AUSTRALIAN GARDEN HISTORY SOCIETY

NATIONAL ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

SOUTHERN HIGHLANDS BRANCH

Photo: provided by Sue Whitehouse

Interviewee:	**RICK SHEPHERD**
Interviewer:	SUE WHITEHOUSE
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INTERVIEW WITH RICK SHEPHERD, HEAD GARDENER
AT RETFORD PARK, BOWRAL ON 3rd October 2019.

This is an oral interview with Rick Shepherd, Head Gardener at Retford Park, Bowral. Rick will be speaking with me, Sue Whitehouse, for the Australian Garden History Society (AGHS) as part of a collaboration with the Berrima District Museum (BDM) to create an exhibition of eight significant gardens of the Southern Highlands, to be showcased in the BDM digital gallery 'Story Centre'.

Rick, on behalf of the AGHS and the BDM I would like to thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview.
(Rick's comments in *italics*).

My pleasure, I'm Rick Shepherd and this is my voice.

This interview is taking place today, Thursday, 3rd October 2019, commencing at approximately 10.30 a.m.

As you know, Rick, this interview is intended to cover the history, development and adaptation of the gardens at Retford Park, from commencement to the present period, in particular since your appointment by James Fairfax as Head Gardener in 2011, and including any future plans for the gardens at Retford Park now that you are working under the auspices of The National Trust.

We would first like to start with some biographical details:

Where were you born?

I was born in Narrogin in Western Australia.

Do you have any siblings?

I've got 3 older sisters – Susan, Gay and Lisa.

Where did you attend school?

I went to Narrogin Primary School until Year 5 and then for Years 6 and 7, they have 7 years of primary school in W.A., I went to East Claremont Practical School and then for High School I went to Christchurch Grammar School in Claremont.

Who were your greatest influences in your early years?

Well my mother was very good friends with Carol Serventy, they were childhood friends, and her husband Vince Serventy used to come to our farm quite often, and the two families were quite close, they were like cousins and I am still in regular contact with

Cathy, their daughter. So, Vince Serventy was doing a book on the dryandra forest which was adjoining our property and I was really mesmerised with his love of nature and his knowledge of nature and I think one thing that really influenced me was to show that you could have a career in something that you really loved, and so he had a big influence on me as a boy and a young man. So yes, I was very lucky.

When do you think you were first introduced to gardening?
Dad used to grow veggies, he was a farmer, so we had a veggie garden and yeah I was really interested in the veggie garden, yeah that was probably when I was at a primary school age and in high school I remember the veggie garden was outside my bedroom window and when I was supposed to be studying, I'd be looking out at it, and I'd find all these excuses to put down the books and go out – my sisters called it the Veggie Garden Extension Program, and every time I had a project on the veggie garden would grow bigger.

I understand! Any excuse… but you could argue this was furthering your career.

Yes!

And so, your passion for gardening started at an early age, and you had good guidance and perhaps your family were indirectly guiding you in that direction too.

Where did you study horticulture?

I actually didn't study horticulture. I went to . . . the school I went to was very much training the students to go to university, so there was no question that you wouldn't go to university. I went to the University of Western Australia and studied Science and I majored in Botany and Zoology and I worked for a while in the Department of Horticulture in Perth doing research and I found, I just found research wasn't really for me. I just found it a bit boring.

Yes, you're not out there watching it.

Hmm, it was interesting and quite a lot of field work, but I've got more of a creative drive and I just found the research didn't work for me.

Yes, it was regimented.

4:39

What has influenced your gardening style – did you travel, did you work amongst friends?
When I moved to the East Coast in my twenties I got a job in a garden centre and I had given up the horticulture employment in Perth and I was thinking of getting a horticulture job again, but I got a job in a garden centre and that started me into more ornamental horticulture. I didn't really have a lot of knowledge in that field because training in botany is not horticulture and that exposed me to a lot of plant material and different plant material to what I was used to, because the East Coast is a much different climate and soil, and the woman who ran the garden centre had a kind of landscaping arm so I ended up working in the landscaping arm and I just found I really loved that because that was creative. You know, we'd go in and almost do a 'backyard blitz', we'd start with a clean palette and we'd renovate and create. I found that was what I needed to be doing.

Moving to Retford Park, it has an incredible history, commencing from 1887. What do you know of that early history?

Can you tell us the story you know?

Yes, well, the Gundungara people were here first, I always think they get overlooked. They were here for many tens of thousands of years and looked after the land much better than I think we have done in the last two hundred, then Edward Riley was here and then Sam Horden bought it and it was his country residence, you know when you have the money you build the big house and he ran his stud here and you know, I guess that was what you did when you had your money and your country property and he would entertain his friends.

It was an agricultural venture but also about status?

Yeah, it was about status, that was the primary thing.

Well that umbrella of the Hordens in the area was dramatic wasn't it, and it was about tremendous wealth?

Department stores in those days were making lots of money, yes, and then the second generation of the Hordens really got into the gardens and Samuel's wife Charlotte really loved it and she had a veggie garden from which they would supply to other places and that sort of thing and down in the park, just below where we are now they had a veggie garden apparently, and then the third generation Sam Horden, I don't really know much about his influence.

Yes, I think it was shortlived, and it was that second generation that really created the gardens.

I did get to meet the 4th and 5th Sam Hordens, they came to visit the garden and introduced themselves which was lovely. I've got the phone number of Sam the 5th, who is in his 30s and they really loved coming here, and they were so happy to see that what their family created was being looked after, and to see that the original vision was still intact and that respect was shown and the buildings and gardens were being looked after. I've got photos of them.

Do you know how much is left here now? I know when we were here a week ago a lot of material was being packed up and shipped off. Are there records e.g. diaries, or plant catalogues?

Yes, we have kept a lot, as we're in the process of developing the Conservation Management Plan. There are a lot of documents, I know there are receipts, from correspondence with customs regarding the importation of 2 Abutilons. They came from overseas, so one of the projects I want to do is to get 2 Abutilons and have them at the front of the house. There are no Abutilons here, and I don't know what happened to them. I've read through these records and James had gone to the effort of importing these 2 Abutilons. Whether it was driven by him or his gardener I don't know, but he had obviously sanctioned and paid for it. So, there are a lot of records here and we have kept them on site as we are still developing the Conservation Management Plan and so Scott and I have read through a lot of those documents.

It would be lovely to link them to those old receipts – there's a story there.
Yeah.

So, any gardening equipment? Any old ploughs or…?

10:20

No, we don't really have a lot of the original equipment. There is an old turf-lifting gadget there, a metal thing you use for sliding under turf, which hasn't been used for many, many years, but not much in the way of mechanical equipment. There's a big roller out there from the tennis court, on display opposite the office there. I found it in one of the sheds actually and brought it out because I thought this was a really interesting item, with age.

Can you tell us about your experiences working in this garden?

For example, what is a "normal day" in the life of a Head Gardener?
OK, do you want to do today? So, yesterday we had our volunteers come, Wednesday is their normal day. They usually come at 9, I usually come about 7, let the chooks out, that would be the first job, then I do a quick walk around before staff arrive. I've got Jordan here 5 days and Jim 2 ½, so I usually get here before them and have a quick walk around.

These are your employed staff?

Yes, and I have a list which probably I've done the day before, of what I plan to do that day and I tweak with them the order of jobs, like what we might do with the lawn or whatever is the major project for the day, and I get Jordan and Jim, if he's here, started on those and then about 10 to 9 I'll come back to the office and be here for the Volunteers – unless I might be somewhere else in the garden and they have to ring me up and say "Where are you?". There's usually a plan for the Volunteers, they've usually got their own areas, but we might just have to give them a little bit of guidance. Then we have morning tea at 10, and mainly that's a social thing, have a cup of tea or coffee and something to eat, often my wife might've made a cake, or the volunteers might bring in something which is lovely. The volunteers will be here until about 12 or 1pm, depending on weather or whatever. Then in the afternoon different tasks. Yesterday afternoon we had a meeting with the Volunteers, like a planning meeting, looking at the direction of Retford Park, and I made a presentation about my vision of the gardens, and people were voicing their various ideas. One of the great ones was the café provide more food for the gardens.

I was going to come to that. How do you prepare for Open Day?

It's pretty easy these days, we've got a plan. Because we're open so often, we don't stress as much. With James Fairfax we'd open the gardens once a year, and so we'd have weeks working towards it. But now it's more ordinary, so we've possibly lowered the bar a little bit, because we can't put that amount of effort in every month, to have every hedge done, every lawn done. So, we've got to accept that the public will see that this is an ongoing process and it's not going to be perfect, but we do at the same time try and make it look perfect. So, a week before an Open Garden we try and make sure the lawns are done, or the paths are tidy, the main area near the house is weeded and looks

good, and then we'll do things like arrange pots and put whatever pots are looking the best at the front of the house and various places like the front of the gallery. We make sure the toilets are clean and the flowers are good, make sure the carparks are mowed, make sure the entrance looks good at the front gate, make sure that's all tidy, make sure the signs are OK – there are a lot of signs we have to put out, like 'Be Careful of the Gravel' or No Entry', that type of thing, barriers to areas we are trying to keep out of. Making sure the emu's gate is locked so no-one lets it out, all little things like that. So, we've got a checklist of things we do. It only takes about an hour and a half these days to do those final jobs.

So that's been perfected, but it's been adapted from the James Fairfax days?

Yes, previously we used to spend more time, like in the carpark we used to mark out exactly where to park, whereas these days we don't spend as much time, Open Days have become more relaxed and routine.

15:48

OK, and I think it shows how important it is, and will continue to be, that liaison with the Volunteers.

Yes, that was what we were talking about yesterday, how my vision is to make the garden even better, make it the best garden in the country, that's something I'd really like to see, and the only way we can achieve that is having more visitors, more funding and more volunteers which would really lift the presentation of the garden, and lift the awareness.

Getting back to the garden, and you, which is your favourite place and why?

The Green Room is one of the areas which I think is really special. It's a hedged garden room which David Wilkinson designed. It used to be a chook yard and apparently a real hodge-podge of fences and old sheds and stuff. James Fairfax purchased this sculpture called 'Euphoric Angels' by Inge King and so David Wilkinson was given the task of positioning or placing the sculpture in the garden. He designed the Green Room with the sculpture in the middle and it has a plinth of teucrium and buxxus and then 4 hedges around it and grass in between. I think it's a really special place, it's very minimalist, there are no flowers, no distractions, no pots, there's no busyness, just the sculpture. I always say, when I take a tour, that when it was put there this was a private home and I don't know if there are many other artworks in a private home in Australia that would take up that much space. This was a real indication of how much James Fairfax really loved art.

Have you given specific areas to the garden that you've named yourself?

Yes, the Fountain Walk, which is at the front of the house, I've reworked that quite a lot. That was originally designed by John Codrington in the 1960s and when I came here it was similar to what it is now, but I've really reworked it. It was a grey garden then, and I've added more grey plants and I've clipped them in a hamburger shape, which I call 'blobs', so I've renamed that garden The Blobbery, which is a bit less formal than The Fountain Walk. Visitors seem to resonate with that, they enjoy it.

Particularly when you can go up to the high point of the house, to get that classic photo of The Blobbery.

Yes, it's become quite iconic. I guess injecting humour into the garden is something I really like. I think formal, older style gardens can be quite stuffy. So, I guess one of my signature styles is to have a little bit of whimsy or humour, like the Taps Sculpture, over outside where we're sitting, is another example of that. I call that the Waterless Garden, so we took out a hedge which was there and replaced it with drought tolerant plantings, and the taps which we found in the shed. So, what I say is, like, 'When you've got a waterless garden, what do you do with the taps? So, we made a sculpture out of them. It just gets people thinking, and it's whimsical.

Another garden I've named, which is next to where we're sitting now, is a garden room I created when I started working for James Fairfax, called Aunty Eileen's Best Room. It features a Living Couch. So that was named after my great aunt who was Eileen Coucher, and she was a farmer's wife in Western Australia. Everyone said, 'Oh, she was crabby' and she was this and that, and then I heard that she was highly intelligent, and my aunt said she should've been an academic. Then I thought, well, maybe that was why she was crabby, because she was frustrated and her opportunities were limited as a farmer's wife, and so that was why I created that room. That was her sacred space within the house and that was where she could have complete control over one room, it's like a living room with a couch and a rug and a lamp and window and curtains. It's like the best room in the front of the house that she could have as her sanctuary.

20:45

Another garden I've named is the Cretaceous Garden. It contains the Bunya Pine which is just near the front of the house, which is probably the most iconic tree on the property. So, when I first came it had lawn underneath it and so we got rid of the lawn and just let all the lovely Bunya leaves and mulch develop, which I thought was quite beautiful. An idea I've had since I studied Botany years ago was creating a cretaceous garden, because I studied paleontology, or paleo botany I suppose it was where you're looking back a hundred million years ago when Australia was part of the Gondwana continent. There were virtually no flowering plants back then, they hadn't evolved or had just started to evolve. So Australia would have been dominated by big Araucarian forests, things like the Bunya, and the understorey, would have been cycads and ferns and other non-flowering plants, ones that evolved before the flowering plants. So, I suggested to James Fairfax again to do a cretaceous garden and put a sculpture in there based on that era and he agreed, so we took out the rest of the lawn and planted two types of cycads and about five types of ferns, all native. We created sculpture called the Muttaburrasaurus Nest and chose eggs from an extinct dinosaur, which was an herbivorous dinosaur which did live in Australia in Araucaria Forests, possibly in this area, we're not sure. But again, it's a bit of fun and I'm trying to get people to imagine the Earth in another era, that this is possibly what it was like.

OK, moving on, to your passion for sustainable gardening.

When I first started here it was a contract with James Fairfax, and in my bid – I had to do a tender to pitch for the contract and I said that I wanted to run things sustainably, that my business was sustainable gardens. That was based on looking after the garden in a way that was good for the environment. So that was focusing on things like not using chemicals, improving the soil health, improving things like biodiversity and recycling and

reusing. One of the things that impresses me, is the doctors' oath, which is 'Do no harm' and I think gardeners should do that too, so we shouldn't be using things like toxic chemicals, shouldn't be using things that are going to kill the earthworms, or harm the birds or even harm ourselves.

James agreed to that proposal. When I first came here, the shed was full of chemicals, like a truck-load full of chemical fertilisers, pesticides, herbicides, fungacides, mitacides, growth retardants, the whole lot. They never got used and so they went to the tip and somehow they got rid of them. We started using things like, when I came here there was not even a compost heap here, all the refuse used to get burnt, it was just a giant pile. So, one of the first things I did was we started recycling waste, and we created a chipping pile, which we would get the tree loppers to chip, and we'd have a compost pile for the smaller items which were compostable. We'd have another pile of things which we didn't want to go to compost, like maybe onion grass, which could go to the chooks. So, everything had a use, and then we started doing things like some things were too big to chip, so we made the giant benches which are down by the Canal and the bicycle racks here and the troughs outside the stables. So, it's a matter of you've got to look at each item of waste and think this is an asset rather than waste and how can it have an alternative. Now we've got our neighbour who gives us horse manure and we go to a couple of cafes in town who give us coffee grinds and we put our lawn clippings there and our soft prunings which we chop up with the lawnmower and we've fertilised all our lawns this year with compost which has been a fantastic result.

26:19

We've done a lot of things to improve the biodiversity here so ducks, from the ground up, and we're using a lot of diversity of mulch, often sticks and branches under the trees, not just leaves and that gives different habitat opportunities for different organisms and then the birds come and it goes full circle. We've got 78 species of birds we've recorded here over the last few years. We've put in safe water, like a bird bath, we've put in a few nesting boxes and we've planted wind breaks next to the orchard to try and bring in more honeyeaters, as there are not many honeyeaters here.

OK, so I think we've already addressed the change in approach that's come about with the National Trust now having control of the property.
In what way will you liaise with them and adapt to their stewardship?

We're about to adopt a document called the Conservation Management Plan and that's different from the Garden Management Plan and what I'm trying to inject into that is, there's a couple of things, and one of them is Climate Change, and we need to know is that the garden in 2019 is like it is now, but in 10, 20, 30 years' time the climate will be different. It's already changed in the years I've been here and so when a tree dies we've got to work out why it died. Did it die because it's too old, or had a disease or did it die because of the change in climate? So, I want the document to be flexible enough so we can say, well, we'll try and keep the character of the garden the same, but we don't have to stick to the species that were here in 2019. Everyone says that the Southern Highlands is a cool climate garden area but I think we have to acknowledge that it's really on the cusp of a cool climate garden area and it's going to be changing in the future. That's an important part, to have climate change heavily built into that document .

Another thing is that over the past 50 years there has been an enormous amount of change in the garden. John Codrington redesigned the Fountain Walk, also known as the Blobbery, David Wilkinson designed the Green Room, also the Knot Garden, the Persian Carpet and also the Millenium Canal. Gilford Bell built the swimming pool. So, there's been a lot of change to the garden over the past 50 years, so for the garden to reflect the James Fairfax era here, which the National Trust want to do because James has generously gifted the property to the National Trust, I think the document has to acknowledge that change is part of the culture here and so change should be continuing to be part of the garden's style here and we shouldn't be locked in to a 2019 or 2017 garden. We should acknowledge that every 5, 10 or 15 years there is an opportunity to do something different, and that needs to be part of that document.

OK, I think that just about wraps it up. Obviously, it's in good hands. It's been absolutely fascinating to hear you, particularly that last point.

Those are just my thoughts which I'm hoping to put in the document, that would be my pitch.

Thank you so much. Is there anything else that you'd like to say?

Yes, just to mention something that we covered yesterday. We do have the orchard and the vegetable garden here, which were here before James Fairfax's time. One of my visions is I'd like to see that expanded and somehow incorporated into somehow members of the public when they come here can eat produce from the garden. We did talk about that yesterday at the meeting and there was a lot of enthusiasm for that.

Well, that would be linking back to the heritage.

Yes, the Horderns had the veggie garden. We do, whenever we make a minor decision in the garden, try to link back to James Fairfax and even in events we run, like I'm thinking of doing a peony workshop because James Fairfax planted the peonies here and that was something he loved.

Thank you very much Rick, on behalf of the Australian Garden History Society for inviting us here.

Formal interview ends: 31 minutes 48 seconds

A WALK THROUGH THE GARDENS WITH RICK SHEPHERD

32:00

So, this is the Cretaceous Garden, with the beautiful big Bunya that everybody comments on when they come here and we've got all the cycads and the ferns, and the lovely mulch from the prickly Bunya leaves and we've got the Muttaburrasaurus Nest which is, I call it a collaborative artwork. It was done by myself, I designed it, and then Heidi McGeoch and Sam Larwill who are based in Bowral built it. Heidi made the ceramic eggs and Sam did the metal nest.

Just next to the Cretaceous Garden are two blue chairs. James Fairfax's letterhead had this symbol which is on my shirt, showing the house, the Bunya tree and the dogs. So when I wanted to repaint the garden chairs I chose the same colour which was on his letterhead and we've since had it put onto our work shirts. So it's a corporate branding in a way, but I wanted to have the same theme running through, because these chairs were white and landscape architects today say you can't have white because your eyes are drawn to it too heavily, you want a darker colour. They suggested a dark green, and I thought 'Oh no, you can't have dark green', to me it's just a little bit boring, and so we went for the blue and James and he was happy with it. Everyone seems to like it and I actually have seen it in other gardens, so it does seem a popular colour. I've got the colour sheet in my office, but I can't tell you off the top of my head.

What I've tried to do is create an effect as though someone lives here, like James Fairfax is still here, so I try to make the garden not look like an institution, to try to make it look as if someone's home, which is how it used to be. That's why the pots at the front we change, because when you've got your own garden you change them and that's why I move some of the furniture around because that's what you do, you change things, it's not static.

So now we're just at the front of the house, looking at the succulent collection. One of the things I really like about this collection is that they're very appropriate for this site because it's very hot, they're drought tolerant and in full sun here. The other thing is here we have a mansion valued at $20,000,000 or something but these succulents cost practically nothing, they often came from friends or gardens, and the pots cost practically nothing, they're just terracotta. Some of them I found on the side of the road, so I like the contrast. This place represents a lot of wealth and here we've got a part of the garden which cost practically nothing and anyone can do this at home. Yeah, that's the kind of thing I like, it makes this part of the garden accessible, something that anyone can do. You don't need to be a millionaire to do this.

We're now just walking through the garden, Jordan's mowing and there's that beautiful smell of freshly mowed grass. One of the things I really love about summer is after a hot day when people have got their sprinklers on, and the smells you get when you go for a walk in the evening. The hot hard surface you get when you use the sprinklers there's just something that releases in the air that is a very familiar and comforting smell.

We're now just walking through a part of the garden I call the Winter Walk. This pathway has always been here, but we widened it about 4 years ago. It already had a lot of winter planting like this Daphne we're standing next to, and the Corylus at the other end. So I've planted more winter interest plants and coincidentally, a lot of them are very fragrant, like we've got the Daphne, we've got the Lonicera Fragrantissima, the winter honeysuckle. So quite a lot of fragrant plants and also plants which look fantastic in the winter. There are actually roses which have come out, the Hellebores, we've got the little Snowflakes, and the little redstemmed Cornus. So in the winter I wanted an area that's particularly interesting in the winter, just to see the Hazel there, when everything else is bare.

So we're continuing walking around the garden, and we're in front of the Deer sculpture, in front of the stag. This was part of James Fairfax's collection that he had in Dorset, when he had his property over there, the Mill House I think it was called. When that was sold off and a lot of the material was packed up and this sculpture arrived in a container

along with the owl which is on the other side of the garden. I was given the job of locating it in the garden and James wanted to be able to see it from the verandah. We put it here just below the house and I wanted to have the effect that it was coming out of the forest and just sort of peering to make sure it was safe to come out to graze on the lawn, and I think it's been quite effective to put here. Apparently it was made in New York, then it went to the U.K. and now it's come to Australia, so it's very well travelled.

Now, we're just walking in the Bamboo Garden. This area of the garden when I came was really overgrown. It was very solid bamboo and we spent a lot of time opening it up and cleaning it out, and we found the remnants of an old path, so we re-established the path and we cleared the centre of it, because I like the idea of standing in the centre and being able to look up and see the sky, which you can do. Then I thought, 'Really we need some sort of sculpture or artwork in the middle here. I found this artwork, which is called 'The Conversation' – it's ceramic, in a local studio. We brought it here on approval, and I said to James, 'What do you think?' and he said 'Yes', and we went through the process of acquiring it. I think it looks settled in this space as it's a very tall 3-part sculpture, which mirrors the tallness of the bamboo.

Now we're under the Cork Oak, in the Park, the Quercus Suba, from Portugal. It has a Mediterranean origin, I think it's Portugal and Spain and what I've done here, again I guess it's my sense of humour, and instead of putting a mulch of leaves or clippings, I've put a mulch of corks. Some people don't understand where cork comes from, they think it's a fruit and they just fall from the tree. So, we've got probably a thousand corks here, and my son's girlfriend, she works in hospitality, and every month she brings me little bags of corks. We're just trying to make the garden a bit more fun I suppose and create a bit of a talking point.

Walking Tour ends
Interview concludes: 39 minutes 35 seconds