

AUSTRALIAN GARDEN HISTORY SOCIETY

NATIONAL ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

SOUTHERN HIGHLANDS BRANCH



Photo: supplied by Ian Carroll

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Interviewer:	LYN BARRETT
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INTERVIEW WITH IAN CARROLL, HEAD GARDENER
AT OLDBURY, SUTTON FOREST ON 2ND DECEMBER 2020

This is an interview with IAN JOHN CARROLL, Head Gardener of Oldbury, Oldbury Road, Sutton Forest, N.S.W. and it is recorded on the 2nd of December, 2020. This oral history with Ian Carroll, Head Gardener, is being held at 16 Harley Street, Bowral, N.S.W. Ian is speaking with me, Lyn Barrett, of the Australian Garden History Society (AGHS) as part of the collaboration with the Berrima District Museum (BDM).

Ian, do you understand that the AGHS in association with the BDM owns copyright to the interview material, but the disclosure will be subject to any restrictions you impose in completing the form of consent?

Yes.

(Ian Carroll's comments in the transcript will be in *italics*).

For the tape, this is the voice of Lyn Barrett, the interviewer, and for the tape this is the voice of *Ian Carroll, very happy to be here Lyn.*

Ian, on behalf of the AGHS and the BDM I would like to thank you for agreeing to this interview. It's so important that we capture your story, and other people like you in the Highlands because it is unique.

This interview is taking place on 2nd December, 2020 commencing at approximately 9.30 a.m.

The interview is intended to cover Ian's career as a horticulturalist particularly in the Southern Highlands of New South Wales, though you may have been a horticulturalist in other parts of New South Wales?

Like many people in the Highlands, I moved up from Sydney 20 years ago.

Ian, can we start at the beginning with some biographical details about yourself?

I was born and bred in Queensland, so I come from the tropics and subtropics. Dad was a teacher, a Primary School Head Teacher so we moved all over the place. I've lived all over Queensland, finishing off secondary high school in Cairns. Ever since then I've been moving south.

Looking for cooler climates?

Well, definitely, and since I moved to the Highlands, looking for 4 seasons gardening, actually, as my career and life developed. When I finished school in Cairns, I went to University of Queensland to study Commerce, which was aborted after a few years when I realised I didn't want to be an accountant. Before I became a gardener, I went through a couple of career changes. I was a COBOL programmer in the early days of programming for the Queensland Public Service, and when I

eventually moved down to Sydney, I worked in Public Service middle management where I picked up my keenness for record keeping and manual writing, which has all translated well into what I do as a Head Gardener.

Excellent, and that is the one thing I think head gardeners in England do exceptionally well. You can go back to 1800 and see when they planted a particular tree, it's an amazing record that they have, especially Sissinghurst, and other places that were only last century, but the details and the drawings are incredible.

Yes, well it's a problem here, I've moved through a few of the iconic historic gardens in the Highlands and in each one I'm thinking here of Milton Park in particular, and Kennerton Green, and there are no records, they've all disappeared and you come in and Milton Park is 1910, so it's 100 years old and I'm interested in all the old things. I found an old notebook there once which had some pay rates to labourers in the 1940s, and I just find all that sort of thing really, really interesting. Records of how the gardens developed or trees planted, that would be fantastic and that certainly is what I try to definitely do now in all the gardens.

Do they teach that at TAFE, about how important that is for Head Gardeners do you think, or is that up to the individual owner of the garden?

When I went through TAFE I don't remember that part of it. I know there's a push nowadays but I think that is through the AGHS. I remember going to a seminar and lectures a couple of years ago in the Southern Highlands where it was all about record keeping in gardens, the importance of drawing maps and plans and keeping records and plans.

5:05

Yes, one of the important things, and trying to record whatever we can see and trying to record for the future.

I find it valuable. Just yesterday we booked a visiting group for May next year, so I immediately went back through the years to what's going on in the garden in May which will help me plan ahead or what I should get ready for that particular time in May and it's just super-interesting for me who wrote them, to go back in time to 2016, only 4 years ago, and there are things there and I've got photos, and just think, 'Oh, yeah, I remember, that's only 4 years old since we did that', and these sorts of things.

Yes, that's very good. Did you say, living in Queensland and heading south, did you bring plants from Queensland that you absolutely love, that you wanted to grow in the South?

When I was living in Queensland I had no interest, I knew nothing. My family weren't gardeners. Dad used to fight the lawn and the weeds and the Paspalum and that's all I remember about gardening in our house. My grandfather was a vegetable gardener, so it was us grandkids picking the strawberries and being yelled at and that sort of thing.

I moved to Brisbane and then to Sydney and we came up to the Highlands by then I was a gardener and I brought a lot of indoor plants up to the Highlands. They're all sub-tropical plants and I had some until very recently, but they've all gone now.

It sounds like my orchid collection that I brought that melted in the first winter frost here.

Yes, if I did it now, I'd make sure I had the glasshouse set up and I'd take better care, but it took a few years to appreciate that.

What motivated you to look at gardening as the change in career path, as the big one, from administration?

Well, I used to travel a lot, so I used to work for a few years and then cash in and travel overseas. Eventually I got sick of that, and came back, and I always wanted to work outdoors and my first thought was I wanted to work in forest and I was looking at studying forestry, but in those days, this is 30 years ago, the Forestry Department had a philosophy that was a bit alien to what I was wanting to do – it was more about production than conservation, which was my interest. Anyhow, I was pointed in the direction of horticulture by a friend who had done the Certificate III Course and that was fortuitous, so I enrolled at the Horticulture Certificate III Course at Ryde School of Horticulture. When I went there, I was mature age and did the full-time course, and really brought very little to it in terms of gardening skills.

Except passion and enthusiasm and commitment.

Well that came immediately, certainly, for me.

That's wonderful.

So in the travels, did you think these are things I'd like to replicate or was there any point of gardening when you were travelling?

My travelling was around South-East Asia, back-packing, that sort of travelling, up through South-East Asia, up through India, Nepal, which tied in with the love I still have of the sub-tropics and rainforests, which is where I got the passion for forests, visiting Botanic Gardens in Sri Lanka and Singapore and Malaysia and so on, gave me a passion. I love the Botanic Gardens and yes, it was the tropical things that really had me excited.

10:00

Now I'm doing 4 seasons, and there's no way I could go back and do this work in Queensland. I couldn't reacclimatise to the heat as it gets hotter and hotter. I go back to Queensland to visit my family and they're all using air conditioning now, whereas when we grew up there wasn't, they're all saying how it's changed.

What would you consider is the most important aspect of your work in gardening? Is it the conservation side, or is it experimental or...?

I am a maintenance gardener. I always just reduce it. I am a maintenance gardener. My idea is I want to create beautiful spaces and I do that through what I call maintenance gardening. I can always have discussions with people over what 'maintenance' means. A lot of the time people want to reduce it to hedges and edges, and it is part of what I think reduces it to what people regard gardening to be, the idea that people hire contractors usually come in and do the edges, mow the lawn to within a few millimetres of its life, do a bit of pruning – that's maintenance. For me, it's a lot more than that. It's a big commitment to create beautiful spaces because I want to work in beautiful spaces.

Yes, and it's the trees. I know that the trees are one of your passions. Is that part of your garden philosophy, planting the trees and planting the spaces under them?

For sure, the important thing about trees is that in the garden, someone pointed this out to me, that trees are plants too and so the idea is to integrate trees into the garden spaces. And so when you're talking about creating micro-climates and shade and shelter and so on, that all comes back to the dynamism of developing a garden. A garden is always developing, because we're dealing with growing things. You put trees in and you have to think about how they're going to grow, how they'll be when they're full grown and how that's going to change the area around them. So that's an important aspect of trees.

I sometimes think in the Highlands that people plant big trees here, but don't give them enough space sometimes. You walk into a garden and you think, 'Oh that's going to be a really big tree'. They sometimes don't think about that. You're very aware of all of that of this with that beautiful Arboretum that you're working on.

I keep telling David the owner, that the Arboretum is, in some areas we have planted specimen trees. In most of the Arboretum, what I'm developing there is a woodland, OK, so it's different, they're going to be crowded together. In early years you'll be able to see individual shapes and habits and so on but eventually what I'm after there is a woodland. What I love is a rainforest, what I always wanted to do was to build a rainforest. I can't do that in the Highlands, but I have found an opportunity to build the next best thing, and so in this case it'll be planting trees and at the moment it's open enough that we're mowing the lawns. Eventually we'll mow in between as much as possible. Some areas we're letting go to meadowland but what I'm really seeing there in another generation, and I probably won't be around to see this, is that it will be a woodland, the grass underneath it will go to woodland ground cover, it'll be bulbs etc. This is the thing I've found with trees, you talking about people planting the wrong trees in the wrong places, and when working with clients, in my contracting years, you have to remember that when I suggest a plant, I am imagining what it's going to be in 15 or 20 or 50 years down the track, and that's hard for novices to see.

Especially here in East Bowral, I used to drive along this road every morning to go to Milton Park when I worked there, and so I watched a lot of these gardens being installed. The obvious one is the Leylandii hedges which were being installed, and I used to think, people are going to have so much trouble with them in a few years' time, and they are, they're having them now, and so many of the trees that were put in small areas, the trouble's coming now, 20 years later.

Yes, that's the age of this estate. So, you've just mentioned Milton Park, as you've worked in so many of the heritage properties. That's the unique thing about the Southern Highlands, is the number of heritage properties that are around, when people had money to be able to plant and develop these gardens. What properties have you worked on, other than Oldbury?

In that category in the Highlands, it's Milton Park and Kennerton Green. Kennerton Green is much younger, however it's one of the iconic gardens that appear in that book 1001 Gardens You Must See Before You Die, that book, I have a collection of those books. I contracted up here, out of the past 25 years, I contracted for 10 or so, so I've worked in a lot of the rural properties all over the district, but the classic iconic heritage gardens I'd class as Milton Park and Kennerton Green.

17:05

Yes, you're in a unique situation – how are gardeners treated differently up here to Sydney? Do you think there's more expectation here, or is it with the Sydney siders coming into the Highlands now that we're bringing that edges and hedges, Paul Bangay look into the Highlands?

There's room for everything and I think there is everything here. There's a history of estate gardening here, which is a thing. What I see with a lot of the new properties coming in up here on Range Road, all the farm land is gone, it used to be dairy country when I came here and it's all gone now. People are moving in and building beautiful grand estates, there's a lot of instant gardening going on, huge gardens being installed by landscaping companies. The thing that bothers me is I don't think the gardening skills are being developed widely enough for the gardeners to maintain and look after a lot of those gardens. I know in some of those cases people have come up here, installed big gardens without realising the maintenance. I think that's what comes up from Sydney, not used to living in such large areas and it's all very well installing a brand new beautiful garden, but maintenance is crucial, and that's one of my passions now, late in my career is trying to figure out how to create; develop more gardeners with the skills to look after these established gardens.

Yes, because in Sydney you can get the contractors in a day a week. These blitz gardeners who come in to look after it, if you're on less than an acre, down to the residential blocks. Up here people are buying big acreages and installing big gardens.

And it's big money watering and feeding.

Yes, and just mowing sometimes, as well as creating. And you grow big hedges here, you've got room to do it.

And it's sort of an iconic look up here too isn't it?

It is. It's another one of my things. If I'm ever designing a garden, or looking at plants for a garden, the first thing I think about, and it should be the first thing thought about, is maintenance. Everything from how I'm going to get access for materials,

how I'm going to fit the mower through this gap? Where are my services going? You can't put the garden in and then think where you want to expand the garden and you haven't got the services, water. The first thing you should do, think about the maintenance.

Do you do contracting as well Ian?

Not any more, no, no, I've got a full time job.

How many staff do you have with you?

Oldbury is traditionally 1 Head Gardener, 1 Assistant Gardener. There are 3 little properties there, 3 gardens, actually 4 garden beds if you count the Farm Manager's garden, which is where I cut the hedges and the Farm Manager and family look after most of the garden beds there and I cut the hedges. We also have Oldbury Cottage, the guest cottage, and Oldbury Vale, and they're both 2 acre, 3 acre gardens as well as we're up to about 10 to 15 acres around Oldbury now.

Oh my gosh.

I've built a rod for my own back; it's tripled in size since the 12 years I've been here.

And you've got that incredible layered hedge – do you want to tell us a bit about that?

Oldbury is 1 of only 2 places in the country that lay hawthorn hedges. It's an ancient European practice laying hawthorn hedges before barbed wire was used for fencing. So it's a living fence. We do it at Oldbury and it's been done since the earliest days, maybe 200 years but most of it was let go over the years, which is why there are weedy hawthorns all over the property. But in the mid- 80's John Hawkins, who owned Whitley, and whoever was the current owner of Oldbury then, brought out a fellow from Shropshire in England, and they re-laid hedges at Whitley and at Oldbury, and there are some around Bowral too. There's one at Old South Road, at Harby Park, there's one on the corner there.

22:55

That was done by the same guy, Mark Fowles, who came out in the mid-80's, he came out a couple of times. Then when I got to Olbury in 2009 I got interested in the hedges, and started looking at this practice, looked at Youtube videos, had a few goes myself, did it really badly, and the owners were on the same bus with me, David Newby, we brought out a bloke from Shropshire as well, Karl and he came out for 5 weeks, and he taught me how to do the hedge-laying properly, and we started a program. Since then we've had a program of relaying, rejuvenating and actually extending by planting new hedges.

Is it a lot of work?

It is, it's hard and terrible work. It's thorns in the middle of Winter. It's another one of those things – there's a few at Oldbury. You're in the middle of something and you

stand up and turn around and say: 'Whose idea was this?' But, very rewarding. Oldbury in Winter, is one of those great gardens with great backbone and the backbone of elms, which were started to be planted by James Atkinson in 1826 when he first built the house there, and the hawthorn hedges which also go back that far. In the middle of winter those elms and those hedges are the backbone of the place.

So, you were saying that you have extended gardens yourself. Is this an aim for yourself, to keep developing the garden?

Empire building! [lauging] You know, a garden's got to develop, and I've said this many a time, if the garden wasn't developing, well, it's happened before if I'm working in a garden and it's not developing, the owners for whatever reason, just want to have hedges and edges, well I'd just move on. In contracting days you could just move on.

Yes.

At Oldbury I have a really good relationship with the owner. One of the things I am really interested in, is this Owner – Head Gardener relationship business which I think is crucial in the development of any good garden. And we're on the same bus in terms of...

And mutual respect?

Yes, he understands when I talk about where we can go with the garden, he's willing to go along with ideas and he has his own ideas. The Arboretum, it's one of those things, it's like 7 or 8 acres, you stand in the middle of it now when you're doing something, and say, 'Who's idea was this?' and it actually is a partnership between me and the owner.

The owners that you've had, do they actually ever work alongside you or is it purely for their pleasure?

They contribute according to their expertise. I contribute according to their needs and they contribute according to their expertise.

It's a relationship, bringing different things to the party.

That's right. They have to provide the resources. This is one of the big issues with gardeners. Gardening is labour intensive – labour costs money nowadays. In the old days all the grand gardening traditions which inspired me, particularly UK and European style, it's big money owners and a lot of cheap labour. It's different now, gardeners get paid and that's one of the things I'm interested in, developing career paths.

There seems to have been a shift in skill levels across the Highlands. Once upon a time when you employed someone to come and help you with the garden, they actually had a horticultural qualification and they actually brought some skills and knowledge into the equation. There seems to be a little bit of a shift these days

where there seem to be a lot of young fellows expecting big bucks, with no qualifications. Have you come across any of that?

I find that really problematic, the idea that ...

It's a little unfair to the people who have put in the training and the hard yards.

It's also indicative of this idea that if you've got a trailer and a whipper-snipper and a mower and a blower you can set up and come and do edges and hedges and there's this idea that that's all there is to it. And it works both ways, and there's also this idea that that's all there is to it, so I shouldn't have to pay for it and what you're talking about is maybe the unskilled person who can say 'Yeah I can do your gardening' and maybe they mow the lawn but they will not understand the weeding or fertilising or ...

Keeping the mower up at certain times of the year and all of those little tricks of the trade, I suspect.

Yes, it's crucial, to me it's a high skill thing and I like to employ gardeners who have some qualifications. I like my gardeners to have done the Certificate. I like that scientific background, the botanical name, the understanding of the Latin nomenclature and the science behind fertilising, the chemicals and so on. I like them to start with that, and then on top of that you just lay layers of experience and time.

It's a wonder that TAFE up here hasn't got a horticultural course. I think we've got to go down to the Illawarra now, or is it still at Ryde?

Yalla, down at Dapto, had a good reputation for years. I've heard they've closed their glasshouses. I think you can still do a course there. The other one is Padstow, which still has a decent reputation and Ryde has a reputation still, it holds, but TAFE has really dropped the ball over the last 15 to 20 years.

30:05

I mean it's an industry that's growing and there's a new resurgence in gardeners and respect for green spaces, and yet there seems to be less available education. It's a shame.

Well it went the way of a lot of vocational education over the past couple of decades. When I went through Ryde it was a fulltime course I did, a year full time, and a year part time. We did everything from bricklaying to tissue culture. We have put young assistant gardeners through a certificate course, we put one through at Goulburn. They may offer a Cert II in Moss Vale. I think they still offer a Cert. III at Goulburn but it's been reduced, it was done part-time in a year. The quality of the course, and the quantity and the depth of the course was nothing like I did. It was almost, maybe not a waste of time, but that bit of paper that that gardener got at the end of it wasn't a match for what I think it should be.

Well, there's nothing like working with a gardener of your experience or Les's experience or somebody who has that grounding, to reinforce what's being taught in the classroom.

That's right, I like them to have done the Certificate III but like me, we all come out of the Cert. III thinking we know everything and then you spend years, gardening is such a humbling industry and job. Just when you think, 'Oh yeah, I can do that', and 'Doesn't my garden look great' you visit someone else's garden, it happens every time, and you think, 'How are they doing that?' and 'Why didn't I think of doing that?' I find gardening is brilliant for that, it's a lifelong learning thing, and this is what you need in a good gardener, that idea that it's lifelong learning, that you learn something new every day and add skills on.

And working with Nature too.

Yes, well to come back to that. This year has shown that particularly. There's been a boom in the nurseries during this Covid year. As soon as people are locked down and stuck in their home and looking for engagement that's not just purely social, obviously they've turned to their gardens. It's a chance to get out.

I've been trying to put tree orders in left right and centre and they keep telling me, 'Lyn, I've got no stock'.

The wholesalers are the same. All year we've come across different suppliers saying that everything's been bought out. It was bought out, the tree tube stock was bought out after the bush fires for replanting and rejuvenating, but also then everyone was locked down and so they got stuck into their gardens. It's wonderful.

It is wonderful to see people turning to green and clean, it gives them peace of mind. I always think of the work that Welby does too, that anyone can participate, I think it's a wonderful thing, what the nursery can provide, for the special needs kids too, they've got their hands in the soil, they're watching things grow, it's a great skill for them to have.

Yep, Welby is a great example.

They do a good job up there. So, we were talking before that you were looking at your program for May, and obviously Open Gardens play a big role in the Oldbury calendar and David's very generous in allowing people to visit his private sanctuary. This is now December and you're talking May, what do you have to consider when you're getting ready for these Open Days?

OK, so the first thing I'd like to say is that, with Open Days, what you're aiming for is the same thing I'm aiming for every day. I always think about Fridays, like a weekly program, I'm always thinking all during the week the owners have got us gardeners hanging around. I often wonder, I don't think I could live with someone hanging around in my lawn. So, I always think about, I aim for Friday afternoon. By the time I leave on Friday afternoon, the garden should be as schmick as I want it to be, so they get to enjoy it on the weekend. It's the same thing you're aiming for with an Open Day. The thing is with an Open Day you don't have any choices, every corner

from the far back corner at the north-west side to the south-east corner, everything's got to be perfect, for me. There's a little bit of lea-way for me during the week. So, I'm thinking about May and I go back, I have different ideas about May already, so I go back through my diaries a lot and see when the main hedges are finished and I try to get them done in April, the big Leylandii hedge which is a feature. As I said to David yesterday, mostly in May there are really good sunsets and a lot of leaf raking going on. So, it depends on the season as well, my thinking at the moment is it looks like we're going to have a good Summer with a bit of water, we've had a brilliant Spring, best Spring ever, so by the time we get into Autumn this year, hopefully the trees will all be flush and full of bloom, full of leaf, haven't dropped everything like over a long, hot Summer, like they did last year and Autumn wasn't so good, so we should have good colour and leaf hanging on right until the end.

37:00 [phone ringing, pause in the interview]

Do you get good frosts at Oldbury?

It's wicked, we're just at the base of Mount Gingenbullen and the frosts can hit hard. There are trees that I lose in the Arboretum over the years, that should be able to cope but when we get that frost roll down off the Mountain two or three mornings in a row and it's -5o to -7o, they just seem to be very bitter, but we're looking for some nice cool evenings and warm sunny days leading into Autumn leading up to May. It's all about presentation, that's the same every week, it's all about presentation, so the scheduling of things I'll do leading up to it. We've a few avenues of Iceberg roses and I can time my pruning to them so that they'll peak on the 5th May, hopefully, so I'll prune them 8 to 10 weeks before and so they'll be performing.

I've got log books where I can go back and this is how I'll work it out in that particular garden for those particular roses. I can look at when I pruned it and go back to the log book for when the Icebergs are peaking. The same with the Catmint, I can get 2 or 3 blooms of things like catmint along the pathways around the house.

Yes, in my previous property I followed your method of pruning one side and then the other in order to always have part of the border green, rather than bare.

They'll always keep repeating on you. Things like the Iceberg roses, I've stopped deadheading them as such. Nowadays what I do with mass roses is wait until they are sort of half gone and then I prune the lot, then about 8 or 10 weeks later I get another magnificent show which lasts for 3 or 4 weeks or more. Because there is plenty more going on in the garden and I think it's better to see like an avenue of Icebergs that have just been pruned with no flowers on, while underneath the lavender is flowering or the catmint is flowering, there are plenty of other things to look at, and then later on you wait about 2 months and then there's a full new flush of roses, rather than just pushing on through the season, or always deadheading half the flowers on or half the flowers off or dying.

So, I do that nowadays and the other little extras for Open Days are the logistics, I think about the number of people that are coming, safety and security issues, where we are going to let them go, are we going to let them access all areas, toilets.

Weather, what are we going to do if the weather's no good on the day? So those are the little extras.

You've probably already told me, have you got a favourite place in the gardens that you've worked in, that you remember from previous gardens or even your garden at home?

Yes, my favourite place is everywhere. The favourite place can fluctuate by the season, stages of growth, if it's a new area that's been developed that's just coming to look like you imagined, you know 5 or 6 months down the track, can be a favourite. The time of day, you know, different parts of the garden and the best places to be at different times of the day. If I have to be specific at the moment in Oldbury Farm it's in a bowl area of the Arboretum which is Japanese themed, a grouping of dwarf weeping maples with a little Japanese teahouse and with the rill running. It worked out exactly as I envisaged and it's just a magic little part of the garden.

I can think back to parts of Milton Park that I really loved and so on. One of the things I say to new gardeners, the first day they arrive, there are two things I say: first, make yourself indispensable, that's how you keep your job, and second, you've got to fall in love with the garden, so you've got to figure out what you really like about the garden. If that doesn't happen your work will just be pedestrian, it'll just be superficial. You've got to get the garden right into you and you've got to love it and then the whole garden becomes your favourite place.

Do you have a ritual place where you sit and have a cup of tea? John and I always have our morning and afternoon tea in the garden and it might only be 5 or 10 minutes and it makes us actually sit in one of the trees for peace so that we're actually looking and exploring it.

Maybe the third thing I say to new young gardeners is the old saying: 'Take time to smell the roses'. You can get caught up when you're working in a garden, you never take that time but you can never have too many benches in a garden, never too many seats. So, I'm always looking for where the seats are and I do this when I visit other gardens. I sit in every seat and I look and I try to figure out why did they put it here, what are we looking at and so on. Yeah, often when I'm working, I take time, I sit down on that seat and I try and make sure. Usually, I'm there late and after hours and so on, early evening is the best time of the day and I often take the time to just wander round without really thinking about work, but I do, I think about it in terms of if I was a punter coming as a visitor for the first time walking around, what am I seeing. I mean, I am keeping work in my mind, what should be done.

It's hard physical work, gardening, and you've got to be fit, you can't afford injury.

I'm getting older now, I'm always looking for a young person with a strong back, I need one nowadays.

I'm looking for a strong back and someone who will do what I tell him. Can you tell us about, we've talked about hedging and the Arboretum, there are some sculptures

too in Oldbury, and I know you have made some marvellous sculptures with barbed wire and birds' nests and things like that. Are you still doing that sort of work?

I still play with the barbed wire. Yep, there's not much sculpture in Oldbury it's something we talk about.

The dogs?

Oh, around the house, yes, David's got a collection. I probably don't notice that, a collection of bronze castes, dogs, roosters, bull, brolgas, that sort of thing. We've talked a lot about big sculpture, big garden pieces that could go in the Arboretum, on the lawns and so on. No-one's ever been able to decide on anything. There was a sculpture exhibition recently with the Arts Trail. The Sculpture Garden was set up out at Cameron Reid's, cabinetmakers. He's got a property, he was nearly burnt out, he went in collaboration with a woman who sculpts and does stone pieces. There was a combination of some pieces of Oldbury elm, because Cameron collected some – we had lost some trees in storms and he took some big trunks out there and he's doing some pieces on that, so I'm hoping some of that comes back into the garden as a sculpted piece of elm.

Yes, they've done something similar out at Bendooley Estate where they lost part of a big tree and so when they built The Stables, all of that timber was used for the benches, the bar and some sculptures, all made from the wood from the tree, so that the tree wasn't lost to the property.

Well, I think that's a beautiful way to use it.

What are you most passionate about in the garden? Would it be bird life, wildlife, or not?

Wildlife's the bane of my existence, rabbits, deer, kangaroos, parrots. It reminds me of when my daughter was young, I'd read her Peter Rabbit stories, and we came into conflict because I was always pushing for Farmer MacGregor and she was always pushing for Peter Rabbit.

So, passion in the garden, it's all about presentation and what comes out of the presentation. It's like a really good abstract work of art. You look at something that appeals to you, you don't know what it is about it, but it's something that speaks to you, it's art, it's poetry, it's something in your spirit you know. I think that's what happens when I visit a garden, I walk around, apart from sitting on seats, how do I feel in this garden. I'm trying to work out, is this a show-off garden where they're doing follies and all the fancy bits, is it a plant-person's garden, not so much the maintenance or presentation, they've got all these really interesting nursery stuff. There are different types of gardens, there are nursery gardens, plants gardens, parks type gardens and so on.

50:20

People say I'm reducing it too much but what I'm after with that maintenance, if your edges are just right then everything is clean and tidy and neat and every plant is

growing the way it should be and presented in the way it should be, then what you're after is this harmony and flow and also in a garden there's discovery, it should have a sense of mystery in the way it's designed, so you flow around and there's something new around every corner and there's this sense of calmness. One of the things we've talked about at Oldbury is it's a big old house that dominates, this huge carriage circle and it just looks like elms and hedges and so on, and this big stone house, that once you get into it and get around, there are all these little things happening in every corner that's different. As you flow through, the idea that less is more and with the presentation you're not overwhelmed by too much show off stuff or folly stuff, a different feeling in each part of the garden but it's that sense of harmony in the garden, that's what I'm after.

One thing I've noticed with these estate gardens on Open Days is that visitors rush in and then they wander out. It's as if their whole bodies have responded to that relaxed state that gardens offer.

That's exactly what the result should be. If they're rushing in and then rushing out, you know, well different things appeal to different people, you know, well it didn't work for them.

Now I'm going to ask a question you may hate – If you could be a tree or a plant, what would you be?

I'd be a tree, I don't have a particular favourite but if I was to be a tree, I'd be a big old tree, I'd be solid I'd be anchored in the landscape, I'd have good roots, I'd be full of wildlife and fauna. I'd be scarred, I'd have a history because I'd been around for so long and the scars would show it. I'd have what the Japanese call Wabi Sabi. There's something I'm always working for in the garden, there's this philosophy they call Wabi Sabi, have you heard of it?

No, I haven't.

So, it's very much the idea in bonsai, it's the idea of impermanence, imperfection, of ageing.

I know they never cut a tree down, they always prop it up.

They like to prop it up, thank you. So that's what they're trying to do with the bonsai, trying to create this small, miniature version, that looks as though it's really old and that's going back to what I like in sculpture. One of the best sculptural things in Oldbury Farm is a piece of timber that I pulled out of a burn pile. It's an old piece of elm, just charcoal, about 3 metres tall and I stood it up in the creek garden and it looks fantastic, and everyone liked it so it stayed, because it was something I didn't ask about beforehand. It's just an old burnt piece of timber, and the barbed wire is the same, it's old, it's rusty, it's recyclable, it's got history, it's got those signs of age and that's what an old garden should have, and that's what I'd be, an old tree, scarred. I'm starting to feel like that nowadays.

Well, is there anything else that you would like to talk about that we haven't mentioned?

One of my pet things is about gardening as a career. It's something I'd like to be able to do more about. It was the driving force behind getting the Head Gardeners' Group together, which we did over the last couple of years at Oldbury, running day seminars and lecture sessions for a group of Southern Highlands head gardeners. It's about continuing professional development. I mean, all the white collared occupations talk about CPD, it's necessary in a lot of other trades like electricians, plumbers, have to keep up with new regulations, builders and so on. Gardeners, we spend all our lives, our careers, hanging around in other people's backyards, we don't know each other generally, we don't talk to each other. There are no guilds or groups or real networks. If you want to do the continuing professional development it's pretty well up to you to go to lectures, book yourself into a weekend dry stone walling course or hedging workshop if someone is putting them on. AGHS and RAIH do these sorts of things, but if you don't bother to or are not encouraged to do it, it's not part of a career. And most of those lectures or courses are set up for the general public, they're not specifically set up for career professional gardeners to be logically or in a sensible way building on their skills.

That comes back too, to older gardeners mentoring younger gardeners, passing on knowledge. We're looking for a trainee now at Oldbury so unless you get into that situation where you've got a mentor or an experienced gardener, you'll do your Cert. III and you'll get your whipper-snipper and your blower, and your ute and trailer, and off you'll go, that's how I started. It's then up to you to do that life-long learning. I'd like to see more structure and process whereby it would help the gardeners, produce better gardeners, it would help the clients, whether they're private owners or corporate owners, hotels and institutions. It would help them obtain quality gardeners.

58:30

It used to be businesses like Ryans, used to have beautiful gardens.

Yes, it's pretty much cookie-cutter stuff. So, I'm very interested in professional development, I guess that's where I'm at now in my career, really.

Do you see that being a State thing or a National body?

I see it as an industry thing, I mean as a role in TAFE and TAFE courses have been gutted and I see they're making new noises now about improving TAFE courses, I hope that happens. I just think within the industry, there could be more opportunities, they should be looking at ways of doing it. There is an over-arching body, the Royal Australian Institute of Horticulture, most gardeners I know aren't members, institutions join, businesses join, nurseries join, but just working professional gardeners like myself, I don't see a lot of them as being members.

AGHS do have a few members who are gardeners and they like to attend lectures and conferences but probably they should be offering special rates to professional gardeners as an incentive to join. Do they get much out of garden history?

Well, I love garden history which is why I'm a member. I didn't join until late in my career. Priorities change during your career, but I had to do it pretty much off my own bat, there was no one telling me when I was younger, 'actually you should go to this course'. I went to courses but there was no one telling me 'you should do this', 'you should go and talk to this particular gardener', 'you should go and find out how to do perennial preparations from this particular person'.

Is there any particular organisation or nursery, or industry in say the big money fertilisers industry who offer the opportunity for gardeners to go over to Dixter for example, to work there for a season?

There is. Victoria does these things better than us, and I know someone who got a scholarship, she was a gardener who did an apprenticeship at Cruden Farm, Amanda Woodhams, who did an apprenticeship at Cruden Farm under John Morrison, and won a scholarship. She was sent to the U.K. and Europe and given introduction to 10 or 20 top head gardeners. I don't think Great Dixter was one of them, and she travelled around, got intros into gardens, interviewed all these people. I don't think there's enough of that. I've talked to other head gardeners around here and I've offered to show the things we do at Oldbury like hedge-laying. Every June or July we'll be doing hedge-laying and I've said, 'if you want to send one of your gardeners over for a week or two we're happy to do the swap, work out the logistics and so on. We'd like to do the same with someone who is an expert lawn person, you know, we could send our trainee. I think there is an opportunity for things like that to be organised. The assistant gardener who comes to Oldbury to learn about hedge-laying, they may never do any hedge-laying ever, but it teaches you another aspect about how plants work, it's a history thing, it opens up 'why this plant responds this way', 'how it will work with other plants'. You add it all into your knowledge.

Well, from this interview today, that is certainly something I will take to AGHS, to our management to think about scholarships. We do offer it to writers of garden history but I don't think we offer anything to actual hands-on gardeners to develop expertise and knowledge.

Yes, well that sounds promising, that's got my head ticking over.

We probably need to talk a little bit more about that.

I suppose I should ask you too, at some stage, for a list of the Head Gardeners we should make contact with, so that we've got an idea of who is in the Highlands, because they do stay, they're not nomadic and are a pretty consistent group.

Yes, I've got a Contact List.

Well, Ian, on behalf of AGHS and BDM, thank you for sharing your experiences and insights into the world of being a Head Gardener and what you're passionate about, and we want to say thank you too for your contribution to the custodianship of these significant gardens. If it wasn't for people like you who are absolutely passionate about them, they would be lost, and when we lose these gardens they are irreplaceable because we have lost that knowledge, and as you say there isn't that

recorded history. On behalf of future generations who will enjoy the tranquility of your gardens thank you very much for your time today.

You're welcome, thank you.

Interview ends: 1 hour 05 minutes