

Early days in High Street, Watsonia

Society members Keith and Margaret Willimott, as a young courting couple, went out for a drive one day in September 1956.

They were traveling toward Grimshaw Street along Watsonia Road, which was such a narrow bitumen road at the time that, according to Keith, you had to put one wheel into the dirt to pass an oncoming vehicle. Looking up the slope to the left, Keith thought the area would be a nice place to live.

Only a week later they saw an ad in the paper, viewed the block, paid a deposit and the land for their future home was theirs for £525. This was without any sewer, made road or street gutters.



The site of Keith and Margaret Willimott's future home in High Street, Watsonia (October 1956)

Keith and Margaret married in 1958 and lived with Keith's grandmother in East Prahran while they saved for their house. Building was finally commenced late in 1959. The framework was up and weathering for quite a while as it took about six months to get the bricks for the walls. They had no curtains, but Holland blinds in the bedrooms. There were no carpets, just polished floorboards.

Keith recalls: "The whole thing was virtually completed inside and a lot of rude people turned around and asked us if we were building it or pulling it down!"

Finally the proud day arrived in July 1960 and they moved in when their second child and eldest daughter, Heather, was three months old. The house was 12 squares in size, clad in brick veneer, with a cement tile roof. It cost £3,600 pounds to build.



The bricks arrive at last!

Oral History

Among the few shops in Watsonia at the time were a corner milkbar - greengrocer - delicatessen, a newsagent and a post office. The current Watsonia Neighbourhood House was a small underwear factory.

Bill White was one local identity. He was a school teacher, church member and member of the Progress Association.

The suburbs were still being filled in and there was quite a physical gap between Watsonia and the nearby communities of Greensborough and Macleod. Bundoora didn't take off until Jennings began developing its estate there in the early 1960s. There wasn't much interaction between these communities. People had young kids and tended to have their own friends locally.

There was very good camaraderie in High Street, Watsonia as it was full of families with young children. Keith again: "It was nothing for us to have 14 children in the back yard. That was alright until they all got hungry and wanted something to eat!"

There were a lot of informal get togethers and outings such as Sunday school picnics, as there weren't many local facilities. The nearest tennis courts were in Elder Street and football was played at A.K. Line Reserve.

One highlight each year in the early 60s was all getting together on the vacant corner block on Guy Fawkes Night for a bonfire and letting off crackers. Margaret and Keith still keep in touch with some of the folk who lived in High Street in those days but have moved away since.



Keith, Margaret and young Keith in the backyard of their new home.

The Willimotts were initially one of the few couples to have a septic tank connected to an indoor flush toilet. This was a fascination to neighbouring kids.

Most homes had pan lavatories in an outdoor loo in the back yard. The nightsoilman would transport filled pans by balancing them on his head. He drove what was called a '24 door sedan' which was a truck fitted with ranks of cubicles for the pans.

The home's heating was by an open fire in a ventilated hearth which included the clever design element of a small door on the outside of the chimney so that all the ashes could be swept directly outside.

Cooking was done on a single upright electric stove. Later a small combustion heater, which burned briquettes, was installed beside it.

Oral History

A briquette hot water system was installed next to the home's one toilet, so on a cold winter's day people would sit there longer to enjoy the warmth, with others banging on the door and telling them to hurry up!

There was a trick to operating this hot water system and it wasn't unknown for Keith to come home from work to find a frustrated Margaret telling him that it had gone out again.

At one point the hot water began smelling bad when the bath was being run for the kids at night, so Keith got up in the roof to check the water tank. Next door's pet budgerigar had been missing for some days. Keith found a very dead budgie floating in the tank, probably having made its way up the outside overflow pipe and then fallen into the tank.

The family had no washing machine. Instead there was an electric copper to do the washing in.

Margaret said: "We had a nasty experience with that. When you had done the washing with the copper you used to flip the washing over into the two troughs and then rinse them and put them through the hand wringer and go and hang them on the line. To empty the copper you had to run the hot water out from the bottom of the copper into a bucket and tip it out. It was very hot water. One day when our son, Ken, was three he was playing, pulling a train along on a string and walked backwards into the bucket. He fell in and was badly burned and was rushed into the Children's Hospital where he had to stay for several weeks."

After a break of nearly 10 years with her own kids, Margaret went back to secondary school home economics teaching in 1968 as there was a shortage of teachers. She was approached by Watsonia High School to take on the position and worked there until it was closed and largely demolished in the Kennett years.

Keith had worked as a glass tubing blower from late 1945, when he was 15, making items such as test tubes and the glass pieces for condensers. The Willimotts still have some artistic glass animal sculptures he made. Next Keith briefly worked making ph meters, used by chemists to test the alkalinity of solutions.

Keith finally found his true calling as a medical instrument repairer at the Royal Melbourne Hospital. He eventually did this job he loved for 39 years, but had only fairly recently begun it when Margaret and he took that fortunate drive through Watsonia in 1956.

My thanks to Keith and Margaret for sharing with us reminiscences of their early days in High Street, Watsonia.

John Gibson
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Many thanks to the Society's Treasurer, John Gibson for recording and documenting Keith and Margaret's wonderful story of life in the Watsonia district in those early days of a developing new suburb. John prepared this article from the oral histories he recently recorded with them and a number of photographs from their family albums they kindly allowed the Society to use for this story.