

MOUNT ELRINGTON GARDEN



MOUNT ELRINGTON GARDEN

near Braidwood, New South Wales

Edited by
Astrida Uptis

Australian Garden History Society
ACT, Monaro and Riverina Group

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Preface and Acknowledgments

Each home and garden has a personal history which evokes a range of memories and emotions for the families who live there or once lived there. This booklet describes what is known of the garden's history at 'Mount Elrington', first settled by Major William Sandys Elrington in the late 1820s and since the 1860s has been part of the O'Brien family. The property is located some 20 kilometres south-west of Braidwood in southern New South Wales.

For first time visitors to 'Mount Elrington', it is a very special place which evokes a strong sense of history with its aging homestead surrounded by its old world garden, perfectly positioned on a rocky knoll overlooking the distant Shoalhaven River. In Stuart Read's words, " 'Mount Elrington' has the untrammelled air of a much-loved family home - a working place - yet with a peace and a repose all its own. It is increasingly rare to find an example of an early pastoral homestead garden with so much of its original structure intact - the sheltering trees, fringing hedges, paths, beds and rock work."

The Australian Garden History Society is indebted to the owners of 'Mount Elrington', Debbie and Terry O'Brien, for their enthusiasm and hard work in rejuvenating the old homestead garden, and for inviting members to visit and survey the house and garden. As with most things in life, personal contacts in both town and country often make things happen, and so it was with the recording of this garden. The Society again thanks Mrs Olive Royds of 'Durham Hall' for making the initial contacts, and seeing the potential of Mount Elrington as a place worthy of recording. Thank you also to all the booklet's contributors especially Mrs Gwen Wilson (nee O'Brien) for her personal account of the garden. Also the voluntary time of Society members in measuring the garden, drawing up the plan and identifying the plants is gratefully acknowledged.

As Debbie O'Brien so aptly sums up, "Today, as another generation of children play happily, the 'Mount Elrington' garden reflects the contributions of all its residents, from the Major to the present day. It is a lasting reminder of our past and hopefully will continue to grow for generations to come."

Astrida Upitis
Editor

September 1996



*Aerial view of 'Mount Elrington', 1989.
Photo courtesy of the O'Briens.*

History of the Garden

Major William Sandys Elrington (aged 45) arrived in Australia in March 1827 on the ship Elizabeth with his 18 year old son Richard and his housekeeper, Mary Smith (aged 75). The Major had resigned his army commission in 1824 after service in the West Indies and Spain.

On the 14 May 1827 the Major received from the Crown a grant of 2560 acres on the Upper Shoalhaven River which he named 'Mt Elrington'. He took possession of the Mount on 26 July 1827. In June 1839 he received a further grant of 2560 acres and in 1840 purchased 2865 acres from Mary Smith which had been granted to her by the Crown the year before. In his application for the second grant in 1839 it is shown that he had on 'Mt Elrington':

4000 sheep	4000 pounds
1100 cattle	6928
51 horses	1400
wool	500
wheat	200
2560 acres at 5' per acre	800
Total	13 868
Improvements made	2725.10.10

Also at 'Mt Elrington' were two habitable houses, a kitchen, wash house, barn, sheep shed, store, milking shed, pigsty and dairy. Thirty pounds had been spent on plantings in the garden.

The Major bought out a lot of trees and shrubs; elm, ash, Belgium walnut, oak, pine, loquat, bay and laurel box for the hedges. Around the house garden he planted a mixture of hawthorn and privet hedge and the box hedge which lines either side of the path towards the front door. All of these hedges exist today. The Major also planted the lighter mauve lilacs, the darker purple ones being added much later, and a beautiful magnolia which still flowers magnificently to this day.

Having to be self-sufficient, the Major put in an orchard containing apples, pears and most stone fruits (plums, apricots etc). The present owners still pick and preserve the apples, pears, and plums while the apricot tree gave way to old age only a few short years ago. In a section known as the lower orchard (towards the river flats), the Major established a berry garden which included raspberries and gooseberries. The berry garden is said to have gone into disrepair between 1910 and the 1920s.

"With the aid of numerous convict servants assigned to him the Major turned the wilderness into a picture of English rural beauty. He planted hedges of hawthorn and elderberry, constructed long winding avenues of willows, and planted oaks, walnuts, elms and poplars around the house, laid down lawns and filled his orchard with pears, apples, plums and cherry trees, which old and moss-grown, bear fruit to this day" (excerpt from the Sunday Times December 16, 1923 in an article about Major Elrington).

The Major was the earliest Justice of the Peace in the Braidwood district and in 1828 was appointed a magistrate, one of only two resident in the region until 1836.

It seems the original building was a small slab cottage on the Braidwood side of Mount Creek. The present house on the other side of the creek is built of rendered rubblestone



*Layout of the front garden, circa 1910. Note the low box hedges leading to the front gate.
Photo courtesy R. Butt.*

with a small weatherboard section on one side., At the time of the 1841 census, a timber homestead was recorded at 'Mt Elrington'; it is likely that the present stone house was built in the early 1850s. According to the 1841 census there was a total of 43 males (15 of them assigned) and 16 females living at 'Mt Elrington'. To securely house these assigned servants (and other convicts brought over from Bendoura nightly), a stone prison was erected adjoining the back of the house and forming a wing. This was later used as a butcher shop and cool room.

Another wing, the original kitchen, which contained big ovens and store rooms was demolished in 1923 after a tree fell on it and the dining room, kitchen and pantry were rebuilt on the same site by cement blocks made on the property. Mrs Gwen Wilson (nee O'Brien) can recall taking away the huge rocks of the original kitchen by dragging forked trees (fastened around the rocks) behind horses. These massive stones can still be seen behind the blacksmith's shop where they were dumped. Beyond these wings was an old stable and coach house which no longer exist. On the edge of a steep drop into Mount Creek is a small rendered stone building (marked 'shed' on the garden plan) that used to house a double-seated lavatory and is screened by a tangle of ivy. The original timber wash house, carpenter's shop and blacksmith's shop (the larger 'shed' on the plan) are all now draped in an extraordinary thicket of ivy.

In 1845 the Major sold the land to Charles Nicholson who renamed the property 'The Stock'. The Major then returned to England where he died at Southsea in 1860 aged 80 years.

In 1855 James O'Brien arrived from Ireland to the Braidwood goldfields and bought 'The Stock' at auction in 1866. He renamed the property 'Mt Elrington'. James' first



*Bess O'Brien on the front
verandah, circa 1942.
Photo courtesy of the
O'Briens.*

wife, Margaret, had died in 1860 leaving him with an infant daughter to care for. In 1863 he married Mary McManus and they subsequently had two daughters and five sons.

James built a water race from the Mount Creek through the outer backyard and round the side of the hills to supply water to the house and irrigate the plain paddocks. On the site where the shearing shed now stands, James built a water-wheel but what he used it for is unclear. He also planted the many 'basket' willows along the river. James passed away in 1907.

James and Mary's son, Michael Richard O'Brien, was the next resident of 'Mt Elrington', and in 1909 married Helena Elizabeth Hogg (Bess). Bess was an avid gardener and with the assistance of a maid to help with household chores was able to spend many hours in the garden. The basic design of her garden can still be seen today. Bess added lots of garden beds and footpaths. She planted moss roses, japonica, the darker lilacs and mock orange as well as assorted flowers and bulbs. Her dream of a shrubbery was not realised when her order of small cypress was planted and grew into what today are the 80 foot pine trees which stand on the southern side of the house. The Virginia creeper which rambles over the old 'gaol' was also added by her. Michael built the tank stand and put in the hydraulic pump.

Michael (Mick) and Bess had five children; Michael John (Jack), Gwendoline, Constance, Margaret and Helen. In later years Mick and Bess moved into Braidwood where she once again created a lovely garden at 'Coobija'.

Michael John (Jack) moved to 'Mount Elrington' with his wife Terese Gerard Bourke (Bonnie) and their three daughters Patricia, Maree and Jacqueline. Their other two children Rosheen and Terrance (Terry) being born in 1955 and 1957 respectively. In the courtyard against the 'gaol', Bonnie planted a beautiful rose with almost salmon pink blooms which last from spring to early autumn - its wonderful fragrance filling the air. With hard times and the farm as first priority, the garden fell into disrepair and the

pathways became overgrown with ever encroaching weeds. Outside the kitchen window, on the edge of the drop overlooking the creek, Jack built a small stone creche, in which stood a statue of the holy mother, which adds a lovely peaceful feel to this part of the garden.

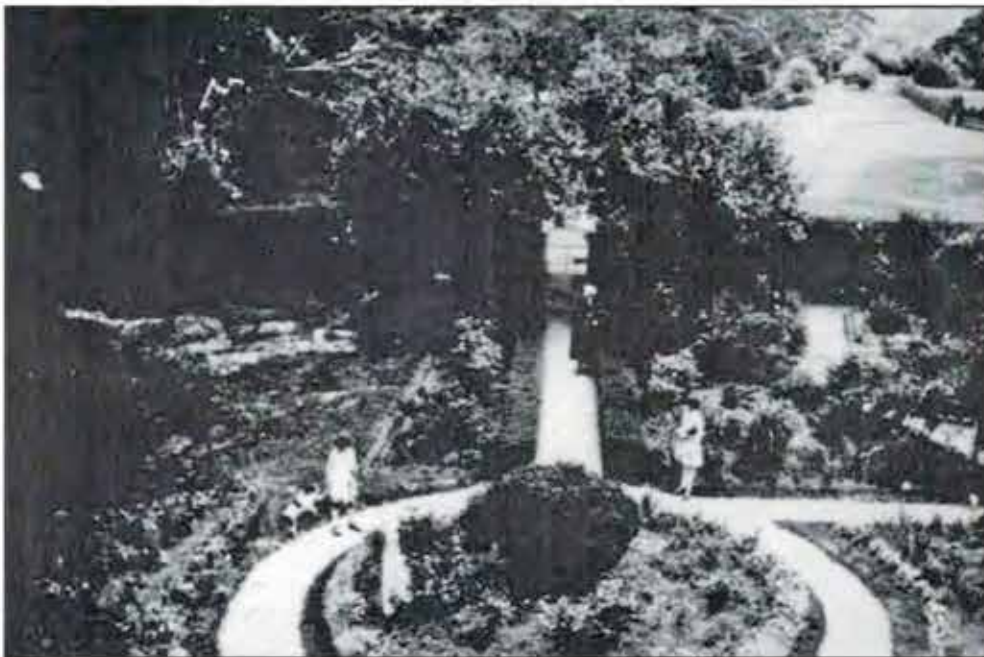
Terry O'Brien, the present owner, married Debbie Mondy in 1981 and they have three children, James (12years old), Nicola (11) and Michelle (9). Terry and Debbie have done much work re-establishing the gravel paths and garden beds and keeping the hedges to a manageable size.

Today, as another generation of children play happily, the 'Mount Elrington' garden reflects the contributions of all its residents, from the Major to the present day. It is a lasting reminder of our past and hopefully will continue to grow for generations to come.

Our thanks especially to Mrs Gwen Wilson (nee O'Brien) and also to Mrs Helen Sygrave (nee O'Brien) for their memories and contributions.

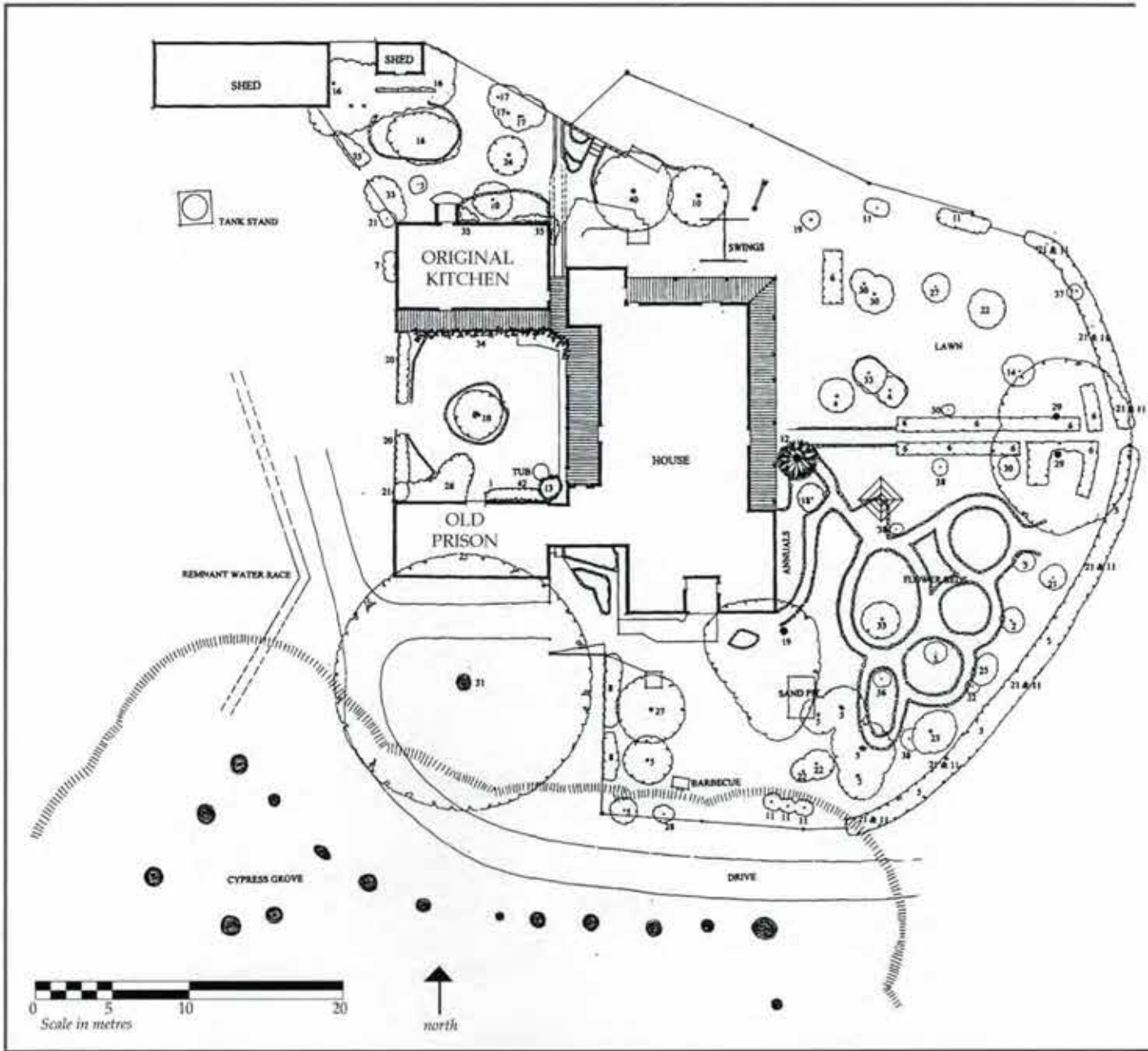
Terry and Debbie O'Brien

Original historical information about Major Elrington supplied by Annette McLean.



*The front garden showing circular path design, circa 1924.
Photo courtesy of the O'Briens.*

Garden Plan



Mount Elrington Garden
near Braidwood NSW

Original garden survey
commenced 1994
Plan drawing completed 1996
Drawn Richard J Ratcliffe

Plant List

1	<i>Abutilon megapotamicum</i> 'Variegatum'	Variegated Chinese Lantern
2	<i>Acer palmatum</i>	Japanese Maple
3	<i>Aucuba japonica</i>	Japanese Gold Dust Plant
4	<i>Berberis thunbergii atropurpurea</i>	Purple leaf Barberry
5	<i>Berberis vulgaris</i>	Common Barberry
6	<i>Buxus sempervirens</i>	English Box
7	<i>Campsis grandiflora</i>	Chinese Trumpet Creeper
8	<i>Chaenomeles speciosa</i>	Flowering Quince
9	<i>Cotoneaster lacteus</i>	Cotoneaster
10	<i>Cotoneaster pannosus</i>	Cotoneaster
11	<i>Crataegus monogyna</i>	Hawthorn
12	<i>Cupressus sempervirens</i> 'Stricta'	Roman Cypress
13	<i>Dietes bicolor</i>	African Iris
14	<i>Escallonia rubra</i> var. <i>macrantha</i>	Escallonia
15	<i>Euonymus europeus</i>	Spindle Bush
16	<i>Hedera helix</i>	Ivy
17	<i>Ilex aquifolium</i>	Holly
18	<i>Jasminum mesnyi</i>	Primrose Jasmine
19	<i>Juglans regia</i>	Walnut
20	<i>Ligustrum ovalifolium</i> 'Aureum'	Golden Privet
21	<i>Ligustrum vulgare</i>	Primprint or Prim (Old English)
22	<i>Lonicera fragrantissima</i>	Shrub Honeysuckle
23	<i>Magnolia x soulangeana</i>	Soulangé Magnolia
24	<i>Morus nigra</i>	Mulberry
25	<i>Nandina domestica</i>	Sacred Bamboo
26	<i>Parthenocissus tricuspidata</i>	Japanese or Boston Ivy
27	<i>Philadelphus coronarius</i>	Mock Orange
28	<i>Poncirus trifoliata</i>	Trifoliolate Orange
29	<i>Prunus laurocerasus</i>	Cherry Laurel
30	<i>Pyracantha fortuneana</i>	Firethorn
31	<i>Quercus robur</i>	English Oak
32	<i>Rosa</i> cv 'Bloomfield Abundance'	Rose "Bloomfield Abundance"
33	<i>Syringa vulgaris</i>	Lilac
34	<i>Vitis labrusca</i> 'Isabella'	Fox Grape
35	<i>Wisteria sinensis</i>	Chinese Wisteria
36	Unidentified plant	
37	<i>Rosa indica major</i> (stock plant grafted with unknown rose)	
38	<i>Rosa indica major</i> (perhaps stock with grafted variety deceased)	
39	<i>Cytisus</i> sp.	Broom
40	<i>Malus floribunda</i>	Crab Apple
41	<i>Cupressus macrocarpa</i>	Monterey Cypress
42	Old climbing Rose	

Living Memories from Mrs Gwen Wilson (nee O'Brien)

'As the eldest daughter of Michael O'Brien, I have memories of Mt Elrington, that go back a long way. I am 84 [years old]...

...The original kitchen and stone rooms were demolished by my father in 1923 and a kitchen and dining room were built. The original dining room was in the main building. The cement blocks were made on the premises. In my memory I can still see the wooden forms they used.

The old timber barn they refer to was, and still is I think, the laundry, carpenter's shop and blacksmith's forge. They may [not] still be used.

My grandfather built the water race from the Mount Creek through the outer backyard and round the side of the hills. The idea to supply water to the house and to irrigate the plain paddock etc. My father built the tank stand and put in the pump. There was a water wheel from my grandfather's time which now is under the shearing shed.

In the old prison I remember the 'stalls' where the convicts were chained at night. My father removed them and cemented them over the whole floor. We used the lower floor for a butcher shop, dairy and cool room. The loft was full of things from Bellevue [across the river]. One of the Clark daughters married a man named McCarron. Their daughter Maggie and sons worked for my father at various times and I went to Ballaba school with some of their children when I first started school. They lived just across the river, one family in the old Clark home.

Mary Smith is buried in what is called the lower orchard. All remains of the picket fence that was built around the grave were washed away by floods when I was a girl. I think I could still closely remember where it is. Also at the entrance to the lower orchard was a derelict berry garden.

Lots of things that I now remember are now gone but I still have some old photos which are of general interest.

Major Elrington brought out a lot of trees and plants etc. Elm, ash walnut, oak, pine, loquat, bay, laurel box for hedges, also hawthorn from which he planted lots of hedges. Apple, pear and most stone fruits. Also willows. My grandfather planted 'basket' willows along the banks of the river. I remember moss roses, japonica, lilac, and mock orange. My mother was a keen gardener and added lots of plants and garden beds."

Letter from Mrs Gwen Wilson (nee O'Brien) 1995

Editor's note. Accompanying the letter was a hand-drawn plan of the house and garden as Mrs Wilson remembered it from her childhood days. This has been reproduced at reduced scale on the inside back cover.

(Excerpt from the Sunday Times 16 December 1923)

Solid Old Home.

BUILT in true Colonial style, with very wide verandahs running right round and a wide passage through, the house as only needed new roofing and modern ceilings to make it one of the most comfortable residences in the district to-day. The order, floors, cupboards, mantels and window frames are quite perfect and window frames are quite perfect after the lapse of a century.

With the aid of numerous convict servants assigned to him the Major turned the wilderness into a picture of old English rural beauty. He planted hedges of hawthorn and elderberry, constructed long, winding avenues of willows, and planted oaks, walnuts, elms and poplars around the house, laid down lawns and filled his orchard with pears, apples, plums and cherry trees, which, old and moss-grown, bear fruit to this day.

Famous Poplar Tree.

A HUGE poplar tree, overgrown with ivy, stands close to this house, and is still known as the Major's tree, as he planted it himself about a hundred years ago. The willow trees grew from slips taken from Napoleon's grave at St. Helena.

PERSONALLY, the Major was a man of striking individuality, and numerous legends are rife in the district concerning him. Many old residents still recall him as a tall, red-haired, blue-eyed, soldierly man, with a sabre-cut across his forehead. This wound was received in the Peninsular War, where, as leader of a regiment in action, he distinguished himself by his bravery. In the (block of battle, all his superior officers were cut down and he led his troops to victory alone.

Historically Significant Plants

One very pleasing aspect of listing the plants in this garden, was that they could be positioned accurately on to the scaled garden plan expertly drawn up by Dick Ratcliffe and his willing band of field assistants from the Australian Garden History Society. Also the owners, the O'Briens, had consulted the Society before renovating the garden, and through contact with relatives and research into previous owners' records, were able to supply information and old photographs about the garden many decades ago. In addition, Myra and I had the pleasant company of Olive Royds for the day, as well as having her as a rose consultant.

We found at least two plants that were very interesting and deserve further comment, as well as a couple of garden placements that enable me to make some historical assumptions.

The first of these is the containing hedge around the house garden, which is unusual in that it consists of a double line of two different species. The two hedge plants are hawthorn, *Crataegus monogyna* (number 11*) and old English privet or primprint, *Ligustrum vulgare* (number 21). There is a third occasional species, common barberry, *Berberis vulgaris* (number 5) which, with only three plants, occurs at three regular spacings along the south-eastern side of the hedge.

I consider this pure chance, as the supposed parent bushes are only located in the southern sector. It would appear that if the original hedge were privet, that by itself in winter, when this privet would lose all its leaves, it would not have been enough to keep sheep out of the garden, so the hawthorn was added, either originally or later. Some further evidence to support the hypothesis, is the occurrence in the north-eastern sector of the hedge of a grafted rose (number 37) which with its thorns was used to plug



*Ivy used as screen as per Chinese custom.
Photo J. Webb.*

The huge oak tree near
the old prison, covered by
Virginia creeper.
Photo R.Ratcliffe.



a gap. The three barberry plants may have been used as 'gap stoppers' but unlike the rose they could have also germinated from seed carried by birds.

There is an outer hedge to the south not shown completely on the plan. This row of Monterey cypresses, *Cupressus macrocarpa* (number 41), now mature trees, were not part of the first plantings, but were ordered from a nursery as hedge plants meant to match the privet hedge. They now serve as a very effective windbreak and division from the old orchard up the slope.

The next landscape feature is the ivy, *Hedera helix* (number 16). The original planting is said to have been made by Major Elrington alongside a timber building (part of the old wash house, carpenter's shop and blacksmith's shop), now collapsed under the weight of the ivy. From the original plant we can trace a number of large diameter trunks leading out to an adjacent stone structure, originally the toilet. Any supporting frame has long since gone.

When I first saw this plant feature over a year before in 1994, it did not register that here potentially was a prime example of a Chinese landscape technique; a purposeful plant screen where ivy had been skilfully interwoven to hide the toilet entrance. However, during my visit to the garden this time in November 1995, only one month after I had been to China as a leader of a classical Chinese gardens tour, I could recognise a strong similarity in design. I thought, but how do we know? So the next question was to ask the O'Briens if any Chinese gardeners had worked at 'Mount Elrington' in the last century. 'Yes there were, we know for sure', was the positive response. Debbie O'Brien also informed us that Chinese gardeners had vegetable gardens on the river flats to the east of the house garden.

The next plant of interest is the common barberry, *Berberis vulgaris*. This plant is quite rare in New South Wales; I have only seen it at Braidwood. At or about the end of the last century, this plant was found to be an alternative host to wheat rust. At the time,

William Farrer and others were working on producing a resistant wheat strain, so by proclamation, this barberry was subjected to eradication, and prohibited to be imported or sold. I believe this may still apply today. Braidwood in the early days did produce wheat, but later in the century with drier areas to the west producing wheat more efficiently, Braidwood has now stopped growing wheat. Without wheat crops to be infected with wheat rust, perhaps the removal of this barberry was not pursued as actively as was required. This plant is clearly one of the early plants imported from England in 1827 by Major Elrington.

The other plant of interest is the old English privet, *Ligustrum vulgare*, which also was one of the original plantings. In Elizabethan times it went under the common name of primprint or prim and was used as hedging, however it lost all of its leaves in the winter and was soon replaced by the oval-leaved privet, *Ligustrum ovalifolium*, introduced from China in the 1840s, which was semi-evergreen. This latter plant has become a bad bushland weed, spread by birds into bushland in Australia. I had a quick look at the bushland surrounding 'Mount Elrington' for any plants of the closely related *Ligustrum vulgare* but none were evident. Its black berries which last through the winter are not favoured by birds, probably as they are reputed to be poisonous.

One garden tree that is very prominent is the magnificent specimen of English oak, *Quercus robur* (number 31). It is one of two originally planted; the other fell in a storm and demolished the original kitchen.

Two plants await positive identification; one is the shrub marked number 36 on the garden plan, as flowers or seed are required for this; and the other is the broom, *Cytisus* at number 39 whose flowers are also needed to determine the species. I am looking forward to returning again to this fascinating old garden to complete the task.

Jim and Myra Webb
January 1996

* Numbers refer to location on the garden survey plan.



*Members of the Australian Garden History Society surveying the garden.
Photo R. Ratcliffe.*

The Garden Today - a Visitor's Impressions

'Mount Elrington' is approached at some length along a wide valley south-west of Braidwood. The access road swings off, crosses the Shoalhaven River by a wide flat weir and winds up onto the river terraces. The road passes along broken avenues of hawthorns, elms, and pines past other farm buildings, through paddocks scattered with pendant-branched grandfather hawthorns - bare in winter, but no doubt heavy with creamy flowers in spring, ferny leaves in summer and scarlet haws in autumn.

Through the property gate a small local creek is crossed, and the road winds around and up in an s-shape, opening the view from the gully with its enclosing gums and willows to a raised knoll where the house sits and the hills lie behind.

Perhaps located on an old river terrace cut into sharply by the creek, the homestead is sheltered to the south by a row of tall Monterey cypresses ('they were meant to be a maze but the wrong species was chosen, and they got away'), a mighty oak and a row of elms. Behind are low hills, still mostly bush clad and the aspect is north-east - a charmed spot for a garden in an otherwise seemingly exposed landscape.

The garden is enclosed on top of this knoll by a curving hedge - no doubt once to keep out stock - of hawthorns and a now-rare privet species, primprint, bare in winter. Two large cherry laurel trees frame the front gate and with the cypresses and the hedge, they are first to greet the approaching eye.

Inside the gate a central path to the front door is flanked by a fine aged box hedge. A tall Italian cypress flanks the front door, and to the left a flower garden is laid out. With a lot



*Box hedges leading to the
front entrance of the
house.
Photo T.Dixon.*



*Rear u-shaped courtyard
with a circular bed.
Photo R. Ratcliffe.*

of hard work, commencing in 1989, the O'Briens have peeled back the shrouding grass and overgrowth to reveal the original flower beds as they were; flanked with river stones on edge, in circles and curving shapes. The paths have been reinstated in local gravel where once was bare earth, 'swept daily'. A large walnut tree shelters the kitchen door and greets the visitor from the side.

Even in deep winter, the hardy survivors of the earlier garden are quietly, proudly present - large old lilacs with fat flower buds, barberries with their arching red twigs, rose bushes poised for spring, jonquils and belladonna lilies pushing through the soil. An enormous old bush honeysuckle scents the air. An air of settled peace envelops the place, and all the while, just in earshot, one can hear both the gurgle of the creek below and the wind whipping tree tops above.

The back of the old lavatory is completely crowned by an ivy, of tree-like proportions. A closer peep reveals that once the ivy had been trained to screen the toilet door, with several of its branches trained over and down to the ground, intertwined, woven and pruned to make a living, sculptural screen. Jim Webb notes that this is something typical of Chinese gardens - a 'feng shui' device to ward off evil spirits from entry into a naked door and occupation...

Today the tips of the trifold ivy wash over the ground, in their prostrate juvenile form. The several trunks snake through the air between the two sheds, climbing to the tops and bursting into the air above in a tree-like adult form, a mass of leaves, flowers, and berries. Wild arum lilies or 'cuckoo pint' push through the ground in the shady corner.

The rear of the house is u-shaped, forming a courtyard with a circular central bed filled with a cotoneaster striving for tree-like dimensions. An old tallow pot sits in one corner, resting. The old lock-up for the convicts is softly shrouded in Virginia creeper, and is now turned to more peaceful pursuits.

The rear (working) yard is flanked by a row of old elms, and still has traces of the old water course - which at one time carried creek water across to the house and down to the river flats below. On the nearest hill to the house, ancient warrior fruit trees still cling, remnants of a large orchard. They still bear their welcome fruits - pears, apples, Japanese and yellow plums.

'Mount Elrington' has the untrammelled air of a much-loved family home - a working place - yet with a peace and a repose all its own. It is increasingly rare to find an example of an early pastoral homestead garden with so much of its original structure intact - the sheltering trees, fringing hedges, paths, beds and rock work.

In one sense the garden is coming into a new era - of being lovingly, gently remoulded after a long slumber. In another sense it remains as it may have always been since the 1830s - an intimate haven in a hard, vulnerable landscape.

Stuart Read



The O'Brien family in front of the newly made gate entrance, July 1996. (Nicola, Terry, Debbie, Michelle and James). Photo A.Upitis

