AUSTRALIAN GARDEN HISTORY SOCIETY
NATIONAL ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION
TASMANIAN BRANCH

Photographer: Rhonda Hamilton April 2025

Interviewee:	**PRUE SLATYER**
Interviewer:	Jean Elder
Date of interview:	4 April 2025
Place of interview:	Hobart Tasmania
Length of interview:	82.34 minutes
Restrictions on use:	Nil
Transcriber:	Kaye Dimmack
Quotations:	Extracts from the interview should be verified against the original spoken word.
Acknowledgement:	All uses of this interview should acknowledge the interviewee and the Society: Prue Slatyer, Australian Garden History Society, National Oral History Collection, Interviewed 4 April 2025 by Jean Elder.

This is an interview with Prue Slatyer recorded for the Australian Garden History Society's National Oral History Collection. I'll be speaking with Prue about her life and career as a landscape architect and her role within the Australian Garden History Society at a state and national level.

The interview is taking place on Friday 4 April 2025 in Hobart, Tasmania. The interviewer is Jean Elder and our recorder is Rhonda Hamilton.

The Australian Garden History Society acknowledges Traditional Owners of Country throughout Australia. We pay respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island cultures and to Elders past and present.

[***This transcript has minor editorial changes to enhance clarity and context.***]

Thank you for joining us Prue, and for contributing to our National Oral History Project.

First of all, shall we start at the beginning, and ask about your early childhood? Where did you grow up and what were key influences?

> I grew up in Sydney, in the northern suburbs and we had a large, bushy block, so I grew up loving the natural environment; playing in the bush – we had a creek as well, running through our property. My parents were quite keen gardeners, established a lot of exotic trees and lawns and shrubs and fruit trees around the house – the rest of the two and a half-acre block was bush – and we did spend time going on bushwalks together.

Wow, it sounds like a fairly idyllic childhood, in the '50s?

> Yes.

I understand your father built your five-bedroom home in that era. Tell us about that.

> Yes. I was born in 1950, so post-World War II there was a great shortage of building materials and tradies, so my father decided to build the house that we lived in. So even though he had a full-time job as a scientist he spent the weekends building this two-storey, five-bedroom house around us, which took over a decade to build. But that possibly inspired me to study architecture. I was a teenager in the 1960s and, you know, the 1960s were very forward-looking, and architecture was seen as a very trendy, fashionable career.

Did you get involved in the building, or were you just observing as a child?

> I often helped out. I've got photos of me as a two-year-old passing him bricks [laughs].

Did he actually have an architect do the design? I'm just intrigued.

> No he did it himself actually, and probably had a drafting service draw it up.

So at school. Where did you go to school? What was your interest at school?

I went to the local public schools, primary and high school. It was a very good girls' high school – Cheltenham Girls High. Very good science and maths, they had very good STEM. So I really enjoyed those subjects. I also wanted to do art, but art was not considered academic enough and you had to either choose an academic stream or a creative stream.

As you did in those days.

Yes. I guess my main subjects were the STEM ones.

Do you remember when the idea of doing architecture at university began to form?

I can remember sketching up house plans as a 13-year-old, just from my imagination you know, not for real sites. So I was pretty interested, and the Institute of Architects in New South Wales used to run workshops for high school students who were interested in studying architecture, so I went along to them.

Whenever I went to a careers evening, architecture was never mentioned as an option for a girl, interestingly. When I started studying architecture, only 10% of the students were female.

Yes, totally different today.

Yes because I think more than 50% these days are women.

4:40 **Your mother was quite an influence of a different kind? She was a volunteer I understand, with the National Trust, was that correct?**

Yes while I was a teenager, she worked with the Bradley sisters in Sydney, who developed a really fantastic method of bush regeneration; very labour-intensive and relied a lot on volunteers. Then the National Trust actually adopted this method. There were various sites where development was occurring and had remnant bushland and the National Trust would be engaged to regenerate the bushland, on a development site. So my mother worked for the National Trust – she had a paid position working for the National Trust – managing these projects. And then later in life, she and my father both did voluntary bush regeneration.

From a very early childhood you were influenced – both in terms of the architecture and the whole conservation, natural world?

Yes.

That explains a lot about where your career ended.

So, you started studying architecture at the University of Sydney, but then you moved to Hobart. Tell us about that. Now have I got that correct?

Yes. Well – architecture courses are six years long and double degrees, so I started at Sydney Uni and after second year I came on a summer holiday to Tasmania and while I was here discovered this very radical architecture school in Hobart, run by Barry McNeill. It was at the College of Advanced Education – it was the School of Environmental Design – and I decided that I'd like to transfer from Sydney Uni to this course in Hobart, which I did. So I

actually finished my architectural education in Hobart. It was a very interesting course, and it was interesting that, in terms of education today a lot of the things that we had in environmental design in the '70s …

It was quite radical wasn't it, his approach?

Yes, it was all self-directed learning. You actually set goals for yourself at the beginning of the semester and then worked out some projects or tasks or research that you could do to achieve those goals. And it had self-assessment and a lot of team-based projects. There were no formal components of the course at all, unless we decided we were working on a project and we wanted to learn a bit about structural engineering for an architectural project we were working on, so an engineer would be engaged to give us some lectures, related to this particular project.

I guess you could say that the emphasis was on the process, because the body of information is constantly changing, so it wasn't about accumulating factual information, it was about learning processes and skills and also it was environmental design, so it was the undergraduate degree for architects, planners and landscape architects, so those three disciplines all worked together. It was very broad, and it wasn't restricted to the traditional disciplinary boundaries.

So, we got to work in multidisciplinary teams and take a very broad perspective about the inter-connectedness of everything in the environment.

It sounds extraordinary.

Yes, so that had quite a strong influence, I think, on my later professional life, because I always enjoyed working in multi-disciplinary teams and even as a landscape architect, liked the big picture stuff and also roles where I could combine both architecture and landscape architecture. So I like to work in master planning, site planning, urban design, which actually combine both disciplines.

When you finished that degree, you then went to work with Barry McNeill?

Yes, by this stage – because the course was at the College of Advanced Education – these were being disbanded in the late '70s and with the prospect of the course moving to the university, Barry knew that it would never be able to continue in its current form …

Too radical.

Yes, under the university administration it was too radical. So he resigned and – with a group of graduate architects, myself included – set up the Hobart Architectural Cooperative. That was like an architectural club really. We ran workshops and lectures and conferences and rented waterfront space. But Barry ran his practice from there – the same space, and a few of us worked for him, and I worked for him then for a few years.

10:13 From there – how did you get to Hong Kong?

I had a number of roles in Hobart after I graduated, and one of the architects I'd worked for in Hobart became a partner in a practice in Hong Kong and asked me if I'd like to go to Hong Kong and join the office there. So I did that.

That was quite a big step for a young woman, new graduate, was it?

Yeh. I'm quite adventurous, I think. Well, I [laughs], and quite impulsive too.

Off you went. Tell us what happened in those couple of years.

Well, Hong Kong was booming then, you know it was a real economic hub. It was still a British colony so there was a lot of development going on. I got the opportunity to work on all sorts of jobs – big projects – that I never would have had the chance to do in Australia. So that was very exciting.

The office was multi-disciplinary – we did interior design, architecture and landscape architecture. The office was DCM (Denton Corker Marshall), it's an Australian practice based in Melbourne, but they had this office in Hong Kong.

And they had – at the time – a lot of landscape projects and not enough staff to do them, so they asked if some of the architects would like to swap over and help with the landscape projects. So, I did that and became really interested in landscape architecture, did some really interesting projects: urban spaces in their new towns and new territories. You had to have lots of trees, because all the old men have caged birds and they come out every day with their caged birds and hang them in the trees and have social time with each other. There were aspects like that which were really interesting.

So that began the cultural influence in terms of design.

Yes. And sports facilities, for which the space was so tight in Hong Kong we had to do multi-purpose sports facilities, so you'd do a number of different layouts for different types of games on the same court. The layouts would be painted and colour coded.

All in the one tiny space?

Yes [laughs], and parks, temple gardens – which were interesting – and I decided that I'd like to study landscape architecture when I came back to Australia.

That's when you did another degree – at Sydney?

Yes, I returned to Sydney and studied landscape architecture there.

You talked about your aunt being quite a significant influence. What was her name (in WA)?

Jean Verschuer and later she married Brodie-Hall, so she was Jean Brodie-Hall. She did a lot of work early – well she was actually one of the founding members of the landscape architectural profession in Australia. She was my father's sister, so that generation, born in the 1920s, '30s.

She did a lot of work in the mining towns through Western Australia. They were trying to establish in these mining towns, you know, green lawns and exotic gardens and she took a much more common-sense approach and got

involved in site-planning to maximise shade in the outdoor areas where it was needed, and using Indigenous plants, rather than trying to establish exotics in these dry areas where there was no water. Then later she became the landscape architect for the University of Western Australia, so she was there for decades, and the grounds of the University of Western Australia are really beautiful.

14:59 She must have been very proud of you, ending up doing landscape architecture?

Well, she lived in Perth of course, so we didn't see each other a lot but yes we did have a connection, yes.

After you finished that in Sydney, by then did you have a couple of children at that point?

Yes.

What brought you back to Hobart?

Well I'd married a Tasmanian and we thought Hobart would be a nice place to raise our children, so we moved back in 1990 and I worked mostly lecturing in my old school, which was now part of the university, called the Department of Urban Design, but one of my old lecturers was Head of School, so that was lovely to be working with him.

Who was that?

Barrie Shelton.

You then worked as a lecturer for nearly eight years, is that right?

Yes. I loved that job, and the only reason I left really was because the course was sent to Launceston – for political reasons, not educational ones. There was a big protest against that, but anyway, politics won.

Were there any other key staff members that you really enjoyed working with, or outstanding students in that time?

Well, John Ancher, whose father was Sydney Ancher, of Ancher, Mortlock, Murray and Woolley – a very well-known Sydney practice. All the time I was there I was working with John.

It was terrific to be working with Barrie; Damien Mugavin – he was an architect and a landscape architect. And this course, although it was predominantly the undergraduate course for architecture, people could also use it to go into landscape architecture and urban planning, so it did have a bit of an environmental design influence, a bit like the course that I'd studied. We tried to emphasise that as much as we could. You know, really – the units I taught were very much about (if you were designing a building) thinking about the landscape that you were siting the building in and doing a really thorough site analysis so that the building worked well with the landscape.

Very important. When the course moved to Launceston, what were your options then?

I was offered a job with the university, working on campus planning and design, so I did that and enjoyed that. Then the university was restructured, and our department was moved to Launceston again [laughs], and just a few people left in Hobart, but my role and the role of my boss disappeared.

Then I did some part-time lecturing in Launceston, going up with John Ancher a couple of days a week for a while, just for a couple of years.

And then, was it about that time you set up your own private practice?

Yes, I set up my own practice, did a bit of work, but really preferred working with others, to practising by myself. A position came up at Hobart City Council.

That's right. You were managing the architectural landscape and urban design projects, with other staff. One of the major projects then was the Swansea townscape study.

Yes, we were, sort of, lent by Hobart City Council to the Glamorgan Spring Bay Council to do a townscape study in Swansea, which was interesting. With all these townscape studies, there's a lot of heritage involved and, really, I think of towns being townscapes which are cultural landscapes.

Did you know about Cambria at that point in time?

I knew about Cambria but it wasn't under threat at that stage.

19:58 **We should, for people who are listening who may not know about Cambria, do you want to just outline a little …? Cambria a very historic …**

Yes, this was the home of one of the Meredith families – one of the very early settlers of Tasmania – and a large property, but it was bought by a Chinese developer, along with a number of surrounding properties, amalgamated an enormous, absolutely enormous parcel of land for, virtually a Chinese town, wasn't it? It had a …

It was going to have a nursing home …

Yes, it even had a hospital and a mortuary and an airport to fly in people from China. And it wasn't just for older Chinese people, it was a lot of residential units as well, hotels, golf courses. And very little respect for the cultural landscape that existed, in the designs.

Our local branch (of the Australian Garden History Society, plus also the national body) started advocating against this development. Gwenda Sheridan and Stuart Read prepared an enormous submission and it's ongoing, it's still under threat, but they keep getting knocked back by the planning authorities.

So we've managed to fend it off for about four-five years now.

I think it's more than that. I think it could be almost ten actually, and there's a very strong East Coast alliance.

Anyway we're diverting a little bit, but I'm intrigued that you probably had some contact with that early on, when you were doing the work at Swansea.

Just to finish your career before we talk about your amazing contribution to the Garden History Society, you did yet further study. I can't believe, you did

a Masters by Research in Environmental Studies, and then more study in history?

Well actually no, that was prompted by a project I was working on at the council which was renovating the rear of the Town Hall. And I must say, all these projects are not just mine, they're very much team projects, but we were renovating the office spaces at the rear of the Town Hall, and we wanted to do it as a green building. I decided I'd go to uni and do a Masters by Research on sustainable buildings. That was quite an architectural thesis about the occupant experience of sustainable buildings. We managed (I had left the council by the time it was fully implemented) but we did manage to get a number of sustainable initiatives incorporated into the renovation.

Yes, but by that stage, I was doing a lot of long-distance walking in Europe and became really interested in cultural landscapes. I think, inspired by my experience of walking through these wonderful cultural landscapes in Europe, and historic villages and towns and then, I thought, there's a fantastic opportunity to develop a walking trail in Tasmania. I think Tasmania has a really great opportunity compared to the other states of Australia because our settlements are closer. But we also have so much wonderful history still evident. I remember in that book *Great Properties of Tasmania*, Richard Archer from Brickendon saying – 'Tasmania's got so much old stuff, there's so much authenticity because no one's had money to demolish it [laughter]'.

So, it's not just buildings but it's the landscapes as well, all the coniferous plantings, and rectilinear layout of the paddocks and the engineering infrastructure; those beautiful old convict-built sandstone bridges. Inspired by this I went to uni to study tourism management and history and started developing a proposal – and working voluntarily with Southern Midlands Council – to develop a walking trail. At this stage, it was just Hobart to Oatlands, and last year I was contacted by the Heritage Highway, which is a group of Northern Midlands Council, Southern Midlands Council and at times, Brighton Council, who've also wanted to develop a walking trail through the Midlands. So, we're now working together on a proposal.

25:38 Which is possibly going to be called Heartlands Way?

Yes, we had a brainstorming session for a name, a name that we all like. It's not decided yet that this would be the name but is Heartlands Way, because that ties in with the Tourism Tasmania name of the drive experience through Heartlands.

In many ways this project you're talking about brings together your range of experiences and expertise in terms of conservation, cultural landscapes, landscape architecture?

Yes, that's right, because one of the motivations is that if these places are actually used by walkers – and I've seen this happening in Spain with the Camino de Santiago – where (I don't think anything we do in Tasmania will reach the same level of popularity [laughs]), but it has been remarkable the conservation and economic advantage benefits that have evolved from having the Camino de Santiago passing through these little towns and villages that

were in decline and they've been revitalised and, you know, new food outlets, new accommodation outlets, shops.

It would be wonderful.

Yeah. And that's very much what the Heritage Highway is about and that's why it was established some time ago to develop a theme for the towns through the Midlands, for people driving through, but they're now looking broader than drive experiences.

How long would that walk be if it went through?

Oh, if it went all the way from Hobart to Launceston it would be ten days to two weeks, but I think you could do sections of it. Some of the walks I've done in Europe, there've been school groups walking, so it's not just been a sort of physical education exercise but it's also an opportunity for school students to learn about the culture of the place they're walking through. Like in Italy, I was chatting to some school students from Venice who were teenagers – there were about 30 of them walking in a group with their teachers – so not only was it a sort of, as I say, physical education exercise but also they were stopping every now and again and visiting the farms and learning about olive oil production and growing olives.

It could have such exciting …?

Yes, yes, we see that school students could, maybe spend two or three days walking a section of it and learning about the history of that particular area.

A really exciting project. We're coming to the end of talking about your career – the other projects you did in association with Sue Small – what other landscape management …? You did some work at Home Hill, another historic property in Northern Tasmania?

Yes, after I studied history, and as I moved into semi-retirement, I thought doing landscape management plans, rather than being involved in design projects – which involve a lot of effort and going out on site and things – I thought it would be nice to work on projects that involved quite a bit of writing and historical research. Home Hill was the … I had done some conservation management plans and heritage studies previously, for significant sites, like Coal Mines and Willow Court at New Norfolk.

Willow Court – just for those that may not know – was an asylum.

Yes, actually Australia's longest continually operating psychiatric institution. It operated from the 1820s to the 1990s, I think, and the gardens and grounds were very important in the early days, as a form of therapy. I would say that was the main reason.

30:39 So when it was decommissioned, then they were looking for other ways of using that whole ...

Yes, but they wanted … There have been a number of conservation management plans done [laughs], because it's such a significant site, but I worked in a multi-disciplinary team and I was focussing on the landscape

aspects and looking, really, at what had conservation value, what heritage value, and what should be retained, that was the focus of that.

But then in 2017 an opportunity came up to do a landscape management plan for Home Hill, which is heritage-listed, and it was the home of Joseph and Enid Lyons. Joseph Lyons was Tasmania's first, and to-date, only Prime Minister of Australia and Enid, his wife, was the first female member of the Australian Parliament and the first female Cabinet member also. They had a fairly modest house in Devonport but, after she retired from Parliament, Enid was a very keen gardener and established quite a beautiful garden – very much a mid-twentieth century garden – but it really showcases a lot of her character, and her incredible initiative and resourcefulness.

Yes she built (I think, actually did it herself), dug out a pond area and did a beautiful stone ...

Yes.

I think you've got this wonderful quote, haven't you? She writes about her blue garden and looking out the window at her garden. It was obviously very, very important to her.

Yes, in the 1950s she had a radio program. It was called 'Hollyhocks' and it was about gardens and she often talked about her own garden, and in this particular episode she … It was a weekly radio broadcast which she made regularly over the Australia-wide Macquarie Network, and she described her blue garden of blue-flowering plants and this really captured the imagination of listeners and generated a huge amount of mail from them. And they all wanted a list of her blue-flowering plants, and this was from the transcription of the broadcast. So, quote:

"Outside the French doors of our living room, there is a little separate garden that is really an outdoor room. It has a lovely green carpet of grass and soon will have walls of green cypress. This year the flowers in the borders have been nearly all blue, except for a few big splashes of rich crimson and pink Sweet William and some tall spikes of Russell lupins in apricot, rose and pink. The rhapsody in blue opened with the lupins, masses and masses of them on a high bank. Larkspurs early took up the theme, with anchusa and Canterbury bells, cornflowers, campanula, and love-in-the-mist, with drifts of mauve/blue catmint as a kind of obligate. Then the delphiniums came in a burst of glory and they showed all the shades of purple to blue. It has been the most satisfying garden picture I have known, and I think of it often, even when the gladioli are rioting in the beds, asserting with all their brilliant colour and perfect form, their claim to be regarded as the aristocrats of the garden".[1]

34:46 That's a gorgeous quote. Absolutely gorgeous. I just love the phrase 'the rhapsody of blue', even though she had so many other colours. But it was important because, over time, that garden had deteriorated dramatically.

It's been very frustrating, yes.

[1] Trust, the National Trusts of Australia Magazine, Canberra ACT. Issue no 6, 2018. Jennifer Stackhouse *Plants that tell a story* pp 68-69

When Enid died, she left her property to the Devonport City Council, but to be managed by the National Trust. So, we actually did this landscape management plan for the National Trust but also for the Devonport City Council because hopefully they would be implementing it, but it's a complicated relationship, with not much consultation between the two organisations. The Devonport City Council thought we were interfering, doing this landscape management plan, but the way they've been managing the garden … Sorry, I should say, the house is open to the public and, you know, it's quite a popular tourist attraction, but the grounds have been just ignored really. The interpretation potential, the visitor …

Perhaps to explain, part of the dilemma is that National Trust manages the house, but the property's owned by Devonport City Council, which is part of the dilemma.

Yes, so the council has been maintaining the grounds as though it was a municipal park, putting in a big asphalt car park that is more appropriate for a recreational ground and even street signage, you know, 'Give Way', on the driveway and, probably leftover street lighting, in the car park in the garden – all very inappropriate for a residential garden – which has such potential for interpretation, and Enid was quite a character and an extremely impressive woman and a lot of her character could be seen in the garden with appropriate interpretation.

We live in hope perhaps, that one day we might see some form of her blue garden again.

Yes, they're actually focussing now on building a pavilion as an interpretation centre and I think this is the problem with a lot of heritage sites that they seem to want to make money from, well, not the authentic experience of the place, but an interpretation of it, with a shop and a café and a whole lot of other paraphernalia that is detracting from the authenticity of the place. That's what is happening with Home Hill at the moment – the council is focussing on building this new interpretation centre in the garden. We've realised that that's their focus at the moment, we can't convince them to do anything with the garden right now, we'll have to wait till that's all finished.

Perhaps we should broadcast Dame Enid's – that wonderful speech – more frequently so the message gets out there?

Yes.

We are going to have a pause soon Prue, but anything else you want to add about your extraordinary career, in terms of landscape architecture? Are there other projects we've not talked about?

No.

Recording paused.

38:30 **And now Prue, just before we start talking about your involvement with the Australian Garden History Society, I want to go back and ask about your working career. What was the project that you got most pleasure and enjoyment from?**

Well, it was probably while I was working for the council and we redeveloped the foreshore at Lower Sandy Bay, Long Beach.

Again, it was a multi-disciplinary team. I was the Project Architect but we had engineers, landscape architects, architects, all involved and we engaged some geomorphologists from Sydney to actually do an analysis of the movement of the river in the bay, because the beach was gradually getting smaller and smaller and what was happening was that the existing sea wall was the wrong shape and in the wrong location and the waves were smashing against the wall, gouging out the sand and carrying it away. And what they recommended was moving the sea wall ten metres inland and curving it in plan, following the arc of embayment, and also curving it in sections so that the waves would roll up the face of the wall rather than smash into a vertical surface.

We got a lot of criticism for that, for moving the sea wall inland and taking up, virtually demolishing some foreshore space, but it's been very successful in that the beach is getting bigger, gradually, because the waves are coming in and dropping sand on the beach and not hitting the wall so often because it's further inland. But the main thing we did was dedicate the foreshore strip to the people. There had been car parks really close to the water's edge. In fact, the car parks were actually at the water's edge, and you had to walk behind the cars. We pulled all the car parking away from the water's edge, made a big promenade along the foreshore and put in barbeques and shelters, re-did the playground. The area has a lot of potential because it's got the sports fields nearby and then it's got all the little cafes and restaurants of Lower Sandy Bay as well, so it's been really successful. I think, just in terms of social benefit and environmental benefit, it's been a great project, and it was fantastic to work on. I really enjoyed it too because of its complexity.

And the inter-disciplinary aspect, clearly.

Yes.

So important. That would have been a wonderful note to end your career on – well, it wasn't quite the end but a very satisfying project.

Ok. Let's move on to talking about your work the Australian Garden History Society, and we're going back now to the 1990s when you were an active member of the Australian Institute of Landscape Architects, and at that point, knew a little bit about AGHS Tas and you talked about their interesting talks you sometimes went to, with fabulous afternoon teas and you occasionally attended. But then Anne Latreille came to Tasmania. Tell us a bit about that; she was writing a book?

Yes. In the early 2000s, Anne Latreille came to Hobart to do some research for a book she was writing called *Garden Voices* and this was about significant garden designers in Australia, not just contemporary ones but ones who had passed away as well.

Kitty Henry?

Yes.

So the two Tasmanian ones that were included in the book were Kitty Henry and Torquil Canning, who's a fantastic landscape designer and contractor. I had worked with him; I got him as a tutor when I was teaching in the '90s and we did a landscape design project together where the students designed and built the landscape, under Torquil's supervision.

I met Anne Latreille and she then recommended, or suggested that I could join the Editorial Advisory Panel of the Australian Garden History Society. And although I wasn't a member of AGHS, I think the idea was that I would provide an outsider's perspective on the journal (from someone in an allied area as a landscape architect). Nina Crone was the editor of the journal at the time and, I think Richard Aitken was Chair of the Editorial Advisory Panel and Christina Dyson I remember was on the panel too.

Nina Crone was a fantastic editor and, interestingly she'd plan out the year's journals in advance, giving each journal a theme and then she'd try and get the majority of articles to fit the theme for each issue.

So your work would be following her theme, trying to find people that might write for the journal? What was your role in that?

Yes. Really, it was more providing comment on the ideas for the planning and also comments on the actual issue of the journal.

44:55 Then around 2007 you joined the Tasmanian branch?

Yes, well after being involved in the Editorial Advisory Panel for a while I thought I really should join this organisation [laughs]. I can't remember exactly when I joined but I think it was around 2007, and I remember going to the Launceston conference which I think was 2009 or 2010. Did you go to that?

No.

That was fantastic. Really inspiring. I was really impressed, really blown away and loved the combination of the lectures in the morning and the garden visits in the afternoon. It was, as I say, in Launceston so we visited a lot of properties around Launceston.

Then in 2013 you joined the Branch Committee and over that next, nearly 10 years, you were Treasurer, Secretary, Deputy Chair, with the Tas Branch, then on the National Management Committee. So you had a whole range of roles, but in 2014, which is when, well, I joined a little after, I knew of your incredible work in event organising. The branch has two, three events a year – the first event you organised was a trip to Mt Field, tell us about that.

Yes, that was 2014 and it was quite ambitious actually. We hired a bus, which we don't usually do that for our trips do we, it's self-drive, but we hired a bus and the idea was to go to Mt Field for the turning of the fagus [Tasmania's deciduous beech]. So we drove up and then unfortunately, there'd been heavy snowfall that morning as we were driving up and the road to the summit was closed, so we couldn't get up to see the fagus. But I'd organised for a botanist – Alan Gray – to be on board. He'd been studying, in the 1970s, environmental design with me but he was doing it as a mature-age student, so

he was already a botanist but was doing environmental design. But I can remember doing field trips with him in the 1970s, particularly up to Lake Dobson and he had these fantastic stories about all the plants. He was on this AGHS trip as our guide and although we couldn't see the beautiful fagus changing colour, he knew some other areas that had a wonderful diversity of Tasmanian plants, so he took us to these other spots and gave us a guided tour of all the plants.

And saved the day [laughs].

What were other memorable events? There've been so many. I know … involved in the committee but often it was you that pulled them together in terms of getting a flyer. As a recipient of these wonderful flyers it usually had a picture of where we were going to go and some background about the cultural history – it was quite a lot of work, these events.

Yes, it was. Usually the committee would come up with ideas for places we could visit or speakers we could have, but I had the role of compiling the flyers for a number of years and, in doing that, I always tried to develop a theme for the day's outings, do a little bit of research on the history on the area we were visiting, information about the different places we were visiting. So, although I wasn't necessarily the event organiser, I did have to pull things together in order to produce a flyer.

We visited a huge variety of places while I was on the Branch Committee, really interesting gardens and landscapes.

49:33 **And occasionally whole weekends.**

Yes, yes.

I remember the visit to John and Robyn Hawkins' house at Chudleigh, at Bentley. Do you want to describe that, quite an extraordinary house and garden?

Yes. What John has done with the house is quite remarkable and really doesn't follow the Burra Charter at all, in terms of conservation practice, because what he's done is taken an existing house and then replicated a mirror image of it, joined by a vast conservatory with a huge dome, modelled on the Brighton Pier in England. It's very much fake history and really, I regard it as a folly. But nevertheless ...

An extraordinary folly.

It's extraordinary and very exciting and interesting to visit, yes. And then, in contrast, I think Robyn took probably most of the responsibility for the garden, which is quite contemporary and minimalist; water bodies, very large rock sculpture and clipped hawthorn hedges. They actually got tea cutters from Ceylon and tea cutting equipment from Ceylon that cut the hedges in a cylindrical shape rather than rectilinear.

We've interviewed Robyn and she spoke a bit about establishing that garden and her planetarium [arboretum] as well. Yes, a fascinating property.

That same weekend I think, we went to Wesley Dale, which was, in contrast ... do you want to describe a little bit about it?

Oh yes well Old Wesley Dale – Scott and Deb Wilson – I think Scott worked with John a lot, on his property.

That is just the most delightful … It's a very historic property, probably 1820s too, Old Wesley Dale. There's a big old stone barn where convicts were kept. The garden is absolutely delightful. Again, probably not based on any historical research I would imagine. Because of course, a lot of these old farming properties didn't have elaborate gardens around the house because they were so busy doing their farming and that was what was important, not establishing beautiful gardens around the house.

They've done some very creative things in their garden around the house, including the elephant hedge which runs across the front of the house. Unfortunately, it no longer exists but Scott used to shape the plants – I can't remember what plants they were – into a long line of elephants, with the rear one's trunks hanging on to the tail of the one in front [laughs]. Very unusual and quite elaborate and would have been very complicated to trim, probably twice a year. But they also had interesting things like a ha-ha, so they avoided having fences at the front of the house because they had the ha-ha to keep the animals out of the garden.

Yes, some wonderful, wonderful events.

There were so many roles you played at the state level; I know you and Kim Dudson catered too. That would have used your wonderful cooking skills, for the Christmas events. That must have been a lot of work and that were great fun.

It was, yes, because we were often catering for 70 people or so. Yes, the fact that we took on these things [laughs].

You look back now?

Yes [laughs].

I can remember roasting multiple tarragon chickens and spending a week making ten pavlovas or something. The most challenging one was probably when we had lunch at Tom Lyon's property outside Deloraine. He has a huge property. He was Secretary of the Branch Committee at the time, and he's a Rosarian. He had over 300 roses in the garden but what I loved about his garden was that they were quite wild and rambling, they weren't all trimmed and clipped. So it was this quite wild garden, with these rambling roses all through it. A big garden, it had a lake with a little island in the middle and a boatshed.

54:58 How did you do the catering?

Well we tried to get the rose theme into a lot of the food. I remember Kim made this fabulous ice-bowl where she actually froze rose petals. You get a large bowl, put some water in it and then you sit a smaller bowl inside, so you get a layer of water running up the inside of the large bowl. You put that in the freezer and then just before you're ready to eat, you pull it out, remove the

bowls and she filled it with, I think it was a fruit salad or something. But it was this beautiful rose bowl, and we scattered rose petals all over everything, we had rose tea. I can't remember what else we had rose-related, but logistically that was actually very difficult to do because we were bringing the food from Hobart to serve the following day at somewhere near Deloraine.

Quite extraordinary [laughs].

One of the other roles you played an important part in 2016 was working with the Allport Library in Hobart on the production of the botanical drawings of Margaret Hope, a book called *The Character of the Blossom*. Tell us about that. AGHS contributed to the book design and …

Well financially, yes. We were actually approached by Allport to see if we could help fund the production of this book of botanical drawings. We were very interested in doing it and it became my responsibility to follow through with this. I thought it was a great idea, and the branch donated some money, and I think we got some money from the Kindred Spirits Fund too, which we were able to repay. Caitlin Sutton wrote the foreword to the book and most of the pages were the illustrations of these botanical drawings. As AGHS was providing financial support, we were invited to comment on the layout of the book and provide some input, which I did a bit. But I can't really take any credit for that input, it was fairly minor, but it was great to be able to support something like that and it actually benefitted us quite well financially.

Yes, the Treasurer was impressed because it got an 18% return on the investment. Was that correct?

Yes, exactly, yes, even though he was quite critical [laughs] in the early stages of us being involved.

And just in terms of raising funds, because the Tas branch has been quite successful. We have done other joint work with the Allport Library in terms of the Margaret Hope drawings on the Christmas cards which has also generated funds for the organisation. That was a very important initiative.

Then Prue, COVID hit and we kind of ground to a halt for a bit, everywhere, but when the Sydney conference was going to happen and then got delayed, but you, in 2020, were appointed as the Convenor of the National Conference that was going to be held in Hobart. First of all, it was going to be 2021, wasn't it?

Yes.

Then it was 2022. That was a huge amount of work and I can say that, being on the committee which Prue so ably chaired, it was enormous. Tell us about that; it was a most successful conference.

I think in 2019 our branch agreed that we could host the 2021 conference in Hobart. At this stage – I think when we made the decision COVID … [minor chatter re dates] it was pre-COVID I think when the decision was made. So, we started planning late 2019, early 2020 and it was still very unpredictable about what was happening with COVID. In 2019, we had the conference in New Zealand and the 2020 was to be held in Sydney and 2021 in Hobart, but

as COVID became worse we were never certain what was going to happen and eventually, in early 2020, it was decided to cancel the conference for 2020 and postpone the Sydney conference to 2021. And even then, 2021, it was still very unpredictable as to whether it was going to be held and a couple of months before it was to be held, in 2021, it was decided that it couldn't be face-to-face, that it would have to be our first online conference. I thought it was really successful.

Ofcourse it lacked the garden visits, which most delegates really enjoy; the garden visits as well as the lectures. But the lecture component, as an online conference, I thought was very successful. And you did get a feeling of being engaged because you could use the chat function on Zoom to comment, so there were little chats going on [laughs] during the lectures. But that meant that our conference, instead of being 2021 was now 2022. Again, there was still a bit of uncertainty around COVID, we weren't sure whether we'd be able to run it as face-to-face, but we kept planning it as though it would be face-to-face and, of course, it was.

It was extremely successful. I think there were two reasons it was so successful. First of all, it was Tasmania and I think a lot of mainland people love to visit the gardens and landscapes of Tasmania because they're quite different to most places on the mainland, and also everyone had been cooped up for years during COVID so it was a great opportunity to travel, relatively safely within Australia and we did work very hard, didn't we, to create a great conference. I think we had a really good theme; a strong theme and we were able to tie all the speakers into that theme.

62:63 The theme being '*Landscape on the edge: the challenge and opportunity'*.

Yes, yes. And I think we worked together as a team very well, with different sub-committees.

Largely due to your excellent chairing … yes, to hold a group together with such a diversity of roles, it was fantastic.

It was a lot of work, of course.

We all fell in a heap afterwards [laughs].

Yes. But also interestingly, I did quite miss the challenge of it once it was all over.

So, 2022 ended your nine-year term on the Tas branch. You were elected for three three-year terms, the maximum under the constitution.

Before I talk about your current work now, as Chair of the National Management Committee, going back there were a couple of other things. The other important things that the branch did which I know members really enjoyed was the importance of the winter lectures, and usually we've had two or three a year. Which again, was quite a bit of organisation … for the committee. Do you want to comment on that, the importance of the Winter Lecture Series?

Yes. In Tasmania of course, the climate is not conducive to going out and visiting gardens and landscapes in the middle of winter, and there's often not a

lot to see, with a lot of deciduous plants losing their leaves as well, and perennials dying down, so we replaced our visits during the winter months with lectures.

We'd usually – yeh, I thought it was really important – we'd usually have three lectures over the winter period. One would generally be someone from interstate. So, we'd pay for all their travel expenses to come to Hobart and give us a lecture. And then the third one would always be connected to the AGM and that would usually be a local speaker.

65:06 **That was an important part. The other role you played whilst on the committee too was, in terms of our state advocacy work.**

Earlier in the interview we talked about the work with Cambria, which is still ongoing, and as you said, we've managed to hold off the development at that historic site on the East Coast for some time now, but the other areas of advocacy was (well, we weren't successful), but we tried to get naming of a new bridge in Hobart, the Kitty Henry bridge. [Can you] talk about that?

Yes. Kitty Henry was an early garden designer in Hobart, around the time of Edna Walling. There was a new footbridge being built over the Brooker Highway in Hobart and it was leading from the CBD side to a rose garden that Kitty Henry had had a big hand in establishing. I think it might even be called …

It has a little plaque, yes.

Yes, our Branch Committee thought it would be terrific if the bridge could be named the Kitty Henry Bridge. So we wrote – I did a lot of research on the history; Kitty Henry's contribution to garden design in Hobart; and we wrote a lengthy submission to the council.

One of the things is that most places are named after men. There are actually very few places, bridges, monuments, statues, dedicated to women. So that was one aspect of it as well, but it was more, really, her great contribution to garden design in Hobart at that period.

As well as designing, she also built gardens, so she was quite remarkable for a woman of her time, what she did. Unfortunately of course, the council rejected it and called it a very boring name, The Rose Garden Bridge [laughs]. But interestingly, I heard that a couple of years later, there was a street in Canberra named Kitty Henry Street because it must have been a new subdivision and they were deciding to name all the streets after influential women from all over Australia and they picked up on our submission to the council previously [laughs].

Fantastic! So, it did have an outcome, that's great.

Yes.

Then there was the work we've talked about earlier too, on Home Hill, with Dame Enid's house.

More recently, a couple of successes. I remember the one where the council in Longford wanted to build a toilet block right in a very sensitive cultural area and we, I think, were successful then, weren't we?

Yes, that was extremely short notice. I think it was the morning of the council meeting I was contacted and told that there was a toilet block being proposed for – it was in a park – but right opposite Kilgour House, which is heritage-listed in Longford. Anyway, I whipped off a submission to the council, which managed to get to the council meeting and actually, there were already existing public toilets in a community house or something adjacent, so it really wasn't necessary to have new toilets there, and it was such a compromising position, just opposite that heritage-listed house, right in the middle of the park. Anyway fortunately, the council voted not to approve the development, so that was a success.

69:24 **The other was work, again at fairly late notice, Runnymede a historic property in Hobart. That was a joint work with National Trust, wasn't it?**

Well we actually did separate submissions but National Trust contacted us to say – because they own this property Runnymede, with beautiful gardens – and there was a development proposal for the adjacent property with a building, virtually right on the boundary, and it was two-storeys high overlooking the Runnymede garden and it would have meant that from the Runnymede garden you're confronted by this great, high wall. The existing vegetation on the development site – they were going to totally raze all the vegetation on the site.

Sue Small and I worked together and put in a submission to the council against this development being located so close to their fence and the fact that they were removing all the vegetation, and the impact that this was going to have on people visiting this historic garden of Runnymede.

And also, on the Runnymede planting, adjacent to the boundary, because there were trees in the Runnymede garden adjacent to the boundary but often developers just ignore the fact that trees have extensive root zones which were often the size of the (as a rule of thumb you can say the roots extend the same diameter as the canopy), and the development was really impacting on the root zone.

We were successful in actually getting the development changed to move it away from the boundary and retaining more of the vegetation. It wasn't totally successful but it's better than the original development proposal.

The last, final thing the State Committee was involved in was opposition to the proposed football stadium which, it seems given the release of the recent Planning Commission report, which is very damning of the possible development, that we might have had some impact.

Yeh, well our perspective was very much from the adjacent Cenotaph landscape and the impact that the proposed stadium would have on that landscape. Because as you know, AGHS has a web page Landscapes at Risk, so we're listing all the landscapes that we think are threatened, and so

we had listed the Cenotaph landscape as at risk from the development of this enormous stadium.

The Cenotaph is a very important site. It's got a reverential atmosphere and this is enhanced by the fact that you've got these expansive views over the water and up to the mountain, and having a huge stadium built, jam-packed against – rising, I think it was, the equivalent of three-storeys – right adjacent to this very important cultural site, would have a huge impact on your experience of that place and your ability to use it as it was intended, as a memorial site.

You get these wonderful views down the river where the first ANZACs sailed because that was how they were transported to Europe, on the ships, sailing down the Derwent. The other aspect to the stadium development is its impact on the cultural landscape of the historic Sullivan's Cove area. It's going to totally dominate, and it contravenes all the guidelines in the Sullivan's Cove Planning Scheme, which interestingly, the planning assessment has picked up on.

I think that advocacy work has paid off. I mean, we've got to wait for that stadium development to be seen out – hopefully it doesn't proceed – but I think it's had some impact in terms of the planning assessment's role anyway.

Yes.

74:24 **Now Prue, you had been the National Management Committee rep from the Tasmanian Branch for some time and then you were Vice-Chair from 2022 and then, from the middle of last year, you've been chairing the National Management Committee. What are the key roles that the Management Committee are taking for AGHS?**

Yes … what's our focus at present? A big issue, a big problem that we've had for many years is the inadequacy of our online membership system for joining, and for renewing membership. It's very clunky, very complicated. We're losing members because of it. We're also wasting our Executive Officer's time because people phone her up to get help. She spends a lot of her day talking people through how to renew their membership online, but a lot of people get so frustrated with it they just don't bother renewing their membership. So, it is really important that we get that working and we've just made a decision to replace the software we use at the moment, to a much more streamlined and logical system.

So that's one aspect, and then along with that we're just restructuring the website which has a lot of really valuable information on it, but it's very hard to navigate. You can't figure out where to find things, so we're restructuring that to make it easier to use, and all that wonderful information that's available to people.

Becoming more accessible, which is great.

And what about – at our Tasmanian conference in 2022 – Tim Entwisle introduced the Climate Change Position Statement for AGHS. Is some work progressing on that, as an organisation?

Oh well it's an ongoing thing, like our Landscapes at Risk and our List of Remarkable Gardens. They're continually being added to. So whenever anyone sees something that maybe could go on the website under the Climate banner it's continually being updated with new information.

I think climate change is really important for historic gardens. So how do you – I mean gardens and landscapes, of course, planting is living, so it's continually changing – so we're used to change but climate change is introducing a more significant … because you know because the old rule of thumb was always you replace like-with-like, but you can no longer replace like-with-like because we've got a different climate. And I think the important thing is that we maintain the structures, the actual plans, so even though the plant material within it may be changing but we're maintaining the structure and the character, so similar plants but from a different climate.

And in terms of the future directions, you feel quite strongly about possibly changing the name of the organisation?

Yes, yes. Peter Watts … I can remember at the close of our Hobart conference, Tim Entwisle, our Patron, mentioned something about introducing our organisation as the Cultural Landscape Society of Australia, and Stuart Read, who was our Chair at the time, also mentioned changing our name – this was at the conference – and I mentioned this in my post-conference editorial in the journal. Peter Watts and Colleen Morris then wrote a paper inspired by that, talking about – they are both from Sydney and they're founding members of the Australian Garden History Society – and they said when it was founded 40 years ago, they were both working in the field of heritage and the focus was always on the buildings and they were excited to see that, actually, there were historic gardens around as well.

So that was when AGHS was formed and the focus very much was on the historic colonial gardens because this was something very new, but you know over the 40 years we've gradually expanded our scope: in terms of our journal articles, our conferences, our events. We're looking beyond colonial gardens. We're looking at, in spatial terms, we're looking at landscapes, cultural landscapes, much broader environments than just gardens. Temporarily, also we're looking at not just the colonial period, we're looking further back to Indigenous land management. And in fact, that is actually becoming quite important now in dealing with climate change, the Indigenous approach to land management. So we're looking at that. We're also looking at more contemporary landscapes; 20th century landscapes, they're also historic.

Our activities all reflect this change in scope but the name doesn't, and I think it's really important that we remain relevant to what we're doing, but also to contemporary society. And I think, just generally, when you say the Garden History Society, you can see people's eyes glaze over [laughs].

81:11 They just think gardens.

I just think if we had a name that reflected more of what we do, it would be good, positive marketing. We might attract younger and more members, but also, it's more appropriate for the organisation. I'm really supportive of that but it's difficult to know how to progress that move at the moment.

A future role.

Yes.

Prue, are there any other aspects you would like to pick up on that we might not have covered? We're coming to the end of the interview.

No, I don't think so, thank you.

In that case I think we might conclude. Thank you so much for sharing your knowledge and experience with us today. I think your insights and perspectives on garden history, the landscape architecture, and especially your work with AGHS has been so important in adding to our collective history.

So, thank you again for contributing to our National Oral History Program.

Thanks Jean, it's been a pleasure. It's been good to talk to you, thank you.

Recording ends: 1 hour, 20 minutes, 31 seconds

Interview ends.