh yeah. Well, they were both Curtis houses. They probably had like the Ritz that sort of thing... Lamberts; they would have been the three main people, I think.

The tree planting scheme in Armidale has obviously made a huge impact.

Alwyn Jones who was the progenitor for all that. As I said, when I remember it, it was just barren. They started planting trees, and then it got to the stage when they were planting a particular type of tree in a particular street. And from where I am, inside the village [*i.e. Masonic Village*], I look down, they've got different colours in different streets. It's brilliant.

Yes. Claret Ash ...

Claret Ash.

[indistinct] **Mountain Ash, Pistacia.**

Pistacias. Yeah, so there's all sorts of trees.

And it's one of the beautiful aspects of Armidale.

It is now. I mean, the autumn festival is a little bit early normally, the real autumn colours ... it's there always. Where I am it's magnificent to look down on. I look down in spring and the green coming on, so ... it's certainly changed, and I think it's probably improved the temperature in Armidale too.

Well, I imagine Anzac Day would be round about the time that the leaves **would be close to their peak.**

Yeah, just at this time, yeah. It depends on whether its been a dry or wet season too [indistinct – background noise] because the season's ... but that's about the period, and so ... Yeah, it's certainly spectacular. It brings some of the people too.

To what extent do you think that the Malpas Dam and the improved water supply has had?

Oh, I think it's made all the difference. I mean, they can still boast that Armidale's got a good water supply. Nearly proved them wrong, this last drought.

Is that so?

Oh yeah, they were just about to go onto restrictions 'cause all the springs in Guyra that normally get fed dried up, and it was getting a little bit 'toey'. So it rained and they filled up again and away it went.

It must've been about 1967, '68 that Malpas Dam was opened.

Yeah. I mean, they spent a lot of time trying to work out where to put it, the reason it was going up in the sticks on the eastern side. Buzo was very keen on using that water ...

He was the engineer ...

Yeah, but I think it was actually accident rather than good business that they built a dam that was big enough, knowing what Council's are like. Davis Hughes was one of the drivers of that.

Yes. Because Zihni Buzo was involved in the building of a dam out the east, which became the hydro ...

Hydro-electric scheme, yeah. He was a man way ahead of his time.

He was a refugee from Eastern Europe I believe.

Probably. They were quite a family. 'Cause one of the boys was an author, yeah, **Buzo**.

Yes. A playwright.

Yeah, that's one of his.

I believe his daughter has been at TAS. I don't know whether she's still doing that ...

Yes. She was on staff, that's right, yuh. The dam ... they're going to have to double its capacity 'cause they're talking of putting Guyra on the water supply and the proposal is that Uralla and Walcha will go on. But there's room there to go up ... double its height. Really make a dam out of it and that'll give rise to all sorts of small industry 'cause they'll have water. Certainly, growing plants, things like Marilyn [Pidgeon] with her ...

Peonies ...

Peonies. Another one in Guyra's growing peonies too, in a big way. Somebody put in a ... started to put in a flower farm and got hit with a storm, I think, and went bust. But anyway all a recent boom. They send peonies by the semi-trailer load to Sydney, to Woolies.

Amazing.

So, that sort of thing is starting to happen. You go into the growers' markets in Uralla, in Armidale now and there's a whole lot of stuff coming ... going.

The large tomato farm in Guyra is another area of agriculture that's made a huge difference.

Yeah, because it's ... the reason for it, of course, is that it's more daylight than probably anywhere else. And they don't have to cool it in summer, which is a big plus. And it basically does its own job in the winter. And, I suppose, it's easy to transport in all directions. They've doubled their output to about 3 million kilos.

58.38

Extract Recording 3

00.00

Owen, thank you for agreeing to continue with this series of interviews. Yesterday you mentioned that you'd been involved in a number of organisations, one of which was the Garden History Society. I understand the first meeting of the Garden History Society, Northern New South Wales Branch, was held at Salisbury Court, your home.

Yes. For my sins I was elected Chairman. [laughter] As I was saying I was an awful Chairman. I like working behind the scenes, so I'm not a driver and it's been my weakness all the way along well realised. Peter Principle comes into play. [laughter] Yes, so the initial one, I was the Chairman and Sally [Owen's late wife] was Secretary. And I think our first was the heritage rose guys came up and we had a raffle, and we got a bit of money, and that's how we got started.

Yes. Started the Northern New South Wales sub-branch.

Yeah, and that was where the initial funding came from. And then when we had the Garden History Conference up there, that was when we really got money and that was the beginning of Saumarez.

And that was 2013.

Yeah, yeah. So that was when we really got firing.

And I think quite an amount of money was made as a result of the optional day trip to gardens, significant gardens to the north of Armidale.

There was quite a lot of money, anyway. There was enough to kick off Saumarez.

My memory is that it was about $20,000.

Something like that, yeah.

And I think that we were successful in getting a grant of $5000 from the National Garden History body, and we matched that dollar for dollar.

Yeah.

And, initially, the first roses for the garden were donated by Catherine MacLean.

Yeah, that's right.

The money enabled edging for garden beds and for gravel paths.

Yeah. We must've got some other funding because the rough guess is that that part of the garden cost over $100,000.

I would think so.

At least. I mean, if you price it. The work of the volunteer ...

I think that was judged, or estimated, at about $25 an hour.

Yeah. So, to get as far as we've got as quickly as we've got is quite remarkable.

Well, the first sod was turned in 2013 before the Garden History Conference in October.

Yeah.

And during that time I think there was a donation of some $2000 from the Heritage Rose Society.

Yes, yes, I know we got funds from them.

Yes. To provide signage for the garden.

Yeah.

And now stage one is effectively complete. There's still some ...

Still bits and pieces ...

Still some roses ...

Nothing much to be done now. But the remarkable thing is how few roses we lost.

Yes. In the transfer from Catherine MacLean's place.

Yeah, well, ~~that and~~ in planting generally. I mean, we had a stinking hot dry season and we hardly ... I don't think we lost more than 10 or 15 roses.

That's quite remarkable, isn't it.

That's the remarkable thing. Even in the early days without water. That's just one of those shots. Everything goes right. [laughter]

And roses, modern roses are regarded as being fairly temperamental creatures.

Yeah. Well, there are no modern ones in that early ...

Heritage roses are far more robust.

Yeah. So it will be interesting to see what happens with the rotunda, the new part was new roses, I think they will steam ahead.

Now they're largely, at least the central ones, are Alister Clark and Frank Reithmüller roses ...

Yeah.

... **and both of those men lived not far from St Leonards — they were up around the Turramurra area.**

Oh, drag 'em up [laughter]. See if we can get something out of them.

Yes.

Yeah, it's going to be interesting. I know that part I don't know actually what's going in. From here on, I think that's going to be the important part. We'll have modern roses plus the old ones. And we'll give cuttings to people ... or sell cuttings to people, not give, from all the range of the roses. Could be a huge part of the garden.

Yes.

As long as they can arrange to get the money back out of the National Trust.

Now the modern roses you refer to, I think, are those going into Stage 2.

Yeah.

And apart from the Australian-bred roses, there are going to be examples in the number of different beds of ... either species roses on the trellises outside or roses grown by ... significant roses grown by international growers.

Yeah.

Some of the best examples of them.

That's going to be an important part of it ... all in the one area. Then they can see ... potting up rose cuttings is going to be a major job. But, I mean, it'll be a major income out of that too.

Yes.

That'll make it important for people coming through, they'll be able to do it. But the fact that they're talking about putting rugosa roses out on the highway, on the roundabout ...

This is the new roundabout south of Armidale ...

Yes, just going in. That'll be another way of bringing people in. I mean, the local bloke who looks after all the plants and gardens and so forth in Armidale said that there were no rugosa roses in Armidale, he's being led round by the nose and pointed to ... I think Lynne's coming to Sydney to talk to the RTA and stuff.

This is Lynne Walker

Yes.

And I think the rose roundabout was one of her ideas.

Yes.

And she's driven it ...

And she's still driving it.

... with passion.

Yes, yes. It's going to be a very big roundabout so rugosas don't require much work, which means we won't have to go on to the roundabout often but you know people working there, major highway … that's a small part of it.

And am I right in thinking that members of the Garden History Society have volunteered to plant and take care of the roses?

Oh yeah. That's been the strength of it. The only outside people have been in preparing the ground for the second stage. We've had the BackTrack boys putting the gravel down.

7.48

Tell me about the BackTrack boys.

I can't think of his name now [Bernie Shakeshaft] the kids that have fallen off the education scene, they're in trouble and this chap got working with them and the first thing he does, is he gives them a dog, and they're responsible for that pup and they have to rear it. So it means they've got a responsibility, which they've probably never had before.

Given a dog when it's very young.

Yeah. And they look after it. And from that ... they've trained their dogs up and they now go round doing exhibitions of dogs jumping up over obstacles. And they're the Australian champions. And then from that they started looking for jobs for them. And they got 'em to do fencing. And there were big floods up at Tenterfield and they took a team up there and they fenced for weeks. Eventually got the freedom of the city as a result 'cause they ... everybody was so grateful. And as a result, about probably 90 per cent of those kids never go back into trouble. Most of them find jobs as a result. They do have education facilities for them.

Yes.

It's been a marvellous thing.

Yes.

Armidale's juvenile stuff dropped considerably as a result of this.

Juvenile crime?

Crime, yeah. It's been quite noticeable. And the kids have been given an opportunity, they got pride in themselves and away they go. And some of them, in fact, now are instructing.

Really.

Yeah, so that's how far it's gone. They got no government funding as far as I can see. They cut firewood for sale, that's one of the things. But they're talking environmental protection. They only cut certain trees down. They know when to do it and how to do it. So, they're taught that part of it.

The fellow who got this going, his name is Bernie, isn't it?

Yeah. Bernie Shakeshaft.

OK.

So, he's been brilliant. It's become quite a big organisation now. I think it's going ... it started to spread around the State. As long as they keep the government out of it, it'll be right.

Now I understand the State Governor has an interest in this. He was made aware of the program.

I'm sure he has been 'cause they've been even in Canberra, they done a display in Canberra so they've been pretty good, people are aware of it everywhere. And they're doing a lot of this emergency fencing and things like that. People are starting to use them for bits and pieces. And that's where they put all the gravel down.

Yes. In the Heritage Rose Garden.

In the Heritage Rose Garden. Quite fascinating. One morning I was there doing a tour of the young ones about half past 11. So, we see these three going back to town. And they got about 300 yards and somebody yelled out, 'There's pies and pasties for lunch here boys.' They were back. [laughter] He must have the patience of Job to handle those kids.

11.18

Extract Recording 5

48.45
Now, we've covered a fair bit of territory in these interviews over the last few days. We started off with the Garden History Society and the Heritage Rose Garden at Saumarez, and I wonder if an appropriate place to finish might be the social activities that are generated out of the Garden History Society in northern New South Wales.

Yeah, I think it started further back than that with the Open Garden. We used to go out for a weekend somewhere — Coonamble or Moree, and that was the beginning, I think.

When you say 'we', it was your wife Sally ...

Sally was the chief Selector, she was Chairman of Selectors. So we tended to go out to nearly all the major meets. So we stayed for a weekend and went round the 5 gardens that were usually in the group. So quite a few who were in the Garden History were members of the Open Garden, and I think that's mainly part of it. Then once we got going onto the Garden History one, we tended to go away for a weekend once or twice a year.

Yes.

And it's been brilliant seeing gardens that we wouldn't see otherwise. We've got a good rapport between our members so it's a lovely chat with a few stories occasionally. It's a very pleasant way ... 'Cause quite a few, now, are single for all sorts of reasons and it's a way of getting together. It's become quite a thing. We'd go away for a day. Get a bus ... the last one was down to Kentucky and we had lunch down there and we got the heritage rose group, growers were up so we were able to entertain them. And we had lunch there. And in my particular case, I ... the lady I was sitting across says, 'G'day Owen, when did we see each other?' I got a job by accident, by talking ...

Yes.

A chap walked into McCrossins Mill one day and we started chatting and he [indistinct] said, 'Do you want a job?' I said, 'What is it?' And he said, 'Will you be a local guide 'cause he was bringing two bus loads, two different times to New England?' And he wanted somebody to do the Armidale region. I said, 'OK.' So I did. Interesting exercise. He has a lot of those bus tours around eastern Australia and he's got a clientele would go out with him quite regularly. And he's not cheap. He stays in good hotels and ...

People pay for quality.

They pay for quality. Hates to go on a main road so he goes places no one else has ever taken a bus. So when I met them in Walcha, I said, 'Anybody got friends and relations in New England?' Deathly silence. So I presumed they didn't. By the time I finished with them and I'd spent three days with both bus loads. 'Cause he ... we went round and we picked sites in various places to go and have a look at — gardens and not only gardens. Metz Gorge was one, John Taylor's timber replanting. So it was not always the same place. And little cafes, you wouldn't believe how good they were. But you get a bit sick of strawberries and cream with the scones. We toured the Aboriginal heritage place in Armidale. We went there because ...

Oh, the Aboriginal cultural keeping **place.**

Yeah. We went there for morning tea and they had quite a lot of their jams and preserves that they made. And we said to them, 'OK, next time don't use strawberry jam, use these things and you'll sell a lot more.' That was a good way to get round. Now I've lost the track of where I was.

We were looking at the role of Garden History Society.

Ah, Garden History, yeah. Because of Garden History, I knew where to take them, of course, and where else. But with the Garden History we had been out for a day to see gardens, not always gardens but we went somewhere different each time. Certainly we'd go away for a weekend. One or two weekends a year. But it was quite a big social ... that's the thing. Fortunately we had a couple of very good organisers. It was a lot of work for them but ... 30 people you know. 30 to 40 people for a weekend, it's quite something.

At the Adelaide conference three years ago, I can remember Richard Heathcote, our current Chair, standing up and saying that Garden History Society conferences are a little like a moving house party. Some others have said that the New England Garden History group is very much like a moving house party because they enjoy one another's company and have a good time.

Yeah. That's been the secret of it because it's not only just a working bee or a meeting, it's ... Well, every time we have a meeting we go to dinner afterwards.

Yes. And enjoy one another's company.

And enjoy one another's company. I mean, there's probably a hard core in the middle of it but there's usually 20 / 25 people come to dinner every ...

And some of them come from some way out of town.

Oh, they come from Guyra and further away. The furthest one comes from Gloucester. Periodically she comes and stays. So the social part is very strong and I think that's the secret of our ...

The secret of the success.

Yep, I'm sure it is because how else the groups still work ... You know, you can drive a horse to water but it's pretty hard to make it drink.

Well, I'm sure it's something that adds to the quality of our life in the society.

Oh, I'm sure it does. It's a lesson for others. But you've got to have somebody who can handle this organisation because by the time you book hotels and you book gardens and you book buses, it's a big business.

That's right.

And Liz Chappell was brilliant. And Liz is, and Lynne.

Lynne Walker.

Stirs the pot a bit too. [laughter]

Very much like a sheepdog, isn't she? She's doing a lot of work behind the ...

Doing a lot of work behind the scenes. So they're the key at the moment. Succession is important as we were saying yesterday that we need to seriously consider what's going on.

A succession plan.

Yeah. I talk my daughter into doing a lot of it. [laughter] Just one of those sort of people. [laughter]

That sounds wonderful. It sounds wonderful for the New England group. And it sounds wonderful for the society.

Yeah, I think we'll get quite a few that way. A lot of them have kids who are finishing university now so they'll be ... they're gonna be lost. We are the ones who have nailed it before somebody else gets it.

Owen, perhaps that's a good time to finish for today.

Yeah, good.

Can I thank you very much for the time that we've had together. I've found it really very interesting and most enjoyable.

Well, it's been fascinating for me. A habit of mine took over a bit. I'm only sorry my memory is not accurate enough to bring in actual facts but I don't think that's quite so necessary in this one.

That's right.

You know where to go and get it if you want it.

Precisely.

So, as I've said to you before, it's saved me from writing a lot of things down. [laughter]

Owen, thank you very much.

Interview ends: 57.47