

**AUSTRALIAN GARDEN HISTORY SOCIETY**  
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**NORTHERN NEW SOUTH WALES**

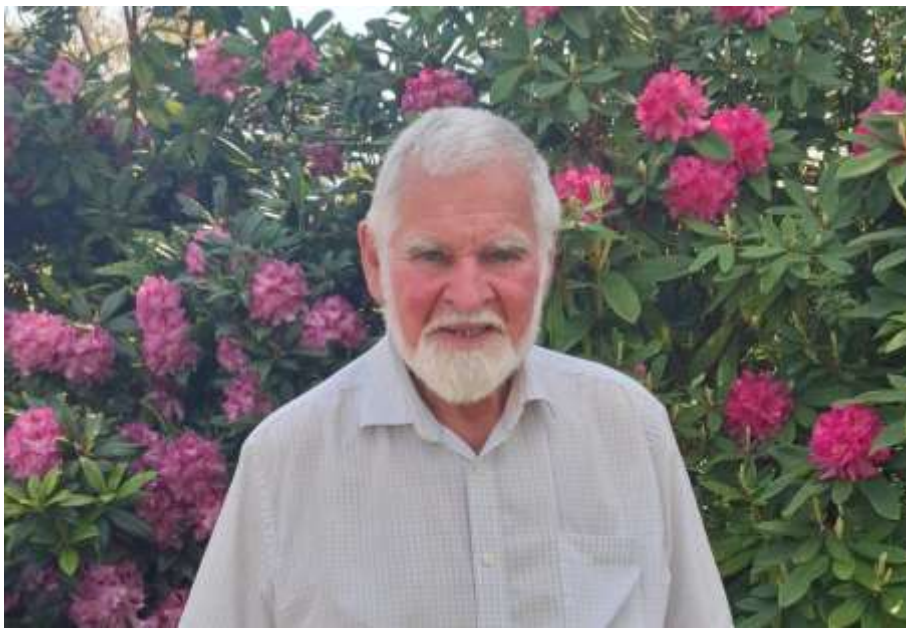


Photo: Lynne Walker 10 October, 2025

Interviewee:	DR IAN TELFORD
Interviewer:	LYNNE WALKER WITH ELIZABETH CHAPPELL
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**This is an oral interview with Ian Telford at *Invergowrie Station*. Ian will be speaking with Lynne Walker for the Australian Garden History Society (AGHS) of the Northern NSW Branch. Liz Chappell also present.**

**Now Ian let's start way back, tell us about your childhood.**

My childhood, well I was born in a public hospital in Milton in Brisbane because that was near my maternal grandparents' house. Raised in Holland Park in suburban Brisbane which was then the outer suburbs, now it's virtually inner suburbs. Went to Holland Park State Primary School, went to secondary school at Brisbane Grammar and then to Queensland University where I started out doing a degree in Forestry, because in those days there weren't many botanical jobs around, there weren't many people employed by herbaria and there was botany in the forestry course, well to start with. I did well with the botanical, got distinctions and so forth. But then in the second, no the third and fourth year, the third and fourth year were down in Canberra at the forestry school which was run by various state forestry commissions and then the boring things like forest mensuration and so forth which was of no interest so I failed.

**Can we just go back a step? Where did the interest begin? Did you know from the very get go?**

Well when I was a boy I used to collect bits and pieces and so forth. But I can't really remember when.

**So you can't remember why you made the decision to go to university and do forestry?**

Well because there was botany in the course and there were lots of scholarships being given for forestry by the various state departments of forestry and Queensland Forestry gave about 10 a year. Now of course there's now no such thing as a Queensland State Forestry Department because it's all privatised and all these millions of dollars spent in setting up plots to measure how fast trees grew and whatever were wasted because most of the forests now are national parks which is a good thing.

**OK, so failure at the end of year 3. So what happened then? You'd failed the course.**

Well I was in Canberra.

**So you'd gone to Canberra by then?**

Yes, so the first two years were done at Queensland University where I had a wonderful botany lecturer called Dr Crisp and we used to go on field trips and he really made me enthusiastic about Australian plants. And then the last two years were down in Canberra at the Australian Forestry School which wasn't so exciting as doing the botanical bits up here. Anyhow so I failed and paid my way out of my scholarship bond and got a job as a gardener at what was then the Canberra Botanic Gardens. Anyhow I only stayed in the garden for about 3 or 4 months because I kept peering in through the Herbarium window and eventually got inside there and they saw that I would probably be an asset to assembling the collection and naming the collection. So I started working

in the Herbarium and I was still classified as a gardener. There were no technical positions in what was then the Parks & Gardens of the Australian Capital Territory Government. And now of course it's a federal concern. Anyhow, and then it became the Australian National Botanic Gardens and I was there for 34 years. Anyhow a great job because I would go on several field trips a year to collecting living material, cuttings, seeds, transplants for the living collection and the botanist in charge of the Herbarium and the gardens when I started was a Dr Betty Phillips who had done her PhD in Ecology. She had this grand idea that all collections that were brought into the gardens to be grown had to have a voucher specimen collected with them so that you collected the cuttings, you got a specimen, pressed it, dried it and it went into the Herbarium so that you could identify what you had collected from your voucher specimen. And this was before her time, I mean some botanical gardens are doing it now but not all. I won't mention names but we had a case where there's this beautiful new species of *Phebalium* growing in botanic gardens and they don't know where they collected it and it's a new species. And they don't know where it's from. And there are no other collections of it, just this one collection that had the cutting struck and they're growing in the botanic gardens.

**Ah, so they are growing it at least?**

Yes, so we have a living collection but we don't know its native source.

**So now with the Herbarium, the few that there are you were telling me, they all have common ways of collecting and recording?**

No they don't. So many botanic gardens, well we've got the Australian National Botanic Gardens are purely for native species whereas others have to grow roses and showy things to keep the general public happy. So we were just collecting native plants and with 34 years collecting you get to know the Australian flora.

**So you must have travelled all over Australia did you?**

Yes, so the furthest west was Cocos Keeling Islands which is a territory just south of Java, an Australian territory, and the most easterly were the coral cays of the Coral Sea in the Coral Sea territory. I had to go to those because I was writing up for the flora of Australia project (which we'll get onto later). The Floras of the Islands and they hadn't been well collected.

**So when you were doing all this for 34 years, there weren't a lot of people doing the same thing were there? How many of you were there for example in the Herbarium in Canberra?**

Well, two botanists and six or seven gardeners, classified as gardeners but they were doing recording, localities, writing accession numbers and so forth, identifying plants.

**So I was looking at Te Papa this morning and your name came up, or maybe I put your name into Te Papa. You have 57 exhibits over there, at Te Papa, with your name on them. I will show you where to google. Oh this boy gets around. Ok, tell us the importance, in your view, because I did read that the Beadle [NCW Beadle Herbarium at University of New England] has 100,000 specimens. Is that right?**

00.09.16

We've now got, well by the time you rule out the things we've deaccessioned because they were called specimens. In the early days there was really no rigour to collecting, we're onto the NCWB [NCW Beadle Herbarium at University of New England] area now, there was no rigorous way it was all done and we're slowly bringing it into line with best practice. Well Jeremy [Bruhl] started when he was appointed in 1993 as director and now we have Andrew Thornhill as the new director and he's a moss enthusiast so they're going to be building up an extensive moss collection as well as flowering plants and ferns.

**Interesting. We've just come back from Adelaide and we were at Carrick Hill yesterday and met a woman who is involved in The Diggers Club and I don't know how we got onto the subject but I said we were from Armidale and she said well you'll know about the Beadle Herbarium and I said yes, well we do actually. And she said their director is here tonight and he's talking to us about pollen. What are the chances? [EC comment] So that is why he was on the ABC the other morning. [LW]: Oh that's who it was. So perhaps he could come and talk to us about pollens. Interesting. So tell me why you think herbariums, I mean well this is stating the obvious Ian but I think it needs to be said, tell me why herbariums are important?**

Well when they started out of course the dried specimens were important and the living because things alter when they are pressed and dried or squashed flat because they're culled. So to have a living collection tied to that dried specimen is important for morphological studies because before DNA sequence data was used for classification of plants you had to depend on morphology and we got it wrong so many times because converted evolution, parallel evolution, you get things looking the same which really aren't related and we've been led astray quite a few times. Anyhow now that's all been rectified because they slowly worked through the flowering plant kingdom and the ferns too and worked out what's related to what and so now it's almost all sorted out. But things keep changing. So when I was a boy acacia belonged to the family *Mimosaceae* and then it was put into the legumes, the big family *Fabaceae* and the sub-family *Mimosoideae* and DNA data showed and the paper was published, a big collaboration of doing so many species in genera because it's a very large family, putting the sub-family *Caesalpinioideae* and *Mimosoideae* just doesn't exist anymore.

**Ok, so I did google you I have to say and I was very intrigued with what interests you most because I did not understand any of them which is understandable, I guess. Let me find the piece of paper. Here we go.**

This is the National Botanic Garden site?

**Yes, so your main interests are in the biology system and bio-geography of that one you just said and that one which I won't even try to. So can you explain first of all the systematics in the bio-geography, what those terms mean?**

Systematics is the way plants are related. So a species is in a genus, a genus is in a tribe, is in a sub-family, is in a family and so that's the systematic arrangement of it.

**So it's basically the structure?**

Of the kingdom, yes. Now another part of it is the taxonomy, which is the naming of plants which is a different field but of course the names are important because the generic name is repeated up the line. So the first genus named gives the name to the family that it's in so at the moment the legumes are called *Fabaceae* because the first genus named was faba, the broad bean, by Linnaeus so faba gives rise to the name *Fabaceae* because -aceae is the family ending in Latin for the group. Now the problem is when they started to investigate, broad bean, faba, is not a good genus. Broad bean belongs to the genus *Vicia* which is common. You may have a little climbing thing with pinky purple flowers. So if you look at the flowers they are just like a tiny broad bean. So that's the genus broad bean belongs to, but it looks so different because it's been selected over all the years of cultivation because that was the bean of Europe. They didn't have the beans that came from America, way, way back thousands of years. They were growing broad beans. Anyhow, and mine are starting to pod at last. I had my first ham and broad bean salad last night. I don't bother waiting until they get big and you have to do this double peeling, that's boring. I pick them when they are that big and you cook them up with onion, garlic, sherry vinegar, chopped ham and then hard-boiled egg stirred in. Beautiful.

**OK, so bio-geography.**

Well that's the distribution of plants.

**Great, ok, so these two areas that particularly interest you, can you explain what they are and why they interest you particularly?**

Well, I'm particularly interested in what are called areas of endemism. So for some reason there are special areas which are rich in species which are found nowhere else. And one of those of course is the New England tableland. So the granite outcrops of New England have special flora so one of the genera in particular is the genus *Homoranthus* which is in the *Myrtaceae* because every granite outcrop has a different species sitting on it. So in the past there must have been an ancestral species that was widespread across the tablelands. As the tablelands eroded and you've got granite outcrops separated by clay soils the things that grew on granite outcrops didn't like the clay soils so they got restricted to there and as the granite outcrops became separate with genetic drift they speciated and became separate species. That happens with *Phobalium* and we've had Lachlan Copeland do his PhD in *Homoranthus*, oh 30 years ago, oh not quite that, 20. And named so many new species from New England and we are currently revising a genus *Phobalium* and quite a few separate ones in New England that are sitting on granite outcrops. *Boronia*, again closely related things but they are different enough to be called species but they are sitting on separate granite outcrops.

00.17.47

**So it's a bit like the Galapagos Islands.**

Yes, except [instead of] the sea, there is the clay soil, where things that like granite outcrops can't grow.

**Alright, so this means cucumber but it's not cucumber.**

*Cucumis* means cucumber so salad cucumber is *Cucumis Sativa* which means edible. The rock melon is also a *Cucumis* and it's *Cucumis melo*. Then in between you've got all sorts of little cucumbers, big cucumbers, little melons, big melons, in fact the smallest cucumber grows in the Kimberley and on the Arnhem Land escarpment on rock outcrops. The fruit is about as big as your little fingernail and it contains one to three seeds. And I had the good fortune to name it.

**Actually, speaking of naming, that little purple flower that's on the Welcome to Uralla, that's named after you isn't it?**

Yes.

**And where does that fit in?**

Well the student [Lindy Cayzer] was doing a PhD in the family *Pittosporaceae* and the genus that that belongs to *Cheiranthra* is in the *Pittosporaceae* and that was one of the new species. And I was with, I couldn't be called a supervisor, I was called an advisor, because I didn't have a PhD the Australian National University wouldn't let me be called a supervisor. Anyway she named it after me. And it's local.

**I was going to say where did she find it?**

It's virtually confined to the Uralla Shire so it grows.

**That's perfect. Wow. Ok.**

It always grows where mugga ironbark<sup>1</sup> is so if you are going down the Bundarra Road and you see an outcrop or a bit of a hill with mugga ironbark at Christmas time, have a look around and you will see this little climbing thing to about that high with these beautiful deep blue flowers.

**Liz: I haven't attempted to write down the botanical names Ian. I think we will have to do a transcript and come back to you. I will ask our typist to do this phonetically as best she can because I will be interrupting all the time to get the spelling.**

So that was my Masters, the *Cucumis* study and that's when I was working in collaboration with [Ludwig] Maximilian University in Munich which is interesting because the Professor of Biology there, Professor Suzanne Renner, had emailed me requesting leaf samples of a rare Australian cucurbit which I had named and I sent that to her and I kept corresponding with her and she had a series of PhD students working on the family *Cucurbitaceae* and I got involved with each of those and we named a new genus and quite a few new species of *Cucumis*. Good times.

**So are there enough herbariums in the world? Are you happy with the way the herbariums are developing or are there any short forms that you know of?**

Well, they are underfunded. I mean, at the University of New England, NCW Beadle Herbarium, we've got the Director and one technical person for 3 days a week. Most of the work is done by volunteers. So I'm the Honorary Curator, which in any other

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<sup>1</sup> Mugga ironbark is often the name for *Eucalyptus sideroxylon*

university herbaria is a well-paid job. We've got the mounting of the dried specimens done by volunteers. That's often done by volunteers, even at the State Herbarium because they are under-funded of course. John Nevin who you know of course is doing our photography.

00.23.27

**I didn't know that. Excellent. Phillip Rose I think is the volunteer there?**

Yes, but he hasn't been coming in with his medication affecting him.

**Because he was seriously into she oaks. Oh that's not good. So you said you moved up here when you retired basically. We will get to your private life in a minute. So you moved up here and retired and then how long have you been working at Beadle?**

Well I retired in stages because Doug [Moffatt, Ian's partner] moved up here in 1997 and I kept going. I had long service leave accrued so I would come up here for a month or two on my long service leave, go back to Canberra and work for a month or two, staying with a friend who worked in the Herbarium, then come up here again. So I was commuting virtually for a couple of months at a time, until my long service leave ran out and that was building up my super. And then I retired in 1998 I think. And of course I started doing the work up here that I'd been doing in Canberra. It was curatorial work, namely identifying plants in the collection and so forth.

**Liz: Yes I do apologise for not getting the botanical names as we go but if you don't mind I will do my best and ask you to check them. I think that's probably the most accurate. And also some of the individual names.**

**So that brings us to the personal side but also the garden side, the practical garden side of your life.**

Well restoration of the garden started way, way back because Doug and his nephew David bought the homestead blocks from Graham, Doug's brother who was slightly older than him and then there was Ken the eldest boy. They bought it in 1986. And from then on, we realised, virtually there were no gardens. Fortunately, the box hedge had been retained, the old trees to the north had been retained but all the gardens, all the gravel paths had all been grassed over. The courtyard out there was concreted over. The in-ground well, tank, in fact it's a rain water tank had been concreted over. And there was a lot of work to do to bring the garden back to its late Victorian glory.

**We probably need to state now we are talking about Invergowrie Homestead, sorry I didn't to say what it was, where we are. So the actual garden, the original garden, went back how far?**

Well the first part of the house was built in the 1870s, 1876, which was the cottage, four rooms, the verandah on the north side and the south side and the detached kitchen. And then they joined the kitchen to the house and put this wing in so it became L-shaped and then in 1900 I think the bachelors' quarters/cottage was built. Because their original house was a slab hut down by the creek in the gully, they had a track up to here when they were building the house and the front garden was on the north side so they

planted it up in Victorian symmetry, the two funereal cypress and the two big photinia and circular garden, paths and so forth. So that was on the north side. There were no photographs or people with an eye who had memory of the garden because when Doug's grandfather took over a fence was put along just off the north verandah and where the trees were became the lambs yard. Anyhow when we were doing the restoration you could see where the gravel paths had been because the grass wasn't doing so well because the soil was so shallow over it and so we knew it was a circular bed and so we could restore it that way. The main framework of the trees, the symmetry of the trees was there still. Now the vegetable garden was the first garden we restored because we knew it was there, had always been there and in fact had been maintained as a vegetable garden even though it was run down a bit until the 1970s. Anyhow but we didn't know how to go about restoring the garden because of the history of the house with the original front garden on the north side, a garden developed here later on when the mail run came out from Uralla and down to Bundarra. So this became the front garden and then with the advent of the motor car garages were built there and everyone came through that gate so that became the front garden. So we thought we had to just have three front gardens.

00.30.58

**So you have become all gardens to all people.**

And there were photographs and people remembered what the garden was like, even though it had been grassed over and a single concrete path had been put through and the box hedge was still there. There were flowering quinces gone wild everywhere but we cut that out and kept some bits of it, one as a dome to match the box dome at the other end of the garden.

**So when Doug and David bought the place how long ago was that? You were still in Canberra?**

Yes. So Doug and I would come up for a few weeks at a time, bringing up truck loads of plants. When I was restoring the rose gardens I would buy my roses from the Tumbarumba people who ran a very good nursery, they had beautiful plants and they were run on basalt so they did very well here. Whereas the South Australian were on a different root stock, I think they were on Dr Huey and didn't do as well on the basalt.

**That's interesting isn't it? So you could see where you wanted to go. Did you sit down and say ok this is what we want to do or did it kind of develop over the years? Did you imagine when you started what would happen?**

Well we put the paths in, we knew where we wanted the paths to go.

**So from the beginning you had the paths?**

Well we knew what the paths would be like. Now we had this huge clump of bamboo, what to do with it because it sends out rhizomes. Anyhow we got Daryll and his bobcat to rip out half of it which is now what we call the white garden, that used to be all bamboo. And then he knocked a path through the middle of it. And we're slowly keeping it confined. Tim, our gardener, has just dug a trench on this side of it because

it's contained on the western side but on the eastern side it sends rhizomes along under the flowering quince which is a nuisance. So he's slowly taking it. But we have to keep it because it was an important part of the original garden and was a source of stakes. I mean I'm cutting bean poles at the moment for the climbing beans I'll be putting in when the frosts have finished. Maybe they'll be finished by this. Some years they finish very early and you couldn't put in tomatoes and beans by this stage.

**Yes, it's hard to tell. You think yes it's all over red rover and then suddenly bang you get one frost out of nowhere. So then you were generous enough to open the garden to the public for fund raising activities. Did you enjoy doing that? Was there a reward in it for you?**

Oh yes, I always enjoyed showing people around. I mean it was a bit of chore having to do the weeding and getting it all neat and tidy to have them open but very rewarding.

**And do you think that, it seems to me there are obviously fewer and fewer gardens opening but surely it must be important to continue to do so because otherwise nobody is going to know what gardening is about if they don't see how to do it, or what to do or where to do.**

Well we get requests every now and then, can we bring in a tour and David says yes, well it's his garden.

**OK, well I don't think I have any more questions. Liz is there something you think I've missed which we haven't talked about.**

Well we haven't talked about the roses and how we had the 1919 planting list in Doug's grandfather's journal. 32 roses listed and of those when we started restoring the garden we could get 13 of them. Mostly they were teas, a few were hybrid perpetuals and there was 'La France' which is a hybrid tea but I think there might have been a few more hybrid teas but mostly they were teas. One of the 1919 planting is still alive. Madame Lombard down there was planted in 1919.

**Wow. And what about Madame Leonie here, how old is she?**

I got that, it must be nearly close on 35 years old. The drought nearly killed her but she's come back and is about to bloom which is good.

**She's on it, that's fantastic.**

Souvenir de Madame Leonie Vienot.

**Liz: I'd like to throw in a question about your latest study Ian because I think after retirement you went full circle back to academia. Is that correct?**

Well when I retired up here and started doing the same work I'd been doing in the Herbarium in Canberra, after a while Jeremy [Bruhl] said "you're doing all this work, why don't you do it towards something." He said do a Masters. So I had done in Canberra before I'd retired, even though I didn't have degree, I was able to do a Graduate Diploma which gave me a leg into doing a Masters and a PhD.

00.37.37

**Which is where the Dr came from?**

So under Jeremy I started doing a Masters in *Cucurbitaceae* in the genus *Cucumis* and then that went well. I got funding to do that and did very well with that so I got a PhD scholarship so I did the PhD on the family *Phyllanthaceae* which you probably haven't heard of?

**No.**

You may have heard of the family *Euphorbaceae*?

**Oh yes.**

Well *Phyllanthaceae* is one of the splits from *Euphorbaceae*. *Euphorbaceae* was split up into four families I think when we did the DNA analysis. And I worked on a little genus called *Sauropus* which turned out not to be the correct name because there was an earlier name *Synostemon* which they are all transferred to. So I named 12 new species of *Synostemon* for my PhD. The Masters had been working with the students at Munich so I did the morphological work and they did the DNA work so we collaborated like that. The same thing happened with my PhD. I did the morphological work and they did the molecular work, the DNA extraction and sequencing and so forth, which works very well because the extraction of DNA and the sequencing is quite expensive and UNE doesn't have the facilities. It would have to pay a lot to do it so to do this collaborative work is such a good thing to do. Anyhow and now I've got this collaboration with the University in Paris.

**Yes, well because there are a number, you just told us. A collaboration in Paris but also other places as well, didn't you say?**

Yes, there was Leiden, Leiden University in Holland, the Netherlands, which was with the PhD, that was the *Phyllanthaceae* and then before that Maximilian University in Munich was with the *Cucumis* for the Masters.

**So tell us now about what's about to happen with this event that's about to happen that you and Jeremy are being recognised in?**

Well it's supposed to be secret until it's announced at the conference.

**That's ok, this won't come out before then.**

So most botanists in Australia, and New Zealand too, are members of the Australasian Systematic Botany Society and every year there's a conference which is held at various State herbaria or universities. We held one here in 2009 and this year, the first week of November we are holding it again, November 2025. This year it's called the Next Gen Conference and Next Gen has a double-barreled meaning because Next Gen is a way of sequencing but it's also the next generation of botanists coming on. So it's concentrating on early career botanists and students and so the three keynote speakers are in fact early career botanists, including our own Helen Kennedy who graduated with her PhD two years ago.

### **So they are coming how far afield?**

Well when we had ours here we brought in a keynote speaker from the Missouri Botanic Gardens and took him on a field trip to Point Lookout where he saw a rare climbing plant he'd only ever read about and here it was in full bloom. He was beside himself to see this. Anyway so this year we are running a field trip close to Dorrigo so we are doing a rain forest trip, visiting the gorges on the way so we go to Wollomombi and Ebor Falls as well.

### **So roughly how many people are you expecting?**

150 or so, maybe not quite that many.

00.42.55

### **So are there enough young botanists coming on in your opinion? Is the interest still there or is it waning?**

There's so much work still to be done in Australia, I mean Jeremy and I have been listed in north eastern NSW and adjacent southern Queensland and we have probably 80 or so new species still to name that we know of, that's looking at the pathology, that's not the DNA sequencing which would yield more. So you might know the genus *Pultenaea* which is eggs and bacon?

### **It's flowering now.**

It's flowering now. Anyhow there was study done 20 years ago using no DNA data, just the morphology and one species that was treated in that revision yielded 19 species with the DNA sequencing and they're quite different, different habitat, different morphologies, but they looked similar enough for the botanists back then to lump them altogether.

**OK, I think we are done. Thank you very much for that. Thank you Ian. That was fascinating.**

00.44.30

### **(Recording resumes)**

Ian continues talking about reclassification of genus *Melichrus* at the NCW Beadle Herbarium.

....What used to be the family *Epacridaceae* now it is in the family *Ericaceae*, sub family *Epacridoideae*, anyhow *Melichrus* was last revised by a student at UNE in 1957. The student was Betsy Patterson who went on to become Betsy Jackes when she married and became Professor of Botany at James Cook University in Townsville. Anyhow Betsy is still alive and Helen [Kennedy] on one of her field trips met Betsy and they had a talk, which is nice and Helen is naming a New England species, new species after Betsy. So it is nice to have the tradition continued that a UNE student is revising *Helichrys* after all these years. I thought we should get that in there because I think it is important.

**I realise we haven't talked about who Doug was. Do you want to give us a little brief about the Moffatt family, and it wasn't just the Moffatt family, there was another family tied up with them as well.**

The Mitchells

**Can you just give us a potted history of the Moffatts and the Mitchells, how they have interacted over the years?**

The only relevance really is that the Mitchells planted the original front garden and designed the house, the dates and so forth don't really matter.

**I wonder if you could give us a virtual walk around the Invergowrie garden with the specimens of note, like you mentioned the Isabella grape.**

Along the eastern verandah, the Mitchell's had planted Isabella grapes along a trellis, the roofline follows down along the top beam of the trellis which Daryll repeated when he replaced it there. The trellis eventually fell down and instead of rebuilding the trellis and replanting the grapes, the grapevines were chopped down. Anyhow in restoring the garden, there were photographs of the trellis so we knew what it was like. It was restored fairly early on with cuttings of the Isabella grapes from Salisbury Court [See oral history interview with Sir Own Croft] which may have been the source of the Mitchell cuttings because the families are related. [the woman who brought the cuttings out was Mrs Marsh].

**The source of some of the plants here like the *Photinea* and the funeral cyprus?**

They may have been bought from a nursery in Armidale because so many plants around Armidale are the same age, particularly in Central Park. They would have had a nursery going to grow the plants for Central Park and maybe they had additional ones. The two big Bunyas date from the 1870s.

**When the house was built?**

Or a bit later when the mail run came through and the driveway was put in. I'm not quite sure. There must be records of when the post office was established. There was a post office in the bachelors' quarters and the mail coach used to come down and stop there.

**It was called the bachelors' quarters because?**

That's where the male children, because there was 13 children in the Mitchell family, too many for this little house.

**Is there anything else in the garden of particular note, that we may not have discussed, Ian?**

We've done the rose list. The garden's pretty well been covered I think.

00.50.12 Recording ends.