

AUSTRALIAN GARDEN HISTORY SOCIETY

NATIONAL ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

SOUTHERN HIGHLANDS BRANCH



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INTERVIEWEE: **Laurel Cheetham**
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MARCH 2026 BY LYN BARRETT

0:00

Good morning Laurel

Good morning Lyn.

This is an oral history with Laurel Cheetham on the 11th of March, 2026 at her home in Bowral.

Laurel was going to talk to us about her involvement with gardens in the Southern Highlands.

First of all, I'm going to start with some personal information. I spent my childhood in the northern beaches of Sydney. I have a twin. I had a twin sister. We were born in Mosman in a private hospital, and we lived in Dee Why and we went to school at North Sydney. My parents were both teachers, my father was a metalwork, woodwork and drawing teacher and my mother had a business college in Dee Why. So they were both very, very busy people. My mother worked five days and four nights a week, and my father, at school, worked five days and then he helped my mother four nights a week, so there wasn't much time for gardening at home. We lived on a rock, you might say. We lived above Dee Why, looking out over Dee Why Lagoon and Long Reef. My early childhood memories are of this rock face and the difficulties of being able to grow anything there, but my parents brought some soil in from various places, and my father had a little vegetable garden where the soil was deepest. And we did have a garden. We grew some reasonably large trees, we had camellias, we had a tibouchina in the front and we had roses growing up the house and black boys and plenty of azaleas under the shade. It was quite a nice garden, really. In the school holidays, I used to do a bit of weeding there, and my father used to do weeding as well. We did have a special tree, a variegated weigela, and that was special because it flowered on my sister's and my birthday.

Was it planted specially for that?

I suspect it might have been planted especially for it, yes. After I left school I went on to Sydney University, and I studied geography, geology, economics and psychology. I graduated with honours in geography in 1967. Later I enrolled in the diploma of Town and Country Planning at Sydney University, and I went there two nights a week. I spent many hours working on the various projects which were set for us on these big boards, I had never been taught like that before. Quite interesting, but the architects were in their element. By then I was working at the State Planning Authority in Sydney amongst architects and engineers, town planners, economists and geographers and that's where I met John Stowar. John and I used to work together, doing our field work together. He did what was called Clause 52 work, which was country dwellings, and I was looking after the outer areas of Sydney, and it worked quite well. And at the time, we had bought a block of land at St Ives it was a carnation farm and it had absolutely nothing on it. I was envisaging what trees we might grow on it so I would ask John, what's that tree over there? How big does it grow? What are its conditions? What does it need? And I stored all that information up to help me in designing the garden at St Ives, and for later life as well.

Would you say that John had a major influence in your gardening life?

Yes, John did have a big influence, not only because of my earlier association with him in my town planning career, but when we moved to the Southern Highlands, they were already here, and it was after. Now it was when came to their place for a lunch on one occasion that we decided we would try and move here too. This was a nice place to live. John, when we first moved here, had a wholesale nursery at his place at Moss Vale. Oak Cottage he lived in. Afterwards he started a retail nursery at Moss Vale, and he asked me to look after it one day a week in the middle of winter. Well, it was a nursery full of deciduous trees, there was not a leaf in sight, so I spent most of my time (he had a great library of books) reading up on the trees in his books, and then going out and having a look at them to see what they looked like in real life.

6:00

Probably sitting over a kerosene heater.

I was, I was sitting over a kerosene because it was a very cold spot. It was an old railway cottage, and it was in very poor condition, horrible, really.

But you learned a lot?

I learned a lot. And then when people would come in, I could help them with their choices, and that was how I started. Now we've been friends with John and Anne for a long, long time, and we've visited their gardens in various places and stayed with them.

They've got the properties down the south coast...

and Magnetic Island, and we've stayed with them in both places. And it's very interesting to see how John has changed, grown various plants. His knowledge of plants, of all different areas is huge, and he wrote the frangipani book, of course,

Yes.

And that was when he was...

...he was one of the leading people to go through Australian [Garden] History Society (AGHS) to try and save the plants in Hillview.

In Hillview as well.

Yes. And another person that you may have met, or who has influenced you, has been Les Musgrove.

Yes, I haven't known Les as long. I first met Les through the Australian Garden History Society. We had a visit for a weekend. I think it would have been up to the Blue Mountains, from our branch, and one of the first gardens we went to was Les's. Later, we had a dinner at Leura, and I was sitting at a different table from Les, but I went over to thank Les and Elaine for the lucky door prize, actually, which my husband had won. It was a painting by Elaine, beautiful. And Elaine looked at me, and she said, "look, excuse me for asking, but I think I know you, did you go to Wenona?" And I said, "Yes." And she said, "Were you one of the Smith twins?" And I said, "yes", "are you Laurel?" And that was amazing, because, she and I hadn't seen each other since we were 10, and most people found it very difficult to identify us apart if there was only one of us there. They could tell a little more easily if there were two, but if there was only one, they didn't have that comparison. And Elaine knew straight away. Well, we became good friends, we talked quite a lot on the phone, and then when they moved to Wildes Meadow, we visited them there, and we watched as Les created his garden there. We loved going and watering it when they were away. We loved going and visiting it, there were always special areas, different areas, and Les was always trying to work out, oh, this area, I need to work on this area. I need to change this and, well, that's not working too well.

He's a very good mentor, isn't he?

Or Les is a wonderful mentor. And then, since they've now moved into town, into Bowral, and again, it is great watching what has happened in their garden here.

And sharing...

... and sharing it with them.

And, of course, Les did a lot of work at the Botanic Gardens, where Chris and Charlotte [Webb] were also involved. Would you consider them an influence as well?

They were great influences, and they are still great influences. If I need to know what a plant is, I will always talk to them,

Yes.

And first of all, if Charlotte's busy, I'll ask Chris. Chris can generally tell me, sometimes he'll say, ask Charlotte.

Chris is more the tree man.

Is more that, that's right, and Chris has worked on a lot of gardens in the area as well. He knows a lot about the whole area. They both grew up here, so they've got long term knowledge of this area. If it's a plant that neither

of them can identify, Charlotte, will say to me, "well, we'll have just have to wait until it flowers", and that's what we do.

11:00

That's what you do too, you give that advice to other people.

Yes, I do. Les at one stage was working also in the Botanic Gardens in the plant propagation area, and he used to grow plants. He showed me how to propagate plants to start with, and how to show them. And I'm very careful now about the positioning of a plant in a pot, and how much I take off when I am getting it ready for a plant sale. And I work with Charlotte also on the Wingecarribee Heritage Advisory Panel and previously on the Wingecarribee Council Heritage Committee. So I've seen quite a lot of them and learned quite a lot, and their knowledge has been great. And of course, I worked with Chris and Charlotte in the AGHS consultant study that was done at the Crowe nursery. They also did the inventory and statement of significance for both those gardens and Charlotte had been growing over 200 of the camellias from the Crowe [nursery] and then she gave them to me. It was my job then to distribute them. And so, as you can see, I've had a lot to do with Chris and Charlotte, and I still do.

And I'm on the committee, on the Friends Committee.

Of the?

[Southern Highlands] Botanic Gardens, and Charlotte is the CEO of the Botanic Gardens, and Chris is the chairman of the Friends Committee, so I have quite a lot involvement with them.

When did you first meet them? Was it around 2008 when you joined AGHS under the guidance of John Stowar.

Yes, I think so.

There was a conference.

Yes, there was a conference [of the AGHS] in the Southern Highlands. That was the second conference in the Southern Highlands. The first one was in the year 2000 which I didn't attend, but John did, and came and stayed at our place for some of that time, but the 2008 one I was involved in to some extent. I was asked, would I help? And I sold the books for the AGHS National Committee at that conference. I was able to listen in as well and sometimes I even got to go to the gardens, some of the garden visits. So that was where I first came across them [Chris and Charlotte]. And then it was also with the consultancies involved with AGHS...

Yes?

Where I then became more involved with them.

You did an awful lot of work on the Berrima Bridge Nursery with Charlotte and Chris.

Yes.

What happened with that project?

I did a lot of the research. What happened, Berrima Bridge Nursery was the go- to place from the 1940s to the 2000 when it closed. Berrima Bridge Nursery was run by Claude and Isobel Crowe, a lovely old couple. Claude was also the warden of the Scouts, so I knew him through that. We called them Mr. and Mrs. Crowe always, excepting at Scout meetings, when everybody called him Claude. But, back to Claude and Isobel. Claude died in about 1998-9, and Isobel died, I think, in 2003 and their nursery, as I said, was the go- to place. Isobel claimed that the Southern Highlands is “our landscape” because they supplied most of the plants that were growing in this area and they did a lot of the planting, as well, in garden spaces. It wasn't just here, though, they did go as far afield as Nimmitabel and to the North Coast and to the Far West as well. So, the first thing that happened was I organised an exhibition of the Claude Crowe memorabilia. And that was soon after Mrs. Crowe had died. Oh, no, that was in 2011, I organised that, and that was at Berrima, and we had lots and lots of locals who came, and I collected a lot of material. What had happened was Mrs. Crowe had donated a lot of the material, all their books, their ledgers, their docket books, all their records, to the Caroline Simpson Library in Sydney. And I had become aware of this, and I went to the Caroline Simpson Library, and although we couldn't borrow that material, we could copy it. So, I made a lot of copies. And I also had some material that their son, Noel, gave me as well. And we decided we would have this exhibition at Berrima to get the stories of the Crowes and their nursery before they became lost. So, we had an interview with Noel and with Mrs. Crowe. And people listened to that, and tears glistened in their eyes. So great. We asked them to write their memories and their thoughts and what their experiences were of visiting the nursery. And that was great.

18:00

We were then able to compile that, and use it, and that was the beginning of it. Then after that, we decided we needed to do the consultancy and actually protect the property, because the property was going to be sold out of the family. Whilst it was in the family, it was pretty safe. When it went on the market, though, we knew the glasshouses would probably disappear, the growing fields, the walls, the little streams, the plant material, the really rare plant material, the significant plant material; and one plant did, the Berrima Bridge maple had died. Fortunately, I have one in my garden, which is great. It's a great size. It's really good, and I can look out on it from here. AGHS engaged, Chris and Charlotte to do that too, with funds we got from the Royal Australian Historical Society, the Heritage Branch of the New South Wales Department of Planning and the Kindred Spirits Fund of AGHS, I think it was, as well as from the local branch of the AGHS. They made it possible for us to engage Chris and Charlotte and they did a very thorough job. They went and visited the site quite a lot, and they found there were a lot of quite rare plants there. They propagated the camellias at that stage as well, which were later on sold or given away to heritage properties including Harper's Mansion, Riversdale, Camden Park and Elizabeth Farm Cottage. In some cases, they replaced camellias that had been lost, ones which had been planted there by the Macarthurs and had been lost. It was an excellent thing to do, Chris and Charlotte worked on this and

prepared it. And I'm pleased to say that the property has now been listed in the draft heritage LEP [Local Environment Plan] and we're hoping that there will be full protection. But the current owner is quite good, he has been restoring the glass houses.

Yes, they look good. I saw them the other day. The other thing that you were working with Charlotte, because you were back on the Wingecarribee Council Heritage Advisory Committee at one stage, was the listing for the heritage properties that you looked at with Dennis [McManus].

Yes.

Do you want to tell us a little bit?

Yes. Charlotte and I had been on the [Wingecarribee Council] Heritage Advisory Committee for a long time, and she and I really worked more on the gardens and the trees and the plants in the gardens that should be protected. And we went out and we looked at those, and we were involved in preparation of heritage [assessments] for the garden areas as well as of heritage plans and conservation plans and design...

I think, is that [indistinct words]...

... of many of these gardens as well. The most recent work that we were doing has been working on identifying over 600 properties that we considered should have heritage listing. And we found that the draft Local Environment Plan going to council includes many conservation areas, landscape conservation areas, 13 at the moment, and 413 additional heritage items. It's been quite a job, because we've had to go out and look at a lot of them and do the research. You don't just look at them, you actually do the research as well. Linda Emery, has been very good at this as well and helped us. It is a great team.

And you're just waiting now for the results to come through?

Well, we're waiting. We've been exhibited, and we're waiting for the submissions report to go before Council. And that should have happened in February, but it didn't.

You mentioned that you've got the Berrima Bridge maple here. Could you tell us a little bit about your beautiful garden?

We moved here in 1980 and our current garden was a pony paddock apart from anything else; but it did have some very large eucalypts, and we decided that we really wanted to retain as many of those as we possibly could, because we come from a previous carnation farm in Sydney where there were absolutely no trees. So, we valued the big trees. In the front garden, we have been able to keep quite a lot of those, we haven't changed it a huge amount. The back garden is where we have changed things. And that came about because we subdivided our land, and we now have two thirds of an acre, whereas we had 1.6 acres before and we had a family. So, the garden area became really suitable for the family. We had a big dam with ducks. We had a large vegetable plot.

We had an orchard. We did, to start with, have lots and lots of blackberries, and we had managed to clear them, that was one of the big tasks, and privet had to be cleared too. When we subdivided we decided we would terrace this smaller area and make distinct characters for each of the terraces. The back garden is a woodland garden, and it is in shade essentially most of the time. It has bulbs and easy-care things more than anything else. It has deciduous trees in it, which is great because then the sun comes through in the winter time and the bulbs all come up, it's great. Over in the side area it's a bit sunnier and we've got a persimmon tree, from which we're hoping we'll get a few persimmons. We haven't, we usually don't, even when we cover them with paper bags the possums and the birds find them. We have a large fig tree at the back, and again, mostly we don't get any figs. You can't see into the bottom terrace from the middle terrace. There's a hedge that stops you from seeing into it, so it's a bit of a surprise.

Yes

26:10

All our levels are designed so you can't see from one to the other. There are lots of surprises in this garden. The middle level is more formal, and it has a pond, a rectangular pond with a fountain in it, and I've just planted some water lilies in it. So, it's lovely. I'm hoping that they'll do well. We have tried fish, but they didn't last, the birds just fish them out. We've got formal floral gardens, and they started off to be all the same but we soon found that didn't work, because the types of soil that were there was different, the climate, the aspects were different, and the amount of shade was different, so they've now developed into four garden sections. They're all different. And then there is a gazebo in there as well, which we use for entertaining, and if you just want to go and sit quietly, you can do that and have family gatherings, and other gatherings as well. Then just a few steps above that, separated by a camellia hedge, is what we call the play area, where our grandchildren can come and play with balls and play cricket and all that sort of thing. It is surrounded by camellias as well. On the side, the top terrace is the terrace that we look out onto from the house so it's important that it looks good all year round. We have a large crabapple and a large Acer japonica in that garden, and they give shade between the house and those trees. And in that shady area, we can grow all sorts of things that we otherwise couldn't grow, and that's where my special plants go, and I can look out on them from the house and keep an eye on them. We also have quite a few maples here, and as you mentioned, the Berrima Bridge maple, but there's Acer viridis and Acer palmatum as well, the purple one is dissectum. They're protected here too, they're very protected. And those two actually have been moved several times. In fact, the purple one has been dragged by the root ball by the car to its current place. When we did extensions here, we had to move it.

It's very lush. You've been very generous with sharing your beautiful garden with people over the years. And what sort of events have you had?

Well, we've shared the garden with our friends, of course, and we quite often have a number of friends just after Christmas here, and I think they thoroughly enjoy it. But we've had the Highlands Garden Society for a summer garden evening and a garden visit. We've had Garden History [AGHS] for a garden visit as well, a special event and we've had it open for the [Southern Highlands] Botanic Gardens as well for their Autumn Garden Festival. So, we've had a lot of people. I quite enjoy walking around with people and explaining things to them,

and telling them what the plants are and talking to them about their gardens as well. I don't just talk about our garden.

And your volunteering roles, you've also been a very generous volunteer person across the Highlands. What are some of the other volunteering roles that you've undertaken?

Well, I've been involved with volunteering for the National Trust and the Australian Garden History Society. My first volunteer role was with the National Trust Golden Vale, and the garden there was quite neglected, and a group of us decided that we needed to do something about that. We used to go there and we didn't have a leader, or not a formal leader who was paid or anything but we did have a leader who helped us, Brenda was our one, but we gave as much advice as she gave to us. We found that there were a lot of bulbs in the garden and they had been scattered everywhere. It was a fascinating garden, because every time you went there, there was something different, something else coming up. Most of our work was weeding, cleaning up and bringing the bulbs all to one place. And we had morning tea, of course, I enjoyed that as well. And then you and I interviewed Karen Keighley.

That we did, and we made a recording of all the plants that were growing in the garden.

Yes, so we've been involved quite a bit with Golden Vale. The other garden that I've been involved with the National Trust is Redford Park. It was quite a different situation there, because Rick Shepherd was the head gardener, and we worked with Rick. He directed us, told us what we should do, and that was good, too. We learned a lot from Rick. He would come round at the end of your session with his cart and pick up your rubbish and we also learned a lot about chopping and dropping. Mostly we were given gardens to work in, but sometimes we worked in the whole area. And the garden I was working in was the Jurassic garden with its Bunya pine. So, I had to be very careful and look up, "is there a bunya nut going to drop on me if I go over here today?" We I also worked in the dog cemetery, and that had to be kept nice. There were pathways and woodlands with corydalis and babies tears growing through them, it was a lovely setting to work in, beautiful. That section was quite a contrast to some of the other areas, like the shrubbery, which had to be so neat and clipped all the time. Sometimes we would work on cleaning up around the big trees as well, in other areas. We also used to meet together for morning tea, and again, talk about plants and gardens and people, those things.

And you also have been a long- time volunteer with the Highlands Garden Society.

Yes, I joined the committee almost immediately after I joined the Highlands Garden Society, which was when we first came here in the early 1980s. One of the first things that I got involved in was the Friendship Gardens, oh no, I wasn't involved in Friendship [Gardens], that was later; was the Bulletin, writing the Bulletin. The Bulletin was very different in those days. There was no technology like we have today. It was quite a simple magazine, and we had to do the whole lot, I did it with a friend who lived up the road. We took it on, and we wrote, or we sourced the articles, and then we typed them up using a stencil and that horrible red stuff. And then we roneoed them off at Berrima District Industries. We were able to use them [the roneo machines] there, and then we would distribute the Bulletins. So, a labour of love it was. That was the first volunteer job that I did with them.

35:30

And now you're very involved in the Friendship Garden visits, which is every month, finding a garden that's of interest for the community

Yes, every month, I took over that role after covid, and the job then was to source gardens. So I would ask members and my friends, nearly all my friends have had their gardens open. We have a Friendship Garden open on the third Saturday of every month and sometimes I get that to coincide with the speaker on the Friday night as well,

And you've organised speakers.

I have organised the speakers for it. I need to go out beforehand, have a look at the garden, find out what issues there are, and work out where we're going to have morning tea, because morning tea is a very important part of it. Parking and morning tea and how to find it, yes, they are really important things. I also have to organise with the owner that there will be some sort of a talk, or viewing, or information about the garden given to the people who visit. So, I often ask them if they could provide me with some information, and if they could just talk for a little while, and we always acknowledge their efforts by giving them a present at the end of it. I go over and get the gift voucher from the nursery.

Mount Murray [Nursery]?

Yes.

Another one of the other projects that you were a volunteer in helping with was the Lions Park that was in Bowral.

Yes, yes. In the early 1980s when I joined the committee [of the Highlands Garden Society], I very soon became involved with this new project that they were taking on. It was called the Lions Park Scented Garden Project, and the first job was to locate space to develop these gardens, and then the design of it. The idea came from Tamie Fraser. One of our members had visited Tamie Fraser's banksia centre in Canberra, and came back and said, it would be lovely to have a similar garden in Bowral. A garden that everybody can visit, including those who are in wheelchairs and those who are disabled. There are things in it for people who are sight impaired and people who cannot hear properly. This caught on with the Highlands Garden Society, and they contacted the Council. The Council then came up with a couple of sites and two councillors who represented the council and joined that committee, as well as the Shire engineer to organise us some help. We got the Lions Club involved as well, because they were used to organising projects. We started off first of all asking "where are we going to build this?" The sites the Council came up with were great. They were at the southern end of Bowral, and they became the southern gateway to Bowral as well, so they had another purpose, not just the Lions Park Scented Garden. The first of these sites we decided we wanted to work on was the eastern park, but we needed to get a design first. Our chairman, David Solomon, knew Craig Burton, who was the lecturer in third year landscape design at New South Wales University. Through him we had all the students come up, about 26 of them, for a weekend. We entertained them, and we took them to the site. We took them around the Highlands, and we told

them about the trees they could grow and the trees they couldn't grow; about growing conditions and generally, as much background as we could. They went away and they designed these gardens for us. We got 26 designs, and we looked at them, and we reviewed them, and put them all on exhibition. We invited Councillors and the community to come and have a look at them too. We decided which one we thought was the best and which ones had elements in them that we wanted to help incorporate into the gardens as well. Some had come up with some fascinating ideas. Some had come up with very expensive ideas. They were just such a range. The one that we chose was by Fiona Armstrong. And we asked Fiona if she could put these other parts also into her design. Once we had the design, we went to Council, and Council formally approved the design. We were away, but we didn't have money. It was the implementation that was then the problem. We decided that we could probably do the smaller eastern park without getting grants, without going out for money, so we did that. We got plants donated by the Highlands Garden Society while the Lions Club and Council did all the hard work. They got their machinery in and helped us while the Lions Club laid the stones and moved the soil.

And Work for the Dole?

Not in that one,

Not in that one.

No, it was basically community. The community worked on that one, it was fully a community park. We didn't have water in on the site in those days either, so we got a tap installed, and one of our members used to go down and turn the tap on and water all the gardens. When it came to the western side park, which was a very much larger garden, there was much more involved. We knew we couldn't do that without funding, so we applied for a whole series of grants. I used to write the grant submissions, we got Commonwealth grants, we got State grants, and we got Local grants as well. One of those grants involved having men who were working for the dole working for us. It was a quite a complicated garden, and it never really got finished the way it was planned. Some elements had to be modified because they were just too difficult.

The fountain and toilet block.

43:12

We wanted to move the toilet block. We still want to move the toilet block, [laughter] but it is finding somewhere to locate it and the cost of moving it. In addition, new toilet blocks have to be designed and built to special specifications these days, which are much, much more expensive than that old toilet block was. So, it's been modified over the years, but not moved. And it was designed that the two gardens were designed, as we said, as an entrance, so they had a semi- circular pattern. Also, what we wanted was, across the road, not a barrier, but a raised surface so you knew you were coming into Bowral but that didn't get done. We wanted parking for disabled people over in Bowral Street, in a corner there. That didn't get done either, some of the things just did not get done. By then I had gone back to work, and so I was not able to put as much time and effort into it.

And the eastern side is called Maynard Park...

... in honour of Miss Maynard, who was a matron at Bowral Hospital and who donated the land to the council. The western side was an interesting parcel of land. First of all, it had a road alignment through the middle of it, so that had to be expunged, Bowral Street was going to have a modified alignment right through the middle. The rest of it was just parkland, really, on the other two sides.

You still see a lot of people sitting there, especially in Tulip Time.

Yes, we decided we didn't want to make it a specifically tulip- oriented garden. We wanted a garden that people would be able to enjoy at all seasons and all different people would be able to enjoy. The gardens tended to fall into disarray a little bit. And only a few years ago, Peter Wurfel from the Highlands Garden Society, said he was walking in the garden, and he saw this little plaque, and it said that the Highlands Garden Society was responsible for part of this. And he came back to the Highlands Garden Society and said, "What's the history of [this garden] what's the background?" I was able to supply him with that information and we have met with the chief gardener and told him what we think should happen, and they have been working on it. In fact, it has improved, it's been very much better. And we've told them one thing that is important in one corner, it is a plaque to honour Elaine Jennings.

She was patron...

She was patron of the Highlands Garden Society when we were doing all this work.

Yes,

So, I suppose, in a way, it is still regarded as the special park of the Highlands Garden Society.

It surely is. Then you became involved in the Australian Garden History [Society]. You were introduced to it in about 2004 by John Stowar. And what's that been like working in [this organisation]? You've been involved with a couple of national conferences, what's that been like?

Well, in the 2008 one. I wasn't terribly much involved. I only looked after the bookstore and helped, doing some of the cleaning up, and that sort of thing. With the 2018 one I was asked a number by the Chair, Eleanor Dartnell, asked a number of us who'd been involved with the [Australian] Garden History Society over the years, to form a committee, and you, Lyn, and I were on that committee, and she wanted me to specially work on the garden visits project. So, every afternoon, we would go to a garden, the group would go to a garden. And that was quite a lot of work, because it involved sourcing them to start with, then going and visiting them, finding out about them, then working out at the logistics of how we were going to get around these gardens, and how were we going to get from one area to another. I think there were six buses and 240 people that needed to visit these gardens, all in an afternoon. They had to visit each garden over the period, but each afternoon, we were only visiting a select number of gardens. So, 240 people had to be accommodated in each garden each afternoon, and the buses had to be worked out. Which route they would take, and how they would get there and when

they would arrive? It was all in the briefing notes. The briefing notes, the logistics of it all were quite complicated, we needed to work out how these buses could turn around as well, because some of the gardens were up narrow alleys, narrow streets, narrow lanes, country lanes. We had to make sure there were no other vehicles, and that the other people who lived in that street were made aware of what was happening, and they wouldn't have access to their properties at certain times.

And the other thing that you're involved with, in AGHS, I think, was a significant tree register.

Oh, that was one of the things I first started when I joined the committee. I said, "we need to have a significant tree register". What had happened [before]? There had been one done, but it was done unofficially. According to Chris and Charlotte, the Council asked a whole lot of different people, "what trees do you think are significant?". So, it hadn't been done using any scientific basis or any criteria. Consequently, I set up this little committee to look at how we could identify significant trees. AGHS, the National Trust the garden societies as well were on it. So, "what criteria do we use?" That was quite a big job. Actually, it was quite interesting to try and work out how and where do you measure them? Which trees are we going to start with?

Was it the trees that you could see from the street?

Yes, it was only the council trees, or trees on roads, or trees in front gardens that people could see from the roads. The first area we were going to try it on was Burrawang, and we knew we had to get that community involved. We planned to have a big public meeting but we didn't actually get there. We didn't get the public meeting, we didn't make it that far, because in the meantime, Eleanor [Dartnell] resigned, and I became the Chair, and I just couldn't carry everything. I couldn't do everything, I had to drop out on something.

And then, of course, you did the amazing work, which we've spoken about, on Berrima Bridge Nursery, but that actually led to a couple of awards for AGHS that you were very involved with.

Yes, the Australian Garden History Society was awarded a National Trust award, and that was a cup, which was lovely. And we were also awarded a Wingecarribee Council award for our advocacy work for heritage. I had to absent myself from that meeting.

The other thing that you did was the Exeter /Sutton Forest landscape. I think.

Yes, we were working on identifying significant landscapes in the area, and I identified the Sutton Forest one.

Just recently?

Yes, for the Council. I had done work on that before but when it comes to the statutory side of it, it's a very complicated process, and we didn't want the other proposals [in the draft heritage LEP] to fall down because of delays caused by the opposition to the Exeter/Sutton Forest landscape. That landscape is a really important one, and it is under threat all the time. There are proposals for development in it now which we can't do anything about, we've done what we can.

As far as mining...

53:40

Well, mining is one of them, but there are urban development proposals as well. Anybody who owns land seems to think that they can do what they like. The reason why we were not happy to include it was the amount of work that would be required, and we didn't feel we had done enough work on it, to be able to convince the minister that ...

Colleen Morris did quite a lot too.

Colleen Morris did the first project that was for the National Trust. Of course, listing with the National Trust is excellent, but it is not a statutory control. It does not give protection.

Do you want to talk a little bit about saving the camellias of Station Street and the...

...the pin oaks. Yes, that was another project that was actually started with National Trust. I attended a lunch here, and the CEO of the National Trust was talking about the advocacy work that they had done in Sydney. And I stood up and I said, you know, we need the National Trust to take on an advocacy role here too. We have pin oaks, really significant pin oaks. The main the northern entrance to Bowral is under threat, it's pin oak avenue is under threat, as are its camellias, both of which, we believe, are significant. And he said, "Oh, well, I'd be very interested to hear more and if it justifies it, we would give a listing to it." I was going away but when I came back, I set up a group to investigate the significance of this, and we worked on that, and we found out a lot, and we did get enough information that the National Trust was prepared to list it. We were working all the time on the listing. We were getting more and more information. Once it had been listed, they were preparing a press release and I wasn't happy with the press release. I said, we've now done more work and we have found that's not right, and that's not right, and that's not right. We can't put out a press release if it's got inaccuracies in it, so we pulled the press release and we did a new listing. In the meantime, the camellias were investigated further, the timing of the planting of the pin oaks and the timing of the planting of the camellias.

It had been considered by the Berrima District Historical Society, that all those camellias were planted in 1936 after the stone walls been completed as part of the beautification project we found a number of them couldn't have been [planted then] because they weren't in Australia at that time. Some of them were much, much younger. So, it's been a job ever since, and we've involved Dr Stephen Utick, who helps every time he comes back, he goes and has another look and sends me a message, "Laurel, I think number four isn't such and such. I think it's such and such." It's been an ongoing project to identify the actual camellias that are there. There are 18. We thought there were only 17 to start with, then we found what was called an outlier. And we thought that was a certain camellia, only brought to Australia in the 1960s, but it's been found that it's not that one, it's another one, still much newer. So now we know that there were at least three plantings, and we believe the *Aspasia*, *Camellia japonica* "Aspasia Macarthur", is the only one that probably dates back to the original planting. This makes sense, because we had the war on and there wouldn't have been anything done to look after those camellias in that time, and the pin oaks were planted later.

The impetus to save this whole area, basically, was the result of the terrible droughts leading up to 2019 where a number of the camellias and trees were...

59:00

... they were almost dead...

...and beautiful, wonderful people like Margaret Chadwick, were watering trees off the back of their utes, with wheelie bins for water, and so that was another labour of love to save and protect them.

You then worked constantly, for up to a year, with the Department of Transport to get some signage identifying and restoring the trachyte terraces.

That's right, the approval process was interesting again, because the [Bowral] Railway Station is heritage listed. So it required their heritage branch to approve [the signage]. Then it is also part of a larger rail system and the rail lines themselves are owned by the Commonwealth. What I did was, before the Council had to formally seek approval, I made contact with all these people, and told them what we were doing. I got them to come and have a look and see where we thought the community signs should go. I got them actually to be part of this. I wrote the signs, which was also another long process, trying to fit the information they wanted on each one. Would we have one sign? Would we have two signs? How big should they be? Should they be in black and white or colour? What materials should we use?

Wonderful legacy.

Yes, and I'm so pleased now where they are, and that they do tell the story of both the terraces. The trachyte terraces were built with trachyte stone from the Gib, and they were restored only using trachyte that they found on the site. They did not bring additional trachyte in for the camellia gardens, they were restored as well, and additional camellias planted on the lower terraces. They are looking to be a great legacy, the whole thing,

I think, from some research that we did as well, this is the only planting of japonica camellias that we can find in a public space.

Yes.

A public space, yes in Australia....

I went out...

...not in Japan.

Yes, I reached out to [the state representatives] of the AGHS, and I asked them, would they please check in their areas and come back to me if they could find any [significant japonica plantings] so we could work out the significance of these [at Bowral Railway Station], and no one could find any. I could find one or two, but not 18

camellias planted on the footpath of a street anywhere in Australia. And of course, there's not a great number of areas where it's possible. You wouldn't plant camellias in Darwin, for instance.

Now I know that you're a wonderful artist, and when you have spare time, when you're not volunteering that you love painting, painting landscapes and trees. Do you want to tell us a little bit about your travels around Australia and all the wonderful things you've been painting.

Well, if you look around, there's quite a few paintings of mine around here, nearly all my paintings help me to remember where I've been in the past. We do quite a lot of travel. That was one of the things that I started doing with my parents. With my parents, we used to camp in different places. I developed a love of landscape quite early on, and a recognition of different landscapes and what made landscapes different. And partly, of course, it's the vegetation that you see. So fortunately, I married a man who also liked doing that, and we used to go camping quite a lot, and we've now bought a caravan, and we've travelled right around Australia a couple of times, and up through the middle. I'm quite sure there's not that many places that we haven't visited. The landscapes that I paint, as I said, help me to remember where they are. I take a lot of photographs, but I don't paint directly from the photographs. I might take three photographs of an area, and I might then combine those. And yes, I like this, but I don't like that, in a photograph. What I'm trying to get is the feeling of a place, not the photograph, not a replica of the photograph, but how it felt to be there. A lot of my paintings have water in them, and that's, I suppose, just one of the things you appreciate. And trees, of course, most of the trees in Australia are eucalypts but there are lots and lots of different eucalypts. There are brown barrels [Eucalyptus fastigata] and peppermints [Eucalyptus nicholii] and the mallees are the trees of the outback.

Yes, yes. If you could be a tree, what would you choose?

Oh, I'd have to say the laurels. What else could I choose. It has great symbolism as well. I don't think I look very much like a laurel tree, and I hope not. Laurel is associated in Greek and Roman mythology with the attributes of wisdom, honour, strength, and symbolises glory, knowledge and victory.

So happy to wear that one?

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Not sure I quite live up to it.

Well, Laurel, is there anything else you want to talk about?

I think I've actually covered everything.

You've had a fascinating life, and you're living a fascinating life, with everything that you're involved in and doing on behalf of the Australian Garden History [Society]. Thank you for taking the time to prepare and get your thoughts together on what you wanted to tell us, and for sharing all of this wonderful story with the Australian Garden History [Society].

Thank you, Lyn, for that, and thank you for being so patient [laughter]. And thank you for the Australian Garden History Society for giving me the opportunity to go through all my material.

Interview ends: 1 hour 6 minutes and 39 seconds