
NILLUMBIK SHIRE COUNCIL
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Interview: Doug Orford

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Place of Interview: Aurrum Aged Care in Plenty

Interviewer: Katherine Sheedy; Way Back When Consulting Historians

Note: This transcript has been reviewed by Doug Orford's daughter, Kathy Whiteside. Words added by Kathy are shown in italics.

Time (min:sec)

00:24

Thank you, Doug, for sharing your experiences with me. Can you introduce yourself?

Well, I was born in Eltham. My birth certificate shows I was registered in Eltham. That would be – probably would have been some of the last people to do that. When's that? – 1929.

We grew up – we lived on acres out Reynolds Road, which is Reynolds Road now. We lived on acres there so my backyard was plenty of space. I don't remember really much of child/boyhood because there weren't many houses between us and Eltham and there were no other boys around that I can recall to play with. Yeah.

Did you have siblings – brothers or sisters? Do you have brothers or sisters?

I have one. I had one older brother who's passed away now. Yeah. We had to play together or else.

Tell me about your parents [Ernest and Kate Orford].

Well, as far as I know, they were married in the church at Eltham North. Now, my father always told me that he and two other men started that off up there. They all put money into that and built the church up there.

What church was that?

It was – you couldn't say it was any denomination. It was everybody's church. *[Eltham North Gospel Church]*

And did you go to church when you were growing up?

When I was growing up, I went to the Methodist Sunday School and we used to have a – I suppose you'd call it a Christmas Party. We had a party once a year. We used to go down by furniture van, down to the beach somewhere. That was the outing for the year of all those folk from the church.

Which beach did you go to?

04:04

Oh, mainly Mordialloc I think it was. We used to go down there. It was in Mordialloc. Down the end of Springvale Road, you could go onto Mordialloc.

What school did you go to?

Well, I went to Eltham Primary School and then Eltham Higher Elementary School and then when I was an apprentice, I went to the Working Man's College which later became Melbourne Technical College or College or whatever. *[Preston Institute of Technology, which became RMIT]*

Tell me a bit about school. What was that like?

School? We had to walk to school. About 2km I suppose we had to walk to school.

Summer and winter?

That was all dirt roads, of course. The only metal road around Eltham was the Main Road in those days.

So who did you walk to school with?

With? My brother and I, we'd pick up a couple perhaps on the way. We'd all walk to school and all walk home together. We used to take different routes home and go home

via certain creeks. We could go into one creek and walk along it and then onto another. Yeah.

So what if it was raining? Did you still walk to school?

06:29

Oh yeah. Yeah. Well sometimes you'd be lucky. There were folk with – a couple of families that had cars – they'd always take you.

Did your family have a car?

We didn't have a car, no. My father was, I would say, one of the last horse brigades. So he was born in – when was it? – 1983, I think. [1892]

Eighteen -

No, sorry, 1890; yeah, 1893, that's – no, 1892. Eighteen ninety-two. He died in 1983.

What did your dad do?

Mainly general farm work. Fencing. Post and wire fencing. He was great for the post and wire fencing. He'd put in a line of posts and every one would be as straight as the next one. How he did it, I don't know. I couldn't do it, but yeah. And orcharding. We did have a small orchard at one stage.

What did you grow?

Apples, pears, plums, mainly.

Was that to sell?

Some, yes. Some for ourselves and some to sell. Yeah, well, that was the way people lived around there in those days. They all had to live on what they could make and do.

Do you know how much land you had? How big your block was – how much land?

About 18 acres, I think.

And what did your mum do?

My mum? She was just a housewife. They all were in those days, yeah. Nearly all women were housewives. No woman went to work before the war.

09:25

Did your mum help on the orchard?

Oh yeah. Yeah. Well, we had an orchard and a big garden, of course.

You said your dad had a horse.

Yeah. Horse and cart, yeah. That's why I say it was the last of the horse brigade.

Do you remember going in the horse and cart?

Oh yeah.

Where would you go?

Well, we'd go down to Eltham, mainly. We used to go across – could go across to Warrandyte but that's about as far as we went by horse and cart, otherwise you went by train and you had to walk to the station. That was about 2km.

Where did the train go?

From Eltham.

To the city?

No. Eltham to Heidelberg. You got out at Heidelberg and changed trains to catch a train to the city.

How long did it take?

About 50 minutes, I suppose.

10:49

What do you remember about the shops in Eltham?

Well, if you started off at Bolton Street there was a couple of shops opposite the opening of the Lower Park and they'd sell you a billy of hot water and a teapot full of tea and hot water for sixpence.

Of course, coming over the creek into Eltham you had Mrs Bremner's shop on the corner. There was another smaller shop between there and the school, but it was really of no consequence that I knew of. And then we had Collis' shop – grocery shop up Franklin Street corner and there's a butcher shop opposite. I believe Collis' shop was owned by Councillor Andrew's father – parents – so that went back into the 1800s.

And then there was, of course, a little old bank next to the Methodist church and there was Burgoyne's shop and where the funeral parlour – there was another grocery shop/hardware shop there, they used to sell hay and corn.

What did Mrs Bremner's shop used to sell?

Mainly more like a, you know, you couldn't call it a coffee shop. Just like the street shop would have –

A milk bar?

Milk bar, yeah. A milk bar type of shop.

And what about – what was the other one?

Burgoyne?

13:50

Yes.

Burgoyne's was a grocery one. Collis' was a grocery and hay and corn, they used to have behind the shop a shed with hay and so forth. That was in bales, of course. And then, well, when you got down to the Catholic school and then the chemist shop, the chemist used to come over from Greensborough every afternoon and dispense and he couldn't go home until he finished what the doctor had dispensed for the day.

Did you get anything delivered to the house?

Deliveries, yeah. We had what I can remember, for periods of time I'm speaking of, we had the butcher come with the horse and cart. He used to call. He had like a box on his cart with the meat on it. The baker, the same. The baker came the same way.

Who else came? Oh, groceries. The grocer used to come out once a week. He'd come out one day and he would get an order during the week or like, mum used to go shopping to town for food and she'd give him an order and they used to bring it out every Friday night. They brought it out. Yeah. Of course, that goes into war time and things changed very much so.

Can you tell me about war time?

War time. Well, of course, I was ten years old when war broke out. All available men went off to war leaving the women to look after their properties. So that meant my brother and I were in full-time work in our spare time. When I wasn't at school, I'd be, in season of course, I'd be – we had orchards over the road on either side of us and the weekend would be spent picking plums or picking other fruits and then you'd do other jobs as well. All the manual work that had to be done. There were only a couple of older men available in the area to do anything.

Did you get paid?

Oh, a bit of pocket money. Yeah. Well, there was no money in those days. So, if you had sixpence in your pockets, you were rich.

18:20

And were things hard to get during the war? Was there rationing?

Oh yeah. Rationing. Yeah. We were all issued with ration cards and when you turned 16, you got your own card. I still have my own card. Ration was: tea, sugar, clothing. I don't think milk was. I think we used to be lucky there. It was tea, sugar, clothing were the main ones.

What about butter?

Yes, butter. That was on the list.

Meat.

Yeah, and meat. Butter and meat.

So did your dad go to the war?

No, he was a couple of years older than the call up so he didn't go to the war.

Did you know people that went?

Oh, we had – I had cousins go there, well, cousins living up country, a couple of them went to the war. One was killed over there at El Alamein.

What about in the local area? Were there local men that went to war?

20:37

Oh, yep. Well, there was, oh, well the Anderson family, I'm not sure whether any of them actually went to the war or were in the service. There's only a couple of eligible ones really to go. Arthur Cox went. He was in the army.

And do you remember when the war ended.

Oh yes. I was an apprentice working in the city [*apprentice motor mechanic at Kellow-Falkiner Motors*] and I think about, it would have been around nineish, I suppose in the morning, the news had come through that the war had finished so everybody packed up and shut shop. There was no argument. I caught the first train home I could. I think that was the time we finished up catching the train to Heidelberg and we were going to walk home to Eltham and somebody in a car came along and gave us a lift to Eltham, to the hotel's corner. That was the day war ended.

Did you celebrate?

What would I have been? Fourteen. People that age didn't drink in those days. You certainly didn't drink any alcoholic drinks.

No. Speaking of hotels, what hotels were in Eltham?

Three.

How many?

No, two. Two. Watson's which is still there and Morris's was opposite on the block where the vet is now, isn't it? That's where the second one was. Of course, it got burnt. It got burnt in the early thirties I think it was. I just vaguely remember it.

What about, was there a police station?

Police station. Yeah, that was there. That was the meeting of people on voting day. They used to have the polling booth at the Eltham Courthouse. Yeah.

And was there a hospital?

Yes and no. There have been private ones. Back in the, round about 1910 I think it was, a lady had a hospital in the big house opposite the Methodist church in John Street.

24:55

Now you've got where the kindergarten is on the corner now. Well, it was the next block up. It was quite a big house and she ran a hospital there, sort of, I think, for a while. There was another hospital opposite – the road – Belmore Avenue – up the top of the hill, coming out of Eltham to Research. There was a big building there on the left. I'm not sure – no, it's not there now. It's gone. Yeah, that was a part hospital for a while, apparently. But not a public hospital. They were private enterprises.

And there was a doctor?

Not really. I believe there was one on the corner of Bridge Street and Main Road at one stage. But there was Dr Bradbury – Ron Bradbury – in later years, of course, opposite 728 – corner Brougham Street. He was doctor there for a while.

But there was one doctor. He used to come over from Greensborough, I don't think every afternoon but, you know, it would be mornings and afternoons. Some doctor would come over from Greensborough.

And how many churches were there?

Churches? Oh, three main ones were the Catholic church – their original one was down near the Diamond Creek and Main Road. Fordham Road. That's where the original Catholic church was. Then there was the Pitt Street, of course, the Church of England St Margaret's. And the Methodist. They were the three churches in Eltham.

And you wanted to mention the old public hall.

The old public hall. That's a long story. I don't know when it was built but, as I say, it was there, my first memories of it, and then of course it was used for all sorts of things, and then a chap named Harry Hawker. Now, Harry Hawker had a grain, hay and corn store. You know where the senior cits' building is on the Main Road? Well, the next one on the other side of that road there where the – oh, what was there? It would be some council and public works.

29:34

Anyway, Harry Hawker had a grain, hay and corn/grain store there. Quite a big shed. Brick building it was. And it wasn't big enough and that's when he moved and took over the old public hall up the top of Henry Street and it became a hay and grain store up there.

And then I'm not quite sure. Harry was killed at the railway crossing out west. Was it Deer Park? It might have been out there or somewhere. Anyway, I'm not quite sure what happened after that and it eventually caught fire and it was burnt. But it was situated on an angle to the road. That was the memory of it. It was the angle of it to the road up there.

So what was the public hall used for?

Public hall?

Yeah.

Various meetings like lodges had their meetings. You had the, you know, different groups, I suppose, apart from lodges. People learning or meeting. People meeting publicly. Public meetings, it was used for.

You mentioned a Christmas Party there?

Yeah, yeah. They used to have parties there. It had a stage and all inside.

Now, how long has your family been connected to the area?

My father tells me that his father told him that he came to Eltham when he was six years old. Now, to be six years old, that makes – he would have moved there in 1853 or thereabouts. He went to school over the creek at – well, in 1856, he went to school over the creek there near where Bunnings is. There was a school over there. I'm not sure the name of it but I think he said he paid threepence or sixpence a week over there. That was my grandfather. That was my grandfather that did that. *[James and Sarah Amelia Orford. Their grave is at Eltham Cemetery]*

So the Orford family has been in Eltham for a long time.

There has been a continuous line since 1853 and I'm the last one on that line. *[1853-2024 – three generations at Eltham cemetery at present]*

33:51

What did your grandfather do?

My grandfather? That I don't know. Well, my memories of him are growing up. He seemed to be home all I can remember. He used to have a big veggie garden but he was – oh yes, he was – he was caretaker of – I'll call it Laughing Waters because Laughing Waters consisted of 350 – about 350 acres out there – and a chap named Gordon Lyon owned it – this is what I was told.

And this Gordon Lyon had gone to the west and was successful over there. And when he came back here, he bought the property, and it was subdivided up. He subdivided it up round about the 1812 or so – '10/'12. Sometime like that.

And that's when William – I'll call him William Irvine – bought two blocks. He wasn't Sir then. He was just William. He was a politician up in the Wimmera country there somewhere, apparently, before he came down here to Melbourne. And grandfather was caretaker of that property. Even Dad said – he said, "There'd be nothing to see a hundred horses out there in the paddock."

Why was it called Laughing Waters?

I don't know. It wasn't called Laughing Waters when we were young. It didn't have a name at all. I think it's something to do with the small, rippling water, I think it is.

Are there any family stories about the district?

I don't know. Like what?

Do you know much about your grandfather's time?

Time? Not really. No. I don't know. I think it was just a normal little town. Not many houses. The hotel was the meeting place, of course. They used to go and meet there.

How much did the area change during your time?

How much did it change?

Yeah.

37:56

In my lifetime, a lot. Well, just imagine – just a few houses. A bit like the population of say Christmas Hills – sparsely populated. Yeah. That was about it. As I say, just a few houses and nothing else, really. You had people that ran cows, cattle. Some had orchards. We had a couple of fairly large orchards either side of us.

So did you see those orchards gradually go? Did the orchards get turned into houses?

It has gone – sub-divided, smaller and smaller. Each block has a house on it these days.

Can you remember any natural disasters like fires or floods?

Fires. Don't talk about fires. We had a few fires out there – 1939 Black Friday. Had fire all around us. Had a hundred men at our place. All you had in those days was a green bush, leaves – pull a branch off a tree that was to put a fire out or a wet sack bag.

We had fires. Fire always came up the river. It spread out. We lost fences and a bit of property but fortunately it never got near the house because it was well cleared around the house. It was a hot day; I can tell you. Our back door more or less faces east and I happened to hear a bit of a roar and I looked out – this was in the afternoon – I looked

out and there's like a valley behind us – just whoosh, and the fire had gone from that treetop to there. Just like whoosh, it was gone.

And then that night, the Cox family – Mr and Mrs Cox had been down to Richmond all day with their daughter and they'd come home by train and the first thing that struck them was all the hundreds of men at Eltham Railway Station.

Anyway, that evening they must have come down, I suppose it would be about eight o'clock or so at night to our place, and they were going home because they just had to go up the road a bit and they were home and they said, "Oh, we'll be alright tonight. The moon's going to come up. There's a big red glow up in the north-east." And it wasn't the moon coming up. It was the red glow of the fires from up Warburton and those places. You can still see it.

Were you scared?

Hmm?

43:22

Were you scared?

No, not really. Not really, because, well, we were cleared. We weren't in trees or anything. I mean, once it goes through the treetops, the following fire is only on the ground. Dad wanted them to burn off below our house. Anyway, there's quite a few men there as I was saying. They lit it and it wouldn't burn.

It had been a very, very bad day. I had a bike, of course, and in those days, we used to repair the tubes, put solution and a patch on, and then I had a little, like a vulcaniser – you put metho in and lit it and it burned; kept it hot to seal the two rubbers together. I didn't need that. All I did is just put solution on and just pressed them together and they were stuck. That's how hot it was.

Was there a fire brigade?

Small. When you say a fire brigade – small, no actual registered fire brigade vehicle. They didn't come till after the war. What happened on that day – we went down Reynolds Road and Morrison's had a gate on the property. So everyone that went out the back stopped. Well, there's only three houses out there. There was Morrisons and

there was Guests and Heath. They were the only three houses out there. So anyway of course, me, sticky nose, I go outside to see who's at the gate. I think it was Bill Walker, a local plumber. He's just gone down the road in his ute with a fire cart behind. Dad came out; I just looked down there. He looked up and said, "Yeah, that's one hell of a fire." And that was Black Friday.

Did you have a telephone at the house?

No. No, we didn't have. Not many did. I think the nearest phone would have been down – Mrs Morrison's down at Irvine's. Yeah, that used to be half a mile away. But that was it in those days. No one had a phone or rarely.

And do you remember getting a television?

Oh yeah. I remember. Dad bought – no sorry, it wasn't a television; it was a radio. You know they had a big console radio? Dad bought that the day war broke out. When he heard the war broke out, he went and bought this radio. What he knew I don't know but that's what he went and did straightaway. So we had radio all through the war.

48:33

Now, I believe that you have been a member of the Historical Society for a long time.

A senior member. Yeah.

Can you tell me a bit about it?

Well, just a life member. I don't know. Retiring age, you know, and my wife Gwen had joined up a bit with the Historical Society. There was only half a dozen members in those days. This is the days before Russell, of course. Anyway, we struggled on. There was Gwen, myself, Sue Law, Mary Regan. We spent a lot of – once 728 was acquired we spent a lot of time setting it all up and getting photos and I was copying them. You know, things to set up a historical society. We spent a lot of time doing that. I guess it should be recorded somewhere where we did.

And what prompted you to get involved?

Hmm?

Why did you decide to get involved in the Historical Society?

I'd always been interested in local history. I hated going to school and learning about English kings and queens and I think a bit of local history I found far more interesting.

Do you think your own family's history prompted you to get involved?

Hmm?

Do you think your own family's history or connection to the area was part of that?

Well, I suppose it could be, yeah. I read a book written by Geoff [*Geoffrey A Sandy*]. Anyway, he lives down here at Watsonia or somewhere down that way. He wrote the history of the St Margaret's Church which went back to 1858. Now, he managed to get a copy of some of the original notes of the meetings and in that, it lists my great-grandfather as doing work for St Margaret's Church of England and apparently, he also attended work and he was supposed to have built the gates at the cemetery. Now, he was a carpenter and the gates down there are metal so I don't think they're the same gates.

53:19

That's your great-grandfather?

My great-grandfather, yeah. My great-grandfather was a carpenter.

And what else do you remember about setting up the Historical Society?

Dressing up?

No, setting it up. Establishing it.

Oh, I suppose I went out with President Harry Gilham at the time. We went out and collected different things like Harry would get onto – he used to liaise with the council and he'd hear there might be a dozen chairs somewhere or other going begging. He'd come home and we'd put the trailer on and we'd go and get them. That's how we started. We'd go around. We even went as far as Yan Yean to pick up furniture and whatnot.

Did you have meetings?

Did we have –

Meetings.

Meetings. Oh yeah. Of course they're not on a regular footing now, but yeah.

Was there a library?

The Eltham one or ours?

55:26

Well firstly, was there a council-run library?

There was the council library down at the – oh –

The municipal buildings?

Where the community – but we had our own library down at 728. That's been – we established that ourselves, what's there.

Is that the Local History Centre?

Local History Centre, yep. It's – 728 is the address. So we call it 728.

Is there anything else that you wanted to talk about today which we haven't covered?

No. It was the hall – the old hall that I was more concerned with. I can't recall anyone ever talking or writing anything about it.

This is the public hall?

Yeah, the first public hall I can recall up in Henry Street.

Did you say it was called the Rechabite Hall?

Yeah, I believe so. Now, who owned it, I'm not sure but if it's called a Rechabite Hall I presume it was a methodist-owned property, but as I say it was used by the public for all sorts of things.

So perhaps before we finish, I wanted to ask you what's so special about Eltham to you?

Well, to me it is because I was born there, I've grown up here and apart from living down at Rosanna for five years, I've lived here all my life. It just seems to me to be, well, why go anywhere else? Yeah, it just feels, I suppose, the right part of life. It's been a good place to live. As I say, growing up as a child I had freedom, well, freedom to go. Parents still had to watch you because of snakes and whatnot in the area. We used to have to kill two or three snakes a year out there; they still kept coming.

Well, thank you, Doug. It's been lovely to hear your memories. Would you be happy if I stopped the recording?

Whenever you're ready.

59:42

End of Interview