

AUSTRALIAN GARDEN HISTORY SOCIETY
NATIONAL ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION
VICTORIAN BRANCH



Photo: provided by Dr Kate Cregan

Interviewee:	KATHY WRIGHT
Interviewer:	DR KATE CREGAN
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Acknowledgment:	ALL USES OF THIS INTERVIEW SHOULD ACKNOWLEDGE THE INTERVIEWEE AND THE SOCIETY: MRS KATHY WRIGHT, AUSTRALIAN GARDEN HISTORY SOCIETY, INTERVIEWED 19 MARCH 2024 BY DR KATE CREGAN.

OK the 'tape' is rolling so, my name is Doctor Kate Cregan and I'm here to interview

Kathleen Sophie Wright, née Chester

OK and my name ... [see above], the day is Tuesday the 19th of March and we are at Kathy's house in Brighton, and the purpose of the interview is as part of the larger oral history project being run by the Australian Garden History Society. So, just to start out, I'd like to ask you where you born and where you grew up.

1:00

I was born in Maffra in 1939, just before the outbreak of the Second World War, and my family lived on a dairy farm in Gippsland at a place called Glenmaggie, which is on, almost on the Macalister River in the foothills there. And ah, my paternal grandmother lived with us and I'm the second in the family. The, in those days we didn't have electricity, we didn't have running water and we had deliveries from a nearby town of groceries, um, once a week. My grandmother loved growing ornamental plants. Ah, she had been living there since the 1920s I think. I do remember she had a Snowball Tree, a Cecil Brunner rose and some rather fancy cactus, and she also had a sort of locked up section of her own, which we as children were always wanting to get into this little section of garden. We kept chooks and there was vegetable garden. I think because of the lack of water gardening was something of a struggle there.

I lived there until I was ten, did home schooling for two or three years, a year at the Glenmaggie primary school, which had about a dozen students and three of them were from our family, and move to Heyfield and went for one year to the Heyfield Primary School, and then too by bus to Sale High School. In Heyfield my mother grew a lot of vegetables, enjoyed growing vegetables and we were then on town water. I do you remember she used to make a lot of liquid cow manure which she thought was the most wonderful thing for the vegetables. Um, she also must have mail ordered, I think, some roses, she was keen on roses.

3:30

Part of my childhood, um, was, a few interludes were spent in Morwell with my maternal grandparents and that grandfather was a tremendously good gardener and he had the most beautiful vegetable garden, raised up beds. He had raspberries and asparagus which were new to me. And he grew flowers for the house and in fact when another baby was coming my sister and I went there for I don't know how long, maybe a couple of weeks, and I still have quite a bit of visual picture of grandfather Green's vegetable gardens and that was, it was the house where my grandmother's sister was with them – a bit of a Milly Molly Mandy family in a way – and she was in charge of arranging flowers for the house and she had a collection of very nice vases and it would

take her all day to cut the flowers and treat them and fiddle around. I guess that kept her out from under people's feet. [both quietly laughing] So yeah, so that's really my gardening in my formative years. From time to time I remember planting things, some things, some vegetables produced, some didn't ...

So, the private part of – your grandmother who was living with you – the private part of her garden, why was it private?

5:00

Well it was all trellised off because the children might spoil things [both laughing]

Touched the plants, pulled the leaves?

Something like that, yes, I don't know. I do remember she had those cactus with the big red, salmon red trumpety flowers that you see around and of course immediately she said we couldn't touch them, pick them, it was a great temptation [both laughing]

So, she wanted to, she wanted to keep her garden looking the way she wanted it to look. Ok, so ... you said you're the second and there was a baby after you so how many of you were there?

5:50

My, so the first in the family is my brother Robert who was an architect, then me, and then my sister Elizabeth who did nursing, my brother Arthur who worked here there and everywhere, and then the youngest in the family was John, who did go back on the family farm.

So, the farm is still part of the family...?

Well cousins. My three brothers have all died in the last few years but there is a cousin who is on the family farm at Glenmaggie, north of Glenmaggie really

And was it dairy or ...

Dairy

Yes, that is kind of a dairy area, OK and you say you remember planting some vegetables and having a bit of success and a bit of failure ...

Probably peas and beans because seeds were ... seeds seemed to be available. My mother seemed to be able to get ... her hands on the seeds, perhaps she got them from Grandfather, I don't know, but ...

That's great, so you spent a good deal of your childhood in Gippsland, moving around ...

7:16

Yes, and when I finished secondary school at Sale High School I came to Melbourne and did a science degree and I never lived in the country again.

What drew you to a science degree?

I guess, I guess I found maths accessible and so just sort of ... what you did really and I had a teaching bursary and my brother was a year ahead of me studying architecture and um ... I think without the teaching bursary the family wouldn't have been able to cope with two, financially, with two of us, although there was never any question of girls not going on to do higher education it was just accepted that that's what *everybody* did there was no distinction made about that.

So, what period are we talking about?

Ah, [19]56, I started at Melbourne in '57

The birth of television

Yes, the Melbourne Olympics, I was in Year 12 for the Melbourne Olympics, yes

Rock and Roll. And how did you get by if you were coming from the country?

[I] was resident at what was in those days called Women's College, it's now called University College at Melbourne. It, Melbourne, was the only university so you didn't make a choice, Monash opened in the early 60s and I'd finished by then.

And how did you find university life?

Well ... living in college was ... fantastic and I still have many friends from my college days. So, ... it's a bit different, really, from students who don't live in college because you do have that whole community and social life.

And was there any? ... I know now those colleges have quite tended gardens, was there any sort of ...?

9:39

There wasn't anything much in those days. I did choose botany in first year partly because my mother had studied pharmacy in the late [19]20s and somewhere there was a book when she had these beautiful pastel drawings from her botany classes, and I think that's what I thought, "well that's what botany is", well of course we didn't draw beautiful pictures at all, but it was, it was very interesting and of course there was the systems garden there at the back of the botany school in those days where they had experimental plots and things and ... Professor Turner was the Dean then I think of botany, um, but I only did it for one year because teaching you, you know, that wasn't something you could major in. You had to have a mixed, because on a teaching bursary had to have a mixed range of subjects so I just did that for one year

So yeah, the aim of the teaching bursary was to make you a High School Teacher at some point?

Mm, yes, and to have a range of science, as well as maths, a range of science subjects to teach science

That's true, you wouldn't be able to teach botany in high school even today, biology yes. But ... you didn't, you didn't stick with it only for that reason? If you'd been able to specialise in botany do you think you would have stuck with it?

Look I don't know, I don't know ...

That's, interesting. So, when you then finished your degree?

11:38

I was teaching at, my first teaching was at Canterbury Girls High School. In fact, I had applied to teach in country schools but I was ... sent there and ... and I married halfway through my first year and continued to teach at Canterbury Girls High School. My husband and I lived above the National Bank in Chapel Street Prahran and there was no land or anything no gardening there and I was pretty busy with the teaching because I immediately had year 12 classes so there's a lot of preparation, lot of correction and so I didn't have anything really to do with gardens then. We went to England for a year in 1966, five years after we were married and we didn't have children then and ... I worked as a teacher and we travelled around, like everybody did in the 60s and then really ... English, I do remember English parks but again I didn't, I wasn't really aware of famous English gardens *then*. After that I did become much more interested in gardens and English gardens and had quite a lot of the sort of standard English garden books in the late 60s, early 70s. Then I had children, I had three daughters. In 1967, we moved to Brighton [Victoria] and at that time there were extreme water restrictions so you saved the babies' bathwater to just put on a couple of plants that you wanted to save. It was quite a big suburban block and there was an apricot tree and a pear tree and a lemon tree, all well established and fruited, fruited quite well. There was an old hen house in the corner (no hens) and ... look, I can't remember, ... a few old roses can't remember much of it, so I had, my children were born between '67 and '70, so they were busy years ...

Not a lot of time for gardening?

No. And then when the youngest was five I think I suddenly decided I would go back to work and Brighton Technical School was the nearest school that I could walk to so that's where I was for three years and I don't remember too much about being involved with the garden then. I mean clearly, we had lawn and the lawn was cut, and weeds, you know we kept the weeds out and so on. And ... in 1980, my husband [Bruce] died. The children were, two were at primary school and one had just started high school, and that was quite, quite a sudden thing, he had an aneurysm ...

Oh, I'm sorry ...

15:15

And so it was quite sudden. At that stage I had moved to be teaching at Star of the Sea in Gardenvale and I had the most *amazing* support from the lay staff and ... There were only about three nuns on the staff then, but there was a woman who was the principal, the most amazing woman I've ever met really, and they were *extremely* kind and *extremely* supportive to me and I stayed there then for twenty years. So then after, so that was the early 80s, in that year another friend of mine, who was called Lorrie Lawrence, who was also a Garden History person, had been a social worker to that date, and she had trained, retrained as a landscaper. So she, putting her social work practise and her landscape together, came to me and said we need to fix your garden and so she redesigned the garden and did some work and we worked side by side and ... between the staff at Star of the Sea and my friend Lorrie and my garden, the next ten years ran, all things considered, very smoothly. And I do think that, that my daughters who are grown, got families, got good jobs and everything, I think those 10 years which were significant for them without their father, we owe a lot to gardening and we owe a lot to the Star of the Sea really. And because then I was very enthusiastic about the garden. I was a bit given to burning rubbish, but ...

Who wasn't?

... [laughs] but it did mean, I mean I needed really to be home for the girls and I always you know I never felt that I was trapped or anything like that because I always had lots and lots to do in the garden and, I didn't grow veg, I grew tomatoes, but I didn't grow any vegetables really. Lorrie would call by and use her social work skills and you know, praise me up and keep me going with this garden project so it was marvellous, really marvellous. And I'd also joined Garden History in 1980 but didn't do a lot of things and ... I was working for another 20 years and mostly teaching senior students, so I didn't go to Garden History conferences in those twenty years. The time of the year just wasn't right, but I retired in 2000 and from then on, I went to every Garden History conference and loved them. So I got back to gardening.

You obviously had very keen gardeners in your childhood ...

Yes

...but then this long period where it was not a focus

18:45

Yes, that's right from probably, well probably from the late 50s till 1980s it wasn't a focus, no.

Ok. And you say that Lorrie helped you by helping you landscape your garden. Did you get hands on with that or were there people who came in and helped? because when I think of landscaping ...

I think at that stage Victor, who later became her business, her garden partner, and her life partner actually, I think at that stage Victor did some work for her and I remember he came and moved a lot of rocks, sandstone rocks had been put on the side and they were arranged around the edges of the

garden in an extremely ugly fashion so they all had to be sunk down to the level of the lawn to go, disappear them sort of, make edges for the lawn and apparently, Victor must have helped with some of that but quite a lot we did ourselves. I mean I was only 40, you've got a lot of strength and energy at that age yeah

Absolutely ... and were you guided by her in what went in?

Yes, yes, yes. I didn't, I didn't know much about plants then. I could recognise all the sort of common garden plants but I didn't really know anything much about plants. I think there's so much to learn about plants you never ever know as much as she'd like to know, I don't think. Yes, yes, and she helped me choose plants and we restructured everything and there'd been a sort of bed in the middle with stones around it that had a grapevine, so we took that out. I used to cut the lawns in those days so.

Powered mower or a ...?

A hand mower then

Good exercise

Good exercise yes and the lawn had always been in the back of that block and it was good Buffalo lawn that was, that was fine, that was easy to do. There was a huge fig tree ... typical of this, of most suburban areas in Melbourne, I think, to have those fruit trees. My daughter, when she got into her house at Highett had a huge apricot tree ... and I didn't have, crab-apples were also very popular but didn't have a crab-apple, but there was a beautiful one next door, the common one with pink and white blossom, they were very popular at that time. So were photinias then, I remember digging out a huge photinia, I hated it, but I don't mind them now. [laughter] At the time I felt it didn't pull its weight, you know just a leafy thing, I was all wanting everything to have flowers or fruit.

And did you make use of the fruit?

Yes, yes. I, with the figs there was a marvellous recipe for, I sort of crystallising them,

Oh, yes ...

So, you'd boil them in syrup and then you put them out in the sun to dry and all that, I used to do a lot of that with the figs and give them away. The apricots, I would make apricot jam, pears I'd just stew

I've just got through bottling some pears ... and were you drawn to, I mean I can see you've got floral pictures on your walls, were you drawn to having arrangements in your house like your great-aunt?

Always, always and I still do you know I still always have flowers, yes, yes.

Did she teach you or did you ...

I think we just watched her ... and ... she, they had quite a collection of John Campbell pots and I've got some of those now, which were good for arranging flowers in, yeah those greenie-coloured Tasmanian troughs. And they had a house with ... sort of three living rooms and they all had mantle pieces so the mantle pieces were perfect for putting these troughs with flowers. They were lovely, yes, I do have, that aunt was also very crafty, she taught my sister and I to knit and crochet and always had a bag of coloured wool that was like the most beautiful thing to us because, from war-time and living on the farm, there wasn't a lot of colour in anything. You know, clothes were pretty plain but at Morwell there always seemed to be this colour, in a way that we didn't have on the farm.

So, going back to your house in Brighton that you bought with your husband is that the house you lived up until you came here?

24:13

Across the road from here at number ten and I lived there for more than, for fifty-two years I think, and then ... and it was a big old weatherboard, and it was in a big block of land so ... my daughters pointed out to me it was way too much space for me to be occupying. Now it's got six units on it so probably houses eighteen people. They're all three bedroom units.

True. So, the garden obviously has gone ...

The garden is gone and what surprised me when they excavated over there, below the topsoil, not very far down, I reckon less than a metre, it's that bright orange sand that you see in the Australian Garden at Cranbourne ... all the way down, because they dug out the block completely to make an underground car park. So not a light colour, that real rich red sand. Just interesting.

So, there's something about the geology is similar all along the coast. Okay. So, you say that Lorrie also introduced you to the Society.

Yes

What did you do in the years before you became very active

25:45

I worked, and ... what did I do? I used to do some gardening around the Star of the Sea, plantings around there and so, they had a full time gardener but [I] used to do a little bit there. Honestly, I don't know. I didn't have much to do with, I mean we used to go into the Botanic Gardens from time to time and walk around and look at things. I don't even know if at that point, oh ... at one stage I was selector with Lorrie for the Open Garden Scheme and that was before, that was when I was still working, so maybe that was in the 90s, when the girls had left home. And then Lorrie stopped doing it, which sort of left me a bit stranded, I did it for a couple more years but that was ... I really didn't know enough to be doing that without her there as well.

So, what did that involve?

Well going to gardens and trying to decide if they were suitable for the Garden scheme, and if they weren't telling the person why they weren't, and if they were recommending them to whoever was in charge of the scheme at the time, Wendy Richie I think, and, and you had to write the little paragraph that went in the book underneath the ...

So, people self-promoted? It was ...

Often, yes. Or sometimes people would, people in Garden History would look over the fence and see a garden and say "look, there's a garden at such and such a place". Or people were in the scheme and they'd say "knock on their door and see if they're interested", so we did a bit of that. Sometimes it worked, sometimes they weren't ... hmm... I'd sort of forgotten all that.

I find that little bit amusing, door-knocking people ...

Saying are you interested in being in the Open Gardens Scheme. I don't know, I wonder when it started. Maybe in the late 80s early 90s ...

That's something somebody could check through the Society's archives

Yes, yes. I think I did for two or three years. But it was certainly when I was still working, so perhaps in the 90s. And I always looked at gardens, so walking up and down the street, you know I could tell you what all the gardens in Asling St looked like. Pretty much, a lot of similarity in suburban gardens at that time and oh ... not ... say, well there's two things that have changed. There is the designer garden, so they're much more designed than they were and the other thing is the clipping of hedges and so on that you see now that gives shape to gardens. And I think that's to do with the development of electric clippers and tools ...

Ah, yes ...

... that make it so much easier to keep things clipped. Maybe it's a bit on the wane now, maybe it's had its day, all that clipping, but there's still a fair bit and it can work well with mixed plantings I think, I quite like that.

Um, going back to the society, um ... you said that you were, you became a member in the early 80's, were you a founding member or ... ?

No.

Ok, and you obviously had taken part in the selection of gardens for the Open Gardens ...

Yes I was in those days ...

... and you also said that you became active once you retired ...

Yes in 2000.

So, what was the first thing that you, that was ...?

30:22

I joined the Victorian branch and I became Treasurer of the Victorian Branch. And ... after ... I can't remember exactly how long, but then I became the National Treasurer for a few years. When I was on the Victorian Branch Pamela Jelly was the President and we organised the Geelong conference. And then John Dwyer was the President and we organised the Ballarat conference. And the important thing about that, John Dwyer as president thought that everyone in the Society should be able to attend the Annual Conference and for many years the conference had not taken more than 200 members and I'm guessing the Society had about 1200 members, so there were always people who couldn't get a place at the conference. So, for Ballarat conference we set that at 300 or bit more than 300. We found an auditorium, it was flat so it wasn't ideal, but still we did have 300 people attend the conference. And that seemed to leave us without a waiting list. So, John Dwyer was National President for some time and he was an excellent, excellent President. You know, he had a very clear view about the Society, had a lot of experience with National Trust so he was there, the right person for the job. And Pam Jelly and I, on the Victorian Committee, we arranged lots and lots of garden tours. Um, many to the Western District, because Pam had grown up there and ... some to Gippsland, we had day tours and weekend tours and so we did, we did lots and lots of tours which people enjoyed, they were good. We always liked to have a bus tour because we liked the, our audience to be captive and we could give them lots of information for what to look out for. Some members preferred self-drive, but Pam and I liked to get them so we could talk to them and you know point out all sorts of, ah, Pam was absolutely marvellous she had a terrific sense of garden history, and in fact, she really is a garden historian, so she always prepared excellent notes and always had a lot about the history of the gardens. When I was Treasurer we made quite a bit of money, which was good and one of the first things when I was treasurer, Helen Botham had written notes on La Trobe's Garden and Richard Heathcote, yeah, had suggested to Helen that she published this in the form of a book. He at the time, I think, was working at Ripponlea for the National Trust and Helen approached the Victorian branch to finance half of it, with La Trobe society financing the other half, and ... I do remember, it was \$9,000 dollars and the Victorian branch had about \$12,000 in their bank account. I was very new to Treasurer but I thought this was exactly what we should do and we did finance half that and Helen and her husband John looked after the copies and sold them at every opportunity and the La Trobe society also took half the copies, I can't remember how many, and eventually all the money got paid back because eventually we sold them all. And very recently, in fact I think last year, that publication's been reprinted and it's always on sale, I think it's always on sale but I don't know if it's still in Garden History's list, but it's always on sale through the National Trust or at La Trobe's cottage when it's open. So that was, you know, was a nice thing to be associated with and it was, long term, I would say a great success. At that

time too, they Society used to produce pamphlets for various historic gardens. There were quite a few of them, different people wrote them, and they were an A4, an A3 folded so, (1, 2, 4) 4 A4 sides with photographs and notes and they were sold for a very small amount, two or three dollars I think. ... Yeah, there were a lot of those. I can't immediately tell you which gardens ... um, Belmont at Geelong, was one ... and some of the Walling gardens but I can't remember now which one. A number of times we visited Boortkoi, which was in the Western District which is a very, was maybe be still is, a very fine example of a Walling garden, but it was a farming property and when water was short, and there were years when water was very short, and they said we have to feed the stock, we can't put water on the garden, and that was the case with a number of country properties. We had tours to the Western District where we incorporated the Botanic Gardens. Colac Botanic Gardens, designed by Guilfoyle I think, Warrnambool Botanic Gardens, of course Geelong Botanic Gardens. Yes, so it was, I mean, I think it was then a terrific programme but I think prior to that the Victorian Branch had terrific programme and subsequently they still have a very good programme so in that way, that period wasn't special, but we did we did have a lot of great things.

So, your contribution wasn't just as treasurer, I mean, you also organised a lot of that ...

37:14

Yes, yes and it was the days, I think, before you had to have a commercial kitchen, so we always cooked the morning and afternoon tea ourselves and it was a good fundraiser really to do that. We generally had the lunches catered for. We liked to, if possible, find in the country something like a school committee or the Red Cross or one of those charities to cater for the lunches and of course when the restrictions came in on not being able to cater unless you had a commercial kitchen, I don't know when that was, but that made it difficult to use those country people. It must have been somewhere between about 2000 and 2010 I think, just guessing. But yes, it was good to involve locals and usually the garden owners would know someone on the school committee or on the Country Women's, or Red Cross or whatever ...

Yes, the Country Women's Association is well-known for catering such things...

Yes, yes, and it was good because they got the money, we got lovely lunch and it worked for everyone.

So, you were Branch Treasurer, did you say you also did something at the National level?

38:48

I was the National Treasurer for five or six years ...

And what did that involve?

At that stage, Jackie Courmadias was the Executive Officer in the office in the Botanic Gardens and it did not involve a lot for me because Jackie was very,

very capable. In those days, there were cheques, the cheques had to be countersigned, and Jackie would have all the cheques written ready, I would sign them. Now, I followed Mal Faul as treasurer on the National one and ... so after I signed them Jackie would take them to the Herbarium, where Fran Faul volunteered, she would take them home, Mal would countersign them and then they'd come back to Jackie and she'd post them. I mean, compared with online banking it's something, isn't it? [laughing] And so, then at the time of the, when there was a conference we usually gave the conference committee access to a bank account ... and ... Jackie, all of the applications for the conference went through the office and Jackie banked all of that money and accounted for all that money and gave me a neat summary. And then the people who would run this account up to the conference, and shortly afterwards to tidy everything up, and then that account would be closed. So, once a year that had to be ... by the time I did ... when I did the branch one it was a ledger, with everything done with pen and paper, and we didn't have to have an audit, but we had to have someone check it and say that it was alright. Graham Caple who had been involved with it over the years, he used to often check it for me. But when it was national, they had auditors and it would all go off to the auditors and the auditors actually prepared the summary that went into the AGM and you just wrote a few paragraphs about what had been happening. So, it wasn't really arduous but, finally, because Jackie was so well organised and such a good support that made it straightforward. ... I was a little, then I was not a committee at all when the, in 2017 when they had the conference in Melbourne I was on the committee then, but Mal and Fran Faul did most of the work of that conference. Hm.

So, you also said that you travel quite a bit now, but when you were mentioning living in England, that you weren't really, that gardens weren't on your radar at that stage

42:08

Not really. We did travel a lot, you know at every opportunity in England, Ireland, Wales, Scotland. Then we went, because we had friends in France at that stage, Australians in France, um, we travelled there. We went to Moscow in 1966, which was a bit ...

Wow

... out there. On a bus tour from London. And Scandinavia. I've never been to Spain. I'm sorry I've never been to Spain. I've been to Portugal, not to Spain.

One for the list

I don't know that I can ... Anyway, I can always look at books and things so I think it was really after my husband died that I must have got into the gardening books and the reading a lot about English gardens and things as well. Because we lived mostly in London in 1966 and there were lovely squares and, and small gardens and Kensington Gardens were just at the end of the street. But I didn't really have enough knowledge then to know what was what ... probably still don't [laughs]

So, in your retirement, does that mean that you visited gardens then ... When your focus did move towards historical gardens, what was your favourite kind of garden where would you find it?

43:57

[KW] Gosh, I don't think, I don't think I could say I had a favourite one. ... Yes, no, I couldn't I had a favourite one. I have, since I retired which was 2000 I have travelled a lot and the focus has almost always been on gardens. I did go to America with a friend who was not interested in gardens and we're about eight or nine days in New York and, and she was interested particularly in libraries in historic buildings and I think I saw almost every small and large garden in Manhattan. And they were marvellous, you know it was a real eye-opener, there were all sorts. And they had community gardens then, it must have been early in the 2000s, they had community gardens which are interesting. I've been to Japan to look at gardens and they're all different again but wonderful in their way. In China some of the traditional, one of my daughters and her husband lived and worked in China so I visited China a few times. I've got a few things on my wish list but I don't know that I'll get to them. There's a weekend in the middle of June when gardens are opening Amsterdam and a lot of them you go through the canal houses to see the garden and they're fairly close together and as far as I know that's been happening probably at least 10 years but when I've been to Europe I've never been quite in the right place to get there in the middle of, the 18th and 19th, that weekend, near to there, four days or something. So that's one thing that I haven't done I'd like to do. Um, last year I was in Belgium and looking at gardens with Sandra McMahon, who's a landscaper, and that was interesting because there's quite a move there now for, um, what do you call it, like 'dry gardening', 'free range gardening' and in Belgium and I understand it also in France now, that um the verges in nature strips are just allowed to grow at will for the whole of the summer and they just cut them down at the end of summer to increase biodiversity. I've been to um, I haven't been to lots of English gardens, I've been to Sissinghurst, I've been to a lot in London, of parks and gardens and you know places. I've been to Sissinghurst and ... um ... can't think of ...

And have you done that off your own bat, or have you done it as part of tours, or a bit of both?

47:08

A bit of both. Yes I, most recently I've done tours. It's ten years ago, I had a friend, who I know I said likes libraries and things yeah, I travelled with her. I've done a few tours with Trisha Dixon, I've done Sicily with Trisha Dixon, that was marvellous. I've done a lot of country Australian ones with Trisha, Coombe, South Australia, Goulbourn and that area. I've done several Tasmanian ones. Yeah so, but this is mostly in the last twenty years all of my garden visits.

What draws you to garden history?

I suppose the garden element. And well the history is ... my grandmother that lived with us, got to think, she was probably born in about 1880 something and um she and her, they lived it Seton in Gippsland, she had five sisters and

one brother and only two of them married and one of them was a published writer, which was, you know, quite something. And they were very interested in history, focused particularly on British history um ... and really held quite a colonists' view of Australia, um, but I guess so that, there was always that sort of interest and you know she, she'd talk, and because there were five of us fairly close together and she would read us stories and tell us stories. My mother reckoned she wasn't always red hot on the facts, but she had all sorts of stories. So, we'd hear about the Princes in the Tower and things like that. So that history and as I say, she was she was [inaudible] so I guess I am to some extent interested in history.

Or would you say that your focus is actually on the garden here and now?

49:36

I think it is more, yes. Now, I think it is. Well mainly because there is so much happening, although you know a group of us from Garden History work at the Country Women's in Lansell Road, Fran and Mal, and Pamela Jellie and um ... Ruth Caple works there and Jocelyn Backhouse and ... that started because we wanted somewhere for lunch when we had the Melbourne conference in 2017 that would accommodate nearly 300 people I suppose, with some cover in case it rained. And we asked the Country Women's if we could go there and they said yes, and the garden was very overgrown, although it had been a well laid out garden in the past and you know lawns and there are lot of bluestone walls and ponds and it was certainly in the style of Edna Walling. Um Tim Gatehouse says there's no real evidence that it's Edna Walling but it's very much in her style. So, it had the, it had the structure had pergolas with the wisteria, a big oak tree up at the top, had all that structure but it was full of invasive species and weeds. And so we came, and that was Jackie Courmadias then, we tidied up a bit for the conference and then a few, two or three of us, went on working there. I think when we first started we used to go once a month but now we go every Wednesday morning and the whole garden is in very good shape and we've tried to keep the sort of sense of Walling but go for dry climate plants as far as possible, we try not to water at all now. And, I mean the roses, the wisteria, the trees, they all survive, and we've mostly got rid of the Wandering Jew and the crocosmia and something else, oh, onion weed. And, that spider plant, a thing called spider plant, big fleshy tubers and a sort of nondescript white flower. Very invasive species. Anyway, we've mostly dug those out and we're pretty pleased with ourselves.

Is that the CWA building where women could come down from the country and stay at? Oh ok.

[KW] Mm, mm. And they have not been, had that B and B open since COVID, but I understand there about to open any minute. Great service for country people 'cause it was inexpensive and it's right on the Toorak tram line. Good spot. Mm. And of course they do an enormous amount of catering for all sorts of things, Victorian Racing Club, Government House, Melbourne Show, Melbourne Flower and Garden Show. Heaps. Sorry.

That's ok, that was me. Ok, so I think I've got a really sort of broad question, because I think probably, from my point of view I've got quite a lot of information, you might still have things that you want say, but a broad question about gardening and what it means to you. What does gardening in general mean to you?

52:55

I think it's a visual thing and it sort of shapes and colours really. I'm not really a vegetable grower.

So, shape and form and ...

Yes, I think it's the sort of visual impact of a garden that's important to me.

Does it give you feeling of satisfaction, joy?

Yes, yes, joy, absolutely.

In the time that you've been associated with AGHS, do you feel that it's changed?

Not a lot, I don't think. There are constants, and there have ever since I've belonged, well since 2000 anyway, since I've been active, there's always been a question of attracting younger members and "is the name perhaps not attractive to younger people". But I think most organisations that have been manned by volunteers for a long time have the same problem now and I think. I mean it's a good thing that women have careers and work hard and so they're not available to volunteer. I think that's just a fact of life so I think you know it's always going to pretty much be retirees who do most of the work for voluntary organisations.

Can you see ways in which you think things could move forward ... or change? Do you, do you see need for change? (I guess, that's what I'm asking)

[KW] I expect there is need for change if you want to keep the society going and so you need some renewal and but I've got no idea how to do it because I have three daughters who all garden and know a bit about gardening but they also have very big jobs and families so you know they wouldn't have time to be involved with anything voluntary really. They've been involved with their schools, their children's schools, briefly, but otherwise they don't have time to do any voluntary work.

Gardens do take time

Yes!

So, do you feel like you passed on your connection to gardens and gardening to your descendants?

[KW] Well, they garden, but ... I think they feel the same way. My youngest daughter does, she's not bad you know, she's, she knows (she's single) she

knows a bit and when she was at the Country Women's recently she said to me "you should take that out of there it's way too yellow". I thought. "Oh wow, fancy that". So, she has some sort of sense of joy about gardening and plants and, and she loves her plants in a way the other two not so much. They've got quite nice gardens but they're too busy to be too involved.

And you obviously have grandchildren ...

Yes

... have you gardened with them?

When they were little I did. You know, when they were sort of preschool I used to have them digging up and planting. Um ... in a small way some of them do a bit. One of the girls does a bit at, they all still live at home, there are some of them in their 20s. ... One of them does a bit of planting things in the herbs and garlic and things in the vegetable patch. And the other one of the girls, she's moved out of home, she yeah she's moved out of home, she lives in Geelong and she set herself up a nice little herb garden, that was all, not much, no not much. But they're young, you know they're young and they're busy.

Do you miss having your big garden?

Well the Country Women's has filled the void for me, because I sometimes pop along during the week when I've got few hours to spare and I think I need to get out of here. So, that's been marvellous for me to fill the void, and there are, I mean, there's volunteer gardeners at Ripponlea, and at Como I think, so there are places where you can volunteer to garden if you don't have your, if you don't have your own

Because I noticed coming in that, maybe there's more sort of open area behind this building but just coming into the building there didn't seem to be very much.

There's a big courtyard in the middle and otherwise just what you see in the front, mostly clivias, not sure.

And is it encouraged to ... potter around there ... or is it professionals

No. No. No. I understand there's a history of disputes about the, the courtyard garden but since I've been here, I've been here five years, it's very much off limits to residents. [laughter]

Competing interests and styles?

Apparently.

Ok, so is there anything else that you think you'd like to say, anything I haven't drawn out?

No. I don't think so. Gardening's been, in those middle years I didn't garden, but not really, for the last 45 years it's been a great back stop for me, I must say. Yeah and it ... makes ... it, and it does make a great focus for travelling. I've got other friends where restaurants food and all that's their focus, well, that's pretty nice to go hand in hand with gardens too. No, I think it's ... it's a great thing to do, to garden.

OK, well then, I'd just like to thank you for taking part and I'll explain to you once I turn the recording off, that if you forgotten something how that can be added to what we've done here.

I'll get some lunch.

Thank-you.

60:49

Interview ends.