

AUSTRALIAN GARDEN HISTORY SOCIETY
NATIONAL ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION
SOUTHERN HIGHLANDS BRANCH



Photo: provided by Simon Brandon

Interviewee:	SIMON BRANDON
Interviewer:	SUE WHITEHOUSE & LYN BARRETT
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INTERVIEW WITH SIMON BRANDON, FORMER HEAD GARDENER AT
HOPEWOOD HOUSE, BOWRAL ON THURSDAY 27th FEBRUARY 2020

This is an oral interview with SIMON BRANDON, former Head Gardener at Hopewood House, Bowral. Simon 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 8 significant gardens of the Southern Highlands, to be showcased in the BDM digital gallery 'Story Centre' in 2020.

Simon, on behalf of the AGHS and the BDM I would like to thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview.

(Simon's comments in *italics*).

For the recording, I'm Simon Brandon, and this is my voice.

This interview is taking place today, 27th February, 2020 commencing at approximately 5 o'clock.

This interview is intended to cover the history, development and adaptation of the gardens at Hopewood House, from commencement in 1884, and in particular covering the period, commencing in December 2007, during which you were Head Gardener at Hopewood.

We would like to start with some biographical details:

Where were you born?

I was born in Perth, Western Australia, in 1967.

Do you have any siblings?

I had a sister Rebecca, who passed away in 2016.

And where did you attend school?

I did my Primary at Artarmon Public, and my Secondary schooling at North Sydney Boys High School.

And when were you introduced to gardening?

I think I potted petunias with my mother at an age of about 5.

And where do you think your passion for gardening came from? It probably originated then?

Yes, most certainly. My mother was an avid gardener and that certainly carried through my early life.

So, she would have been one of your great influences through your early years. Any friends, colleagues, research, travel when you got older?

Well, in my college days, when I was studying at Ryde we used to do day trips to nurseries and so on around Dural, and I met Roy Rumsey when he was in his late '90s still working, and his wife Heather Rumsey, who was a very well-known author and expert on roses, so the passion for roses came from Mum, but also fostered by these people.

And you studied Horticulture at Ryde, how many years was that?

I did a Diploma in Applied Science in Landscape, between 1987 and 1991, so a 4 years course.

OK, so moving to Hopewood, it has such a fascinating history dating from 1885. What do you know of that history?

I think the thing that stands out most particularly for me in that history, is the so-called 'children of Hopewood' which were the 80 odd children who were brought up there as orphans basically in the Second World War, and met quite a few of those people at various Open Days.

Did you? How fascinating, so they came back, no bad stories, hopefully good?

No, they were great stories. I remember asking one of them what it was like to be growing up at Hopewood at that time, and he said it was fantastic, he said, 'I had 85 brothers and sisters.'

Exactly, it's a good story of an institution. We hear so many other stories now, and this was obviously a success. They believed, anyone working there and the inspiration of the owner, obviously believed they were doing something really good.

Yes, so great memories.

Compared to orphanages in general, clearly it was not run like an institution was it.

During your time at Hopewood, were you aware of any reference material being still held on the property, for example diaries, garden plans, photos, equipment, catalogues?

There are some archives from the owners prior to the Andersons. The Anstees did have the garden open at one stage and there are some booklets that were available to visitors when the garden was open, and I do have a copy of one of those somewhere, which I will endeavour to find for you.

Is that the red booklet?

5:00

Yes, I gave that back to Janet, and I think you gave it to her. I took from that what I wanted.

I think there might be some photographs as well of the garden in early times and I'm trying to remember where I saw those.

I know Jenny Clegg, Suzie Anderson's mother, has some she's going to dig out for me.

OK, your experiences working at Hopewood. Can you tell me what a 'normal day' working as Head Gardener at Hopewood entailed?

It used to be quite routine for a walk around the garden to see what was happening on a particular day. On a day to day, often particular things would change, for example branches sometimes would fall or there could be things that had blown over. So, it was often important just to do a quick visual tour of the garden to see if there was anything urgent that needed doing. Then typically, a list for the day would be generated, and almost always there were staff of mine that would be there, and so tasks, and what have you, would be delegated. What would often happen was that we would work until around about 10 o'clock – we would normally start around 7.30, and we would work until about 10 o'clock when we'd have morning tea and then we'd all sort of all get together and have a chat about where we were up to with our various tasks and what have you. And whether anything needed to be organised for the second session of the day, so we'd work from about 10, 10.30 until 12.30 and then take lunch.

And I gather, reading your booklet, that you were ably assisted by people with quite a nice pedigree in gardening as well. Was this Bruce Clarke with you for the duration of your stay at Hopewood?

No, probably only for about the last 12 months that we were there, Bruce was my assistant there.

He'd previously been the Head Gardener at Milton Park.

That's right.

And how did you prepare for private events?

I guess the thing about that was when they were on we'd have advance notice of course, and so the overall presentation of the property needed to be very high. There was no detail we could overlook really, but at the same time, we didn't have unlimited means, so we needed to be able to work with a broad brush through the property to be able to get the place looking beautiful and that was something that we became quite proficient at.

So, working in consultation with the Andersons, what were your overall plans and aims? When you first set out, did you have a plan?

Initially, I consulted and designed with the Andersons an overall plan for the garden in terms of its systematic improvement, and so we broke it down into the different areas of the garden where we thought there were specific things that needed doing in each of those, and as I've mentioned in the booklet there, largely it was a process of somewhat editing, identifying things that needed to be specifically improved or removed in some instances and because there had been so many layers of work done over so many different ownerships, some of the things that were tired or needed to be replaced or removed. So we might go into some areas and say, OK well we're going to change this, and carry out that as a job.

10:05

Because at the same time, the rest of the garden was being maintained, there was systematic improvement where you had to revisit different areas repeatedly to get the garden to the shape it eventually took.

Were any of those significant alterations or changes steps being taken to retain or preserve the heritage significance? Were you all conscious of that garden history that partnered the house in a way?

Well, very much so, one of the important built elements of the garden that we took particular care to retain and conserve were the brick pathways which were dated to the early days of the house – whether it was the Horderns or earlier, I'm not sure but they were certainly significant. Some of the other built elements of the garden were much more recent, and we didn't have any hesitation in making changes to them, for example, the pond that was in the area in front of the pavilion was filled in, because it had cracks and was leaking, and that was turned into a very nice lawn on which a lot of weddings were subsequently held on.

During the last decade or so we have become aware of such critical issues as climate change, sustainability and the need to garden in a way that protects the environment, and of course the importance of our most precious resource, water. In what ways did your gardening practices adapt, and how have they continued to adapt to address these issues?

I guess a short answer to that question is changing my management practices and approach, to looking after a garden like that, really is making management decisions around, for example, the lawns are a big part of a heritage garden like that, but in times of drought and so on, decisions need to be made about how much water is to be used, if any, whether or not those lawns are sustainable.

What happened in practice at Hopewood was that the lawns were graded into A, B and C and the Cs were the ones that were let go first, and had the least amount of water put on them, and really only one or two of the lawns had regular watering, and as we know they come back anyway, but it was about using water responsibly, but also about doing the cultural practices towards looking after both plants and lawns, that improve plant health, so by looking

after things correctly and thoughtfully too. So that's about observation and being there and seeing how plants are performing and adapting and adjusting according to their needs and also watching weather forecasts, weather and season.

Before we conclude, are there any things about your time at Hopewood that you would like to talk about that we haven't covered today?

For the tape, this is Lyn Barrett speaking. Simon, with the beautiful trees in Hopewood and some of them are extremely old and beautiful in their majesty. Can you tell us which would be some of your favourite trees on that site. It's a pretty rough site, on the top of a hill on a slope.

I think the Cupressus near the entrance is a really extraordinary old tree, that was very much of its time, and it had very low hanging boughs, and the children used to have swings hanging from it and what have you, and it was planted in the middle of the lawn and it was planted when the house was built and it grew and sustained them all.

That was Cupressus macrocarpa. Monterey Cypress.

Yes that's right.

There are some beautiful trees on the property and it's not always easy to maintain them in the conditions.

15:05

That's right, the arborists always had a big job there, looking after the limbs that would crack, particularly with the Cupressus, they get quite brittle as they get older.

And did they do any of that pinning?

Yep, cable and bracing, yes that's often necessary, quite involved bits of work to do.

It's a magnificent property to have worked on and an enormous job. How many staff would you have had?

It would vary at different times of year. Most often, there would be a crew of 3 of us looking after the property.

It's a big property for 3 fellows.

We had a young woman, Alice Baines, helped Bruce Clarke for quite a while actually, and she was doing her traineeship, and we were lucky enough to have her and she was lucky enough to get to do her traineeship at Hopewood.

We mentioned before about any other comments I had about Hopewood and my time there. I certainly saw it as a period of stewardship and the landscape stewardship was something that was very much taught to us at Ryde School of Horticulture. That we pass on, and it was very much a part of that ethos that we manage it just for a period of time and then we pass it on.

Yes, custodians.

With particular regard to my relationship with the Andersons, the gardens were managed contractually and Michael and I agreed that rather than charge for a number of hours per week or month or year that the garden would be managed on a performance basis, so we both realised that if the garden were to be inspected and needed to be completely perfect every week, that would be one figure, which would be a very high figure, or if it was a more reasonable 4 to 6 weeks cycle, and the garden was divided into zones and we felt that we could manage to a certain level through about a 6 week cycle and we would meet every 6 weeks to demonstrate that that was kept up. What that meant was that I was free to deploy resources as were necessary seasonally. That was very successful, because it meant that we could be on top of things when the garden really needed it, and I could put people on, and then there would be other times when there weren't such a need for as many hours to be spent in the garden and so it flowed very nicely, and it was a very good and successful relationship for both of us I feel.

He clearly recognised your worth. He realised you were delivering what they wanted without their need to supervise you.

That's right, and it wasn't about putting time sheets in, it was about delivering, performance. I was able to say OK, we've got to do what we need to do, and that then also became very important to be really across the rhythm of the season of the garden, the way that it pulses. You know, the Spring in the Highlands in November for example, the amount of work to do in the garden in November is immense. But the work that we would be doing in February for example would be very different. We would often then kind of store up intensive labour periods to do certain activities through the year, and then we'd very much get to enjoy the garden, particularly for me, in early September, because the bulbs would be up, the lawns would be beautiful, the light would be + shining through the silhouettes of the trees, just the new growth that was coming out and it was actually the time of year when you could almost rest!

Spring has sprung! Rest on your laurels!

Well, on behalf of the Australian Garden History Society I would like to thank you for agreeing to this interview.

You're very welcome. Thank you.

Interview ends: 20 minutes 11 seconds.

