Australian Garden History Society

Oral History Programme 2003/2004

This interview is one of a series of interviews being conducted throughout Australia with early members of the Australian Garden History Society. The AGHS was formed in 1980 and these interviews will play a crucial part in recording the formation and early days of the Society. The AGHS is funding these interviews. The AGHS acknowledges the support of the State Library Victoria for use of interview equipment.

This interview of Tony Whitehill in Glengowrie and Margaret Sando in Linden Park was conducted by Di Wilkins, President of SA Branch of AGHS on 26 November, 2003 at Tony's home, Glengowrie, South Australia





Just to start with, if you say your name and where you are from.

Tony Whitehill, originally from the staff of the Botanic Garden. I suspect my involvement originally began with a request from the Australian Heritage Commission to do some research on historic gardens and Margaret Sando, - probably through my involvement with the National Trust with both the Nature Preservation Committee and the Early Buildings Committee.

Do these organisations still exist today?

Margaret – No, not those two Committees, they were disbanded.

Your interest in gardens started from that particular point in time Tony?

It probably was renewed with historic gardens in Australia but I think before that it was my interest in historic gardens in England having been a student over there at one stage.

Where were you a student?

I was a student at Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, London originally and I think that probably set off this great interest in gardens, because often the students would be taken to visit these places. I mean this is back in the sixties; this is a long time ago before places were open to the public very much.

This would certainly have awakened your interest?

That awakened the interest and then later on when there was an opportunity to do something for the Heritage Commission, it just seemed that my association with the Botanic Gardens and Brian Morley, the Director thought I was the obvious person to do it. Those of us who were doing the work in the late 1970's in different states used to come together once a year and have a meeting. Sometimes it was in Melbourne and sometimes it was in Adelaide, sometimes it was in Tasmania. It was at the Tasmanian one that the nucleus, the idea of forming a Garden History Society came about because we thought that other people might be interested in what we were doing.

And these were fellow people who were working in horticultural ….

Doing this research for Heritage Commission particularly Peter Watts, Phil Symonds in Tasmania, myself and Brian Morley and it was Phil Symonds, I believe who said one day look other people might be interested in what we are doing and that led to Peter Watts being the driving force in arranging that first Conference being held in Melbourne. We thought that perhaps 20 or 30 people might come and it was held, I think, at the National Trust property called 'Illawara' and it was made open to the public and the place was absolutely packed on the day and one of the speakers was Ted Fawcett, who was the President of the Garden History Society in England who came out to tell us about what they were doing.

Margaret, were you at that first meeting, that first Conference?

I am very vague about all of this! I only remember the Tasmanian Conference which was the third one in February 1982.

Tony, when you came back to SA after meeting with these people who were all doing work for the Heritage Commission, how did you go about forming the actual Society and how did the SA Branch start?

The national body started really as a result of having that Conference and it was put towards the end of the meeting that it would be worthwhile actually establishing a Garden History Society in Australia, knowing what happened in England.

There was an overwhelming feeling from the meeting, yes, we wanted to establish something about garden history in Australia and call it the Australian Garden History Society and at the end of that meeting, an interim committee was set up to see about organising the Society, a national sort of body and it would have been people like Peter Watts, Phyl Simonds and Oline Richards from Perth, myself and I can't remember all the original people, but there were a number of very core people who were involved. I think there might have been Pat Cameron; her family owned a very important sheep stud which produces the finest wool in the world and she was very active with the Society for many years and it started from that nucleus. At the time that Margaret is mentioning in the 3rd Conference where a number of us met in Tasmania, that is when I really first got to know Margaret, she and her husband Maurice both at that Conference when it was decided at that Conference that the next conference ought to be in Adelaide.

So three years and then into a Conference in Adelaide…!

At that stage we had no state branch so if there is confusion later on when you look and see that we had a conference in one year but the Minutes of the first Annual Meeting of the

Branch were '85, that is because we actually had a conference before we had a branch! That was the Conference that Margaret Sando, Thekla Reichstein, Gavin Malone, John Brine and myself as Chair more or less put that whole conference together on our own.

Did you have a good attendance at that Conference?

We did, an extraordinarily good attendance. We visited Loreto College at Marryatville where we had a series of talks and an alfresco lunch.

Is that historic garden still intact or is it a remnant?

Yes the remnant is still there.

Yes, I think it might be on the heritage list. Then the main Conference dinner and the official proceedings took place at the Grosvenor Hotel.

From that Conference Committee that group of interested people were instrumental in forming the Branch?

And for quite a while, Adelaide was one of the bigger branches of the Garden History; it was Melbourne and Tasmania and Adelaide for a long time. Sydney for years didn't have a branch nor did the West, nor did Queensland.

So once again, Adelaide was innovative, interested and leaders?

Yes, we were quite leaders as we had the backing of the Botanic Garden.

So this was over twenty years ago?

Yes.

Margaret, I can see you have a pile of Journals and Conference programs?

Tony: Margaret has an enormous collection of material.

Margaret: The next Conference that we did was the 4th Annual Conference in Adelaide was in 1983.

Tony: We had one in Melbourne, the Blue Mountains at Mt Victoria and then Tasmania (Hobart). In Adelaide, we had the registration at the Grosvenor Hotel and at the Botanic Gardens, we had a picnic lunch at the Gardens and we had a dinner at the Grosvenor and Professor William Stearn was the keynote speaker from England and then the next day we went to Raywood, Marbury School, Beechwood, Forest Lodge followed with the AGM at the Grosvenor Hotel where we had a series of talks Pamela Polglase, Australia Beautiful Great Gardens; Nora Killop, Frederick Howlett, the First Gardener in Parkville; John Adams, Auckland New Zealand History of Old Government House garden; Dr Judith McLeod, Smaller colonial gardens at Windsor and Richmond. The next day we went to Loreto College where Thekla Reichstein spoke to us about the changing role of the Adelaide Botanic Gardens through the influence of society, economics and politics from 1855 to the 1970's. Trevor Nottle spoke on old roses in Australian gardens, Anthony Mugg presented a paper by John Patrick, then we had a summary from Professor William Stearn. We looked at Loreto gardens then we went to Medindie to the Michell's garden and there we finished.

That was 1980?

1983 November. It just shows you – you keep these things and here are the Conference delegates. Here is Stroma with her cousin, David Buttrose, Dr Sophie Ducker.

Have you both been to most of the Conferences since that day 1980?

Margaret: No

Tony: No I think both of us have had a break of some stage.

But your interest is still keen and you're obviously still passionate about the heritage of gardens?

Margaret: Yes

Tony: While we are talking about all these, this marvellous collection that Margaret has, there is also a collection in the Botanic Gardens Library just for the records. All my collection of material I gave to the Botanic Garden Library. Most of the Conference brochures proceedings are in the Botanic Gardens Library and the Botanic Garden library has got the records from the beginning of the Society.

Margaret: Here is the next Conference we did, 13th Anuual Conference in October 1992 and the Committee was Tony Whitehill, Thekla Reichstein, Trevor Nottle, Francis Walling, Audrey Abbie, Barry Long, Anne McCutcheon, Margaret Sando assisted by Nicky Downer, Betty Lewis and Richard Nolan. And we went to Beechwood, Belair Maze, Carrick Hill, Gamble Cottage, Glenalta, Government House, Grove Hill, Hill River Station, Hughes Park, Mt George, Panmure, St Peters College Hackney; that is were we the Conference was based. In the Memorial Hall at St Peters College and we had quite a few people exhibiting things I see: Aptos Cruz Gallery, Classic Gardens, The Flower Garden, Iron Edge Design.

Tony:

There were a whole lot of things on display and book stalls, Antique Print Gallery was there and we had a huge garden display on the stage at Memorial Hall

Margaret:

You had better tell your story of the slides!

Tony:

Something went wrong with it, it was programmed for the wrong number of slides for the first speaker. The slides went out the top of the carousel of the projector, over the balcony and onto the floor below!

Every speaker's nightmare the technology didn't work & thought what do I do!

Tony:

I was frozen. The school promised us a technician would be on duty if anything went wrong, but the person wasn't on duty.

Couldn't be contacted, mobile phones weren't around then.

Tony:

Dame Elizabeth Murdoch was so upset but said nothing and remained completely composed.

Margaret:

At that Conference we had them all staying at one Motel on South Terrace which made it picking up for buses & things so much easier.

Tony:

I think it was in those days the Travelodge. We did a deal with them and beat them down in price. It made it so easy when everyone stayed at the one place; if they didn't stay there they had to get there to be picked up by the bus.

Tony:

I think we have seen a lot of trouble in the first Tasmanian conference where people got very confused about where they were staying & which buses they were on. Some people went and visited the same gardens in the half day that they had seen in the morning because they got on the wrong buses.

Margaret:

The Adelaide Travelodge South Terrace it was.

And the next Conference Margaret?

Was the 20th Conference at Mount Gambier, November 1999. The organising Committee was Nicky Downer, Merilyn Kuchel, Miriam Hansman, Pam Reid, Margaret Sando, Helena Rungey, Richard Nolan.

I thought that was a very good regional conference.

Margaret:

Tony did help a lot. We did a lot of packaging bags, things and what not.

Tony:

I think you & I went down the day before with a car loaded full of things.

Tony:

Then you might remember I chaired one of the sessions Timothy Hubbard and he didn't want to stop talking!

Verbose!

Nicky Downer kept saying stop him, stop him! It was so difficult.

That is an amazing collection of Conference brochures and is just important to keep those things because…

Tony:

That is why I put mine in the Botanic Gardens Library because I thought they are there for anybody to get access to them sometime in the future. If I die someone could pick them all up & put them all in the bin.

Margaret:

I can't remember but at some stage I looked up an old diary and I went to Melbourne must have been a state representative I think; would that be right? Yes I went in 1983 and 1984 but I can't remember much about it. That is when I went I looked up my old diaries.

Tony:

We rather have vivid memories of the 3rd Conference in Tasmania, when Margaret was put on the Committee and it was decided we were having a Conference in Adelaide. The weather was so hot, we had the Annual General Meeting out on the lawns of Launceston. A very old heritage place called The Grange. It was so hot – I don't remember what year it was but it was in February and we were in the middle of some sort of heat wave and Tasmania being what it was then, it was almost impossible to get a cold drink or stay anywhere where it was air-conditioned. I stayed in a galvanised iron shed and shared a bedroom in February with Gavin Malone who was the Admin Office at the Botanic Gardens at the time.

Margaret:

We were lucky – we got the motel!

This is what the original Journals were like; they were put out by Tim North before we went into this other sort of thing. But I have the Annual Reports there from way back.

Jackie did say that the Journals are still available, one can still go back and buy back copies. I don't know how far back.

Tony:

I handed mine over, anything that I didn't need to be made up at the Botanic Garden, I sent to Jackie. They didn't have a complete set themselves at that stage.

But I think that is important that all of this information is kept in a central spot so that researchers and other historians down the ….

Tony: Accessible…..

Exactly….

Tony:

It was at that second Conference wasn't it, that we had Barbara Hardy declare open the Belair Maze after our restoration and put the stone in the ground with the plaque on it & then we hoped at that stage to hand it over. Somehow or other we couldn't get rid of it quite; we are still a bit stuck with it. We spent a lot of money cleaning it up for the Conference; we had heritage grants and things and had it all absolutely immaculate for the Conference, absolutely weed free and all the hedges were trimmed and it looked absolutely immaculate.

And in your opinion Tony, do you think it is worthwhile pursuing the restoration of the Maze?

I think it probably is because as far as I am aware, it is still regarded as the oldest hedge

maze in Australia. That is its claim to fame. It would be nice to hand it over to the Friends of National Parks or to somebody.

But our small band, sure we are interested but to actually upkeep the Maze with time and money is beyond our capability.

Tony:

It is and I must truthfully admit that after I ceased being President, I stopped going up there and clipping it all. I used to clip it for years; clip the sides and the top and so on by hand clippers and eventually I thought I am not doing this anymore. David Hansman is now doing the work up there.

I made a note to actually try and get up there this weekend to have a look and report back to the Committee.

Tony:

I think somebody has been dealing with the watering system too, it was burnt in one of the bushfires – no it was burnt out when the Belair Railway Station was set on fire recently because I had done some deal with state transport over it and we got the water supply for nothing; linked up to their water meters.

I have to pursue that just to find out what is the current situation with the Belair Railway Station; is that being rebuilt and if so, it had our transformer and irrigation controller in there.

Tony:

I spoke to someone the other day who is a Friend of the National Park or involved in it and he rather intimated to me that the watering system was going to be reinstated. I think his name was Ron Tamblyn and they live quite nearby in Laffers Road and they are very keen on the Park and what is in it.

Break:

Now Tony I was going to ask you and Margaret, what are some of the highlights of the twenty years that the society has been operating in SA? What are some of the important things that you have done or favourite gardens etc? What springs to mind?

Tony:

Perhaps some of the three most important things are probably the National Conferences that we have held in Adelaide and I suppose the opportunity for people to visit gardens long before the Open Garden Scheme really came on steam and perhaps that has been a slight disadvantage to the Society now that there are other ways of accessing these gardens but I think there is still a lot that we can perhaps can do through contacts who would not normally be opening to the public and I suppose we have had the excitement of doing some work on the Belair Maze being the oldest hedge maze in Australia. We have done some restoration work on the garden at Bishopscourt. Interestingly enough other branches have followed us and Tasmania has been doing work on the Bishops Palace or House in Hobart and Melbourne are also working on the Anglican Archbishops house there.

What did we actually do at Bishopscourt?

Tony:

What we did was an enormous clean up of the garden when Ian George first came, the garden had just been left for six months and nothing done and the predecessors had done very little and we did an enormous clean up of the garden with working bees and rationalisation and I think we worked there on and off probably for about twelve months in the garden. And culminated the project with a Concert at Bishopscourt where we raised over a thousand dollars for the restoration of the garden.

And funnily enough this Saturday is Open Garden Day at Bishopscourt and I am helping on the stall!

Tony:

We told them at the time, if you do these things that maybe later on you could get into the Open Garden Scheme and get some grants from that but you will need to open the garden to the public. Margaret will tell you later on that she was involved in a sundial at Bishopscourt and Ian George is still a member to this day. Everytime I see Ian he says "when are those Garden History people coming to work in the garden again?!" I say we have moved onto the Cedars now. The interesting thing was that most of the people in the Garden History Society who came and worked were non-anglicans including people like even Audrey Abbie, who was Unitarian who was I think there at every working bee we had at Bishopscourt.

Margaret, what about ……

Margaret:

I think Forest Lodge always stands out to me as being one of the prime gardens but it has been interesting to see how the interests, especially at the National Conferences have widened and things that Garden History is looking at now and not just old historic gardens I think that Miriam Hansman and I, and I certainly feel I pulled more weeds at Bishopscourt than I have ever pulled in my garden in my lifetime! I remember sitting there one time having a cuppa and saying to Ian George that that blank wall on Ward Street needs a sundial and that's more or less what started the thing of the sundial at Bishopscourt.

And what have been some of your favourite gardens? What a memorable gardens to you Tony?

Tony:

State wise I still think that Forest Lodge is probably the top of the list, particularly having known it probably since the late 1950's and it has been rather sort of sad to see gradually becoming tired and going downhill but its great strength is that the original design is still there and the fact that until recently, it had been in the same family (the Bagots) for all its life. I think it had some particular atmosphere and I think anybody who has visited Italy, as Margaret will also endorse, you get some of that feeling of the great cypress trees and the shade and the coolness and the relief from the heat and the sun and you could well understand why people went up to the hills in the early days like they did in places like India, where they went up to Simla in the hills, Melbourne Mt Macedon, Sydney, Blue Mountains, Adelaide, little Mt Lofty but it was still part of that sort of way of living to get away from the summer heat until I suppose almost all their lives, the Bagots used to go to the hills for the summer.

I suppose I had a particular interest in Beechwood because it was not long after I had been involved in putting it on the heritage list, that the Botanic Gardens purchased the garden and Marbury School and the house and that was probably the first in Australia of a government and a non-government organisation running a property together. That was very successful but I am not quite sure where it all stands now as the whole property has been sold.

There was one other country garden that was of a bit of interest I think some people have let it go to the wall now and that was the Miner's Cottage at Moonta. It was a Mrs Ferguson who had restored this miner's garden from nothing and who worked in the garden until well into her eighties. Trevor Nottle knows the garden very well. It is a National Trust property and she set about creating a garden from what she remembered in her childhood of miner's cottage gardens. It is not what it was nowadays. It was a very important move to try and restore something or put back something. It might have been one of the first examples, if not the first example in SA, of someone trying to recreate a garden. Maybe my other soft spot goes to the Gamble Cottage garden that Barry Long, one of our members and on the Committee for many many years, was rather instrumental in

saving after the Mitcham Council started to carve up the garden. He stopped them in the process.

Where abouts is Gamble Cottage?

It is at Blackwood. Barry Long was one of those people from the Garden History Society who was instrumental in saving it. He was also the one who was instrumental in the Maze.

Barry lives up at Blackwood but he was active for many years in the local branch.

I just think it is wonderful that so many active members are still on the membership list today and I as a new member find that really important that there is a continuum of history and knowledge that is being….

Tony:

There were some very loyal people her right from the beginning who have stuck with it. Bob and Betty Lewis would be such examples, they were right there from the beginning, so much enthusiasm over the years. Even when we were waning a bit, they were always there doing things.

But actually physical things too, not only just attending meetings and organising but actually physically involved in very hands on, when in those days there wasn't the support services around or it was all what you did physically that – there wasn't a lot of money back then. No, not as much as there is today in grants from Government. There is a lot but there is more help now.

Tony:

Perhaps it might be worth registering the fact that is was the second Conference where Thekla brokered an agreement with the National Management Committee that on the optional day, the states could retain the funds and I think we were the first to do it and that what's helping to keep us going now.

What foresight she showed!

Then as you know we put all our funds over the years into the ANZ V2 plus account and always thinking in these formative years, that might well be enough to help keep the Branch going.

It is certainly proving the fact that it is good to have a backup investment and I still think that every little bits that we can raise from our catering the other day at Rosamund Heritage's garden at Falkirk Manor, Stirling just helps the kitty.

Tony:

See Adelaide has always been very different as you would know Di from the other states, where everything seems to be free in Adelaide – you go to lectures they are free, they expect the supper to be free whereas in Melbourne, I think almost from the beginning of the Garden History Society charged people to go to meetings or go to supper, there was always some sort of charge. Whereas I suppose for years we had the use of the lecture room at the Botanic Gardens, certainly all the time I was there, all the time Brian Morley was Director, that was always free to the Garden History Society, so that was the Gardens way of helping and contributing. For a long time the Botanic Gardens supported the typing and mailing out of all the Newsletters. So the Society didn't have that cost.

I actually have some reservation about charging people to come to meetings, I think it should be free and we just have a nominal charge that helps the coffers and allay any costs that we might have and I like the idea that people bring a plate; I know it is old fashioned but still if you converse over food and a drink it still help the conversation flow and people then don't disappear after a meeting.

Tony:

I think it is terribly important to have some sort of opportunity for fellowship and talk and this often used to be one of the big things against the

Friends of the Botanic Gardens that they didn't do that and people got up at the meeting and went, so they didn't get to know anybody or talk to anybody.

I think it is really heartening to know that we can now as a Branch use the Friends of the Botanic Garden meeting room.

Cas Middlemis made that first contact and I have kept it up and when I have been asked how much have we previously been charged, I said absolutely nothing because we are a non-profit organisation and we are a garden society etc, so now we use the room for free - we have a synergy.

Tony:

I think it is the first time for a long time we haven't had members of the Botanic Gardens staff belonging to the Society, this is a little bit of a loss of a link there.

Margaret what was some of your favourite spots, gardens in SA that you love?

Margaret:

Forest Lodge always stands out.

Any other memorable moments over these past twenty years?

Margaret:

Some lovely gardens though.

Any personalities that spring to mind that we should ..?

Margaret:

Sophie Ducker comes to mind.

Tony:

Dr Sophie Ducker has been there almost from the beginning of the Society and later her presence was felt at every Conference.

I can't put a face to a name actually.

Margaret:

Perhaps I should tell you about the Conference in Fremantle when 3 o'clock in the morning the fire alarm went off and we all had to leave the hotel and we grabbed what we could and we went out to the street and we were in various things but nobody had shoes and we had to walk the whole perimeter of the hotel to get back into the front door. That was the only door that would operate at that time in the morning and Sophie Ducker was said to have said "will somebody pack for me?"

Margaret Darling had her dressing gown, I had a jumper and pants but no shoes, there we were plodding around Fremantle at 3 o'clock in the morning!

That is one adventure that has never been forgotten!

Thank you both for talking to me this evening.

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