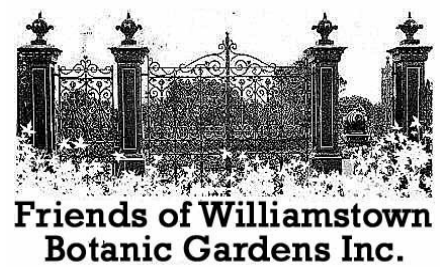


2014.005

**Williamstown Botanic Gardens
Oral History Transcript**

Anne Cocks

27th February 2014



This is an interview with Anne Cocks on behalf of the Friends of Williamstown Botanic Gardens. It is one of a planned series to document personal memories and experiences of the Gardens.

Anne's family migrated from Holland in 1952 when she was three years old. The family lived in Lyons Street for a short while before moving to Altona. Her parents, Kees and Betts Huisman bought the Old Royal Hotel in Nelson Place, which was a boarding house for men in 1958. They stayed there until 1971 when they sold it.

The date of the interview is 27th February 2014 and the interviewer is Lindy Wallace.

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- AC My name is Anne Cocks and I was born in Holland in 1949.
- LW Anne, you recently donated some photos from the 1950s of your family in the Gardens. Can we just have a chat about your memories of the Gardens, what you did there, what you remember?
- AC Yes, well I remember going there with my parents and walking through and the big tall palms. It was always green and beautiful and the flowers were there. It was very stately, different from the gardens you passed in the street, so an honour really to go there. I didn't realise how beautiful they were until you grow up and get out into the world a bit. You liken them to Melbourne's Botanic Gardens really.
- LW Did you go there often as a young person?
- AC Yes, on Sunday afternoons we would have gone there. There's one photo of me with my parents and we enjoyed those walks. My sister also went there with her teenage friends, walking through, there's a photo of that. The statue always seemed very impressive so my Mum took a photo of that and sent it back to Holland
- LW On a Sunday afternoon, did they ever have bands or music playing or anything?
- AC Not that I can recall
- LW Did you ever take picnics to the Gardens?
- AC Because we didn't live so far from there we would have had most of our meals at home, we didn't do picnics
- LW Do you remember the cannons being in the Gardens?
- AC I don't but I know that they're now at the Fort and two of them are on Nelson Place.
- LW So you don't remember playing on the cannons?
- AC No.
- LW What about the pond that's in the Gardens, what memories do you have?
- AC Yes, that was always there. It's been done up so much when I saw it last week. Yes, it was there, I suppose it had fish in it. I can remember in later years going and seeing the aviary
- LW Can you tell me a little bit more about what you remember?
- AC Well, I played tennis in Williamstown from the age of 11, so every Saturday I'd be somewhere for junior tennis and somewhere for senior tennis and often it was at the

Esplanade. Then I'd walk home through the Gardens and you'd see the aviary and have a look at the trees or you'd walk home with friends. That was a nice thing to do with the sea breeze behind you. So that was playing tennis and later on I met Ian and we walked through the Gardens together and we had our wedding photos taken there.

LW Lovely. What memories do you have of having your photos taken there?

3.47

AC Just that it was a lovely time in your life because it was familiar and the Gardens were always there so everyone mainly had their photos taken there because you couldn't get anywhere nicer in Williamstown or the surrounds to get married. We got married at the church and drove to the – had photos done there and took quite a while to get them all done.

LW What church did you get married in?

AC St Andrews in Cecil Street, Williamstown

LW Do you remember – there used to be a Curator who lived on the grounds around that time, in the 1950s – there was a federation style house that was set quite close to the pond. Do you remember that at all?

AC No, that doesn't come to mind

LW Did you ever see the gardener working in the Gardens?

AC Not that I can recall

LW From my readings and a few photos that we have, also round about the fifties, they had horses that they used to use. You don't remember that at all?

AC Inside the Gardens?

LW They were work horses for the Council as well, because it was Williamstown Council then. Apparently they used to graze on the Fearon reserve. Do you remember seeing that?

AC I remember the Fearon Reserve because our high school at Williamstown, we had a lot of sport there but I can't recall the horses

LW That's interesting because I'm not terribly sure when the horses went.

AC I know milk used to be delivered with horse and cart – and bread

LW Is there anything else about the Gardens? Do you remember any particular flowers or plants that appealed to you, or do you remember the fencing and the gates in the Gardens?

AC Yes, and the part that you'd walk to from the tennis court, the section that wasn't cultured garden. There were trees and then you'd come into the Gardens from there so it suddenly transformed into another type of garden. Flowers, I can just remember – are they called Calla Lilies – there's a section where they have all those bright coloured lilies

LW You were telling me earlier that your family migrated from Holland to Australia

AC Yes, that's right, in 1952.

LW Can you tell me a little more about that?

6.26

AC We came over on the boat, it took six weeks. There were my parents in their forties, my brothers were 18, 14, 16 and myself. I was three. We settled in Lyons Street for a little while and had a house built in Altona, in Nellie Street, which is now Civic Parade and then we moved to the Old Royal in Williamstown, on Nelson Place in 1958. I was nine years old then so it was a very different life style coming from a small family home to live in this three story building with twenty-four men that were there at time and we had a cook and a house cleaner. The men, once they discovered we were migrants, twelve of them departed and we were left with twelve. So that was a surprise and a disappointment so my Dad decided that he would go back – he used to do drains from Mr Nordini, who was also a Dutch man, so my Dad went back to his day job and my Mum ran the boarding house. But soon the clientele because we provided very good food and service and then we had forty boarders and a waiting list. We had a cook that came from two until seven at night and a house cleaner that came from nine until two. We changed the sheets every week and fed them beautiful three course meals at night; soup, dinner and sweets every night. For lunch if they worked at the dock yards or the Harbour Trust, they would come home at lunch time and have a hot meal. The ones who worked at the railways or the meatworks or elsewhere, they would get six slices of bread as a sandwich. For breakfast every morning they had cereal and bacon and eggs. Five pound twelve I think we charged them per week. My Mum alswys said, they're manual workers and need to have good solid meals. We had a dining room with ten tables, four per table. My Father served the meal every night, he'd come home and showered. It was six o'clock closing in those times so the men were seated just after six o'clock. It's a very memorable time, I remember it well.

LW Can we just step back a bit with your parents? Can we have your parents' names?

9.16

AC Kees and Bets Huisman

LW Would you spell their Christian names please?

AC K E E S and B E T S but my mum was always referred to as Mumma by the boarders. I think she reminded them of their Mums. Mind you they were of all ages, from apprenticeship ages to sixty-five and my Dad was called Con, it was easier.

LW How lovely. They bought the Royal in 1958, how long did they have that for?

AC Until 1971.

LW It was sold in 1971?

AC Yes

LW Do you know who bought it and what happened to it after you sold it?

AC Yes, another couple bought it but they only had it two years, they couldn't make a success of it. It's now owned by the Housing Commission I believe as a boarding house for males.

LW Now? Is it?

AC Yes.

LW Can you remember any of the men who lived there? Does anyone stand out in particular?

AC Yes, there was Little Phil, who used to like a drink too many. There was Jack, who was a reformed alcoholic. He said when he saw pink elephants dancing, he decided he needed help. He was one of the loveliest helpful men we could have. Some were bank workers, others were from Poland and Ireland – Irish Bill – he used to sing all the time – Irish songs and get tears in his eyes. Some were from Tassie. There was one man, he was a very helpful man and later we found that he was so helpful he helped himself to the washing machine and the blankets and the bedding and took off and the police were after him. (laughs)

LW Oh dear – anyone else?

AC George Charles, he was a nice man. He had two sons that went to my school so they used to come to see their dad from time to time – it was a broken family but fortunately dad lived nearby and they could see their dad.

Another time I was about eleven and playing cricket in the long corridor of the boarding house and there was an electrical storm outside and lightning and thunder and an almighty crash. We went outside to see what happened. The Old Royal had a point at the top of the building and that had been struck and tumbled onto the footpath and gouged a great bit of the bitumen out. So later the top of that building was flattened so it was no longer a danger to anybody. I remember that well.

LW My goodness gracious. Anne, you stayed there until you were twenty-one, when you married. And your parents then managed – did you have to help them?

12.33

AC Yes, every night after school I'd butter five loaves of bread for their lunches and make them with stras and tomato or jam. They had three layers of double – and pack them. We had no dishwasher so I helped wash the dishes. Sometimes we got help in but we had, as I said, soup plates, dinner plates, bread and butter plates and dessert plates and knives and forks to accompany all of that so we were constantly washing from six to seven-thirty and putting it away. You just accepted that, it was just a moving – yeh – my Dad serving, my Mum dishing up with the help of the cook and then she'd go home at seven and we'd have our own dinner after that sitting down with the three of us. The forty boarders were by then watching television. We had one television and that was in their dining room. My parents said that we didn't need one until I'd finished studying. That was a good idea on reflection.

Every Wednesday night they had midweek movies so the boys watched those

LW On the TV?

AC Yes. That was the only time there was a movie of any length on. Mitch Miller was on Thursday night and we all went in and sat and listened to Mitch Miller and that was wonderful.

LW So you lived in the boarding house?

AC We did. There was a big room that would have been a recreation room in the olden days so my parents had a small wall built up so I could have a small bedroom in that. They had their bed in there, the lounge suite was there and an office desk for my Mum to do the work, because she was the one who looked after the administration – the pay packet that came in. So it was all one big room really.

The boarders had their own rooms. In those days you could have four to a room. They were very big rooms and high ceilings – or two to a room. They had a block of showers. We had to have a fire escape built when we came so that had been done. As I said the sheets were changed once a week. I remember helping the house cleaner and you drop the sheets from the third storey right down smack to the bottom storey – that was fun as a child.

LW So your brothers and sister didn't live at the boarding house?

15.14

AC The older brother did for a while. He helped us select the boarding house as a business. But he moved on to other places – he ended up going to America. My sister and her husband came to live with us for a while and two of her children were born in the boarding house. The boarders were so respectful – if they did happen to swear they'd say 'Oh I'm so sorry' if I walked past and with little Sharon who was there. She'd walk around with little bells on her slippers so we knew where she was. They stayed in the front room and then they'd put her to sleep and if she woke up and cried the boarders could hear her and would come down and tell us the baby was crying. But there was never any problems, there was no drugs. As I said they liked to drink sometimes but if they got a bit noisy Dad put them upstairs to bed. Or if they were belligerent he would ask them to leave and they couldn't come back. It was very nice.

Gus and Betty, my sister and her husband, they lived there for about three years so they helped us. Every Sunday night we would have scones, jam and cream along with a salad. Gus used to say to my Mum 'my scones are higher than yours so each week we'd have different scones. Then on Friday night we would have fish for the Catholics and steak for the others. That was very important in those days because they took it seriously especially the ones from Ireland and other Catholics. So we were able to offer that to them and they were both delicious – and home-made chips to go with them, and salad.

LW So your house at Altona then?

17.12

AC We built a three bedroom house and it was the first brick house in Nellie Street, which is now called Civic Parade. So there were very few houses, no footpaths, the roads were muddy and they had ditches. I remember falling in one of the ditches and blood suckers and everything yucky.

My sister and brothers used to work in the city so they'd catch the train. You'd walk half an hour to Altona Station in your muddy shoes then you'd leave your muddy shoes on the platform at the station, put nice shoes on to go to the city in and when they came back at the end of the day they would collect their shoes. Everybody did this and no-one took each other's shoes. Then they'd walk home again because there was no bus and as I said the roads were muddy. Now there are nature strips and trees.

LW Did your parents keep the house when they bought the boarding house?

AC No, they sold it and one brother returned to Holland. My sister later ended up settling in Mt Evelyn. But for many years my parents ran that boarding house, just the two of them so there never any breaks. They worked very hard.

In 1964 my mother went to Holland for three months and she organised for my sister and her husband to come. That was an almighty step but it was twelve years since she'd been home and she felt she could manage that. The following year my Dad did and my sister came back with her little children again – and her husband – and they helped out. I was by then fifteen so I could help a lot more. That was the only time they really took holidays.

LW That is just an amazing story. So you went to school at Willie Primary School?

AC Yes, 1183, and then Williamstown High School and that's where I met Ian. Yes they're good memories.

LW Ian who you married, were you in the same year at high school?

AC No, he was a year ahead.

LW They were local people. Can you tell me a little bit about Ian and his family?

AC Ian came from a lovely family, Alma and Eddie Cocks and they lived at 34 Schutt Street, Newport. They had a little supermarket at 27 Schutt Street, Newport. All the boys worked in the shop after school from time to time. Alma worked in the shop three days a week and Eddie ran the shop. His father ran it before him. His father came into the house where he grew up, he was born in the house and when his mother died, his father asked whether they'd come and live with him. So in 1947 they would have gone to live in 34 Schutt Street and they stayed there. His father was born in the same room that he died in in 2001. He was aged eighty-two when he died. Shortly after that the home had to be sold and Alma went into care.

LW Ian had brothers, did he have sisters?

AC No, he had two brothers, Allan, I was in the same grade with Allan, at high school. Doug was two and a half years older than Ian. Each brother married a girl who went to Williamstown High School, we were all friends then and we're still friends now.

LW That's lovely. After you got married did you remain living in Williamstown or Newport?

AC No. Many of our friends moved to Werribee, Hoppers Crossing was a new estate then but Ian fancied being where the trees were so we moved across to the eastern suburbs and lived in Mitcham. His brother bought a house in Templestowe and the other brother lived in Keilor, where they still both live.

LW Did you come back to Williamstown often?

AC Yes, every fortnight we were here because we had parents in Altona and Williamstown so we'd come to one lot of parents for lunch and the other lot of parents for tea. Ian played cricket at Williamstown since he was a boy. At one stage the father and three sons played cricket for Newport Methodist Cricket Club and Ian would travel across from Mitcham, across to play cricket for a couple of years still. I used to play tennis but at nineteen I gave up tennis much to the disappointment of the coach. He said 'what a pity' and I said 'but I'm going to watch my boyfriend play cricket' (laughs). Because it was such a lovely club and his mother would bring down thermoses with hot water and serve the boys with a cup of tea which they needed – and a Boston bun which she'd cut up and the umpires were allowed to share in this too – every Saturday. (laughs)

LW (laughs) Where did they play?

AC At the Gray Reserve mostly

LW I'm sorry, can you tell me where that is?

AC In Kororoit Creek Road in Altona/Williamstown

LW Do you want to talk any more about your school days?

23.30

AC Yes, they were special and very memorable because I enjoyed my time there. I did a lot of sewing there and I'm still in touch with good friends who went there. I did go back to the school two years ago. I'd done a textile course and I made a piece with my Williamstown High School blazer pocket on it. I called it Leaves of Learning – I cut out little leaves and on the leaves I'd printed all the subjects and the feelings, such as friendship, fun, learning, geography, history, British history, all the things that meant a lot to me. Then underneath it I made a weaving of black and white material to represent the Italians, Scottish tartan to represent the Scots, there were many different nationalities at the school; I was Dutch. I made this quilt up and then I donated it to the high school and it's hanging in the foyer I believe.

LW How absolutely wonderful

AC They asked me to present it at a meeting for the students and the staff and I was able to do that with two friends who went to school with me. That would have been 2008.

LW I've met a couple of people from the school – do you know Iris Whitehurst?

AC Did she used to be Iris Webb?

LW Yes. Very involved with the history of the school with great affection for the school

AC Yes, she was the head prefect I think at one stage. We were always in awe of them (laughs)

LW You had your school sports on Fearon Reserve and you went to the local church – did you go to St Andrews Church or Sunday School?

AC I did for a while. Yes I went to the Sunday School and I was there the other day because it's now an Op Shop, the Sunday School, and they were very nice and friendly in there. Then we went to Newport Methodist Youth Club because Ian was a member of that and we had good friends there.

LW I've seen photos of picnics in the Gardens or on Fearon Reserve. Did you ever have Sunday School picnics there?

26.02

AC Mainly I can remember going to Werribee in the back of a big van, with no chairs or anything. We all just sat there, there must have been forty or fifty of us – it seems like that. We'd have races – yes – that was very nice.

But the Gardens, I do remember my daughter in 2001 left to go to Cambodia to be a volunteer as a prosthetist – they have a lot of land mine victims over there so she went to make new legs and arms, it was something she felt she'd like to do so she went with Australian Volunteers International for a year. As a farewell to her we held that party in the Gardens and the cousins could come from Keilor and from Templestowe and we came

across from Mitcham and we had a nice party for her. I can remember sitting on the lawns and it was a lovely time. That would have been in January, it was summer. That was a really memorable time. At the end of one year she came back.

LW Did you often have family gatherings or picnics in the Gardens?

AC They were always part of the scene

LW You didn't particularly have your picnics there?

AC No no no probably we were down the beach and we would walk home through the Gardens on our way home

LW Do you remember the gates being locked on dusk or were they always open?

AC No, I think they were always open at the time we went through, we wouldn't be going at dark. They were open that I could remember

LW What else would you like to have a chat about – any memories of Williamstown at all

28.32

AC The house that we lived in in Lyons Street was the Presbyterian Manse. There's a little sign on it. It's almost opposite the Town Hall really. We rented half of it. There were my three teenage brothers and sister and my parents and myself in one half and the other half was rented to someone else. That was right near the bowling club it was then and very central to Williamstown. It's a two storey house and it's still there. I often go past it or take a photo. My brothers and sister all went to work in the city so they walked on this lovely pavement and made roads. Williamstown North Station wasn't far away and they came home at night.

Then when the house was ready in Altona and we were to move there they all said shock horror – we like this civilised area where we live with the toilet inside. When we moved to Altona there were no made roads, no footpaths, ditches and a toilet outside, which the dunny man used to come every week and take away the bin and replace it. We had to make a vegie garden. One of my brothers was a carpenter so he built the shed and we managed to buy a car. There were always lots of snakes in Altona. I can remember one crawling on the wire between the house and the shed. Another time one came out of the air vent at the base of the brick house on the grass and when he saw us he slipped back in again. My Mum said 'put a little of saucer of milk out and he'll come and go to the milk' and sure enough he did and my dad chopped his head off. In those days you could kill snakes. We had a coal box out the back yard, they were in there. I went to pick beans for dinner one night and sure enough there was a snake there. We had no back fence for many years and you could see straight through to the Geelong railway line. Now-a-days the estate is fully built up. We did get a back fence but I can remember snakes being strung over the back fence – dead.

LW You said that you lived in Williamstown when you first came from Holland, do you know why your parents chose to live in Williamstown?

31.17

AC Because Mr Nordini, he came to Australia with his wife, Lou and Joan Nordini, they've both since died in the last couple of years. He was a bricklayer but he turned out to be a very good builder and he was building houses. He asked my Dad to come and work for him. My

Dad knew him in Holland and my Dad liked living near the sea because it reminded him a bit of Holland. So that drew us to Williamstown.

LW Would it have felt familiar because it's quite flat?

AC Yes, it's a nice place to ride a bike along – Altona and Williamstown

LW Did Mr Nordini have to sponsor your parents?

AC He did. He had to put his name to the application form because we came as a mature aged family. I was the only child, they were all adults. Australia was keen to get mum and dad with twelve young children and many families came like that. After two years we were accepted. When we came to Australia we rented for a short time in Fitzroy, then Williamstown, then Altona, back to Williamstown. Williamstown is always very dear to my heart, I find myself here each month, coming for a look see or a bike ride.

LW That's a lovely story. Anne, is there anything else you would like to talk about?

AC No, I think we've covered a lot of things

LW On behalf of the Friends of Williamstown Botanic Gardens thank you so much and thank you for lending us the photos

Following a pause the conversation resumed

LW Anne you were just telling me about the Town Hall

33.40

AC Ian's dad was a member of a lodge and once a year they'd have a ladies night. I was sixteen and I bought this lovely long dress, I'd never had a dress like that before, because I came from a Dutch family that didn't really have contacts with lodges and things. Ian came to pick me up and gave me a corsage to wear. We danced and his parents were there, and his brothers and their girlfriends and lots of their family friends were there and it was so special – it was a ball. I'd never experienced anything like that.

LW What lodge did his dad belong to?

AC I can't remember. But the Williamstown Town Hall – it was held there – and it was so special.

LW Did you ever go to other functions at the Town Hall?

AC Last year I went to a quilting bee. We used to have our school speech nights at the Williamstown Town Hall and I remember getting an award there one night. It was the biggest hall I suppose that would accommodate all the children. We had the Drill Hall then and Williamstown High School but that wasn't used for things like that.

LW You would have seen all the work they've been doing on the Town Hall

AC Yes, well you can't always get inside to have a look. I went to a literary week last year. I was able to go and listen to a couple of speakers, Janet Howie was one, so then you could have a little look around the area then.

LW I know you have a luncheon appointment to go so we'd better finish there.

AC Thank you.