

Australian Garden History Society
National Oral History Collection

2025



Interview collection

Interviews are available online at:

https://www.gardenhistorysociety.org.au/publications-projects/#filter=iso_29

INTERVIEWEE	DATE OF INTERVIEW	BRANCH*	INTERVIEWER	PHOTOS
BOURKE, AO Max	20 November 2019	ACT/M/R	Roslyn Burge	Roslyn Burge
BRANDON, Simon	27 February 2020	NSW/SHB	Sue Whitehouse Lyn Barrett	Sue Whitehouse
CROFT, Sir Owen	23 & 24 April 2019	NSW/N	John Maurer	John Maurer
DIXON, Kingsley	26 January 2022	WA	Patsy Vizents	Portrait Patsy Vizents With sign Sue Davis
DUCKER, AM Dr Sophie	6 September, 3 & 21 October 2002	VIC	Jan Holth	Robin Page
GARNETT, OAM Tom	7 November 2002	VIC	Jan Holth	CSIRO Publishing, Obituary, <i>Emu</i> , 2006, 106, 341-342
GLUSKIE, Jan	4 December 2003	NSW/S	Roslyn Burge	Provided by Jan Gluskie
HOLMES, Peter	December 2003	NSW/SHB	Myfanwy Thompson	Myfanwy Thompson
MUSGRAVE, Elaine	27 January 2020	NSW/SHB	Dr Ruth Bailey	Portrait Dr Ruth Bailey Illustration unknown
MUSGRAVE, Les	27 January 2020	NSW/SHB	Dr Ruth Bailey	Portrait Dr Ruth Bailey <i>Kaya</i> garden unknown
ROBINSON, Carolyn	25 June 2019	NSW/N	Dr Liz Chappell	Kim Woods-Rabbidge
SHERIDAN, Gwenda	30 March 2021	TAS	Jean Elder	Rhonda Hamilton

There are 95 Interviews in the Collection, 67 of which are accessible online at the AGHS website:
[AGHS, AGHS National Oral History Collection - Australian Garden History Society](https://www.gardenhistorysociety.org.au/publications-projects/#filter=iso_29)

For information about other interviews in the National Oral History Collection, or further research enquiries, please contact AGHS at: info@gardenhistorsociety.org.au

* Branch abbreviations are NSW/S – Sydney Branch; NSW/SHB – Southern Highlands Branch; NSW/N – Northern NSW Branch; ACT/M/R – ACT, Monaro and Riverina Branch

Introduction

The Australian Garden History Society (AGHS) has built a significant National Oral History Collection of recordings, with more in the pipeline. Interviews have been recorded in every state and the ACT (not yet in the Northern Territory). A large proportion of these have been transcribed or logged, and uploaded onto the AGHS website as well as also lodged in State or Territory libraries.

Those interviews that are not on the website which may be available for research purposes can be requested from the AGHS head office (info@gardenhistorysociety.org.au). Conditions apply for access and use of the interviews.

History of the Collection

AGHS was formed in 1980. The following year, a Western Australian member, Oline Richards, wrote, 'if you know any interesting garden people – designers, gardeners, nurserymen, owners, botanists – try to get them to record their experiences, memories, etc.' (*Journal of the Australian Garden History Society*, Winter 1981, #2, p.12). The idea of doing oral history, in those days still a nascent practice for gathering historical evidence, had been planted.

It was not until 2002, ahead of the Society's 25th anniversary in 2005, that the Society's National Management Committee (NMC) commissioned an oral history program, *separate from the compilation of factual information about origins and ongoing activities*. A list of potential interviewees was compiled of people involved in the genesis of the Society, others who sustained its viability at national and branch levels, and some who had fostered a climate within the community that enabled the establishment of the Society.

Four interviews were recorded immediately in 2002, and another 21 by 2007. This initial project led to what is now an extensive and growing Collection of oral histories conducted by AGHS volunteers or by professional oral historians whose services are paid from Branch funds. These interviews cover both the early history of the Society, as well as stories of the people who have contributed to garden history across the country.

Interviewees share much more than recollections about the Society's beginnings, its conferences and publications. The varied reflections on the influences of childhood or family that engendered an interest in gardens, recollections of their own gardening practices, the impact of changing social and political environments, and the networking and informal mentoring that encouraged scholarship and research in the Society. This is a rich resource for scholars.

This booklet presents 13 summaries of interviews from nearly all Branches, to tantalise readers to immerse themselves in the National Oral History Collection on the AGHS website. There are 67 interviews available in audio and transcription form at the time of production of this document, all full of information on gardening, history and the various ways humans have engaged with nature. These conversations reveal the person and various locations while providing the ambience of a discussion that can be revealing and informative. We are absolutely sure this small contribution will provide readers with information on AGHS, the oral history wonders of the Collection and it is an easy way to share stories while discussing the booklet itself. This has been produced for members of AGHS but will be available online and in hard copy form for the broader community.

The National Committee of the National Oral History Collection looks forward to recording more interviews to continue the Society's Collection.

Contents

Max Bourke AO	1
Simon Brandon	3
Sir Owen Croft	5
Kingsley Dixon	7
Dr Sophie Ducker AM	9
Tara Edmonson	11
Tom Garnett OAM	13
Jan Gluskie	15
Peter Holmes	17
Elaine Musgrave	19
Les Musgrave	21
Carolyn Robinson	23
Gwenda Sheridan	25
Interview Collection	27
Acknowledgments	28
Podcast	29



Jean Elder (L) and Sally Johannsohn, Tasmania 2024. Photographer Rhonda Hamilton

Max Bourke AM



As Foundation Director at the Australian Heritage Commission Max Bourke was involved at the beginnings of the Australian Garden History Society. He recounts cooperative efforts in the mid-1970s and recalls that David Yencken, first Chairman of the Australian Heritage Commission, was *very keen that we work on gardens and from about 1976 onwards we started commissioning scholarly work with Howard Tanner and the very young architect, landscape architect, Peter Watts, who was working in those days for the National Trust in Melbourne. And gradually around all the states we commissioned someone to do a study on gardens.*

Max's diploma, gained from The College of Europe in Bruges, Belgium, was on the management of historic gardens and he has encouraged their conservation ever since. However, Max held AGHS at arm's length until he retired.

I don't think I actually joined the Society. I had a practice all the time I was at the Australian Heritage Commission of not belonging to organisations which we funded.

But with a long-term interest in gardening, gardens and their history and conservation the lure of AGHS was too great to be ignored forever and Max became a member of AGHS in the mid 1980s.

I was interested in the dilemmas that you faced in garden restoration. It's a much more difficult thing to deal with restoring a biological entity like a garden than it is a physical entity like a building. All the issues, I suppose my background in plant sciences, and ex-agricultural scientist, I was fascinated by the difficulties of growing plants as much as I was by the joys of growing plants.

Max reveals many insights into the history and workings of AGHS through involvement in conferences, publications, ACT Monaro Riverina Branch activities and contributions to the management of the Society. He solves the mystery of the Branch catchment.

I was particularly interested in trying a bit of imperialism I suppose, in trying to make sure that we linked up with the Monaro and the Riverina. I didn't know of personally of great historic gardens, but I knew of historic horticulture in the Riverina... There were some incredible rose growers and rosarians in places like Griffith where roses really flourish.

Max's love of the trees is also disclosed: *I've just always been interested in trees as plants I suppose. Because I've been interested in botany, trees have grabbed my attention and I just think they are the most wondrous machines ... converting carbon dioxide into oxygen is a fantastic thing. ... I just happen to like trees a lot that's all.*

Max put his passion into practice by planting an arboretum at an abandoned old dairy farm on the far South Coast of NSW at Tilba Tilba, influencing other nearby landowners to plant trees too. He tells of great success in cultivating rare *Eucalyptus conferruminata* or Bald Island Marlock.

It's the most beautiful tree and I don't know why it hasn't gone into horticulture. We've got dozens of them growing down at Tilba and they're the most beautiful horticultural little eucalypt.

Max has also been instrumental in setting up the Southern Tablelands Ecosystem Park at the National Arboretum in Canberra.

We find groups of people coming to us and saying, 'What can I grow in the area?' And so, that's a really important role for this site ... I think at last count 180-odd of the 220 understory species of the Southern Tablelands are growing there. And it's been a real joy over the last, bit over a decade, planting and now we spend a lot of time weeding and looking after what is a beautiful, small garden of the native plants of this region.

Canberra, where Max lives is full of trees, most planted since Charles Weston started work as first Chief Officer of Afforestation in 1911. Recently Max has been facilitating the production of Weston's biography written by Robert Macklin and supported by the Kindred Spirits fund, which will be launched at the 2025 Mt Gambier Conference: *The Man Who Planted Canberra*.

Simon Brandon



As part of a digital exhibition, Berrima District Museum in NSW worked collaboratively with Australian Garden History Society to bring eight historic gardens to the fore. Simon Brandon is a former Head Gardener of Hopewood, a major historic garden in the Southern Highlands and brings to light practices and details of gardening in such a major heritage landscape. The digital exhibition was displayed in the 'Story Centre', a digital space in the Berrima District Museum in 2020.

The present owner of Hopewood and now Head Gardener, Janet Storrier, has lamented that Hopewood doesn't come with an owner's manual and when Simon Brandon came to Hopewood, he must have felt the same. He did have some 'driving instructions' from previous owners however so it was not all blind sailing; there was some clues and information. Prior to joining Hopewood, he had studied for a Diploma in Applied Science in Landscape at Ryde School of Horticulture in Sydney and came to the position with good work experience and a keen sense of how the garden should be cared for.

The property was often used for special events and the gardening staff, which varied sometimes but was generally about three in number, were well versed in undertaking preparations for them ahead of schedule. *I guess the thing about that was when they were 'on' we'd have advance notice of course, and so the overall presentation of the property needed to be very high. There was no detail we could overlook really, but at the same time, we didn't have unlimited means, so we needed to be able to work with a broad brush through the property to be able to get the place looking beautiful and that was something that we became quite proficient at.*

Simon explained how planning and maintenance of what had been a regularly worked garden was managed. Some plants were removed and some improved by Simon and his team in consultation with the owners, but the intention was to maintain a flavour of plantings and to definitely keep the heritage features of the garden. Things such as the brick paving for instance and lawn locations were maintained.

Environmental issues to do with a warming climate are discussed and Simon explains how he managed water in the significant garden. Lawns and particular gardens were given less water in summer but all were carefully monitored as the season progressed.

... it was about using water responsibly, but also about doing the cultural practices towards looking after both plants and lawns, that improve plant health, so by looking after things correctly and thoughtfully too. So that's about observation and being there and seeing how plants are performing and adapting and adjusting according to their needs and also watching weather forecasts, weather and season.

Arborists were employed to manage the condition of the significant trees of the property, including the huge *Cupressus macrocarpa*, the Monterey cypress, on the entrance lawn. It is believed to have been planted when the original house was built in 1884 and is a magnificent long-boughed specimen that children can easily play in. Simon also mentions how the property had been an orphanage and that at reunions that he had been present at for these returning children, he was impressed with their stories of the joy and memories of the togetherness they felt in the house and in the garden.

Trees have been pinned to prevent limb breakages and the staff worked continually and seasonally on managing the gardens with the responsibility of stewardship that had been instilled in Simon at Ryde College.



Hopewood House, Bowral babies home, 8 May 1944,
photo Ivan Ivey, Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales
and courtesy ACP Magazines Ltd

Sir Owen Croft



Sir Owen Croft looks back over ninety years spent in the New England area of New South Wales in this broad ranging suite of interviews covering garden history, pastoral practices and climate change as well as recalling some historic gardens and memorable personalities of the district. In this edited version, focusing on his gardening life, he describes the foundation of Australian Garden History Society's Northern New South Wales Branch and the multi-generational garden development of his family home Salisbury Court, Uralla.

Sir Owen was born in April 1934. His family has a recorded history dating back to 1085 which is held at Croft Castle near the village of Croft, Herefordshire, England. Apart from a period of five years in his early adulthood, Owen has lived in the New England area virtually all his life. He and his late wife, Sally, Lady Croft, were instrumental in calling the inaugural meeting of a group of interested garden owners, historians and researchers to Salisbury Court, Thunderbolt's Way, Uralla on Sunday 13 March 2005. From this meeting, the Northern NSW Sub-Branch of the Sydney Branch of AGHS was formed with Owen as the inaugural Chair and Sally Branch Secretary. The Northern NSW Branch became autonomous in 2022. The group aimed, through liaison with the Sydney Branch, to record significant public and private gardens as well as organising tours.

The impetus for establishing the Northern NSW Branch grew from the demise of Australia's Open Garden Scheme, Sir Owen explains. Former Regional Coordinator, Lynne Walker, and garden owner, Doug Moffatt of Invergowrie were part of the foundation group. *Sally was Chair of the garden selectors of the Open Garden Scheme, so we travelled from Newcastle to the Queensland*

border, up the coast, up to the tablelands and out to the west. The territory started at Orange and all points north. Nearly every opening of an area, we would go and spend a couple of days there. I remember seeing a hell of a lot of gardens.

Owen grew up at Salisbury Court which was home for much of his adult life and is now in the custody of his daughter, Trish Rasmussen and her family. The granite stone homestead with its shingled roof and cedar architraves, built in 1844 by Matthew Henry Marsh, Owen's great-great grandfather, is one of the oldest in the district. Elements of the present garden are evident in an early sketch by Conrad Martens. English elms lining the driveway and the venerable Isabella grape sheltering the kitchen garden were brought as cuttings by ship from England by Matthew Marsh's new bride, Eliza.

As the eldest in his family, Owen recalls helping his mother in the Salisbury Court garden as well as his grandmother at Canowindra in Armidale where he learned about cultivating fruit and nut trees. Social life for the young Owen entailed visiting many other historic properties in the district for tennis parties and other occasions.

Owen has an extensive knowledge of New England pastoral life and families who settled the land. In this series of interviews, he discusses the challenges of climate in the New England high country and references extensive historic weather records from Salisbury Court, which was settled in 1835. Owen maintains an active physical and intellectual life and has been involved from the outset with the development of the Heritage Rose Garden at the National Trust property Saumarez Homestead south of Armidale, by members of AGHS. He continues to be keenly interested in researching and preserving photographic and written records of grazing families and properties that are housed in the New England Heritage Centre.

Kingsley Dixon



Kingsley Dixon FTSE (PhD) is a renowned Australian botanist, was the founding Director of Science at Kings Park and Botanic Gardens in Western Australia, and helped to establish the laboratories there as among the world's leading. He has also been Professor of Botany at University of Western Australia and Curtin University and is credited with developing the theory of how smoke influenced germination of Australian plants after bushfire.

His early life was in Morley, a northern suburb of Perth and his interest in botany was sparked by regular walks through bushland close by and in the Perth hills area. One of his early memories was of the time he began working with the Harper sisters in their Nursery situated on part of the historic land of their family home, Woodbridge, in Guildford, east of Perth. The two sisters who owned and ran the Nursery, Nan and Sue Harper, were the grandchildren of Charles Harper.

He was a shy 12-year-old but had an interest in plants. This was a work experience position during school holidays for Kingsley where he was introduced to soils and potting techniques but more and more, became familiar with nomenclature other than common names for plants he knew from bushwalking.

Kingsley tells of his experience with the sisters as a teenager. *So, those early days were extremely formative for me because I then started to learn propagation, soil mixes, native plant diversity and I could talk to people about native plants and I started to get exposed to Latin names which I found totally overwhelming, mystifying and it frightened me. I somehow thought this was a secret*

language that I will never understand because my grandparents and my parents loved the bush. We were always in the bush, always on picnics and they always used common names. That will be the sheoaks, kangaroo paws, blue bonnets it was always the common names, never ever the Latin names. Suddenly, not only were they talking in Latin names, but there were plant labels with Latin names on them. And gradually when somebody is talking these names a lot, you begin to try to practice. That was really the toughest part of it. The rest of it like propagation and helping them out, it was hard and it was heavy work sometimes and particularly because I used to get into the garden and prune trees and all the rest of it, during the summer holidays. Then I kept turning up regularly. They never really got to know my parents, they were always only Aunty Nan and Aunty Sue. These two amazing women.

The two intrepid sisters had collected samples of plants from outside Perth and propagated them on site at their nursery, Wyemando, an early native plant nursery providing the people of Perth with one of the first outlets for native plants. They stocked plants from all over Australia as well as exotics and being in that diverse plant “palace” was an important influence on Kingsley’s life and future direction. He mentions the range of trees that he was introduced to in Wyemando.

They had Brachychiton acerifolium, probably the biggest I’ve ever seen growing in the back garden; a gigantic plant. The plant that I fell in love with Allocasuarina torulosa, the beautiful weeping eastern sheoak which used to go the most hauntingly magenta colours. Plus, they had extraordinary rose gardens and a big collection of exotic trees; the biggest Gingko I think in Perth at that stage, I’m not sure.

Kingsley presented a talk to the Western Australia Branch of the Australian Garden History Society on 6 October 2021 on Wyemando. His interview is a summation of that presentation.



Kingsley Dixon with original signage from Wyemando Nursery

Dr Sophie Ducker AM



Dr Sophie Ducker was a renowned botanist and Australian botanical historian. She began her study of botany in Germany, joined the University of Melbourne's Botany Department as a technical assistant in 1944, retiring as a senior lecturer in 1974. As a young child, she remembers her German grandmother showing her how to press plants and was interested in plants from then on.

Self-described as *a botanist who is interested in gardens and the environment rather than horticulture*, Ducker was encouraged or rather volunteered to join the Australian Garden History Society by her friend Professor Turner. The first outings were to private gardens in Launceston, Tasmania and another to Canberra, ACT. She recalled the intimacy of the early society was wonderful because host members took personal pride in making their visitors welcome. *The fellowship, hospitality and the garden inspection was always first class.* It was on the first outing to Tasmania that Sophie Ducker met and befriended members, Alice Jeffrey and Kitty Ghan. They had shared interests and always travelled together.

While she considered the early focus of the AGHS was primarily to enjoy old gardens, by 2002 Sophie was celebrating a change toward the resurrection of old gardens and in particular, she was championing the work of Helen Page, who ran a program of working bees across a number of gardens in Victoria.

Sophie commented on the trending English garden programs of the time which showed plantings of modern cultivars in old rose gardens, her view was that *an old garden with modern cultivars is quite incongruous*. She had an abiding focus on the preservation and cultivation of early plants for the resurrection of the old gardens of Victoria and was most enthusiastic that the Society should have more volunteers to share the load in this pursuit.

Throughout her interview Sophie mentions the many friends and acquaintances with whom she had been involved. In particular she describes Joan Anderson, Grace Fraser and Alice Jeffery as a nucleus group of women who met regularly for planting at *the Hermitage Guest House*, north-east of Melbourne. *There are garden women and plants women – Alice Jeffery was a plants woman*, whose greatest value was her knowledge.

Sophie recalled that Alice *had what many people would call 'green fingers' and if she saw a plant then she said, Could I have a little bit? She would take it home and then make cuttings and have it lovely – that's the sort of thing. She wasn't interested in native plants at all*. She was mostly interested in ... *European plants – temperate plants* and some from Africa too.

Professor William Stearn, the eminent English botanist visited Australia in 1983 as a guest of AGHS, and Sophie refers to her opportunity to visit gardens In Adelaide, Melbourne and Launceston with him during his lecture tour.

Sophie Ducker thought it important that the AGHS did not veer back to a focus on English or European gardens rather it was time now, with 150-200 years past, to focus on early Australian gardens. She noted that the early emigrants brought plants with them to establish their new gardens and wondered if they had known how to transplant the native plants. Fortunately, the early gardeners kept some Australian plants such as eucalypt trees as a backdrop or to create a driveway.

After retirement in 1974, Dr Sophie Ducker continued her research to include study of flowering marine plants and history of earlier recorders of Australia's flora, especially the seaweeds. She has an extensive list of publications in her bibliography.

Sophie was an inaugural member of the AGHS in Victoria, regularly giving lectures to members, writing for the AGHS Journal, a valuable contributor to the Society and certainly enjoyed the outings.

Tara Edmonson



Tara Edmondson grew up in the coastal town of Orford on the east coast of Tasmania, not far from Maria Island. Her childhood was filled with outdoor activities like bushwalking and exploring the coastline with her family. Her parents built and landscaped two homes in Orford. Tara's horticultural inspiration, however, came from close family friends Gwen and Puck Vaughan of Triabunna, just north of Orford, who had a self-sufficient property with productive and ornamental gardens.

Tara began her horticultural career in 2000 through an apprenticeship with the City of Hobart. At the council nursery in Warrane, a suburb east of the city, she gained experience growing a wide variety of plants for public spaces, including trees and bedding plants. Her responsibilities also included working as an urban vegetation officer, where she handled issues such as vegetation complaints and contributed to the Significant Tree Register—an initiative aimed at preserving Hobart's most important trees, including those at Government House. Perhaps it was this that attracted her to the Government House precinct. And in 2004, in her mid 20s, Tara became the first female gardener employed at Government House, Hobart.

I couldn't wait to get started actually.

Initially she was primarily responsible for food production and cut flowers, managing areas like the rose garden and ornamental Quarry Pond Gardens. At that time, the gardening team had seven full-time staff, each independently managing sections of the estate.

In 2019 Tara was appointed Estate Gardens Manager. The food production garden had shifted from growing staples to a broader range of crops in smaller quantities, aligning with the kitchen's needs and space limitations. Government House gardens have historically supported the community, continuing through events from the Second World War to the COVID-19 pandemic, by donating excess produce to various distribution points.

We've not done really the amount of planting that we should have to fill the gaps that we're going to see in the next 100 years.

Sustainability is central to current practices. Tara and her team have implemented biological and cultural methods to reduce chemical use and focus on soil regeneration. Projects include installing irrigation systems and planning increased canopy cover, particularly in the eastern arboretum, where native plantings are planned to transition into exotic ones.

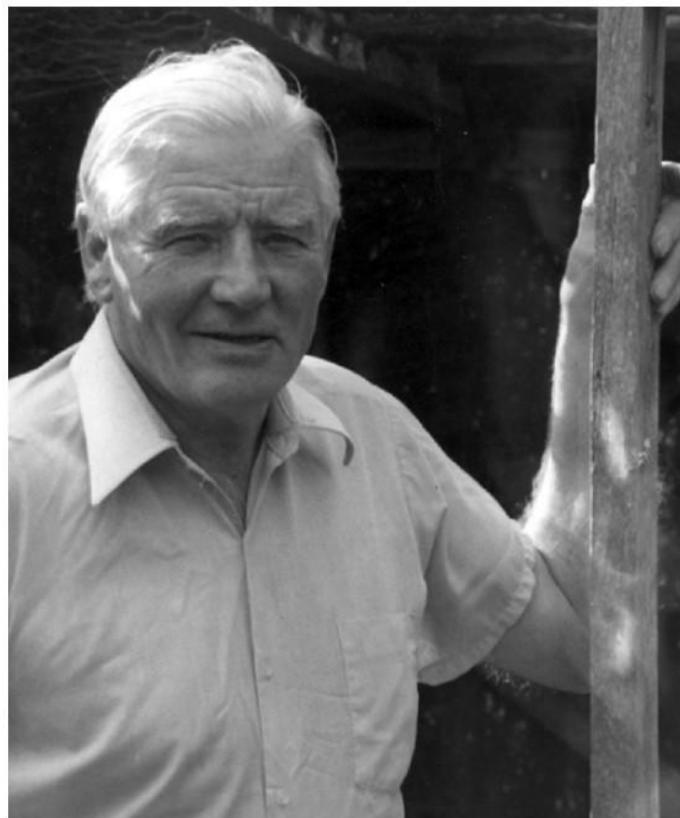
A major achievement was Tara's instrumental role in designing and building Lahaye's Garden in 2016. This recreation of an 18th-century French vegetable garden commemorates the expedition led by D'Entrecasteaux at Recherche Bay. Located discreetly on the estate, it mirrors the original layout and includes native grasses to honour Indigenous history. The garden uses French heirloom vegetable seeds, many from the historic Vilmorin company, and the produce contributes to Government House's kitchen. It also serves educational and community engagement purposes.

Tara recalls notable events such as Queen Elizabeth II's visits, including tree plantings in 1954 and 1963. She also recounted a humorous incident involving a tree planted by an ambassador that had subsequently died and was carefully replaced before his return visit.

It was commented in his speech in the Government House ballroom during his visit that the tree was flourishing like our relationship with his home country.

Tara's story is one of a deep-rooted passion for horticulture, heritage conservation, and sustainable gardening practices that continue to shape one of Australia's most significant historical estates.

Tom Garnett OAM



Thomas Ronald Garnett OAM was an English and Australian headmaster, horticulturalist, ornithologist and author.

At age 46, Tom Garnett was appointed Headmaster of Geelong Grammar School in Victoria and he and his family made a permanent move to Australia in 1961. Tom talked about his interest in garden history as being established in the UK before he came out to Australia. Although not a trained gardener, he had experience in making and enjoying gardens.

Tom was a birdwatcher from an early age and on retirement took up a voluntary role as secretary of the RAOU (Royal Australian Ornithological Union) setting up the foundations of what is now called Birdlife Australia.

He and his wife Penny had moved to Blackwood, two hours northwest of Melbourne to a stone miner's cottage on four hectares of bushland. In an interview prior to his retirement from Geelong Grammar School he remembered saying *I'm going to make a garden*. Tommy, as he preferred to be called, retired in 1973 and for 6 years that is what he did, becoming secretary of the RAOU (Royal Australian Ornithological Union) setting up the foundations of the modern *Birds Australia*. He says, retirement was when his real interest in gardens began.

At Blackwood, the Garnett family developed The Garden of St Erth, now one of Victoria's best-known gardens. Tommy focused much of this horticultural work on Australian native plants, the cultivation of which he thought was much neglected at the time. He planted many native plants

and was always noting the use of the different plants by birds. St Erth was one of Australia's first private gardens opened to the public and today is part of the Diggers Club.

His interest had been piqued by Peter Watts' National Trust survey of the historic gardens of Victoria. In 1980, the Editor of *The Age* in Melbourne asked him to review of *The Art of Gardening in Colonial Australia*, Tommy considered his review as the start of the rejuvenation of garden interest in Victoria. 1980 was also the inaugural year of the Australian Garden History Society. Tommy talks about the establishment of the AGHS, the influence of Peter Watts and mentions many early members of the fledgling society and how he became involved. He mentions the early tensions between Melbourne and Sydney. He joined the Society with George Seddon, a big influence on him as a gardener and writer and they maintained a strong connection over the years, attending the early meetings across Victoria. He recalled his time on the Environmental Committee where his focus was on rehabilitation of the Botanic Gardens in country Victoria.

Tom Garnett did not agree with the concept of conservation or restoration of a garden, preferring always to use the term rejuvenation, maintaining that conservation was not achievable because as new plants were introduced/planted the ecology of an area changed as it grew. His strong opinion on this subject as well as his suggestion to remove the letter H (representing the word History) from the Society, contributed to some debate about the future of AGHS.

Tom was involved with many societies and had broad interests, these included the Open Gardens Scheme, Gardens of the Year scheme, Guild of Gardeners and the Gardens State Committee, focusing on improving the environment and particularly the routes between Melbourne and Sydney, emphasising only indigenous Australian plants would be planted.

Tommy contributed to the *Oxford Companion to Garden History*; was Garden Editor for *The Age* newspaper and wrote a regular column *From the Country* [1980-97], chatting about horticulture, birds and other topics. He also published books on his collections of articles written on various garden topics.

Tommy prided himself in being the only non-public servant on several Government committees. In 1984, he contributed to the government project to rejuvenate Victoria's country botanic gardens and in the early 1990s successfully advocated the establishment of an independent board for the Royal Botanic Gardens Melbourne. In 1996 Tommy Garnett was awarded the Medal of the Order of Australia for his contribution to horticulture.

Tommy mused on the meanings of an historic garden, a significant garden and the Australian style of gardening. He concluded his interview reflecting on his aspirations for a history recording the introduction of all new plants to Australia and that a future Garden History Society might have a wider influence, take more responsibility for the ordinary gardener and consider taking other societies under its wing.

Jan Gluskie



The first committee meeting of the Sydney Branch was held in August 1993, thirteen years after the Society was formed in Melbourne. By the end of that year the newly minted Committee learnt it was to present the National Conference in Sydney in October 1995.

Jan Gluskie was the first Branch Chair (1993–2001); member of the Sydney Conference Committee (2003–2004) and the National Management Committee (1996–2001, NMC Chair from February to November 1999). Toowoomba born, and trained as a nurse, Jan managed her husband's medical practice in Sydney for many years (and had also been chairman of the very active Children's Medical Research Foundation ... *when we young mums with children*).

The family lived in Sydney and in 1985 bought a weekender property, Hawthorn Park, near Mittagong. Later Jan discovered the property was part of a larger estate belonging to the pharmaceutical giant, Parke-Davis, and the little rabbit sheds across much of the property were used when the company developed the contraceptive pill.

Hawthorn Park broadened her interests in gardens and horticulture and Jan decided she would like a subscription to the Garden History Society which at that stage was functioning out of Bowral. She remembered the Goulburn conference and *visiting all those wonderful properties out the back like Markdale; learn(ing) about planting schemes and all these things that I knew nothing about much.*

When her son studied agricultural sciences at Bathurst, Jan began studying at Ryde Horticultural College *and we'd spend our weekends ... doing our homework together, both doing soils and weeds and all those things.*

Jan started her own business designing gardens and as a horticultural consultant and was also guiding at the Botanic Gardens.

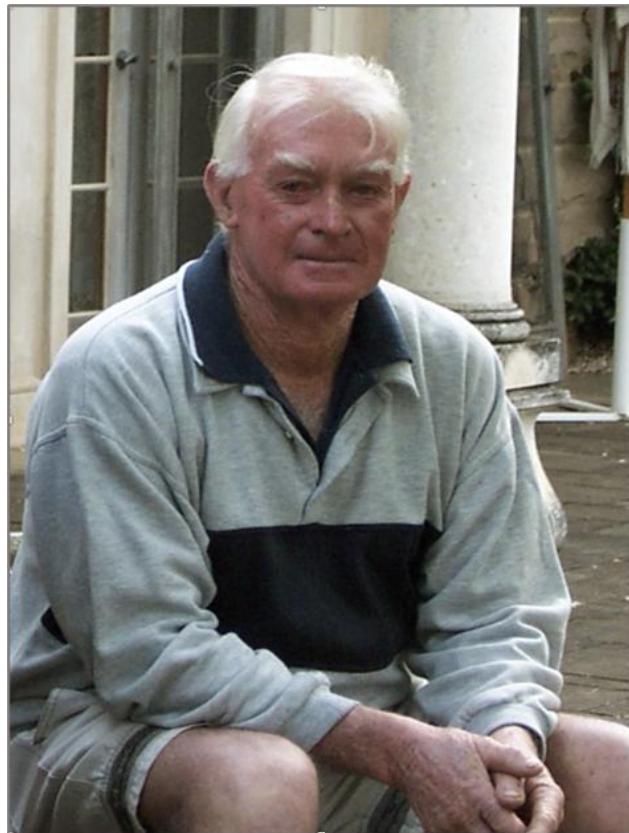
The Sydney Branch Committee met at the Masonic Club in Pitt Street, Sydney ... *In those days and we sat downstairs in the little lounge area and I remember ... it was Howard Tanner who ... gave us the (conference) title because he felt that was important being Sydney's first conference that ... we should start right back at the beginning with those gardens ... From Wilderness to Garden: Early Colonial Gardens, Their Future. It just seemed to fall in place.*

During that conference one of the visits was to *Brownlow Hill in the pouring rain with gutters running*. This was particularly significant because her grandfather, John Grundy, was ... brought out by Alexander Macleay to be the groom at Brownlow Hill and they lived above the stables.

During another garden visit to Wynstay, at Mt Wilson, Jan noticed they had this old urn that had just fallen off its plinth ... *lying in the garden in pieces and I said to the owner 'would he pick it up and put it in a box and keep all the pieces and I'd ask the committee if they would consider ... paying for it to be reassembled as something we could do from the Branch'* – which we did. A girl in one of those little art and craft places down right at the end of Glebe Point Road ... did it for us. Next year when we were at the Blue Mountains ... we went over to Wynstay and reinstated the pot.

Jan endeavoured to form branches on the Central Coast and around Armidale. *Unfortunately the year that I tried ... (Armidale was) in the grip of a terrible drought and they said they didn't think that they would get people to be interested in doing anything except looking after themselves that year.* The New England Sub-Branch was finally formed in 2005.

Peter Holmes



Peter Holmes believes it was a conspiracy that he started work with noted landscape designer and nurseryman, Paul Sorensen, at Leura in the Blue Mountains of NSW. It was another conspiracy that he was employed to develop and maintain the Paul Sorensen designed gardens at Mereworth near Berrima for more than 30 years.

Whatever the contrivances and chances are that led to the shape of Peter's career, he considers that working with Paul Sorensen, who *took on the fatherly aspect for me*, and coming to Mereworth were two of the best things that could have happened to him. The other contributory event was his marriage to Rosemary. She managed their family life with 4 children, often on her own, as Peter was frequently away from home due to his work.

Peter and his family moved to Leura when he was a young child. He loved spending time in the bush but had no initial interest in plants or gardening. This changed when, needing a job after leaving school, he commenced work at Mr Bill Bewley's nursery in Wentworth Falls, and thought, *Geez, this is alright – I like this*. He then abandoned his plans to apply to join the Air Force.

When work at Bewley's nursery dried up a neighbour introduced him to Paul Sorensen and he worked with him in garden maintenance and in his nursery where he was found to have a talent for grafting and propagation which he worked on for 3 months a year and on wet days.

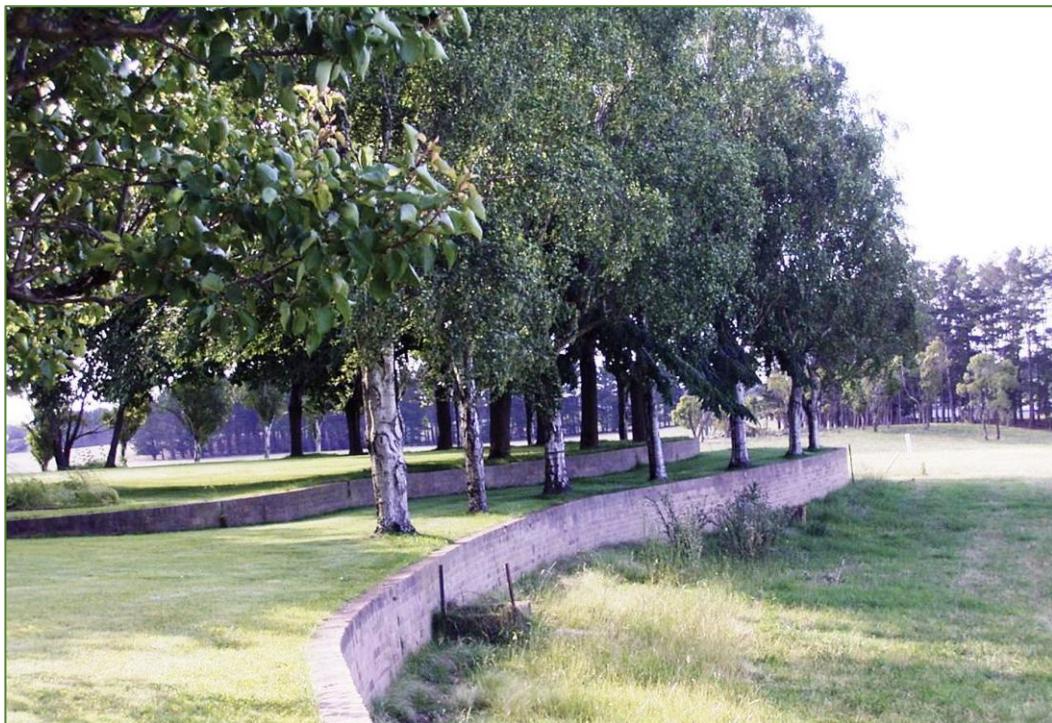
Peter considers that Paul Sorensen instilled in him a strong work ethic work and an uncompromising attitude to doing a good job. He also appreciated the 'peace' he experienced in some of the gardens Paul Sorensen designed in the Blue Mountains, Sydney and in the Southern Highlands.

In 1964 Peter travelled with Paul Sorensen to Mereworth in the Southern Highlands where Paul had designed a garden. Initially Peter planted out the hedges and windbreaks and later, through the interventions of the owners and manager at Mereworth, he was offered a fulltime job there planting out and maintaining the garden. It was life changing for Peter. Establishing the garden at Mereworth was a challenge. There was the bauxite soil limiting the growth of the trees, the scorching heat of the summers and the driving winds. Then there were ongoing fungal problems which plagued the growth of rhododendrons and contributed to the demise of some of the cherry trees.

Following the preferences of Paul Sorensen, Mereworth was planted predominately with exotic trees. These included maples, cherries, elms and ashes with windbreaks of firs and pines. The garden was designed to evolve over time with different vistas planned using temporary plantings. Often, however, these temporary plantings became permanent and Peter sometimes used judicious pruning to frame different views instead.

The owners' preferences contributed more to the selection of shrubs and ground covers with roses and camellias being established along with an orchard and a vegetable garden. Structures were also added including a dam and a ha-ha.

During his working career Peter said that little use was made of garden machinery and at Mereworth the work was all carried out by hand. It was this hard, physical work, together with the knowledge and skills gleaned over many years, that transformed the Paul Sorensen design for Mereworth into the outstanding garden it became.



Ha-Ha at Mereworth

Elaine Musgrave



Elaine Musgrave's interview in 2020 focused on her experience of the Southern Highlands garden, The Kaya, developed and maintained by her husband, Les.

Elaine declared that *I was always going to be an artist, always*. There were generations of artists on her mother's side of the family.

I can remember sitting with my grandmother, particularly at her table in the breakfast room, drawing, drawing, yes, I was always drawing.

Elaine's trajectory towards becoming an artist took a detour while she completed a secretarial course but she then resumed her path by attending art school. She finished her studies while also working in an art studio.

Floral themes were part of Elaine's work as a commercial artist with a greeting card and wrapping paper production company. However, it was when she met Les and moved to Kurrajong Heights that she found a greater interest in the accurate depiction of botanical specimens. She has continued to create artworks in this field, working in watercolour and graphite.

After living 30 years at Kurrajong Heights, Elaine and Les moved to The Kaya at Wildes Meadow where Les established a 5-acre garden. Most of the subjects for Elaine's paintings are found there as she walks the garden. She describes how ... *They identify themselves to me I think, I can just wander the garden and suddenly see, I can almost see the painting, and I get excited.*

Elaine has painted many different plants, several a number of times, including hellebores and waratahs but she particularly loves to paint the browns of death and decay, the fungi and lichen. She wishes to capture the character of this process. The beauty of her illustrations is detailed.

Elaine doesn't have a favourite area in her garden. It is the flow of the garden which *draws you around* which has the most meaning for her. She then loves to retreat to her garden studio, a converted stable, where this renowned and awarded botanical artist creates her exquisite paintings.

Elaine's illustration of opium poppies was used as a cover image in the 2018 Oral History Booklet produced for the AGHS Mittagong Conference.



A work in progress: lily flowers, 2020

Les Musgrave



In 2020 an interview with Les Musgrave was recorded about his garden The Kaya at Wildes Meadow in the Southern Highlands of NSW. The passion Les has for gardens and gardening was apparent very early in his life. When still in primary school he was allocated a patch of the family garden at Rose Bay by his parents who were avid gardeners. By his early teens Les was propagating plants in his own greenhouse and at the age of 17 he was encouraged to further develop the garden which subsequently won Best Small Garden in Sydney over two consecutive years.

After leaving school Les attended the Ryde School of Horticulture where he studied horticulture and garden design. He describes a number of design influences from his studies and reading but the thinking and practice of three designers and plantsmen were especially significant for him. These were Roberto Burle Marx who was a Brazilian modernist landscape architect and artist, Russell Page, an English landscape designer, mystic and artist and Christopher Lloyd a renowned horticulturist and designer whose innovations with colour were of particular interest to Les.

With his horticultural qualifications and imbued with the ideas of other horticulturists and designers, Les commenced work in garden restoration and the cut flower cultivation from his 28-acre property, Fernbrook at Kurrajong Heights. Les managed on his own, his business as well as the 12-acre garden he developed there which was open to the public.

Les and his wife Elaine continued to live on the property at Kurrajong Heights for 30 years before searching for another property. A key criterion for Les in the selection of their next property was good rainfall. This they found at Wildes Meadow which has an annual rainfall of about 60 inches and they subsequently settled on a five-acre property there called The Kaya.

The garden at The Kaya was very new and only partially established when they moved in. There was a parterre garden planted with roses and some deciduous trees but nothing to catch the eye in winter. Les worked to structure the garden with hedging and evergreens and, as the roses were not thriving in the wet environment of the parterre garden, he removed them, planting 70 elsewhere and giving away 200 others. He then experimented with a non-green parterre, for this he used grey-green and colourful foliage contrasted with red granite. Later he added two bog gardens into the flood prone areas, a grass garden, a gravel garden, a bulb garden and an orchard. Les linked all of these gardens with sweeping areas of lawn and vistas, for, as Les commented, *the open space is just as important as the plants.*

In plant selection, Les gravitates towards the bold, using strong colours and distinctive foliage. He considers that all plants have positives and negatives which he takes into account when choosing a plant for a particular location. Planting for seasonal colour and interest is also a priority and Les admits to a susceptibility to perfumed flowers. Gingkos are his favourite plants closely followed by Kalmias and plants of the genus *Gunnera*. In planning for the future Les has aimed to reduce maintenance and the planting of new gardens. However, he still finds there are those moments when ... *all of a sudden something will turn up that you've just got to have, and so you've got to adjust the garden to fit it in.*

For Les, The Kaya has been his creation, all his own work, born of a passion for gardening and a love of plants together with years of experience and knowledge of the conditions needed for plants to thrive. His artistic vision of space, colour, texture and form has infused this fine garden.



Formal layout in part of The Kaya garden

Carolyn Robinson



Carolyn Robinson has created two significant gardens, firstly at Glenrock, Tenterfield in Northern New South Wales, which she started in 1992, then at Eagles Bluff, near Tenterfield, where she now lives. She began as an amateur with a bare paddock and has become a nationally known, award winning and highly sought-after garden designer. In this interview Carolyn describes how she developed her distinctive design style through experience and experimentation. Drawing on gardening knowledge from a range of influences, she adapted advice to suit her challenging climate.

Probably the best source was Cath Horn who owned the nursery in Tenterfield and she sourced a lot of the trees that I planted in the first couple of years. I didn't even start to plant a garden in the beginning. All I did was to plant trees, around the garden, and one the first things we did was fence the gully into the garden area because it was being heavily eroded by the cattle, not that I ever considered gardening down there but there were no trees along that gully whatsoever and so we just felt it needed that. At that time there weren't too many Australian magazines, there were 'House & Garden' and 'Home Beautiful' and a couple like that. But I must say they didn't give huge amounts of information. Most of the information I got probably was from overseas authors like Penelope Hobhouse, Rosemary Verey and Vita Sackville-West.

Carolyn quickly observed that some of Australia's best-known gardens were also in cool, mountainous areas such as the Blue Mountains and Southern Highlands of New South Wales and Mount Macedon in Victoria, albeit with different rainfall patterns to hers. She began collecting

plant material, particularly shrubs, on her exploratory journeys to Australian gardens and nurseries.

It was on a visit to England that she became inspired to not only extend the Glenrock garden but also begin her own nursery.

The nursery came first, propagating my own plants, being able to have that material to use in my own garden beds and I started to read more about design, would look at design when I was visiting gardens overseas.

Glenrock first opened to the public as part of Australia's Open Garden Scheme in 1997. Other gardeners began to seek her advice. Since then, Carolyn has designed around 30 gardens in Northern New South Wales and Southeast Queensland and advised many more gardeners through her nursery. In this interview, she outlines her favourite plant palettes and recalls her most significant garden projects.

Severe frosts and poor drainage were the greatest challenges Carolyn faced at Glenrock. From her own experience, she has extrapolated gardening advice to share with fellow gardeners. She stresses the importance of soil preparation: *In all the gardens I have designed, I have always made that a prerequisite that people would prepare the ground adequately. And then I knew that they would be happy with the outcome.*

She believes that mulch is vital for both soil health and maintenance.

The choice of mulch is never easy. Organic mulches have drawbacks, physically you have to put them on every single year, they stop moisture or a small amount of rain getting through to the soil. At Eagles Bluff I have used crushed rock and one of the biggest benefits is you don't have to reapply it every year.

Carolyn's first garden, Glenrock, was voted Australia's favourite garden in *Better Homes and Gardens*' 2006 television competition and her designs have been included in the NSW State Library *Planting Dreams: Shaping Australian Gardens* exhibition (2016) and Claire Takacs' *Australian Dreamscapes* (2018).

Gwenda Sheridan



Heritage consultant and town planner Gwenda Sheridan is busy incorporating heritage protection values into town planning in Tasmania. She developed the first landscape management plan for *Queen's Domain* in Hobart, which she was invited to revisit and expand, and has worked on hundreds of development applications in Tasmania. This interview charts her career from her early studies in geography and history to her current work in Tasmania's north, naming many of the properties she has helped protect, colonial landscapes that need preserving and the reasons why. She speaks of the historicity of Tasmanian towns, and projects such as her research into and writing a book on the history of the Launceston Horticultural Society of 1838, Australia's oldest surviving Horticultural Society. Sheridan has been described as a 'cultural landscape crusader' – she continues the fight with decades of research behind her into Tasmania's remarkable cultural heritage, especially its landscape heritage.

Born in Sydney's upper North Shore she was influenced by both her parents and grandparents' gardens; ornamental and productive. Also influential was her grandparents' other garden in Blackheath in the Blue Mountains, with tree ferns, bush walks to waterfalls. She studied geography and history at university and taught at the Universities of New England and Sydney in the 1960s and 1970s, switching to focus on cultural and social history under Dennis Jeans. Her thesis was on *Kosciusko National Park*'s social and cultural history and recreation planning, then a new field, the management of tourism interacting with natural areas. She and husband Bert walked the Overland Track over a month in 1970, her introduction to Tasmania and its range of cultural landscapes.

Gwenda moved to Tasmania in 1986, wanting *more green*, moving to Lubrinna in the north and making a garden. She worked as a planner in Launceston City Council, processing development applications and honing heritage research skills. She worked with the State Library of Tasmania and the state education department, as a researcher into the 1990s. She moved to Kingston Beach south of Hobart, creating yet another garden with a landscape outlook. She focussed on heritage landscape planning, joining the National Trust and meeting Brendan Leonard of Hobart City Council who offered her work on Fern Tree, the first of many studies of landscapes and gardens. The *Queens Domain landscape conservation plan* in 2009 followed, with Austral Archaeology. A study of the Heritage Mile (including Woodburn, Oakwood and two adjoining properties, near Pontville on the Midland Highway) in 2006 sought to avoid subdivision of an historic landscape – a ‘win’ in the Tasmanian Land and Resources Commission.

In 2020 she got involved in Westbury in the north, keen to protect the village’s green spaces and integrity against the Tasmanian Planning Scheme with its pressure to rezone for infill. Gwenda particularly loves the colonial estate landscapes of Tasmania and its north, from Westbury and Deloraine to Launceston and Longford. She did studies on Woolmers and Brickendon, long family-owned and now (Woolmers) by a trust – luckily not ‘stranded’ by change to corporate ownership. Her focus has been research for reports on such landscapes, to help conserve them by informing planning. Her work on Cambria, Swansea was much informed by rich Tasmanian historic archives, including maps, Meredith family diaries and letters.

These enliven our idea of former historic gardens, orchards, working farms, their people and particulars. Her reports identified old surviving trees and key remnants of estate elements, and inform advocacy by the AGHS and others to help conserve such places from inappropriate re-development. Governments ignoring or under-resourcing heritage and landscapes has meant much neglect, losses and unfortunate decisions, or *too little, too late*. A long focus has been the need for gardens and public open spaces as connection to nature, to sustain people. Another is links between music and landscape: early piano studies – fostering interconnections – composer, players, listeners. Similar interconnections occur with gardens, people, place, trees and storytelling. Crossing borders and boundaries has long been a modus operandi.

Podcast

<https://www.gardenhistorysociety.org.au/publications/podcast-ticket-to-ryde/>

In 2025, The Society ventured into the world of podcasting. This initiative was intended to showcase the National Oral History Collection and offer a taste of the rich social history of Australia the Society has captured in its interviews.

In *Ticket to Ryde*, Jennifer Stackhouse (garden writer and member of AGHS Tasmania Branch) brings you voices from the collection from people who studied at the Ryde Horticultural College, TAFE NSW, showing where the study of plants, gardens and design can lead.

Those featured in *Ticket to Ryde* are:



Dame Elisabeth Murdoch AC, DBE, was the inaugural Chair of the Australian Garden History Society upon its formation in 1980. She stood down from that position after a year and subsequently accepted the role of Patron, a position she held until 1989. The full interview and transcript are available at:

<https://www.gardenhistorysociety.org.au/publications/dame-elisabeth-murdoch-ac-dbe/>



Shirley Stackhouse OAM was *The Sydney Morning Herald* gardening contributor for more than 30 years. As well as writing gardening advice, she illustrated the column with her pen and ink drawings of flowers from her garden. The full interview and transcript are available at:

<https://www.gardenhistorysociety.org.au/publications/shirley-stackhouse-oam/>



Lindsay Campbell is an influential figure in Tasmanian horticulture and garden landscape design. His practice reflects various cultural and geographic influences from around the world, particularly Japan, China, Spain and Patagonia. His gardens are designed to be environmentally appropriate using plants that fit harmoniously with the local conditions. The full interview and transcript are available at:

<https://www.gardenhistorysociety.org.au/publications/lindsay-campbell-2/>



Bob Cherry enrolled at Ryde Horticultural College at the age of 16. In 1972 he founded Paradise Plants, a nursery at Kulnura, located 50 miles (80km) north of Sydney. At its peak, it was one of the largest wholesale nurseries in Australia. Bob's passion for plants led to many overseas trips collecting seeds and plants, notably from China. The full interview and transcript are available at:

<https://www.gardenhistorysociety.org.au/publications/bob-cherry/>



When interviewed in 2020, Ian Carroll was Head Gardener of Oldbury Farm, Sutton Forest, NSW. His interview was part of a series on head gardeners in the Southern Highlands conducted by the Australian Garden History Society in collaboration with the Berrima District Museum. The full interview and transcript are available at:

<https://www.gardenhistorysociety.org.au/publications/ian-carroll/>

Acknowledgments

National Oral History Collection Committee Members

Patsy Vizents – WA, Chair

Roslyn Burge – NSW/S

Dr Liz Chappell – NSW/N

Anne Cloue-Long – ACT/M/R

Rhonda Hamilton – TAS

Heather McIntyre – NSW/SHB

Andrea McKee – QLD

Stuart Read – NSW/S

Dr Sarah Edwards – Executive Officer, AGHS

Francesca Beddie, Editor, *Australian Garden History*