

FIFIELD GARDEN



Australian Garden History Society

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Fifield Lane, Yass, New South Wales

Edited by
Trish Dixon

Australian Garden History Society
ACT, Monaro and Riverina Branch

ISBN 0 9586356 8 4

First published in 2002 by the Australian Garden History Society

ACT Monaro and Riverina Branch

GPO Box 1630 Canberra ACT 2601 Australia

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Front and back cover photograph: Fifield garden by Trish Dixon

All historic photos courtesy Helen Castle-Roche and Elizabeth Shannon

Contemporary Fifield photographs by Trish Dixon and Gabrielle Tryon

Black and white photograph of Rod, Suzanne, Charlotte and Elliot McBride by Michael Thorn

Design and art production by Beverly Swift, Canberra

Printed by Goanna Print, Canberra

Contents



Preface and Acknowledgments <i>Trish Dixon</i>	1
An Exploration <i>Victor Crittenden</i>	3
Garden Plan <i>Judith Baskin and members of the AGHS</i>	6
Plant List <i>Members of the AGHS</i>	7
The Second Act <i>Victor Crittenden</i>	8
History of the Garden <i>Marion McCarthy</i>	9
Fifield Today <i>Mauna O'Connor</i>	11
Living Memories <i>Suzanne McBride</i>	12



Preface and Acknowledgments

On approaching Fifield for the first time, there is the sensation of straying off course and arriving in a time long past. A time out of synch with the frenetic pace of the 21st century. There are Dickensonian overtones in the tale of the elderly spinster who lived her life tending her cats and garden until her death two years ago.

It is as though both house and garden have slumbered through an entire century – oblivious to the world of today – its dignity intact – arriving in the new millennium without pretence or vanity.

I had heard much of the elderly Miss Stewart who lived in this treasure from yesteryear – an extant colonial vernacular building and garden where nothing had changed for almost a century. Conservation architect Peter Freeman had described the house as one of the most original Georgian buildings he had seen in the region, and so the prospect of visiting became more enticing.

Sadly Miss Stewart died the week I was to visit, ending an almost 80 year reign of the Stewart family at Fifield.

The road that leads to Fifield winds its way upwards from the railway line in Yass in southern New South Wales. Anticipation was high as I turned into Fifield Lane when I was finally taken to visit.

Imbued with that magical glow of late afternoon, the place was deserted. It is hard to say what was the most compelling – the first glimpse of the wide verandah across the old hedging, the play of sunlight across the age-old covered walkway at the rear of the house, a single iris growing under the sagging wooden shutters of an exterior window or the sense of place that pervades the site.

I was certainly not the only one to become entranced with Fifield. Suzanne McBride, who had moved to Yass with her husband, Rod and two children, Charlotte and Elliot from Tasmania had driven up Fifield Lane a few times to peep through the shrubbery.

‘What a treasure. Even with the shutters falling off the windows I thought how lovely it looked.’

Destiny – providence or just coincidence – Fifield came onto the market. Believed to be the first time in its history it had been offered publicly for sale, Fifield attracted much interest, yet there was surprisingly little bidding and the McBrides were to be (thankfully) the new custodians.



Covered walkway at rear of house.

Preface and Acknowledgments

Having visited a number of times since the McBrides purchased in December 1999, it is heartwarming to see how sensitively they have approached both house and garden, retaining the dignity of such an historic treasure and feeling their way through the changing seasons before commencing any major restoration work. Our thanks to Suzanne, Rod, Charlotte and Elliot for sharing Fifield so generously with 'Garden History' and providing welcome cups of tea and refreshments on our frequent visits there.

Yass historian, Marion McCarthy has been supportive from the beginning and our thanks for her generous input into this project. Thanks also to Helen Castle-Roche and Elizabeth Shannon for photographs and information; to Bimbi Turner and Jackie Armes; and the team of Australian Garden History members who measured the garden, identified plants and helped throughout the project: Judith Baskin, Victor Crittenden, Maura O'Connor, Virginia Berger, Max and Margaret Bourke, Gabrielle Tryon and Marcia and Brian Voce.



Doors leading to rooms in kitchen block.

An Exploration

I drove through the city of Yass on a sunny winter afternoon to find the old house of Fifield. The Garden History Society was to carry out an initial exploration of the garden with the idea of undertaking a survey or an historical investigation and a study. Our chairman, Virginia Berger, had aroused our enthusiasm with her description of her visit to the old lady who had lived in the house for most of her life and was still in residence at the time of her visit. Her description waxed lyrical about the old house and its owner who had lived in a house that had not been radically changed for nearly a hundred years. The lady in her nineties still chopped wood and lit her fire in the living room and organized her own food. At ninety she was still very independent.

The garden, as Virginia described it, was also unchanged and had become a wild garden and it was this I was on my way to visit. Miss Stewart had recently died and the house had been sold. It was the new owners who had agreed to us visiting because they too were interested in the old garden and had begun to carry out some restoration to the house with which they had fallen in love with. They promised not to touch the garden until after we had looked at it. People who buy old houses and set about the careful restoration are a special kind of species and the new owners appeared to fit this category.

I drove the car across the railway line, not the main line, and up the hill. Where the road forked was an old house with some castellated additions and I took the road to the left. A curved lane continued up the hill. I later learnt this was the original driveway to Fifield. I found the gateway and then parked my car at the side of the road under some trees. There was a considerable incline, a sort of miniature cliff and without the trees you could look down over the city of Yass. This area was once the property of Fifield – some of the garden and property has been built on and subdivided.

I did not drive into Fifield, wanting to walk in and experience the garden from the front gateway. As I stepped through the opening – there was no gate – it was like suddenly moving back into an earlier world. The long house with its verandah extending perhaps sixty feet (old measurements for an old house) along the front sagged in places and the tangle of wisteria stems at one end obscured the decayed floorboards.

It was autumn and some of the deciduous trees were losing their leaves but there was much green vegetation to give the tangled garden an exciting aura. I walked slowly up the drive – an old carriage loop – and that part of the garden within the circle seemed to be covered with masses of the green leaves of freesia bulbs which had started to meander out along the drive and gravel paths.

I am always enchanted by a tangled old garden. I seem to imagine *A Midsummer's Night Dream* when entering such a place and almost expect to see the four lovers chasing each other among the trees and bushes and Puck playing his tricks on them with his magical love juice. This garden was not big enough for such an adventure but if you can think yourself very small then it might be possible. However I was not here to play fantasy stories with myself and tucked

An Exploration

the thought in the back of my mind and so I continued walking up the drive noting the bunch of large old photinias on the far side of the drive circle and, surprisingly, a tall pipe in the very centre of the circular garden. It could be flag pole I thought. In fact it turned out to be a unique watering system.

The drive is half surrounded by a waist high box hedge with a further little circle of the same hedge around the small round bed in the centre of this large circular driveway, which has in its centre the tall pole. The path down to this mini-circle is also bordered by box hedge but oddly this path was off centre and did not run at right angles to the house. Was this an accident or a deliberate whimsy? I remembered at St. Omer near Braidwood, there was also a central path which was off centre. Many old gardens in this part of the world seem to have had similar kinds of hedged circles for their carriage but sweet St. Omer had a large semi-circle.

Walking around the drive I espied an iron summerhouse almost hidden by a mass of foliage and the front verandah which displayed some of its supporting columns with a decided lean. The garden along the verandah was raised with a concrete edge about thirty centimeters high and crammed with a variety of plants and a tangle of wisteria. I step onto the verandah to be greeted by others members of the Society and our hostess Mrs McBride. Having made my greeting I continued my ramble around the garden.

Forcing my way through the engulfed little summerhouse, I came to an open area shaded by a large Oak over a canopy of green periwinkle. This plant is regarded by many as a weed because of its invasive nature but I was surprised that it was not more vigorous here. I suppose the lack of sunlight was the reason. Then I came to a huge mound of ivy. Pulling away a few strands I discovered underneath what appeared to be the brickwork of a well. The ivy, which had been partly cleared away from the ground had quickly taken off again, as it usually does, and was part way up the wall of the house. It seemed to grow as I watched and would quickly reach the roof!

I emerged through an opening into the backyard and there was a small patch of grass with some old garden furniture and a couple of ancient fruit trees. Here were other surprises. There was still in place a covered walkway from the house to the kitchen block, a feature for many nineteenth century houses but I had never seen one which had survived. Interestingly it also was not at right angles to the house but went from the back door to what had been the kitchen door, at an angle. The kitchen block I guessed had been quarters for the cook and maids as well as store rooms and cellar. It too had been attacked by ivy which had formed a hedge along one side of the walkway.

Continuing my exploration I passed an old outside toilet suitably disguised by ivy so that it appeared to be like a secret cave with an old timber door. Continuing along the far side of the house I made my way through the garden of tall shrubs and a real tangle of plants and undergrowth. Here would be some fun for Society members to identify plants.

An Exploration

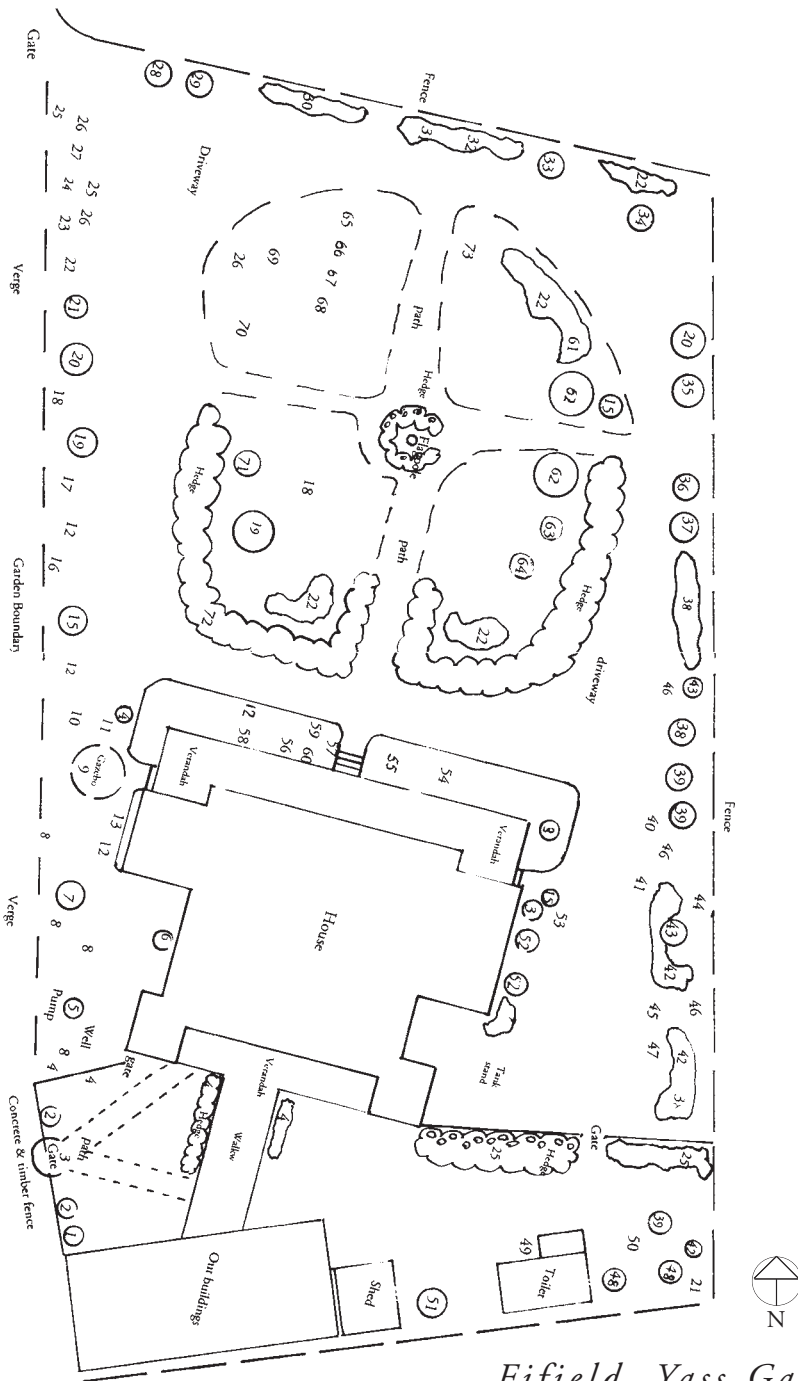


Elizabeth Shannon as a young girl in the front garden.

I came once more to the front of the house and peered over the fence at what had probably been a further part of the garden. Here was a modern house with a perfectly kept garden, everything spick and span and not a weed in sight. I wondered what they thought of the tangled garden next door to their proudly kept perfection. I regretted the other house immediately below the garden. The house itself was so close to the carriage drive that it rather obtruded and now hid the view from the old house out across the city of Yass. This is the sad part of old gardens that are subdivided when suburbia encroaches. But we must not spend our time in regrets. What we must do is rejoice at what has been left unchanged, much of it still there from the nineteenth century. It needs to be preserved and carefully brought back to its previous beauty as a worthy historic setting for a gracious old house.

That was not the end of my day at Fifield, although it completed my tour of the garden. We were all invited inside the house and saw the efforts being made to restore the gracious old house. Our hostess served us afternoon tea in the sitting room with the fire burning in the open fireplace. The tea trolley was wheeled in and tea from the silver teapot into fine china cups and saucers seemed to be so appropriate in this old house. Most importantly, Miss Stewart's sister, who had herself been brought up in the home and garden, had been invited and was there to answer our questions.

I was most interested to find out the extent of the garden and surrounding property buildings. A stable block was revealed – there had been in earlier times a tennis court below the present garden and a small windmill near the well and some larger trees (thought to be an Australian Bunya Bunya or pine tree near the house). Slowly a picture of the garden began to emerge and reflect in my mind's eye. The next step was to draw up a plan of the garden and to identify the plants and trees to fill in the picture. So the curtain of late afternoon light fell on the first act of my mid-summer's night dream.



Fifiield, Yass Garden Plan
 Scale 1: 400 Drawn by Judy Baskin 2002 (see Plant List page 7)

Fifield Planting List

Plan No.	Botanical name	Common name	Plan No.	Botanical name	Common name
1	<i>Syringa vulgaris</i>	Lilac	43	<i>Viburnum tinus</i>	Laurestinus
2	<i>Arbutus unedo</i>	Irish strawberry tree	44	<i>Rosa</i>	Rose - unidentified Rambler
3	<i>Wisteria sinensis</i>	Chinese wisteria	45	<i>Rosa</i>	Rose 'Cecile Brunner'
4	<i>Hedera helix</i>	Common ivy	46	<i>Amaryllis belladonna</i>	Belladonna lily
5	<i>Sorbus aucuparia</i>	Rowan tree	47	<i>Erica</i> sp.	
6	<i>Lonicera fragrantissima</i>	Winter honeysuckle	48	<i>Prunus pissardii</i> nigra	Purple leaved plum
7	<i>Quercus virginiana</i>	Live oak	49	<i>Vitis vinifera</i> sp.	Currant grape
8	<i>Vinca major</i>	Periwinkle	50	<i>Rosa</i>	Rose unidentified pink tea
9	<i>Rosa banksia lutea</i>	Yellow Banksia rose	51	<i>Schinus molle</i>	Peppercorn
10	<i>Lathyrus latifolius</i>	Pink perennial pea	52	<i>Cydonia oblonga</i> or <i>vulgaris</i>	Common quince
11	<i>Rosa</i> hybrid tea	Rose "Crimson glory"?	53	<i>Eriobotrya japonica</i>	Loquat
12	<i>Iris orientalis</i>	Iris	54	<i>Convolvulus mauritanicus</i>	Moroccan Glory Bind
13	<i>Campsis grandiflora</i>	Chinese trumpet creeper	55	<i>Saponaria vulgaris</i>	Soapwort
14	<i>Spiraea glandulosa</i>	Chinese bush cherry	56	<i>Watsonia</i> sp.	Watsonia (deep pink)
15	<i>Crataegus oxyacantha</i>	Hawthorn 'Paul's scarlet'	57	<i>Gladiolus</i> sp.	Gladioli
16	<i>Iris germanica</i>	Flag iris	58	<i>Lilium candidum</i>	Madonna lily
17	<i>Narcissus</i> sp.		59	<i>Pelargonium quercifolium</i>	Oak leaf or scented geranium
18	<i>Iris unguicularis (stylosa)</i>	Winter iris	60	<i>Crinum murrayum</i>	Crinum
19	<i>Laurus nobilis</i>	Sweet Bay	61	<i>Lonicera nitida</i>	Box-leaved honeysuckle
20	<i>Liquidambar styraciflua 'festeri'</i>	Liquidamber	62	<i>Photinia serrulata</i>	Chinese hawthorn
21	<i>Prunus armeniaca</i>	Apricot	63	<i>Philadelphus microphyllus</i>	Mock orange
22	<i>Chaenomeles japonica</i>	Dwarf flowering quince	64	<i>Symphoricarpos orbiculatus</i>	Coral berry
23	<i>Nandina domestica</i>	Sacred bamboo	65	<i>Crataegus</i> sp.	Hawthorn
24	<i>Rosa indica</i>	Rose understock	66	<i>Rosa</i>	Rose 'Dorothy Perkins'
25	<i>Jasminum nudiflorum</i>	Winter jasmine	67	<i>Rosa</i>	Rose 'American Pillar'
26	<i>Crocosmia aurea</i>	Copper tips	68	<i>Rosa</i>	Rose 'Bloomfield Courage'
27	<i>Allium cowanii</i>	Allium	69	<i>Spiraea</i>	Lilac 'Anthony Waterer'
28	<i>Malus</i> sp.	Crab apple	70	<i>Rosa</i>	Rose 'Crimson Glory'
29	<i>Viburnum opulus</i>	Guelder rose	71	<i>Phormium tenax</i>	New Zealand flax
30	<i>Lonicera periclymenum</i>	Honeysuckle	72	<i>Buxus sempervirens</i>	Box
31	<i>Passiflora</i> sp. (mollissima?)	Banana passionfruit	73	<i>Forsythia</i> sp.	Golden Bells
32	<i>Rosa banksia</i>	Banksia rose			
33	<i>Crataegus x lavalleyi</i>	French hawthorn			
34	<i>Kolkwitzia amabilis</i>	Beauty bush			
35	<i>Fraxinus oxycarpa</i>	Desert ash			
36	<i>Fraxinus excelsior 'Aurea'</i>	Golden ash			
37	<i>Prunus domestica</i>	Plum			
38	<i>Syringa</i> sp. (grafted)	Lilac			
39	<i>Malus</i> sp.	Apple			
40	<i>Spartium junceum</i>	Spanish broom			
41	<i>Rosa</i>	Rose 'Felicite Perpetue'			
42	<i>Ligustrum lucidum</i>	Japanese tree privet			

During spring the following plants were also observed in the area:

<i>Lobularia naritima</i>	Sweet Alyssum (by front step)
<i>Freesia refracta</i>	Freesia (along and in driveway)
<i>Viola odorata</i>	Violets
<i>Leucojum vernalis</i>	Snowflake
<i>Calendula officinalis</i>	English Marigold
<i>Oxalis</i>	Wood sorrel
<i>Centranthus rubrum</i>	Valerian

The Second Act

The second visit to Fifield took place some months later and its aim was to measure the garden to draw up a plan and start to identify some of the plants and trees. Judith Baskin, who was in charge of the plan, was established on the front verandah when I arrived. She was surrounded by sheets of papers of the basic plan of the house which had already been drawn. Our job was to fill in the details. We were organized into teams equipped with long tape measures and note papers.

In the front garden from a central line which divided the garden into two parts we measured the distances to enable us to plot the paths and the large trees and shrubs and to make special note of those that could be identified. Society members in the back part of the garden were busy with the smaller and more complicated design. The fence on the road side was not straight as it followed the curve of the road. The fence on the opposite side was also not square but ran at an oblique angle. We thus found we were not dealing with a perfectly rectangular block as is usual in most suburbs.

There was much discussion and often disagreement on the identity of the leafless trees (I fear it was me who was usually wrong). Having finished our measuring we had tea and cake. It was a happy gathering for although it was winter, the sun shone and the air was quite mild. The house and garden was quiet. My fantasy of *A Mid Summer Night's Dream* was now, in winter, a forgotten ghost. The garden was asleep gathering its energies for the spring awakening. We had completed our job. All that remained to finish the work was for the plan to be finalized and some further plant identification to be carried out in the spring when plants and shrubs were in leaf and bloom.

The historic old garden of Fifield which had miraculously survived a hundred and fifty years was now recorded and its future development was in the capable hands of its new owners and their children.



History of the Garden

Fifield was built in 1858 by Dr Allan Campbell, a Scot who had won a Licentiate of the Faculty of Physicians and Surgeons in Glasgow in 1835. He named his house, an important symbol of his colonial achievement, in honour of his wife, Eliza Fifield, whom he had married in 1849. Campbell had also acquired a large grazing property, Yeumburra, on the Murrumbidgee River and was to greatly expand his pastoral empire thereafter. He had become a friend, confidant as well as doctor to Hamilton Hume, the explorer, and was to be appointed an executor of Hume's large and complex estate.

The house was surrounded by fenced land, through which an avenue (now Fifield Lane) ran down to entrance gates and his surgery which came to be known as The Cabin.

Dr Campbell remained at Fifield until his death in 1895, aged 79. He is buried in the churchyard of St. Clement's, Yass, with his wife, Eliza Fifield Campbell, their six infant children and an older son, Henry Fifield Campbell. Eliza had died in 1869, aged 36.

The second phase of Fifield's story lasted 15 years. It was bought by Thomas Besnard, the agent who had conducted the auctions of Campbell's possessions, including his 240 horses, his library and his medical instruments.

In 1912, Fifield became the home of Abraham Pope Wade, a grazier, and then entered perhaps its most significant development phase. The *Yass Courier* of 7 October 1912 reported that "...every room in the house has been fitted with the Wunderlich steel ceiling, the lobby has been tiled, and all rooms papered with some of the latest designs in wall papers selected by Mrs Wade." At the time of purchase, Fifield was surrounded by over five acres of gardens, orchard, etc. Wade extended its acreage somewhat and installed a tennis court. It, together with the stables and milking yard, are long gone but still remembered.

Fifield was then owned briefly by Mr Fred Siggs, another agent and livestock dealer, who moved to Goulburn in 1922 after his short time in Yass.

Thus began the fifth period of Fifield's history – its purchase by Arthur Bryant Triggs, as a gift to his sister-in-law, Mrs Jessie Stewart, née McBean, and in recognition of the invaluable part her husband, Hugh, had played in building his pastoral empire. Hugh Stewart continued as stock manager and adviser to Triggs until the latter's death in 1936. Thereafter he travelled widely throughout New South Wales as a valued adviser to pastoralists, pastoral companies and banks. During World War II he became a confidential adviser to the Federal War Cabinet.



History of the Garden

Fifield was to remain home to the Stewart family and a valuable repository for family and business records until 1999 when Miss Marjorie Stewart died, aged 90. She had grown up there, together with her brother and two sisters.

Photographs taken in 1924 show carefully manicured gardens, faithfully maintaining the original Victorian style, immaculate driveway lined with hawthorns and a tiny windmill to pump water from the well. A description of the property in 1922 had referred to “...water laid on throughout...” One is reminded that not until 1927 could the Municipality of Yass celebrate the luxury of a reticulated water supply to the township.

Miss Stewart recalled ‘Father used to run cows and poddy calves and about a dozen pet sheep. He loved patting the calves and would not hear of them being sold while he was around, so this had to be done when he was away. Charlie Darlington used to break in horses and these used also to run in the paddock.’ Hugh Stewart died in 1955 and his widow, Jessie, in 1975.

The seven acres, 0 roods and 7² perches which comprised *Fifield* in the late 1920s have been largely subdivided since World War II. However, the front garden remains peacefully unchanged, an important reminder of a previous era of disciplined and informed creativity, supported by hard work. Its many paths hint at the generous hospitality always extended to friends and families.



Marjorie Stewart and nephew Hugh Marsh in front of rear covered walkway.



Gazebo enveloped by yellow banksia rose.

Fifield Today

A short meander along the narrow, twisting way of Fifield Lane leads the visitor to a garden of wild surprises. The circular driveway, now smothered by sparaxis, still circles its way around the front garden leading to the worn sandstone steps of the gracious Georgian house. Lining the driveway and threatening to overtake it on the southern edge is a competitive border of shrubs and trees including various *Crataegus*, *Chaenomeles*, *Viburnum*, Golden and Desert Ash, and Liquidamber. Belladonna lilies, freesias, violets, irises, jonquils and other bulbs compete madly in the garden bed below the weathered, broken boards of the verandah, while the Belladonna lilies continue under the shrubbery, largely of lilacs, down the right side of the garden.

Framed by the driveway and dominating the front garden is a circular garden bed, divided in four and bordered on the house side by a slightly overgrown Box hedge. Two narrow pathways through the centre of the bed are lined with stones dividing the bed into four quadrants and meet in the centre around a circle lined with Box. A magnificent Bay laurel and lilacs dominate the top-right hand side quadrant as you face the house, while roses including American Pillar and Bloomfield Courage with rampant irises grow in the bed below. In the remaining quarters, Snowberry, *Philadelphus* and *Photinia* overwhelm the beds with their sheer size.

To the right of the house a lovely iron gazebo covered in a yellow Banksia rose leads one into a gentle corner of the garden. While ivy runs riot over the ground and completely smothers the old well in the corner near the side fence, a magnificent Live oak, *Quercus virginiana*, casts filtered shade across the garden. A sprawling Winter honeysuckle, *Lonicera frangrantissima* diffuses lemon scented charm from its long creamy flowers during the bleak days of winter from its position by the house.

Through the side gate and into the back garden an old timber archway over the entranceway from the street is covered in a tangled riot of wisteria and *Arbutus unedo*, the Irish strawberry tree. A row of old outbuildings, running from the side fence halfway along the rear of the garden are slowly being restored although the roofline continues to be challenged with the thick and penetrating limbs of the Common ivy. A covered archway from the outbuildings to the back verandah of the house continues to provide shelter from the weather as well as support for a currant grape and more ivy.

An eating apple, currant grape and privet compete for space with the graceful cherry, *Prunus pissardii* 'nigra' in a small orchard on the western side. Marking a significant boundary is a riot of Winter jasmine, *Jasminium nudiflorum* which has completely buried the fence line.

Quince suckers drift along the house line, competing with some apples and wisteria, which sends its graceful tentacles over the front verandah. On the other side of the pathway, barely discernible amongst the shrubbery, lilacs flourish with under-planting of belladonna lilies. Roses, including Cecile Brunner, Viburnum and more privet add to the glorious profusion on this sheltered side of the garden before you emerge into the openness again of the circular driveway.

Living Memories

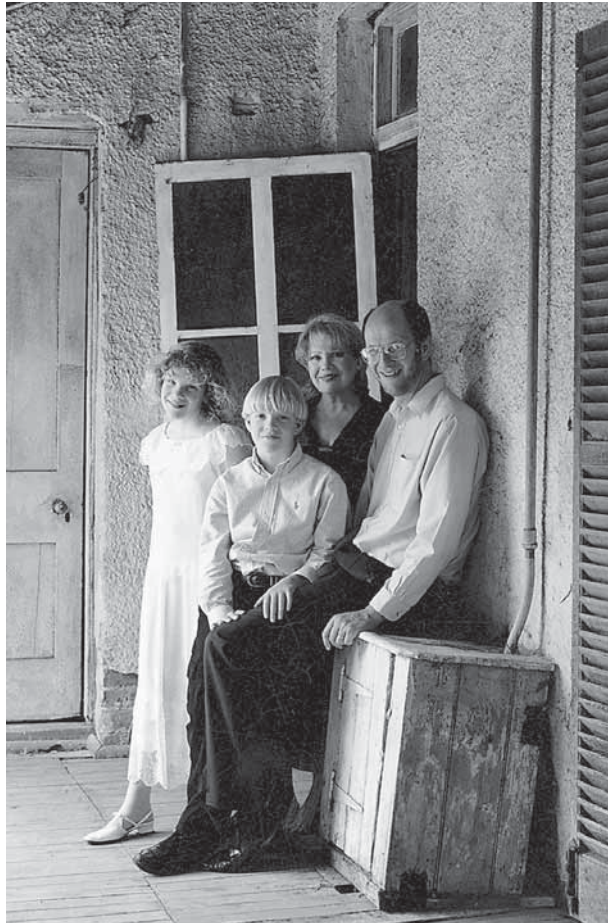
When we came to live at Fifield, our daughter Charlotte so aptly described the surroundings as the secret garden. Although we are within close walking distance to town, our 'secret garden' and the quietness of the lane, once part of Fifield's acreage, seems to transfer us from the buzz of a country town to the solitude of a little haven. We are the grateful audience to frequent performances of a litany of bird calls, and autumnal seasons of 'mists and mellow fruitfulness'.

We feel we are the caretakers of a home and garden steeped in a wonderful and historical tapestry to which we shall add some threads during our time living here as a family .

As the owners of Fifield, our vision is to conserve our home and garden rather than to give it a makeover, losing in the process so much of the history and ambience that exists. It is amazing how one becomes sensitive to every nuance of history lost with every slight alteration or change made to the house with time spent living here.

One of the joys for us is the fact that so many people in the town have such fond associations with Fifield and frequently delight in sharing their special memories with us, not least of all Helen Castle-Roche who has such rich memories of growing up at Fifield with her family, and Jan Bender our neighbour, who was a dear friend to Marj Stewart, Helen's sister who lived here until her death in 1999.

It is a rich gift indeed to be living in such a beautiful home with surroundings that continue to have our children and many others wanting to climb the trees and play hidings in the tangled, beckoning secret garden.



Charlotte, Elliot, Suzanne and Rod McBride.

