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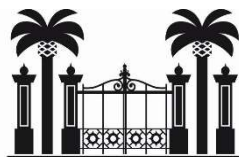
**Williamstown Botanic Gardens
Oral History Transcript**

Michael Wilkins

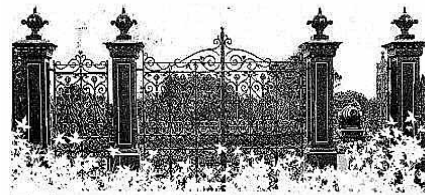
6th October 2014



Hobsons Bay
CITY COUNCIL



**WILLIAMSTOWN
BOTANIC GARDENS**



**Friends of Williamstown
Botanic Gardens Inc.**

This is an interview with Michael Wilkins 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.

Michael first worked in the Gardens for the Municipality of Williamstown in 1987. He was there for eleven years. A few years after the amalgamation of Williamstown and Altona into the City of Hobsons Bay City Council he transferred from the Gardens to other sites within the City. He returned to the Gardens in 2006.

Michael recalls people with whom he worked and horticultural practices over those years.

The date of the interview is 6th October 2014 and the interviewer is Lindy Wallace.

MW Michael Wilkins and I was born in Southampton in England in 1955, May 10th. Mum and Dad immigrated in '68, end of '68, so I was about twelve, turning thirteen when I came here.

LW Did you come to Williamstown?

MW No no, I lived in Geelong. A lot of the people on the boat were coming out to live in high rise apartments and things like that or what they call Nissan huts in North Melbourne and we had a great aunty, my Mum's aunty who lived in Geelong, at a house with a couple of units, we lived in the front unit, yeh in Belmont. We came out in, I think it was sixty-eight, it might have been sixty-nine, I can't remember exactly. Did my schooling in Oberon High School in Belmont and then I joined the CBC Bank in Belmont and worked at the bank through amalgamation with the National up till nineteen eighty-six, no middle eighty-seven.

Then I got a job at the Williamstown Council. They put on two gardeners, or assistant gardeners in eighty-seven. Out of about a hundred applicants, I just applied, I was doing a course at Burnley, doing my horticultural at Burnley whilst I was in the bank, which probably didn't go over that well in the Bank. I could have been an accountancy course or something, so my future was not lying in being a manager. I left the bank and got the job at the Council in November 1987. So this will coming up to twenty-seven years at the Council.

LW What led to this epiphany of changing from banking?

MW I always enjoyed – I used to work in Melbourne office in Collins Street and for the hour's lunch we had, we'd walk around Melbourne Botanic Gardens. We'd march straight across the river, walk around the Gardens and see as much as you could see in that time. I used to always say to the guys 'gee I'd love to be a gardener' – love to work outside – that was basically it, I like to work outside to be honest. I decided to do a course at Burnley.

3.25

I still remember ringing Barry Heath a year before I got the job here, and asking him about the opportunity to work as a gardener, or working at the Council and he asked me what my background was – this is a year before I got the job here – and I said 'oh I work at the bank'. He said, basically, and he won't mind me saying this, he said 'I probably wouldn't waste your time, you work in the bank, you haven't got any qualifications or anything'. So I thought about it for a while and I thought I might go to Burnley and do a course outside of what I'm doing at work. About a year later I saw a couple of jobs come up in the local paper for

gardeners; one was a qualified gardener and one was an assistant gardener. I thought I'd put for the assistant gardener. I came and had the interview here. I still remember rocking up from the bank in my suit. Mum and Dad had said to me it's always good to make a good impression and it was natural gear for me.

So I was sitting outside the office at Osborne Street here in mu suit and all these other blokes are turning up for jobs and I'm thinking blimey I'm out of my comfort zone here. Bob Anderson actually did the interview. Bob Anderson was the assistant superintendent, I can't remember his exact role. Barry Heath was superintendent, Bob was the 2IC. Bob was about my age and I suppose we had a good discussion as far as the interview went as well. I had three daughters in my previous marriage then and I was taking a big punt as I'd already left the bank, didn't have a job, so that was pretty radical. But I had applied, which didn't mean I thought I was going to get it but times were a bit different and I just took a punt. My wife at the time was a teacher and we were prepared to have me as the house dad if necessary for a while. As it turned out, Bob suggested to Barry who came in later on in the interview, that I might be suitable for the job – because I was doing night school off my own bat and had no actual formal qualifications at that stage. They actually put me in as the qualified gardener position because they had someone else they wanted to put in as the assistant I think, basically unqualified. Then for the next two or three years I finished my qualifications at night school. So I did a couple of nights a week for about two and a half years. So it was quite good and I ended up getting the job here, so it was about a week after that I started.

LW Were you living in Williamstown?

MW No, I lived in Hoppers Crossing. I used to drive to work every day to start my job from the Williamstown Depot at the time, which was the Parks depot in Osborne Street, because the cleansing and all the other guys were up at Champion Road, we were sort of two separate entities. The Botanic Gardens actually housed the whole depot for Parks.

LW You were living in Hoppers Crossing, what made you ring Barry Heath here at Williamstown?

MW I'd already made some enquiries at Melbourne for a position and it seemed to be a little bit beyond the position of where I was at at that time. I'd also applied for a gardening job at the zoo but I missed out on that one – I got a nice knock back letter – I wasn't quite right for the position – I was about thirty I think at that stage. I just saw the job come up at Williamstown. In those days you travelling from Hoppers Crossing to Willie – it wasn't like – there wasn't traffic or anything – it was a twenty to twenty-five minute trip at the most so I thought it might be a nice spot to work. Christine, my wife now, has a lot of involvement with Willie but at the time I didn't really have anything to do with Williamstown, I knew where it was but it didn't really come here or anything like that. So I just decided I wanted to do gardening, I wanted to work outside and that was it.

LW Tell me again, what year did you start here?

MW November sixteen, eighty-seven

LW What was it like?

7.58

MW It was a nice, not family type atmosphere, but everyone made you welcome, even though I was from a completely obscure field compared to some. For the first month I was with the

tree crew for a bit of a probationary time. The tree crew was this group of guys that were pretty into it, they got into their work – they were pretty hard workers in lots of ways – not that the others weren't but they had a set routine and I guess you were put into that end to see if you'd sink or swim. They soon worked out that I didn't like heights but that was okay, I didn't have to climb trees

LW Can I just interrupt? That would have been trees for the whole of Williamstown?

MW Yes, street trees. We had our own cherry picker and had a set tree crew – like we do now a little bit but they did every tree in the Municipality of Williamstown in the parks and streets. I had the cherry picker a couple of times doing some street work. My second day here I remember doing Anzac Crescent where Bertie Tee lives, I just remember doing it because I had to go up in the cherry picker – that was horrifying (laughs). That was for a month. In the December – the gardening crew consisted of Shelley Wood, who was at that stage called the Leading Hand I think; Ian McLeod who was the gardener here; there was another guy John, I can't think of his surname, John Wilson it might have been who wanted to come out of the Gardens for a while and Mary Malhallchek was the permanent Western apprentice; so there was four staff. John wanted out for a while and they suggested would I like to work in the gardens for a period of time to feel what it's like to be a gardener. They said to me you'd probably be in there for maybe three years to get you a grounding in gardening and I did eleven years straight so that was really good. That's where I like working and that's why I'm back. Shelley was there, Ian was there – he's passed away now unfortunately – it was a pretty good working group. We had the apprentice but Mary was a bit more than an apprentice in a lots of ways, she's a very good gardener.

LW Can you spell Mary's surname?

MW No, we can look it up

LW So Mary was?

MW Like an apprentice but she was a permanent apprentice with the Gardens, she seemed to work with us all the time. We did have other apprentices that worked in groups and occasionally they'd swap but Mary seemed to spend more time with us from what I remember. The only other difference with how we worked at the stage was that Barry had an idea that he liked us to work in separate areas in the Gardens so it was almost divided up into quarters. Shelley would have a section, overseeing everything else though; Ian would have a section, I had a section and Mary had a section. It didn't always work for us. Shelley seemed to score eighty percent of the annual plantings so you'd help do that. When you're mowing, you're mowing everything. I think Barry liked the idea of us working separately so didn't have the yap (laughs) but I think at the end of the day we managed to get the work done as well, working together. It worked better as a group than it did individually sometimes – it's not like I'm trying to make my area look better than yours. I guess it would stand out a bit if your area started to look really great and mine didn't. That wasn't point to me but Barry would probably say different.

LW Tell my about your gardening practices

12.18

MW It was pretty rigid in so much as you do what the older gardeners used to do. We had a routine and we still do in some ways, it's a bit quaint. We had a lot of annual plantings so

we had seasonal plantings winter and summer. So that's preparation a garden beds, plant the annuals, continually water and weed them, when they're finished you pull them out, redo the beds and plant for the next season. Even back in the day we'd grow our own seedlings for a while. We grew some here in trays near the nursery, there was a glass house. Marigolds, I remember copious amounts of those, we actually grew our own in those early days. When Maarten Hulzebosch – he started off the lakes project at Newport – they had annuals growing up there for us as well. Shelley would have to coordinate with them as to what annuals we'd require. If we couldn't grow them I think we bought them in.

Then you had the routine of mowing the lawns. Because we had mainly buffalo lawns, we used a big Ransome – it was like a ride-on mower but it had a big cylinder at the front – it was about probably three foot wide and you'd ride behind it on a seat. We've probably got pictures of it somewhere. You emptied it with a big – it had like jaws – when you emptied it you lifted the lever back and it would empty out – you'd empty it out on to the pathway off the lawn. The next day you'd come in and pick it all up. It's a bit antiquated but – probably OH&S wouldn't allow you to do it now because the mower itself was a bit heavy to shift – you sort of drove it off a seat and you pushed it with your legs. We should have photos of it somewhere.

So we did the routine of that type of thing. We hand edged everything. We didn't have the steel edging in those days so you had to spade it and by doing that you're always eating into the beds so gradually things get narrower or wider. So the steel edging that went in a few years ago was very good for stopping that. We had the routine of always looking after the Fearon Reserve as far as marking it out for football and lacrosse and we also put the sprinklers out there. We didn't do as much in the Pinetum or the Parker Reserve (as it was known) in those days, someone else came and did that. Our responsibility was the round-about out the front as well.

We didn't have a sprinkler system either so we used to tow hoses out at the start of a week. You'd have about six or seven you'd take out to various parts of the garden and you'd start them off in a day and move them around through the day. You'd gradually work your way back to the depot and by the end of the week hopefully most things got a water. That was that system back in those days – back in the late eighties. We got a little bit of assistance if someone had the small four wheel drive vehicle we had, they'd come in and pick the grass up for us on a Friday morning because it was always dumped in piles.

LW You didn't us that for mulch?

MW They'd take it on the back of the four wheel drive, go up to Newport Lakes where we had areas. We also had a big compost mound here and we put a lot of things through the compost - it was in a big open section there. Once a year we'd got it fumigated and use it as compost.

LW Why did you have to get it fumigated?

MW There was lots of weeds in it. We tried to separate things out but when you're weeding garden beds you've got grass and you got leaves and you got a dandelion and oxalis. If any of that goes in there we're in trouble. In those we used to get it fumigated off – that was in the very early days.

LW You don't collect compost now?

17.04

MW We do a little bit of composting in those bins over there. We don't get as much as we used to. You recycle the bins – you put your material in, then you swap it to the next bin. At certain stages the bin on the right hand side down there has the good soil mix in it. We don't get anywhere as much as we used to.

LW Would you like more compost on the gardens?

MW It would be good, composting great really. It's the time involved. We've got less staff now to do lots of different things. We do have a sprinkler system, which is great from the watering perspective but that needs revamping. Next year we're looking at getting a whole new system put through. That's going to be a costly exercise and fairly disruptive. We have to watch everything that's going on because there can be a bit of destruction when they put in sprinkler systems. The last one went in about eighteen years ago. We've got photos of that going on – that made a big impact on the gardens at the time.

LW In that it had to be all dug up?

MW Yes, there was a lot of digging, there was a lot of weather restrictions. We probably didn't stipulate things enough to keep them in check. The guys were trying to do their job but sometimes we have to set a few ground rules. We're probably more strict now that we would have been. We'll be putting planks on edges so they don't break them when they drive on – trenching through trees routes – trying to avoid things like that. There's different techniques that are used now. You still have to dig holes, you still have to get the sprinkler system in the ground. That'll be something for next time I guess. Back in the day when I started here, we didn't really have a sprinkler system, we had taps around and we plug into all those and put hoses on.

LW Different people I've interviewed talk about the Gardens at different stages of being impressive to stages of being run down

MW I thought when I first started here they looked very lush, very dense with growth – a fair bit of variation – there was one almost native type bed – we gradually got rid of that over the time because the Gardens were set up as an Edwardian type garden so there was plenty of self-grown things growing in the main path beds. That was a summer display of those things that came up every year. They looked fantastic – almost cottagey in a way – full-on dense growth. But a lot of work you clean them out again.

The first couple of just after summers when I first started here, we'd get the beds ready for winter, we trench dug the beds. You'd physically go across each of those beds and dig a trench and take that soil out. You'd do it in blocks and you'd trench dig – you'd turn the blocks of dirt over and as you go you put leaf matter and mulch in the trench and then you'd fill the next one. By the time you get to the end of that bed, you've got a trench dug and you can use the soil that you've dug out from the first bit. There are photos around of it being dug out like that.

That (would have happened) when those palms went in in eighty-seven, because they were there when I started here, they were only three foot tall. You get such a mass of root-ball around palms these days, you can't plant around them. We used to do things like massick (?) around the big palms – massick (?) a trench around them so you grow up to them but we don't do any of that anymore.

21.43

LW Why don't you do that?

MW Too time consuming to physically do it now. The thatch would be such a dense thing, you'd kill yourself doing it. It's not like it's too much hard work but there's too many other things to do. When you think about it – in those days we had three permanent people plus an apprentice. We had a few different jobs to do because we had the Fearon Reserve to look after but we didn't do the Pinetum anywhere near as much. We used to pick up a lot more rubbish than we do now – we do that more in the Gardens – the cleansing guys do the Parker Reserve or the Pinetum for us now – we mow it, we look after it in that way but we don't have to pick up the rubbish.

LW Do you find there's much rubbish?

MW Seasonally. Coming up from now on – daylight saving's kicked in – there'll be more people around. I've spent this morning even just doing rubbish and we had a bit of vandalism – someone had upturned one of the big bin containers so there's rubbish everywhere. I was talking to Ivan Davidson today – he said there was all rubbish in the pond over the weekend – someone's come in to fix that up though – the rubbish bin was in the pond.

LW That's interesting – so the neighbours

MW Yeh there are pretty neighbourhood watch type people. You wouldn't encourage them to get involved in any argy bargy really. Just reporting, it's good. I left here on Friday and it looked really schmick – it was looking lovely. We raked the paths and the grass had been cut and it was sunny and it just looked nice and bright – and you come in on Monday and it just gets trashed – it's a bit disappointing. Summer time's a lot worse really – close to the beach. People don't have to pay for parking in Osborne Street and Gifford Street so nice and easy to park there – walk straight through the Gardens.

LW You worked here from eighty-seven until?

MW I worked here for eleven years – eighty-seven till about ninety-six. I went through the amalgamation time with Altona. Ian and I stayed here, Shelley had left. Ian retired and unfortunately passed away. For the last few months that I was here, I was here a lot on my own really – had a few people for a period of a couple of months from the yard that had come down to work here

LW Can I just interrupt? Barry Heath was your superintendent when you first started, when did he leave?

MW He would have left about the amalgamation time

LW So he wasn't replaced?

MW Ian Carmen (?) was the superintendent at Altona and he basically took on this role

Interview paused

24.57

MW Ian Carmen was the superintendent of Altona and he basically took on that role of the amalgamated group. At the time I was working here with Ian McLeod and we were told that

we could stay in the Gardens if we wanted to be there, we weren't moving out or anything. Just can't think of the dates of those times – it was in amalgamation and that was twenty years ago. A few people left at that stage, there was a lot of movements and things happened. As I said Ian retired, he passed away in ninety-eight and I was still working here after that. I must have finished here in about ninety-nine I think.

Then I went to the horticultural crew at Altona for eight years and worked up there. I did different things there for a few years – community services – looking after Maternal Child Health and day care centres – just mowing them and things like that. That for a period of about three years, with one of the other guys. I did a stint where I looked after Commonwealth Reserve, Williamstown Town Hall and the Dennis Reserve – did that for four years – that was where I worked. So I basically looked after those three areas; that was my role.

Shelley came back to the Gardens in 2006 and a position came up for a gardener back in here. So I just thought I might come back in after eight years. This is my seventh year now, here, again. So that makes eighteen. This time around, there's been a lot go on with the Gardens as far as improvements – the pond was reinstated. There's lots of different activities that go on now. There's the Friends group.

Probably we changed our plantings a little bit when we had the drought period a few years ago. A lot of the annual type plantings that need a lot more maintenance went away for a while. We started putting more perennial things in, still with colour but we tried to make it less intensively worked. We don't have to work so hard on them – well in some ways you do really but you don't have to water them continually. The main path is a whole lot of succulents and drought tolerant plants that went in about five years ago and that made a big difference. That changed the whole look of that garden because that used to be like a cottage looking garden, down those main path beds. Now they're more of a structured dry tolerant plantings, they've got colour and character – it's just changed the look. We had to do that with the changing times with water restrictions.

LW Did you find with the water restrictions and the drought that significant plants died?

MW Tree wise, we certainly struggled with the trees. We lost the ginkgo, we lost a few shrubs through natural attrition anyway. We did get a couple of exemptions at times to water but we were very careful not to overdo the watering. Yes, we would have lost a few plants. But that's why we changed to drought tolerant things. Of course some of those plantings are getting more water than they probably need in some ways. The succulents, the Echeverias, which are down the main path, they swell right up with the water. They look great but they are probably a smaller rosette look.

LW Obviously trees don't live forever – do you have a replanting programme?

29.33

MW We have, we've got one going in the Pinetum. We had six cypress removed last year and replaced. Elm Avenue at the bottom end of the Gardens, near the statue, we've already done ten replacements there in one foul swoop, which is pretty major thing to do. A few years ago we lost a couple of bigger elms so we planted replacements in between the others. For ten years they struggled to grow because they've got competition. You really need the bite the bullet and decide to go straight in and do a new planting – looks very

drastic when you do it. Unfortunately it's not everyone's idea of great – they think why would you do that – well – the trees were struggling. So you take them all out, you put in a whole set of new ones that will all grow at the same rate hopefully, at the same time. Then you've established a new avenue for people to enjoy for the next eighty years. But for the first fifteen to twenty you're probably not getting the benefit of it. The other side of the statue has got to be done in two or three years as well. In my ideal world it would be great to do the whole thing but I don't think it's a practical thought process – cost wise, taking the trees out.

We do different plantings in the gardens, some are more permanent, they stay for a long long time and some things just get worn away to the extent where they get damaged and they need replacing – shrubs and things are like that – they're not there forever. You'd like them to be sometimes but they're not. Sometimes you have to move them. You put a plant in and think it's great and all of a sudden it's not in the best position and so at the right time of year you dig it up and move it.

LW The gardens here gets all the southerly wind, how does that affect the garden

MW You pick a few plants that'll handle the salt conditions. The Pinetum was primarily planted, as well as being part of the botanic garden, has a protective factor for the rest of the garden. You've got the ornamental part, which is about five acres, which is where we all see the botanic gardens. Your bottom or southern end is the pinetum of five acres and that is a protective barrier. At the moment we have a picket fence that goes down the middle of that, which might be coming out at some stage. It has a mirror bush growing on that fence as a protective thing as well – we let it grow to about six to eight feet – that helps prevents the winds. But when you start losing some of your big trees down there, that's when you notice that everything opens up again – the wind will come through.

We have certain soil types that'll – people will often say we haven't got any azaleas or camellias – well you need a different PH for that. Plus we're right by the coast and they're not appropriate. We've got a couple of camellias that do okay but you wouldn't write them up as being fantastic.

LW Do you find that you get a lot of public comment about the types of plants you have?

MW Most of it's complementary. People who want to have weddings would like more colour, that's their main bug bear, is colour. For them colour is the pretty pinks and purples and the blues of annuals. Green is a colour and there's a variety of green, there's greys, we have a lot of blues, we do have purples. The Canna bed, if you come in at the wrong time of year, it's cut down to within an inch of its life but if you come six months later, the Canna lilies are up to five and six foot tall. You need to explain to people that come in to book a wedding, they see the big backdrop of cannas and think that's fantastic but you must let them know that if they're having their wedding in July, they're not going to be there. The chances are that they're not going to have their wedding anyway in July.

34.32

There's a lot of people do like a lot of colour around. Shelley will agree with me here – on Friday you go into the Gardens with the sun out, the gardens have a completely different complexion to today which is dull and grey. It doesn't look as pretty, it doesn't look anywhere near as attractive to some people. It does to me because I see it in all facets. I'd

be more inclined to take a photo last Friday because it just looked colourful. It was bright – it just brightened up with the sun out. People are more complimentary more often than not and the weather brings out that too. If it's a really nice day and you're just standing quietly edging with hand edgers, quietly doing it and you haven't got a machine, they just think you've got a great job. It's lovely really, what you're doing. We've had some good compliments lately. Not many people criticise, not to our face anyway.

LW You working out there all the time, you'd be seeing lots of people come through the Gardens. Do you see the regulars?

MW Oh, all the time. There's probably upwards of a dozen people I'd see of a day that are here nearly every day. Whether they're walking their dog through, Ivan walks around in the mornings, certain groups of people come through in the mornings, walking down to the beach doing their regular walk. Part of our role is to have a chat when they want to. Through school holidays it's a bit more hectic, generally visitors from other places come through so they're not aware of the niceties of the Gardens.

LW What do you mean when you say niceties?

MW Just to treat them with a bit more respect, that they're not a park. If you want to kick a football or Frisbees around, it's fine if you can just confine it to the lawn, but the ball goes in the garden beds. But if you suggest to go out on the Fearon Reserve, it's not quite the same as having your little picnic here and kicking the football. There's a few rules we try to enforce that get a bit tricky at school holiday times. But yeh, we have quite a few regular people.

LW You're now working to a master plan and I know there's a new one coming out, but you were here in the days before the master plan

MW The last one was over twenty-five years ago I think so I probably just came in at the end of that one being completed. The master plan is the future really and a lot of it mightn't be seen in my time here, some of it will be but I've probably got six years to go if I'm still working here. But it's still in the pipeline as well, there's a bit more to do on it I think. The vision that they've got is incorporating a bit more of the Pinetum coming into the Gardens and the Gardens going into the Pinetum so you don't see them as two separate entities. That might be a tricky one.

LW Why would that be tricky?

MW I've tended to tell people that this is the ornamental part of the Gardens, if you want to kick a footy around, you go down to the bottom end. Well now the bottom end is going to be brought up a bit more – maybe knock over a bit of fencing to make it a bit more inclusive into the Gardens. But again you have to take into consideration your wind situation as to how much of the Gardens you're going to open up

Interview paused

38.31

LW Okay Michael, let's just talk a bit more about things that you've done here

MW I started here back in 1987 and there was people in charge, Shelley ran the show and Barry Heath was here and I was just happy to be just a gardener, not just be a gardener, but I

enjoy gardening and I took on a bit more responsibility when Shelley left, I became the leading hand of the place for that short time. I decided to document what we did each day. It's not like every single thing we do but every day I've written in the diary since 1993, so it was after Shelley had left and before I left the Gardens, for a period of time, I kept diaries. I just write down the daily temperature, who was in the Gardens and basically a very brief outline on what we're doing today. I had other personal things in there for weekends and different things, some of the comments in there are personal really for my thoughts for what's going on around the town and things like that. So I probably put myself in dire straits if anyone publishes it. I've always like to keep a record and I like to look back, say this time last year. So I can go back to my diary for the 6th October last year and we can look at and go oh do you remember doing this or we put that plant in –it's more handy for the fact that – say with pruning times – if I know we've cut down all the canna lilies at the beginning of July, I've got it written down there. We might go 'when did we do the cannas?' and I'll quickly have a look and go 'oh we did that in July' – so we might do it again next July - we can format a bit of a programme.

When the sprinkler system went in, I had a lot of stuff written about the sprinklers going into the Gardens. Plants – I used to write down the names of the plants being planted, that I'd bought from different nurseries at that time, because I was on my own working with Ian McLeod. We thought we should keep some sort of record of what we're putting in. Maybe not as much as what we were taking out. In the big picture, it would be nice to have it all on computer so we could just come in here of a day and if you're doing annuals, you could put on the computer we put in primulas this week and have it done that way rather than have it in a written form. But the diaries are handy from the perspective of looking back. Shelley might often ask me a question about something – when did the new gates go in – got to have it recorded somewhere. I'm sure she's got some things written down too but I usually write most things down. It's a handy record to see who's been working in the Gardens. You can count through the days, say a couple of months ago, we didn't have an apprentice for four weeks or this April, we didn't have an apprentice for the whole of April I don't think. So it was basically me in the Gardens and Shelley in here and that was it. You're only going to get so much done in a day really.

The diaries have been good. As I said, ninety-three, so I've got twenty-one diaries. Some of those are when I worked out of here too. I kept details of when I was working in different areas round the Town.

LW There's two questions arise from that – one is would you ever consider donating them to the Gardens archive?

MW Oh yes absolutely. You just have to excuse the language – if we've had vandalism, I don't usually describe those people very nicely – but it's not that bad.

I just noticed the other day going back, we had that massive wind storm last week on the 1st October - we had exactly the same thing last year on the 1st October but ten times worse. That was the one that went through Altona and knocked over trees, a massive blowout – it was the same day, 1st October. It's a seasonal thing obviously, we have more winds this time of year anyway. Today's going to be a blow up later on they say. It's a good resource, to keep a detailed list.

43.14

- LW Another question's popped into my mind but going back to your diaries, to keep some sort of log you almost think that should be some part of the procedures
- MW I know Shel got me to start doing a journal through my diaries highlighting some of the major things and I've done it but haven't finished it yet. Not picking out we planted a pansy today but more like when the bird cage came down, when the glasshouse went, when we had a massive storm, things like that. You have to find time to sit there and go through each page of the diaries to say 'Oh that was a big day' – or we might have had extra people in for the pond – they did the pumping in of the concrete on that day. I'm sure Shelley's got it written down in the diaries as well. She has a diary here but I tend to do mine every day. I just make sure I religiously do it.
- LW You were talking before about the winds and you mentioned that there's going to be a big blow up today, do you prepare for those days?
- MW I've prepared in that I've got the apprentice, Winter, mowing the Parker today before any wind picks up as we couldn't mow tomorrow because there'd be debris everywhere. You might say why wouldn't you leave it until it's all blown through but we have time constraints this week with the weather and I'm then off for two weeks so there's a few issues trying to get – if he mows the Pinetum today, it won't have to be done for two weeks so that's a job that doesn't have to get looked at. But preparing for wind, not particularly other than if it's really bad we will suggest to people that are in the Gardens to move out of the trees because they tend to sit under the elms and things like that. Be aware the next day is a big clean-up. We spent all day Wednesday picking up debris and bits and pieces from last week and then Friday was a raking day, it was a nice calm for raking the paths, cleaning up all the gravel.
- LW Do you do that often, the paths?
- MW Way back in the day it used to be every Friday, four people with four rakes would rake all the pathways, pristine them up for the weekend. Time constraints don't always allow that now, there's usually only two of us. We did a fair bit of raking this Friday just gone. If there's specific weddings on – it does look really nice when you do it.
- LW You mentioned the bird cage and the glasshouse – I didn't know there was a glass house. Can you tell me about that?
- MW The glasshouse was situated in the yard here. Next to Shelley's office here, there was a shade house, going back in the eighties, but the glasshouse was situated over near the work shed there. It was a fully operating one when I started here. We had a heater in there, heat beads and things like that. It was made of glass and over time the glass was breaking, a few repairs were made but then it was basically just let go when the Newport Lakes came into existence and all our nursery work went up to there. They had these big igloos and they did all the nursery work for us so we didn't not to pot things here much. It would lovely to have reinstated the glasshouse but the cost factor was too much to repair the one that was here so it got dismantled. It went about four years ago probably. It would be very handy to have a facility like that now, especially when you can pot on but that might be for the future.
- LW Do you pot on things often?

47.49

MW If we do, we take them up to the Altona depot and put them in their glasshouse. Occasionally we will take cuttings especially if it's a shrub or a tree or a plant that going to have to come out for some reason or its dying off, we might take cuttings off it if we're removing it.

LW The birdcage, can you tell me what you know about that?

MW The original birdcage was out in the Gardens somewhere. I don't know what year this one was built but it wasn't an attractive looking building. It housed, when I first started, finches, canaries, and quail on the floor. Over a period of years it got extra grill on the front because people were breaking into it to steal the birds. So then you had this double grill – you had a mesh and then you had a mesh – so to physically look in wasn't the prettiest thing. It got a little bit of a water feature inside with a pond at one stage – that had to be changed every two or three days – you'd get in there and change the water for the birds. We got a bit of an infestation of rats, even though you wouldn't think they could possibly get in there, they got in and they were chasing the birds down and killing them. A decision was made at some stage – the bird life – you go out into the gardens and there's more bird life than you can shake a stick at to be honest. It's better than having these little things cooped up. So we went for that option. The birdcage was removed probably about four years ago.

LW Was it the gardener's job to look after the birds?

MW Yes, Ian scored that one, I wasn't that enthused about the birds. I didn't mind them but it was a Friday afternoon job. You'd take out the plants that you put in there, hose it all out, restock the feed and the water and put it all back. You had these screaming birds screaming around you and squawking and carrying on. That was a job that was time involved. Ian would collect certain types of weeds and grasses that they'd enjoy as well. It looked good when it was all cleaned up at times but it lost its lustre, the appeal wasn't there anymore. People often ask where's the birdcage now. They ask that question a bit - and probably toilets. They ask where's the toilets. We don't have a toilet in the Gardens, which I don't think is a bad thing but I guess for some people it's not great. It's a bit of a hike down to the bluestone building down in the Pinetum. I think that might be addressed in the master plan, not sure. Coffee shop would be good.

If we ever commandeer back this land here, it could be an education centre and all sorts of things one day.

LW It's got potential

MW Yes it has.

LW Michael, I know that you have to get back to work, so just as a last thing, unless there is something else you want to talk about – are there any special plants in the Gardens that you want to talk about?

MW Unfortunately there are a couple of plants that get damaged more than they should – the peony roses, which are beautiful old fashioned roses that have been there for years and years – when they're not in full flight with their flowers, they look like gnarly pieces of dead wood. They often get broken and snapped.

LW As people?

51.59

MW Yes, walk through a garden bed – they look like dead bits of sticks I suppose. That plant has always appealed to me when it's in full flower. I enjoy the palm avenue, I like the palms. At different times of day you see them – I get here early in the morning before light sometimes and the silhouettes of the palms are just fantastic. The cannas, I've always enjoyed the canna bed and the elm walk. Things that people like in general I guess, the bottle tree is another feature of the Gardens. The pond, or the lake, that's really developed back into a nice ornamental lake - it's looking pretty good after a couple of years now. Just the Gardens in general – some days I take pictures, a bit like Loraine does, but you take a picture because the light's right – even the lawns look good. Overall I just enjoy working in that environment. Pretty lucky really – to see my working life out here would be good.

LW That's a good note to finish on. I'll let you get back to work. As I've said to everybody, on behalf of the Friends of Williamstown Botanic Gardens thanks for your time Michael.