Australian Garden History Society

Oral History Programme 2002/2003

This interview is one of a series of interviews being conducted throughout Australia with early members of the Australian Garden History Society. The AGHS was formed in 1980 and these interviews will play a crucial part in recording the formation and early days of the Society. The AGHS is funding these interviews. The AGHS acknowledges the support of the State Library Victoria for use of interview equipment.

This interview of David Yencken was carried out by Jane Holth on 20 March, 2003 at his home in South Melbourne, - Albert Park, Victoria

This is an interview with David Yencken and Jane Holth on 20 March in 2003 at his home in South Melbourne – Albert Park.

Albert Park.

Albert Park, yes. David, can you tell me how you first became interested in landscape architecture?

Well, I suppose I've been interested in different aspects of the landscape for a long time and probably my interest stemmed from painting as much as anything else, landscape painting. I've always been interested in landscapes in a more general sense, but my interest overall was greatly stimulated by the fact that throughout my childhood we had Australian paintings [hanging in our houses] even though my parents travelled widely overseas. We had paintings that were very evocative of this country. I'd visited the country on a number of occasions and spent a little bit of time here during my childhood so by the time I came back here it wasn't an unfamiliar landscape. So that was my beginning.

And then when I came to live here I started a small gallery and that drew me into contact with a lot of significant painters. A few of the paintings around this room are those that came from that period. Others I've collected since. That influenced me more than books or anything else.

And then, later, I started a firm called Merchant Builders. That followed on from work I'd done in developing motels when motels were not really – well, there were none in Australia. In working on those motels I had to find architects and I had to find landscapers so I was involved immediately with people who had skills in those two areas. The two architects I worked with were first John Mockridge and then Robin Boyd [both of whom are now dead]. Although the landscaping of the two motels was not probably the most significant of the design issues that we faced, certainly it was important and it was something that helped to cement in my mind the significance of the totality of the design process. On the second site, we had a very beautiful setting with many mahogany gums. When we [later] formed Merchant Builders it became very clear to me that we needed to find, not only very talented architects but also the most talented landscape architects practising at the time and, after a deal of thought, we approached Ellis Stones. He did all of the landscape work for Merchant Builders for the last, I think, nine years of his life. And so I got to know him extremely well. When he died I decided that there wasn't anyone who quite fitted the bill here – [although] there were some people who were doing interesting work – so I thought that it would be interesting to try and establish a firm of our own which did some general planning work but also was a landscape body and consulting firm. I was encouraged in that because I was starting to get quite a bit of work – people were asking me to do things and I thought it would be much simpler to have the consulting firm associated with Merchant Builders to do that.

I'd also formed a close friendship with an American called Pete Walker who was a very distinguished landscape architect – he used to be, at one stage, the dean of the Graduate School of Design at Harvard, and had been the principal of a very large firm called Sasaki Walker in California. That's, I don't think, still operational, but he still continues to practise and I see him regularly. He came out here, I talked to him and bit by bit, to cut a long story short, we assembled a group of landscape designers. They did all of Merchant Builders' work. Subsequently they separated off and they now have a firm which has been going for quite a long time and done very fine work,

[and] won many awards. I'm still very very closely, not so much associated with them, but attached to them in more of a friendship than other way.

What's the name of that firm?

Tract Consultants. So that further helped to develop my interest. And now coming perhaps a little bit closer to the Garden History Society, I was invited to join the Committee of Inquiry into the National Estate in 1972. That committee was given the task of surveying the state of Australia's heritage, its national estate as it was then called. That involved looking at the natural history of Australia, the natural heritage of Australia, the pre-history and Aboriginal history of Australia and the built and more recent history of Australia. We carried out that work and produced a report. If you'd like to see a copy of that report, if you don't have one, you'd be most welcome to have that.

Thank you.

Would you like me to get hold of that?

Oh, later on.

Later on, ok. And at the conclusion of that report there was a recommendation that a new body which, at that time, we proposed should be called the National Estate Commission, should be formed to take responsibility for leading the protection of Australia's heritage. That recommendation was adopted by the two ministers. Tom Uren was the principal minister but Moss Cass was also involved. To keep the process going, they appointed an interim committee which I was asked to chair. That interim committee was called the Interim Committee of the National Estate. It had two tasks, one was to help to draft the legislation for the [new] Australian Heritage Commission, and the second one was to start to administer and to shape the National Estate Grants Program. Both were very important roles. The first one because, of course, getting the legislation right for the Australian Heritage Commission was a very important task. The second one was significant because a large sum of money was allocated in those early years for the protection of the national estate – a much larger sum than has ever been allocated since. It was a matter of some concern to everyone that this was spent well and that it was spent properly and appropriately. So we had to try and work out on what basis this money should be spent and who it should go to. There were some requirements built in to the program which were outside of our control but, by and large, Tom Uren who, again, was the primary driver of this exercise, left the Interim Committee [with] the main and often the full responsibility for determining where grants should go.

Then, in 1975, the Australian Heritage Commission Act was passed by the Parliament. This was just before the end of the Whitlam era. The Heritage Commission came into being, or would have come into being if the Cabinet appointees had been given vice-regal assent, but apparently those appointees were sitting on [the Governor-General's] desk on November 11 in 1975, so he didn't, for one reason or another, get around to signing that document. And so at the time that the Whitlam government was dismissed, I was the only person appointed because I had been appointed earlier as the new chair. It took another year for the Fraser government to decide whether or not it wanted to continue on with the Commission. That was a very difficult period. But then, for one reason or another, Fraser did decide, yes, that it was appropriate that the Heritage Commission should continue to have a role in Australia, and so the rest of the Commissioners were appointed and we set about our task.

The most important task that we had was to establish the Register of the National Estate, a register the details of which had been set out in the Heritage Commission Act. We had to decide what kind of a register would be appropriate – most of the thinking at the time outside of the Commission was that it would be a very small register of I suppose national icons, in the natural and historic areas. But we decided that it was more significant to have what might be called a representative register and by that I mean that the register should be representative of [all] the main strands of Australia's natural and cultural history. We realised that it would take a very long time for such a register to be developed but we thought that this was a very appropriate role for the Commonwealth to play, not least because the register was not a fully protective register. By that I mean that the register applied only to the Acts of the Commonwealth because at that stage it was uncertain, and many felt unlikely, that the Commonwealth had the constitutional powers to determine what happened within the states.

So we established, or we agreed to establish, a large register and we then agreed that we would go about establishing

this register progressively. One of the reasons for establishing it progressively was that we knew that it would be controversial and that it would be easier to list the places that had the greatest degree of public acceptance and then move progressively to others. So we decided we would begin with places that had already received recognition and enjoyed some status within the state government or federal government jurisdictions – national parks and the like. We also agreed that we would begin with National Trust classified listings of buildings. I don't think there were, in those initial listings, any gardens. We also went, later on, to a great deal of trouble to go back over those listings and to improve the way in which they had been described – the statements of significance that had been attached to them – because some were not very thorough at that time. Nevertheless the Trusts had done a marvellous job in getting that far. And then progressively we started to list a lot of other places, natural areas, Aboriginal sites which were very difficult to work out because of sensitivities related to indigenous people. Some sites were in their minds sacred sites and we had to be sure that what we did was going to be acceptable to them.

We began to assemble this very large register and by the time I left I think there were some 8500 places on the register. I had a tenure of six years as the chairman of the Australian Heritage Commission so that over the five years that we'd been working on the register, bearing in mind [that] my first year was one when the Commission was in limbo, we'd moved from no places to 8500 on the register. We went through the obvious places, the places that were well known to different groups. Obviously historic buildings were very well known to the Trusts even though, of course, further work had to be done and there were always new places that were emerging. There were places of natural significance that were very well known even if they hadn't received recognition as national parks. [They were, however], known to conservation bodies and scientists and so on. So our listings there were quite predictable.

But then I was extremely keen, and so were other members of the Commission, to start to look at the gaps in listings and to set about trying to fill those gaps. We ran a conference on historic archaeology, because at that stage there were perhaps a handful of people around Australia interested in historic archaeology. We brought them all together at a conference. It was absolutely electric – the atmosphere – because I think they had felt they were totally alone and then they found these colleagues. We used the grants from the national estate grants program to help to bring about these conferences and to make these efforts to try and identify sites that were not on the main lists. We also gave money to the states to develop historical themes so that it would be easier to see how different places might fit within that historical theme analysis. And so it came about that we started to pay attention to historic gardens. I was particularly interested in this, indeed I was interested in all of it, vitally interested, but I took on a personal pro-active role here.

Why, why were you more interested in gardens, do you think?

Well it wasn't so much that I was more interested in gardens. [It was perhaps that] the other people in the Commission were, at that stage, not quite so involved. I think it was also because I was living in Melbourne. Peter Watts was a very important person in the development of the Garden History Society, as you know. He'd been working for the National Trust, I can't remember what his specific title was but he'd certainly started to carry out surveys [of historic gardens]. I think there was a grant from the Victorian government for that. I'd spoken at a conference on, oh I can't remember what the theme of the conference was, but I think it was on historic gardens –yes – which the Trust ran. I was asked to speak mostly because of my association with Ellis Stones. I also decided that I'd like to make the talk a talk about Edna Walling as well – she, as you know, was a very famous Australian landscape designer – because of the association between Edna, between Edna Walling and Ellis Stones. Ellis had undoubtedly been an acolyte of Edna Walling's. I was strongly encouraged by Peter Watts to do this. Indeed Peter and I did a lot of the research together for it. He came with me and we went and interviewed different people and we looked at different gardens of hers. Ellis Stones' work I didn't need the same amount of help with.

It is interesting that that talk that I gave that evening was instrumental in part, at least, in Peter Watts later on writing a book on Edna Walling. It was also instrumental in encouraging Anne Latreille to write her book on Ellis Stones. She rang me the next day and said that [the talk] was absolutely fantastic: 'I was really intrigued, do you want

to write a book on Ellis Stones?' I said 'No, I don't personally but there [is] someone working in our office at the time who [is] interested'. So I said, 'I do have to check with her to see whether she still wants to go on with it.' I did that and she said, 'No,' she wasn't. So I got back to Anne. It took Anne quite a long time after that to actually produce the book. Nevertheless it was a conference that was seminal in all kinds of ways. That's perhaps how my engagement with historic gardens was strongly cemented. I don't want to suggest that I took an interest in historic gardens above all other aspects of the national estate, because that certainly wouldn't be true. But it just so happened that I'd had this background, I'd given this paper, I'd worked with Peter Watts. The most interesting work in Australia at the time was being done here by Peter Watts and the National Trust. So it was a natural thing for the Commission to work with the National Trust, and particularly with Peter Watts, to try and establish a process for identifying and listing historic gardens across Australia. A key part of that process, of course, was to try and assemble together people who were interested in garden history, which at the time as you would realise, was a fledgling activity [involving] only a handful of people.

Now, who were those people?

Oh, now, that's a good question. Who were those people?

Dame Elisabeth was one, wasn't she?

Of course Dame Elisabeth was a very, very important person but not so much in research. I would've said that the key people at the time, apart from, from Peter, were Howard Tanner, undoubtedly, probably the most active, working in Sydney ….. There were other people who were really interested in gardens and for whom this notion of historic gardens was interesting and attractive – people like Miles Lewis, who was an architectural historian, and a very very good one; George Seddon, coming from a completely different background; and others; and people like Phyll Simons had looked pretty widely at Tasmanian gardens. I think that the list of people who contributed to the proceedings of the first Garden History conference is a pretty accurate list from my view point. But I can't say that it's necessarily the most informed one, of those who were doing the most interesting work at that time.

Right.

The other source would be that exhibition 'Converting the Wilderness, the Art of Gardening in Colonial Australia', which, as I recall, Howard Tanner was primarily responsible for. That had a catalogue which I no longer have, I don't think. Have you seen it?

No, but that would be available.

I think that's a very important document for you to get hold of.

So the year 1980 was really quite a logical time in this progressive process, wasn't it, for the History Society to be started?

Yes, it was. It was, because it was right in the middle of this significant burst of activity which was associated with the Heritage Commission and its national estate grants programs. I'm not saying, of course, that the Heritage Commission was doing everything that was valuable in Australia but what I think it did do was provide resources, provide national backing for and tremendous encouragement for all the other people, the key people who were doing work all over Australia. So it was a very appropriate time for something like the, like the Garden History Society to come into being.

Were you involved in the very first meetings?

I was involved in the very first meeting, and this is the proceedings of the very first meeting. Do you have that document?

No. No, but the society will have that.

Yes, ok.

Can you remember who was at that meeting?

No, I don't. I can remember that …..

Would Joan Law-Smith have been there? Was she an early member? Or Phyll Simons?

Phyll Simons would definitely have been there because she spoke.

Lady Ebury was another?

I don't actually remember Joan Law-Smith being there …… but she's been such a significant figure that I'm sure she would've been there if she could've been. I'm surprised if she had been there that she didn't speak. But that may just have been that she decided she didn't want to. I just don't recall who was there.

Was Dame Elisabeth there right at the start?

She was there, yes, and she was elected at that meeting to be the first chair of the Garden History Society.

She tells me that you very much encouraged her…..

I did, yes.

Why, why did you do that?

Well, I talked to Peter and we both agreed that she would be an ideal person to be the chair of the Garden History Society because [of] her tremendous interest in gardening, because [of] her standing in Australian society, and for a whole host of reasons of that kind – because, she's, you know, such a warm-hearted supporter of so many different and interesting things.

Did she fulfil your expectations?

Oh, I think so but I, what I have to now say to you is this, that I didn't really have a very active part in the Garden History Society beyond helping to bring it into being. I was working on something slightly different – I was trying to assemble this register and that of course [involved] many other things. My job as chairman of the Commission was a part-time job, although I sometimes wondered what kind of a part-time job it really was, because it was, in those early days, so demanding, I mean in a very good way. So I really didn't actively take part in Garden History meetings.

I realise that but this, what you've been telling me, is very important and interesting because no one else I've spoken to has either had that knowledge or been able to remember the very early times, but, someone like Sophie Ducker, for instance, has been on a lot of tours, was excellent in, in recounting her memories of the early trips, so that part has been fairly well covered by the other people who joined the society once it was established, and went on all their, their outings and participated in the events of the society. Your early memories are really important. And also you mentioned what a great contribution Joan Law-Smith made. In what way did she contribute?

Well, I don't know precisely what contribution she's made to the Garden History Society but she's made a great contribution [in other ways]. The work she did at Bolobek was in itself a really interesting piece of garden design. [Phone rings]

We were talking about Joan Law-Smith.

Yes. She was a very modest person, a very insightful person. She wrote beautifully too, a lot about gardens later in life, and she did that very well. But I don't know quite what her relationship was with historic gardens, I think Peter Watts would tell you more accurately what was that relationship.

Now when the society was first formed did it have a particular philosophy?

The Garden History Society?

Was there collective agreement about why it should be formed and about what it should do amongst those early people?

Well, [the initial group] used this conference to try and look at a whole range of different issues to do with garden history, to draw upon the experience of the United Kingdom because to the conference was invited a man named Fawcett, who I think had been the chair of the UK garden history body, whatever that was called. He spoke at the conference so he was able to give us a picture of what had been done there and the approach that had been taken. So that there was that background. There were papers from different people talking about different aspects of Australia's garden history. The conference was used to flesh out an approach that might be taken – in Peter Watts' paper, as I recall it, there were a set of criteria developed for garden history listings. They were drawn significantly from the criteria that had been adopted in Britain. I think one of them was that historic gardens, if I remember rightly, could not be more recent than the 1920s. That was later extended to the 1930s and probably it's been extended much since then because the listings of historic buildings have progressively moved further and further up the 20th century. I would imagine on the Register of the National Estate now there are plenty of buildings that would be late 20th century buildings, so I would expect that there'd be gardens now on the Register of the National Estate or which are of interest to the Garden History Society that are much later than those early ones.

So at the conference there were these various attempts to try and get a sense of what's actually been happening up to now, who's been doing it, what other countries have been doing, what therefore might be a starting point for the work of the Garden History Society. From the point of view of the Heritage Commission, what we were interested in was the identification, evaluation and listing of historic gardens. The process that we used was to invite nominations or sometimes commission studies, which would lead to nominations for places to be put on the Register of the National Estate. [We] then examine[d] those places to make sure that they had appropriate statements of significance, that the statements of significance warranted them being put on the register. [We] then advertise[d] them and advertise[d] them reasonably widely. [We] then [had] to deal with comments and objections to them.

After we'd received comments and objections, if there were any, [we] then [had to] make the decision to list or not to list. That would have been the process that we would have looked to develop [out] of the work of the Garden History Society. [We would have hoped] that the people involved in the garden histories would be helping us to identify those key places and put them on the register.

Now the History Society had more of a purpose than just working out which gardens should be registered?

What did you say?

Did the History Society?

Oh yes, of yes.

What was, what was that purpose?

Well, I think you [had] best ask other people to see how [the society has] developed. [Its objectives] obviously were to exchange information amongst those interested in historic gardens, to be concerned with issues of restoration and maintenance of historic gardens, to be concerned with research into the sort of plantings that would've been carried out at particular periods, and the degree at which perhaps those plantings and plant species are still to be seen in historic gardens and those kinds of things. It's a much, much wider ambit than the Heritage Commission's ambit. Our concern was simply to bring those gardens into prominence, and thereby to help their protection.

As far as you know, did the society get off to a good start with an enthusiastic and growing membership?

To my knowledge it got off to a very enthusiastic start. But again it would be best, I think, [to ask] Peter. Peter Watts is the key person. Have you talked to him?

No, because he's in Sydney so the Sydney crowd are being interviewed separately.

Yes.

This is just a Victorian matter……

So you're only doing the Victorian? Yes, okay, yes. But he was the key person and as I say, I had much to do with him in the work that I was doing.

How important was Phyll Simons – you mentioned her?

I think she was important but I don't think I would be in a position to tell you just how important. She's got a chapter in here which is called 'The Genesis of Tasmanian Gardens'. To my knowledge she was important in a Tasmanian context and that's significant in itself, but I don't recall that she was important in a more general sense – now that's not to belittle her in any way at all – what she did, related to Tasmanian gardens, was obviously very significant. I'm just trying to give you a sense of what seemed to be happening in trying to bring the Garden History Society into being.

Was there anyone in the Victorian membership who was particularly important, that you know of?

Well, there were significant people like Norman Wettenhall. He was the deputy president or president of the National Trust for quite some time. He was always very interested in gardens and so I think that he would have been very actively interested [in the society]. Then there were two professors [of botany] at University of Melbourne – John Turner and Carrick Chambers – who I know both took a great deal of interest in gardens such as Ripponlea. Carrick is now in Sydney. He went there to run the Botanic Gardens in Sydney so he carried some of that interest across to them. I can certainly remember that Norman Wettenhall was present at that meeting.

And what were his particular interests and skills?

I'm really trying to think. He had always taken a tremendous amount of interest in the Trust's gardens, particularly gardens such as Ripponlea, and on that account he was always active and supportive of an initiative like that. He was always a person who was a front runner in trying to help to bring bodies like this in to being. I can remember that Alethea Russell was there, she and her husband at that stage own[ed] Mawallok in the Western District which [was] a Guilfoyle garden, a very beautiful Guilfoyle garden. I suppose there were quite a lot of other people [who] owned historic gardens there – I'm just trying to think who else I can remember. This document doesn't, unfortunately, list the people attending. There may well [be] a minute of the first meeting. In fact it seems surprising if there wasn't.

Yes, there would be. And from your personal point of view, were there any particular gardens that you felt were most important at that time?

Oh, well there were the obvious ones such the Botanic Gardens, here, and some of the Guilfoyle gardens round the state. I suppose they were the best known. I'm just trying to think. I tried [to] look up in ['The Heritage of Australia, the Illustrated Register of the National Estate' (1981)], to see what was listed there but the index doesn't refer

to historic gardens at all which is unfortunate. It is difficult to identify what was included at that time because you'd have to go right through the whole book to find them.

I just thought praps you might have……

This was published in 1981. There's certainly a big piece here on….. on the Botanic Gardens by Carrick Chambers …

Yes, just while you're looking at that, do you think the society has been successful?

From what I can gather it's been amazingly successful. I went to a dinner about a year ago, which [the society] kindly invited me to, and I just simply couldn't believe that the membership was so large. It's quite extraordinary how it's grown and that's been wonderful. I can't believe that everyone who is a member attended that dinner but the ANZ Pavilion at the Arts Centre was absolutely full.

Are you aware of its activities these days?

Not really, no. No, I've not kept much in touch with what it's been doing because what I've been doing has moved away from that fairly significantly.

Tom Garnett was another early member.

Tommy Garnett would certainly [have been]. Again I don't remember him being there but he was obviously a very important person.

In what ways do you think he was important?

Well, just what he was doing himself. He wrote that column regularly in the *Age*. I think that Anne Latreille used to edit that section and so Tommy Garnett used to write regularly for her. [He wrote very well.]

As far as you know its, its original purpose has stayed much the same? Hasn't changed its ideas or its aims?

Again, I'm not in a position to tell you, so I really wouldn't know. I would imagine that, by and large, its original purpose has stayed the same but, as with most bodies like this, [that] the thinking about it matured [and that] other dimensions [have] been brought into play.

And you had no personal interest in any particular gardens that you felt should be registered at the time, did you?

You mean no direct …..

No, no.

Like everyone else I suppose, [I] greatly admired gardens such as the Botanic Gardens and gardens such as Mawallok, but, no, I had no direct personal interest in them. My part, to the extent that I had a significant part, was all related to the beginning of the society and the background to the establishment of the society, but not to its further, later development.

No, as I said, that's been very important. Thankyou.

I'm just trying to find the piece on the Botanic Gardens in here but anyway it's not that important.

Now, that's the one that's just come out, is it? This book here?

No, no, this was published in 1981.

Right.

And it might be worth taking a look at.*The Heritage History of Australia.*

I thought that it would be a useful thing to survey what the Commission had done [over its first six years] so I set out what I felt was a useful summary of the things that the Commission had attempted to do and where things were with different categories of places. That's [the] piece that I wrote on historic gardens.

This is in the 'National Estate in 1981', by David Yencken, with a piece on historic gardens, on page 129.

Ok, [is] that useful to you?

Yes, but the society will have that, won't they?

I presume they will, [but] not necessarily. Do you want to take a copy?

I'll check up first whether…..

Right, okay. It had a second [title] when it was reprinted. [I think it was 'The National Estate: The Role of the Commonwealth'.]