
NILLUMBIK SHIRE COUNCIL
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Interview: Russell Yeoman

Date: Monday 25 March 2024

Place of Interview: Russell's home in Eltham

Interviewer: Katherine Sheedy; Way Back When Consulting Historians

Time (min:sec)

00:20

Thank you very much, Russell, for agreeing to speak with me, today. Can we start with you introducing yourself.

Yes, well, I'm Russell Yeoman, as you said. I'm Society Secretary of the Eltham District Historical Society, formerly the Shire of Eltham Historical Society. I many years ago worked for the Shire of Eltham and briefly for the Shire of Nillumbik and I've been in Eltham for nearly 60 years.

That's a perfect introduction. Perhaps could you tell me where and when you were born.

I was born in Geelong in 1938 and lived in Geelong for the first 20 years of my life.

Tell me about your family.

Well, mother and father, obviously. My father worked for the State Electricity Commission for all his working life. We weren't a very well-to-do family – we didn't have a car, but we sort of got around a fair bit on trains and buses and things.

There were four children. I was the oldest. My brother Laurie, he was just a year and a half younger than me, and then Chris who had Downs Syndrome came along in 1945, I think she was; and then it was another five years before the youngest one, Rod, arrived. He was born then. He eventually went to England to live and died of mesothelioma – asbestos poisoning – that he got when he was a university student working at the Alcoa mine in Anglesea.

My goodness. That's very tragic.

Yes, it is. It was sort of, what, 40 years later that he found out he had that. Yeah, that was a terrible time.

It would have been, I can imagine. How would you describe your childhood?

Pretty happy. Just went to primary school, obviously, close to home and the Geelong High School. And then Gordon Technical College which is not really childhood. That's sort of getting to more to nearly adult. Yeah, we had a pretty good life. Lots of relatives that we went and stayed with and who came to our place. So, yeah, I think we were pretty happy.

3:50

Tell me what brought you to Eltham. Would that be the next part of the story?

Well, not quite. I did an engineering course at Gordon Technical College and then came to Melbourne to find work because we didn't reckon there was much opportunity in Geelong. So, I worked first of all for the Melbourne Metropolitan Board of Works for a couple of years and then Melbourne City Council for a couple of years and moved around a fair bit at various rental properties, sometimes self-contained, sometimes boarding.

And then in 1964 I applied for a job at Eltham and got it. At that time, I was living in Moonee Ponds. I shared a flat with my brother Laurie and for the first three months drove every day from Moonee Ponds to Eltham.

And then we got married and after then I had to take leave sort of three months after I started the job but that was the condition of starting. And then we got a council house when we finished our honeymoon. We came back to a council house and lived in Eltham ever since.

So I might ask what prompted you to go for the job? Was it that you wanted to come and live and work here?

No. I didn't know anything about Eltham. Another engineer who worked at Melbourne City Council – there were two vacant positions, so he was applying for one and he

convinced me that I should apply for the other because he knew the shire engineer at the time. And so we applied for them and then got the job.

And was that a job as a town planner?

No, that was a job as an engineer, so town planning came later. I just sort of drifted into doing town planning work instead of engineering and eventually that became my full-time job.

06:50

What were your initial impressions of Eltham back then?

That it was sort of like a small country town, really, although the suburbs were getting closer and it didn't really feel like a suburb of Melbourne. There was sort of a connection to suburban Melbourne through Montmorency but Lower Plenty generally was fairly wide open and there was no connection across the river to Templestowe. So, it sort of felt a bit isolated actually and obviously very generally tree-covered rather than – the bush was a bit further out. Mostly Eltham was houses set in tree cover.

And did that appeal to you immediately?

Not really. I sort of grew more into it, I think. I mean, at that time engineers sort of didn't think that much of trees. You know, trees were nice to have but if they got in the road of engineering works, then they had to go. So yeah, that was really my attitude then but it changed quite considerably.

You mentioned that you moved into a council house – was that provided as part of the job?

Yes, just incidentally as part of the job. I had to pay rent but it was pretty low rent and it was a house that the council had bought the land for parkland and it just happened to have a house on it and there were various other houses that staff members had for the same reasons. The council at that time was buying up quite a bit of land as parkland and for the Eltham Shopping Centre and really, the first house was just behind the shops but that only lasted a couple of months until we got the house in the rural area along the Diamond Creek.

Was that also a council-owned house?

Yeah, that's right. It was a very old farmhouse, actually. Primitive.

How long did you live there?

About four years. So, our daughter was born there but it really sort of became a bit hard to manage with her there so we bought a house after four years.

And where was that house?

That house was in Bridge Street, which is sort of the main street from Eltham to Greensborough, but on the other side of Main Road from where it becomes a main road.

10:53

Just incidentally, not immediately but after a few years, there was a tile business set up further down Bridge Street called Yeomans Tiles and we got numerous phone calls from people who wouldn't believe we weren't Yeomans Tiles.

That really was a coincidence?

Yeah, it was.

Can you describe to me Eltham in those days – we're talking from the mid-sixties – and perhaps reflect a bit on the changes that you've seen?

Yes, well certainly there have been very significant changes. We came really just at the start of large-scale residential development. There were just a few residential subdivisions going on at the time we came, but then shortly after really the beginning of the seventies, the Woodridge Estate which is sort of the eastern part of present-day Eltham, started and there were, I think, a thousand residential lots that were done in stages. And it continued out to the boundaries of the residential zones.

And at that time the council had great plans for the Eltham Shopping Centre. They wanted to turn the shops around from facing Main Road so that they faced the rear. That took very many years to happen but eventually it has happened.

There are still shops facing Main Road but a lot of them face the rear and then supermarkets have been built sort of with parking areas at the back. So, it's now called

a Major Activity Centre which it certainly wasn't. It was like a little country town shopping centre when we came here.

And other changes – there have been major changes to parkland along the Diamond Creek. There's now almost continuous parkland right through Eltham and extending down to the Yarra River, whereas when we came it was just the council gradually buying land as it became available.

13:58

And there have been some very interesting major buildings built: the Eltham Library which has won awards for its design and that was built in 1994; and the Eltham Community Centre, another mudbrick building, was built in 19 – I can't remember – about 1980. So, they're quite significant buildings for Eltham.

When you talk about council buying land, was that from private owners?

Yes, and it was mainly semi-rural land. There were small farms along the Diamond Creek and that's mainly what council bought. They did buy some land behind the shopping centre to establish parking areas and that was residential properties.

Would you describe that as a concerted effort to purchase land?

I think it was, yes. I'm not sure about the funding for it. I think some of it came from government funding but really at that time I wasn't that concerned about that side of it.

And the major buildings that you mentioned, are they both council-owned buildings?

The community centre and the library are council-owned buildings and also there is the Eltham Leisure Centre – another significant building along that parkland spine along the creek.

Do you think you're particularly aware of these types of developments – major buildings – because of your role with the shire? Do you think other residents might not note these as important milestones? What's your thoughts?

No, I think they were probably quite significant buildings through Eltham and probably would be taken notice of by other residents.

Tell me about your role. You started as an engineer and gradually moved into town planning?

Yes, that's right. Initially I was designing roads, mainly – roads and drains. But as a town planner, dealing with what's called statutory planning which is dealing with planning applications for various developments, some residential developments and some commercial and industrial type developments. Yeah, eventually I got to be manager of statutory planning with a staff of – I can't remember how many we finished up with – about five statutory planners.

17:46

And we were working with a director of planning – planning and parks actually – so he was the senior part of the department. And there were managers of statutory planning, which was me, and strategic planning, which is more sort of forward planning.

So, in that role, did you have quite an ability to influence decisions about the way Eltham was developing?

Yes and no. For planning applications, we made recommendations to the council's planning committee, which then at times went from the planning committee to the full council although at later stages the planning committee had delegated authority to actually make decisions on behalf of the council. And so the recommendations that we made were sometimes followed but not always followed. They often made their own decisions from a political basis but we – I and the director – attended planning committee meetings so we had a chance to argue for the recommendations that we made, sometimes vigorously and sometimes we got shot down by the council.

And you mentioned there was another area – the more strategic planning.

Yes.

So did you work together?

We did. Any applications for development that we got that we thought had a strategic basis, we would refer to the strategic planners to give their recommendations and we'd refer them to other departments of the council as well for their comments before we made the recommendation to council.

Would these be things such as subdivisions of large pieces of land into smaller parcels of land?

Yes, that was part of it. Really, the biggest ones were just before my time. Woodridge Estate was largely decided on before I got a chance to have a go at it. But there were some other fairly large subdivisions and lots of smaller ones that we dealt with at the time.

21:09

What about things like infrastructure? Were you involved with that?

Not that much. The things like water supply and sewerage we had to refer – subdivision applications and some larger development applications we had to refer to the Board of Works and we also had to refer them to the State Electricity Commission before Jeff Kennett dissolved it. So we really had to rely on their recommendations for those sort of things.

So you were with the shire for around 30 years – is that right?

Yes, just before the – just before municipal restructuring, they gave me a very nice thirtieth anniversary gathering and present.

And did you reach retirement age and that's why you left?

No. I left after it became Nillumbik. My job was made redundant and I applied for it but not very enthusiastically, and didn't get it, and after that I resigned and took up various temporary jobs really for the next – how long – about 15 years.

Was it a satisfying career?

Yes, I liked it and we had a very good department. Very friendly and easy-going which mightn't have suited some later department heads. But yes, I quite enjoyed the planning much more than engineering, actually. It gave an opportunity to get out to all parts of the shire which I really liked.

Did you have anything to do with any other local government areas and do you think Eltham was different in any way?

Eltham thought it was different. I didn't really have much to do with other local government areas except for the meetings like the Local Government Planners' Association where we met with planners from other councils. But really, that was not so often and no, not much directly to do with other councils as such.

Do you think that Eltham faced any unique challenges?

Yes, Eltham was trying to, sort of particularly sometime after I started, really trying to maintain its environment and character, which was thought to have a special character, but often there were government-type initiatives that had a blanket approach for the metropolitan area which many Eltham people thought were not appropriate.

26:02

How would you balance that?

It was pretty hard to balance. As an example, this area here, this hill that we're on, is pretty close to the Eltham Station and sort of would fit within guidelines – metropolitan guidelines for higher density development. But it really does have its own character once you get over the bridge, this side of the shopping centre. It's got a treed, low-density character and buildings of some character. And so even since I've left the council I've been involved with a number of cases where we tried to resist development, sometimes successfully, sometimes not, but overall, fairly successful.

And is the shire sympathetic to those kinds of views?

Yes, mainly, I think. It's a bit hard to know with changes of council planning staff, just how sympathetic they are at times. But generally, they've supported residents who are objecting to development applications on a local character basis.

How successful do you feel, I guess, the area has been able to be in retaining some of that character?

Moderately successful. Well, successful in patches. Some places it's – where the character is quite obvious then generally the success rate has been fairly good. There are some areas where you'd say it's just another suburb.

Speaking generally about the area – the suburb of Eltham – can you describe some of the, I guess, main features and perhaps some change over time? I'm thinking about businesses and shops, schools, police station, that kind of thing.

Yes, well certainly the shopping centre is significantly changed from when we came here. Even there were some remnants of – the earliest Eltham Shopping Centre was more south of the present shopping centre and there were some remnants of that still here when we came here. But there are still a few odd shops there. But the shopping centre itself is quite different to when we first came here and much larger and spread further back from the main road and with major supermarkets that weren't here when we first came here.

30:04

As far as schools are concerned, the schools have got much larger and there is one significant school that wasn't here when we first came here. It's Catholic Ladies College just down the hill from here. The Eltham High School which was the higher elementary school has probably quadrupled in size since we came here. And the other schools – Eltham Primary School and Eltham East – have got much larger to cope with the rising population.

There is a private church school in the eastern end of Eltham, and Eltham College which is at Research, a few kilometres up the road, that is now a major private college with a campus in the city. And sort of large sporting fields adjacent to the college so it really is a major development. What else was there that you mentioned?

Firstly, you mentioned population. So that has grown obviously.

Yeah, yeah. Don't ask me what it is.

But significant.

Yeah, yeah.

Do you feel that? Does it feel like a busier place?

Well, certainly, the shopping centre does. It can become quite busy at peak times. Traffic is pretty constant along Main Road but doesn't – it's very hard to find sort of shortcuts

so the traffic is generally confined to the main road and is pretty busy particularly at peak times.

Has that had a negative impact for residents, do you think?

Yes, but generally residents put up with it. In fact, plans to widen or duplicate the main road in the past have been resisted. There is a section of duplicated road from just south of the shopping centre through the shopping centre. But there is road-widening area provided along the main road that has never happened and occasionally there are moves for improved roads that are resisted by residents.

33:47

One recent case was Eltham North Bridge over the Diamond Creek which was a little old timber bridge. Vic Roads or Road Construction Authority (whatever they were called at the time) had duplicated – not duplicated – reconstructed as a large concrete bridge somewhat overdone but there was quite significant community resistance to, that failed.

What about churches in the area?

There's one very significant church, St Margaret's, that dates from 1860, that is on the state heritage register. There have not been, I don't think too many cases of new churches being established. They're – sort of all the major religions have their own church and some of them quite old. The Uniting Church, formerly the Methodist church, dates from the 1880s, I think. There still is an Eltham Presbyterian church despite most presbyterian churches amalgamating with other churches to form the Uniting Church. Eltham Baptist Church is a fairly recent innovation and is quite popular, I believe, never having been there. I can't think about anything else about churches.

That's okay. Does Eltham attract a different type of person to come and live here?

Overall, probably not in the newer residential areas. They're probably just ordinary people who want to live in the suburbs. But there's a small cohort of people who actively seek out areas like this where there are trees and mudbrick houses and generally Eltham character.

And what about the artistic side of things. Is that still a drawcard?

It is, yes. Yeah, Montsalvat is very popular. It attracts tourists as well as local residents and sort of generally Eltham is seen as having an artistic community. There is artist open studios a couple of times a year where studios in Eltham and throughout the shire are open to the public but there isn't a decent art gallery and there should be. Montsalvat has its own galleries for various exhibitions but there's no public art gallery and a lot of people are urging that there should be one.

Now, a slight change of topic. I understand that while you worked for the shire, you were involved in the publication of the history of the area. Can you tell me about that?

38:16

Yes, well that was *Pioneers & Painters* which was produced for the centenary of the shire. The shire changed from a road board to a shire in 1871. So that book was published in 1971, written by Alan Marshall who was a prominent author, internationally famous, and he lived in Eltham at the time.

I was on the committee as the representative of the Historical Society. The committee used to meet in Alan Marshall's little bungalow at the back of his sister's house. We put out a call for information and things like photographs, which was fairly successful. But the book is a series of excerpts about the history of Eltham rather than a comprehensive history, but it was widely reviewed as being quite a significant publication. There's a lot of artwork in it as well as historical stuff.

And so that was the shire's idea that they commissioned the history?

Yeah, the shire council, you know, took the initiative there with help from the Historical Society but it was the council's idea. There were council representatives on the committee, chaired by Charis Pelling who was also president of the Historical Society as well as being a councillor.

Well, that seems a very neat segue perhaps into the Historical Society.

Yes, well again, Charis Pelling (better spell Charis with a C-H) – she called a public meeting in 1967 with the idea of forming a historical society which was called the Shire of Eltham Historical Society. It wasn't just Eltham. It was meant to be for the whole shire which extended as far as Kinglake at the time.

So that public meeting obviously resolved to form a society but it was quite a few months before there was an actual meeting of the society, but it was in late 1967. And I was a member; I attended the first meeting, so I became a foundation member and there aren't many of us left.

That was 1967. So the society was pretty young when *Pioneers & Painters* was produced. I think there's probably a need for a more comprehensive history to be written but I'm not sure that it's ever going to be. So, the society sort of started off fairly slowly and gradually has grown over the years.

When the municipal restructuring occurred, there wasn't any Shire of Eltham anymore so we couldn't be the Shire of Eltham Historical Society and became Eltham District Historical Society because by then there were separate little historical societies that had sprung up in other parts of the shire. I think there's nine altogether now.

43:32

Our area of main interest extends from Lower Plenty and Montmorency which are now parts of Banyule, not Nillumbik, and out to Kangaroo Ground that includes Eltham, Research, Eltham North. And there is some overlap with other historical societies now. Greensborough have taken interest in Lower Plenty and Montmorency and there's the Andrew Ross Museum which we actually helped establish but now sort of operates as Kangaroo Ground historical interest. So, we overlap with them.

The society has now grown to around about a hundred members. It's changed a bit over the years concentrating much more on local history now. In earlier days we sort of had more of a general interest in history and had excursions to other areas. But excursions now are really more involved with local history than other areas.

And does the membership stay fairly constant or does it change?

It's been gradually growing in recent years but seems to have plateaued a bit to around about a hundred.

And is it a range of ages, people involved?

Mostly older people. Very few younger people. We used to have a category of membership called 'student membership' but very few student members. So, it is generally older people.

But it sounds like there is quite a lot of interest in history in the area.

Yes. Yeah, there is.

Tell me about the Local History Centre.

The Local History Centre is the former Eltham Police residence. It's next door to the Eltham Courthouse, now not operating as a courthouse. And so together they form what is called the Eltham Justice Precinct. There are only a few left in Victoria where you've got a courthouse, police residence and other buildings such as lockups left.

47:05

After Nillumbik Council came into existence, we were offered tenancy of the police residence. It's actually a government-owned building but managed by the council and so it was offered to our president at the time. And we gratefully accepted it and have improved it and really, as far as record storage is concerned, it's now a bit overflowing whereas once upon a time records used to be mainly kept in my house. It no way could cope with it at present. So, it is mainly for record storage rather than as an artefact museum.

We don't collect artefacts but there is a huge range of local records which have been accumulated over many years, a lot of them coming from the Shire of Eltham as at the time of municipal restructure. A lot of them were being thrown out and I rescued them and there have been many records donated by local people even though there was a concentrated effort in 1971 to get local records and photos and things that the amount we got at the time is multiplied many times with what we've got now.

So there's a focus on retaining records?

Yes, very much.

And do you get outsiders coming to use your collection?

No, we find that very hard to do. We are gradually, over many years, digitising the records, particularly photos, but that's by no means complete but there are still paper records, not indexed, and it would be very hard for outsiders to come and go through

them. So mainly we deal with enquiries and provide information to outside people who want information about their families or local history or whatever.

And the society appears to be active in, I guess, presenting the history of the area certainly through the website.

Yes, very active. One particular member, Peter Pidgeon, has been particularly active in website, social media and digitisation of records.

You started, I believe, as assistant secretary but then tell me what role you moved into.

I might have been assistant secretary. I don't remember that.

41:05

Yeah, but it was only a few years after the society started that I volunteered to become secretary and haven't been able to get rid of it since. So now, because of my eyesight I can't do a lot of the things that a secretary normally would do, particularly taking minutes. I just can't sort of write legibly so other people do that but I'm still nominally secretary.

That is a whopping record.

Oh.

I understand in 2019, that was 50 years in the position which I think means this year is 55 years.

Nine and five, fourteen. Yes.

That's a huge commitment.

I have volunteered to step down every year but nobody steps up to take the position.

Is it an onerous role?

Not anymore, it's not. It used to be. I used to do just about everything; organise meetings, write letters, organise excursions. Yeah, but it's not that onerous anymore because other people do a lot more.

Still, it's a very significant commitment over a very long time.

Yes, well, it has been. I'm trying to taper it off.

Has it given you a lot of satisfaction?

I guess so. I don't sort of think that much in the past. It's just getting on with the job. I probably tended to do as little as possible to keep the place running.

What do you see as the key role or roles of the historical society?

Well, certainly, preserving local history, mainly in the form of historical records, but also providing an interest to members who are interested in local historical stories or meetings with speakers or slide shows or whatever about local history.

54:13

And I suppose also our historical walks which we tend to call excursions, not like the older excursions which were bus trips, but that's something I still do. But I'm trying to back out of that a bit because I can't walk as far as I used to. They're probably the three main things that we do.

And are the people coming through – do you feel the society's in good hands?

Yes, it is in very good hands at the moment. The committee is quite active, particularly the President Jim Connor who does exception work and Peter Pidgeon doing the work with the digitising and social media etcetera and other members of the committee who are very active. Yeah, it's in good hands at present.

That must be reassuring.

Yes, yes it is.

Now that is largely the topics that I wanted to cover. Is there anything you'd like to talk about today which we haven't touched on?

No, I think that's been a fairly wide-ranging discussion. I don't think so.

Perhaps in closing then, I'd like to ask – and you have already touched on this – what to you is unique about Eltham?

Well, the special character that includes the topography – hilly topography – vegetation cover, particularly tree cover and some pockets of very interesting architecture – possibly not always architecture but some of it such as this house – owner built – and the artistic reputation of Eltham, I guess. So yeah, all of that combines to make it a special place.

It's certainly kept you here for 60 years.

Yes, it has.

Well, if you're happy, are you okay if I stop the recording then?

Yeah, yeah, sure.

Thank you so much, Russell. That's been fascinating.

57:29

End of Interview