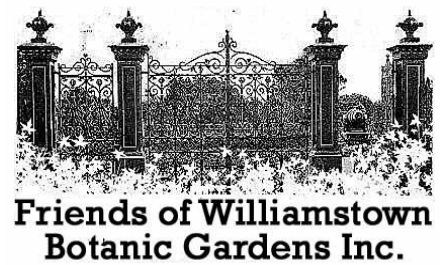


2014.018

**Williamstown Botanic Gardens  
Oral History Transcript**

**Shelley Wood**

25<sup>th</sup> September 2014



This is an interview with Shelley Wood 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.

Shelley was born in Williamstown, as was her mother Margaret McLean. Shelley recalls her mother telling her about spending many hours in the Gardens when she was young with her friend Chic, who was the daughter of the Curator Ernie Anderson.

Shelley, who was the first female gardener appointed in the western region, served her apprenticeship at Gardens and is currently the Curator.

The date of the interview is 25<sup>th</sup> September 2014 and the interviewer is Lindy Wallace.

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SW My name is Shelley Wood. I was born at Williamstown Hospital in 1959. My parents are Margaret and Tom Wood, Mum was Margaret McLean. Dad came from Scotland and they met and married. Mum grew up in Twyford Street, No 74 Twyford Street, which is just around the corner from the Gardens. Her life was very much about playtime in the gardens so much so that her best friend lived in the Curator's house in the Gardens. Growing up for me – all of my tales about Mum's childhood were about her playing in the Gardens with Chic Anderson, the daughter of Ernie Anderson, a previous Curator – some wonderful tales.

I actually came to the Gardens as an apprentice, a female apprentice in 1979, I started in January 1979. Apparently I was the first female employed in the western region as an apprentice gardener. I was led to believe there was much debate in council about whether or not council should employ a female in an apprenticeship. So that must have been quite an interesting little time. It was evident to me when I started my apprenticeship that they weren't really prepared to have a female on site and although everyone was very very supportive I know they had to get a portable toilet in and all of the men had to use the portable toilet and I was privileged enough to use the toilet in situ. It was a very funny time but everyone were so gracious and welcoming, it was great.

Actually one of my very early memories is lying in bed at my grandparents' home and very early in the morning hearing the sound of the doves coming – their cooing - but because the Pinetum and the Gardens seem to be full of lots of wonderful birds, those bird sounds are very evocative to me and always bring me back to my childhood and being near the Gardens which was great. Certainly walking around the Gardens I remember standing near an old cypress tree which is over towards Gifford Street, and this beautiful light filtering through so it must have been late in the day – I think it was summer, we had probably come from the beach but just this beautiful light that at the time I didn't really know what it was. I just remember this big dark trees and glorious gardens and this big green bench that we were nearby so we just stopped and sat on this bench to watch and be part of that.

3.31 I certainly remember the pond and always looking for goldfish in the pond and sometimes sneaking around a little bit – just having fun in the Gardens as a child. We always walked from our Grandparents

LW When you say sneaking around, what do you mean by that?

SW Just that we knew well enough not to go in the garden beds and that we had to keep on the paths but as young children you'd run away from your mum and run along the path and sneak around the next corner and wait for someone to find you - it was always a big

surprise. We weren't doing anything naughty, it was very funny but to us it was an exciting big thrill. I was about three or four but I remember clearly running and giggling when we were found. They never knew where we were of course – it was really funny (laughs).

4.22 And also always walking across what I now know to be the Pinetum, but at that time it was always the old part of the park and there was a pipe rail fence, so you'd duck under the pipe rail fence, right where the Gardens proper – where the ornamental garden meets the pinetum on Gifford Street – duck under the fence and head straight diagonally across the gardens towards the beach. There were actually – the paths weren't formalised at that stage – I think they'd all been covered in pine needles for the last hundred years or something – so they were just this very clear goat tracks – I always remember the goat track that went from the Gifford Street corner diagonally across towards the beach. If we lucky and not in a hurry we were allowed to play on the swings and slides – there used to be a little slide set up and some swings near Gifford Street, and also some over towards the Esplanade. So that wonderful creak of an old swing will still – that sound to me is quite evocative and it always takes me back to having a swing in the Pinetum with that CREEEAAK (laughs). So that was always lots of fun and as we grew up we were allowed to go to the swings and slides by ourselves so that a bit exciting. Of course now there are no swings and slides and across the road there are quite a few children's playgrounds. But at the time I don't remember any major playground in that area. There may have been some over on the Saddler Reserve, which is nearby but they were the ones we tended to use. Yeh – it was a great time.

6.06 I should say – my Mum probably made us love the Gardens more than we ever thought we could because as I mentioned earlier, she spoke about her childhood and playing with her best friend Chic Anderson in the Gardens. She used to tell the tale of how she and Chic would hop on their trikes – so obviously they were tiny – and she could remember riding her trike from the house up to the big gates and Mr Anderson would get his big black key out and lock the gates and then walk along to the gates at the end of Twyford Street, walk Mum across the road and then come back and lock the gates there. So for me that's a really lovely tale and it's quite evocative to me thinking about that. I have – not many – but I have a couple of photos of my Mum and chick playing in the Gardens and you know, doing tumbles and things. So yeh – it's a very special place.

7.03

LW Do you remember – as a teenager did you use the Gardens?

SW Oh dear – I'm going to out most of Williamstown that were my age. We certainly went through the Gardens a lot because we were young people going to the beach, so you always walked through the Gardens down to the beach. I remember that at one stage we went through a time where – I think our parents thought we were somewhere special – but we were actually at the Gardens having little parties that probably went to about eight o'clock but we thought we were so cool being allowed out until eight o'clock and hanging around the Gardens. Some friends of mine lived quite nearby and we would all meet there so it was a bit of fun. Then later on – and this would have been in the mid-seventies – every Christmas eve there was a party at the Gardens and so everyone would – at this stage I was probably about eighteen or nineteen – but everyone would leave wherever and go to the Gardens at about ten or eleven o'clock and there'd be a huge party in the Gardens – we actually never vandalised the place – I don't remember anyone ever being disrespectful of

the gardens or the lawns or the plants. I can never remember picking a flower and I can honestly say I can't remember friends of mine ever picking flowers or anything. At that time Williamstown was still very much a generational thing – so you lived here and probably your parents had lived here – you'd all grown up here – so you just knew that the Gardens were a place to be very respected. They were a great place to have a party on New Year's Eve (spoken in a conspirator manner) but you still were very very respectful of the place – yeh, it was a really interesting time – it was fun.

9.08

LW The seventies - you talked about Mr Anderson locking the gates in those early years – he was there until about 1960 I think

SW I don't remember him, that a story that my Mum told. When I started there was a gentleman by the name of Barry Heath, who was the superintendent, he lived in the house. He was, he still is, an absolute gentleman and he was very committed to the Gardens. Just by his leadership and his actions I suppose, he encouraged people to be very involved in the Gardens but always really respected and loved them. He was very interested in horticulture. As far as I remember he had come as a young boy from England and had worked at some stage at Government House I think. So he came to the Gardens as a person in his, probably his thirties, I'm not sure and then sort of worked his way – I think under Ernie Anderson – but he became the superintendent eventually. He was there at a time when, I suppose, when the Gardens were being looked at as a very old fashioned garden and it probably wasn't all that cool at that time to have very old fashioned plants and things. Also because of his botanical interests he decided to make some changes within the Gardens. I think it was in the early to late sixties that he decided to bring a lot more botanical interest so he removed a palm tree that appears in a lot of early photographs from one of the main lawns and replaced that with a Golden Elm. Now anyone who knows the Gardens now knows that the Golden Elm is the most magnificent tree. He also took a lot of palms out and replaced them with specimen trees so a lot of the lawns that have a specimen tree, initially there may have been a palm in situ there.

11.19 Unfortunately he had the palms on the main path chopped down. I know, he says it to me, that it was something that at the time he thought was important but now realises was probably a bit of a mistake. Thank goodness now we have a conservation analysis and we have master plans to guide the work we do so we would never do something like that. But at the time there were no guidelines and he felt he was doing the right thing by the Botanic Gardens. He's not to be judged on that. The lovely thing that I recall was that he told me that all of the palms were cut to six feet - so it was in the nineteen sixties – six feet high. Each one was covered in chicken wire and a creeper grown over each of the stumps, which is quite wonderful – I think there was about twenty-four stumps - so there would have been about twenty-four different creepers – so it would have been quite incredible. I remember the main path was quite a shrubby when I started in 1979. So there were small specimen trees and lots of billowing shrubs and dahlias – so quite prolific – a completely different feel to the way it is now.

12.35 As an apprentice, as part of the horticultural team in the Gardens, every winter we hand clipped those climbers – I can clearly remember seeing the wire on the stumps – we trenched dug. Anyone in horticulture will know what trench digging is – it's quite cumbersome. We trenched dug the whole length of the main path. It just means that you

spaded quite deeply, add organic matter and then cover the trench in and you worked your way backwards – all the way down the garden beds. Luckily for me, I wasn't there at an earlier period when apparently they trenched dug every single garden bed, which would have been an amazing accomplishment and certainly would have been fantastic for the soil in some ways – but of course the trees roots or plant roots may have suffered a little bit but it probably means why the soil is such a friable and incredible soil now. So I commend those people of the past.

The funny thing was that there was always a bit of a chuckle once we'd done the palms because –having just told the previous story about the parties in the Gardens, I'm loathe to say this but there was always comment that the trunks looked quite phallic and it was quite revolting for a few months –you'd just think oh gosh – and slowly these creepers would come back and be quite billowing and beautiful again. It looked wonderful because it was pristine but it was quite bizarre. Interesting times.

14.09

LW Shelley, you started your apprenticeship in 1979 – under Barry Heath?

SW Yes, under Barry Heath

LW How many people?

SW Barry was the superintendent, there was an assistant superintendent. This was at the time when it was still the City of Williamstown so Barry was in charge of all of the parks and gardens and street trees around the municipality. But there was always staff specific to the Botanic Gardens. Each staff member had been pretty much trained by a previous member so there were very clear techniques, styles, expectations, standards that had continued from probably early nineteen hundreds. The people that I worked with at the time had been apprentices there – Brian Turner, Dean Splatt, there a guy called Robert Anderson, who had come from a nursery background but Brian and Dean had both done their apprenticeships there so they became my mentors and my boss if you like. There was a team of four.

We would look after the gardens, do the lawns – we had tree crews that would come in and do the trees – we were also expected to in the summer make up cricket wickets on the Fearon Reserve. I can make a dam fine cricket wicket – know nothing about turf but I can do that. Also in the winter mark out the football ground and the lacrosse grounds. So you always drew the short straw if you got to that in the middle of winter. Although there were four staff, we did those two tasks – the seasonal tasks on the Fearon Reserve. We had people who came and collected all of the rubbish, we had people who came and collected all of the grass clippings. The lawns were mown and every bit was caught so none of the weed seeds went back onto the gardens beds and lawns as it does now unfortunately. There's something to be said for mulching lawns as you cut but I think when you've got horrible weed problems it's not a good thing. So we certainly had external assistance when required. So the four of us really just focused on just getting the Gardens right. I remember the fairly high standard and the high commitment – you were really passionate about it.

16.44 I was there from 1979 and worked through a rejuvenation programme that was introduced as part of the bicentennial funding from the government in the 1988 bicentennial. Leading up to that, from about 1986 to 1988 there was a full rejuvenation of the Gardens. Those palm stumps were removed and the palms were actually replaced in 1987, I remember that

very clearly. They went in as twenty inch pots and the stems were only of a three inch diameter so they were very small, they stood probably about a metre high. It's quite phenomenal how large they are now in 2014, it doesn't take them long to grow. It's lovely when I do a tour, people often can't believe those palms were planted – they always believe that they were the original palms so I do point that out.

I was there from 1979, worked through the rejuvenation in the 1980s, knew that I needed to move on and had decided that my passion was horticulture but also very much heritage. Rejuvenation of heritage landscapes was very important to me. I was lucky enough to get the job as head gardener at Rippon Lea, the National Trust property at Elsternwick in 1992, I think it was, October 1992, and worked there until 2000 and then went out working in other historic gardens – Rahine (?), Bishops Court in the city, quite a few prominent gardens working on rejuvenation projects and restoration projects in these wonderful gardens. It was delightful and then Williamstown Gardens went through a major transition with amalgamation.

In 1994 the municipal councils in Victoria were all amalgamated into certain areas and so Williamstown was amalgamated with Altona. Altona had only become a municipality about the 1960s so it was a very modern council and Williamstown was the heritage component of that. Interestingly enough the horticultural component, I'm not sure of all of the changes but I know that the Gardens went into serious decline, I know they were referred to as a park and they literally had people mow the lawns and do a bit of weeding but things like raking the paths and – there was a lot of horticultural change or loss I suppose. I have been told that at some stage it was almost the naughty boys corner – if you misbehaved you'd be sent to the Gardens – to that park down there. It was really sad.

- 19.43 Certainly the Williamstown community jacked up and there were letters going to the Council. I remember seeing a little note in the Age at one stage – a note to Steve Bracks who was the Premier at the time, from someone living in Hawthorn who said you had this wonderful garden – it's in your own backyard and it's an absolute disgrace what's going on. It was a really sad time for the Gardens. Luckily there a group of residents pulled together called the Landscape Advisory Group and they really pushed to have the Gardens

LW When was this?

SW I think that was the late 1990s – about 1998, 1999. I was actually a member of that for quite a time until I ended up back at the Gardens. It came about because a woman by the name of Helen Page spoke to one of the Councillors saying there were massive trees coming down in Williamstown, there were some beautiful eucalypts in Melbourne Road that were removed quite suddenly, the elm trees weren't being very well maintained, there was just a lot of angst about things. She suggested to Councillor Angela Altair that there enough residents, professional horticulturists and people of various professions that would certainly come together and offer advice if there were things needed.

Out of that I remember you had to apply to be part of that group. I applied and I think there about eight members of that group – it was a fascinating group for me to be involved in – there was Helen Page from the Garden History Society, Mary Klestadt from the Open Garden Scheme, Mike Hirst who was a horticultural lecturer at the TAFE college, myself as a horticulturist, John Hawker from Heritage Victoria, so it was a really strong contingent. All of those people were residents of the municipality except John Hawker. I apologise if I've

forgotten someone. That group ended up guiding a lot to do with the Gardens certainly and there were often projects that were brought forward to us. I think the staff – it must have been a bit of a nightmare for the staff – but there were projects that came out of that with the Landscape Advisory Group.

Eventually a lot of those people became the advisory group for the Gardens which was terrific. There was a push to have a master plan done for the Gardens, there had been a conservation plan done prior to the rejuvenation in the eighties – so we had a conservation analysis, we needed a master plan, they needed to reinstate a head gardener and staff that knew about botanic gardens, about historic gardens and how to undertake good horticulture. A gentleman was put in the role as head gardener and there seemed to still be some concerns about what was going on. I know during his time the paths were reinstated in the Pinetum but I know that horticulturally there was still a lot of concern and eventually he left.

The job was readvertised and it was actually Mary Klestadt who suggested to me that I apply and return to the Gardens. At that stage I had a young child in the local primary school and the timing sort of suited me perfectly. I was allowed to do family hours, I started a bit later and things so it was fantastic. I knew there was funding, I knew we had a master plan we could work to so it was a really exciting time for me to go back to the place of my childhood and my passion. It was a wonderful time for me.

23.56

LW Your interest in horticulture, do you think that stemmed from spending that much time close to the Gardens?

SW Yes, I actually do. My grandparents were wonderful. My grandfather was a larrikin and my grandma was just very gentle. We spent a lot of time at their home and the Gardens was part of our life growing up, it had been part of my mum's life as I've already spoken about. My dad, although he loved the Gardens, he could mow a lawn and that was about it.

We grew up with not a great garden but both my parents worked full time and I remember Dad would pay me two dollars to mow the lawns. But I do think all of that stemmed from – there were two things – being very involved in that garden as a little girl and also my dear friend's grandma was an amazing gardener. Going through primary school she lived with her grandmother in Newport and we spent a lot of time in that garden. And they had a holiday house in Monbulk so we would go to Monbulk, which was the country. Being surrounded by that sort of environment and having the Gardens in my blood I suppose, it certainly framed where I wanted to go.

I was either going to be a famous Australian potter, I wanted to do pottery, or go into horticulture. At the time it was a bit strange – so yeh - I was lucky enough to get an apprenticeship. I was thrilled to pieces.

25.43

LW Did they advertise for an apprentice or did you more or less cold call?

SW No no no, it was advertised and I remember there was a guy who told me that he was going for the apprenticeship as well and that he would probably get it because his father was a councillor at the time – I don't know if he was a councillor or very involved – but he was

quite confident that it was his job and I didn't have a shoe-in – or he had a shoe-in and I didn't have a chance. I remember being quite concerned about that. I went for my interview, which was in the gardener's office, which was actually the small building at the back of the house in Osborne Street.

LW When you say the Gardener's office, was that Barry Heath?

SW That was with Barry Heath yes. At that stage the office faced the back of the house so it was very much part of the whole house environment – the office was in the back yard of the house if you like. I remember going there late one afternoon and sitting with Barry Heath quite nervously and having an interview and then going out and going straight across to my best friend's house – they lived on the corner of Garden Street and Osborne Street – there was quite a rambling house there. It wasn't until a little bit later I realised her father was a good friend of Barry Heaths. He'd apparently put in a good word for me too, so I was a lucky girl. Yes, I can remember Barry phoning me and offering me the position

LW Do you remember the type of questions during your conversation with Barry?

SW Not really – I can remember that I had said that because I wanted to be a potter that I had transferred from the high school that I was going to, which was called Paisley High School at the time, it's now part of Bayview College. But it didn't have a big art department and the art teacher suggested that I transfer to a TAFE school because TAFE was considered a trade and there was a lot more funding. Luckily Williamstown Technical School at the time had a huge art department, an incredible art department. Think there were about fourteen or fifteen art teachers alone. It was incredible. We did everything from film and drama – there were four arts students – we were taken on weekend and weekly – not weekly – we would go to the country for the week and peel our own clay and build kilns with the pottery class from Swinburne TAFE and do all sorts of amazing things – lots of drawing – so it was a very lovely time.

The relevance of this is that I went to a boy's school, I was one of two females at a boy's school, which was very confronting. I had a very small group of very nice young friends, boys who were very good friends. Because of the art group being so small we related very well to the art teachers and they were incredible – so we tended to hang with the art teachers more than anything, which is quite unusual in this day and age. They were amazing. I just wanted to stress to Barry that I had been in a very male dominated area and so therefore felt that I could cope with being put into this situation - it actually wasn't something of concern to me as long as we were all very respectful of one another and that certainly proved to be the point when I started at the Council. It was great, I was very lucky.

29.46

LW What would you like to talk about now?

SW Certainly things that I can recall about the Gardens during my apprenticeship might be useful and certainly as a record that could be really good.

I've already mentioned that you would be in the Gardens full time. They would sometimes change the people being in there – only if someone wanted a break but it was really was the place to work and everyone wanted to work there so I felt quite privileged to work there.



There was very much a programme. Every morning you went for a walk around the Gardens – as a team – you all did a quick walk, it would probably only take five minutes or ten minutes. You'd just gather any debris that may have fallen – just check what you were doing for the day or plan the week or whatever. We would go for a walk and then get all of our wheelbarrows and tools and head on out and you'd head out to whatever the job was at the time. Obviously if you went into a garden bed you'd ensure that when you left that garden bed the edge was magnificently spaded, there was not one weed to be seen, the soil had been hoed so it was all fresh, you hadn't damaged any of the roots so you weren't going too deep, if there was dead heading to be done it was undertaken and any debris that had dropped from trees were cleared away. There was sort of a seasonal programme where you went around all of the beds and did that.

There was lots of annual plantings at the time – it was the nineteen-eighties so there was still hangover from the sixties of all that ribbon displays and annual colour – so it was always through the summer lots and lots of time spent in – in the spring we would order the seeds, we would grow all of our own seedlings – all off the seedlings were planted out, everything was watered, everything was hoed. There was a lot of time spent on the annuals. There was a lot of pride. Certainly the community expectation was that the standard would be very very high within the Gardens and certainly in the annual displays. On reflection I would think that some of them were incredibly garish and quite funny – yeh – it was something that was undertaken.

I also remember that every winter –there were two major tasks that were undertaken in the winter – one was either the pond was drained and dredged – we would literally put a plank down onto the bottom of the pond, have our wheelbarrows, have a trailer at the top and you would get the sludge from the bottom into your wheelbarrow and try and wheel it carefully up the ramp and then empty it into a wheelbarrow [trailer]. Of course none of this would happen without you becoming absolutely filthy and it was putrid but it was very very funny. Then the trailer would be emptied in the yard – we would previously dug a pit – it would be emptied into the yard and slowly by the spring time – by the following autumn I think – that would have composted and become the most amazing compost to go back into the gardens. It was a real process and it was fantastic. It was certainly a very mucky process and as I said you got very wet and very smelly.

- 33.14 But I can remember one year, we'd finally got through it all, we were very proud to have scraped it all together and hosed it – you'd hose the concrete base and push it into a pile and keep doing it, it would take a week – and on the very last day the guys that I worked with – we went own to get the last bit – I had very long hair in a ponytail at the time – they just literally grabbed my arms and legs and ducked me in – it was almost like an apprenticeship initiation. You would never do that now, you'd never get away with it and you'd never want to. They did it once and that was it thank goodness and we never did it to anyone else either – it was appalling – but it was pretty funny.

So you did the pond one year and the following year you did the palm trees. The very first year I was there I think they did the palm trees and I remember people going up a very very tall ladder with a hand saw and cutting all of the palm fronds away manually – getting any of the weeds out, making sure that the canopy was all clear, getting the seed heads out and then once all of the canopies were clear you would go to the bottom with axes and spades and dig all of the palm roots around the base. If anyone has very done that, you'll know that it's a very hard task

- LW Why do you do that Shelley?
- SW Because the palms create a mat and nothing can penetrate and grow through them. It's really important to keep them to a confined area if you like. Because it was done biannually it never got out of control – the fibrous root mat only extended out, probably about – I don't know – fifty centimetres out of the palm trunk.
- LW It didn't damage the tree?
- SW It certainly didn't seem to, I'm not an expert but it didn't seem to. I know more recently when we redid the palms in the main path – we removed all of the soil because there was an oxalis issue, an extensive weed issue, so we decided to remove all of that soil - it was a bucket on a tractor that took all of the soil away and they went very close to the palms and we weren't concerned about them destabilising or any issue with the palms – and they certainly didn't look back. It's quite an interesting process.
- So every winter there was a major task undertaken and it was either the pond or the palms, just depending on the year. Now the pond is done in a much easier way. We bring the street sweeper in and suck all the gunk and that's taken off and it's just hosed out, so it's quite easy to do. For the palms, we have cherry pickers that come in an arborists that do all the magic jobs. Unfortunately the palm bases are becoming an issue and we'll have to have a look at them – certainly along Osborne Street and Gifford Street beds. We're looking at how we can contain those. But at this stage there are only myself as the Curator, Michael Wilkins who is the Head Gardener and we now have an apprentice and getting across everything is not happening. We need to get onto that. Hopefully get another staff member.
- LW Would the Council supply staff for different projects if you had a big project?
- SW Do you mean in the past?
- LW No
- SW Now? Well when we did the main path planting in 2008 I think that was – I should just say when I returned to the Gardens – that garden had milk thistles 50 centimetres high, there was a lot of soil and weed, a couple of odd camellias, it was actually a really sad time. I can understand why the community were quite irate. So the decision was made that as part of the funding for the Gardens – there had been funding put aside to do the pond. The pond had been leaking and they had removed the water from it I think in about 2000, I'm not sure exactly but about 2000 or 2001. So the pond had been rained and had never had any water put back into it. People thought it was because of the drought but it was actually because they didn't know how to treat it. So Council had been setting money aside for the pond but nothing was happening. I remember speaking to Stephen Thorpe who was the manager at the time and suggesting that the Gardens were in such a sad state – there were recommendations all through the master plan of projects that we needed to undertake that possible we could transfer that money to smaller projects, regain the community's confidence in the Gardens and then look to the pond as a major restoration. That went to Council, I know Angela Altair took that to Council and that was passed.
- 38.00 The first project we did out of the rejuvenation was the gates. Prior to 2006 I think it was they were white. They were very corroded, they'd been graffitied and they looked appalling. So the first restoration was to have those gates removed, the pillars remained, but the gates were taken away and treated for rust etc and then painted black based on the original

scrapings that were done by a historian. They were painted black, there was a lot of gold trim put up. People were horrified initially when the gates went because they thought the Council had sold them – (laughs) we had people abusing us. The big thing was for us to get things into the newspapers. So put the story up that the gates were being restored, that was very important. I remember a little old lady being driven around the round-a-bout and the person went around the round-a-bout three times and yelled out once he gates were returned – and at that stage they were just black – ‘I HATE YOUR GATES DARLING, I HATE THEM’. People across the road were horrified that they were black but once we put the gold trim on and they realised that they could actually see into the Gardens once again – it wasn’t this horrible barrier – two ladies either side actually said they called them now their beautiful gates and they were very proud of them and they did this big turnaround which was very funny. You can imagine people’s angst about things that change I suppose and they just wanted to make sure that the Council was doing the right thing. That was the first project and the main path was the second project.

That was where we took all the soil out, treated everything, introduced steel edging along the grass verges and reinstated buffalo lawns along those grass verges. So very defined areas of path, turf and garden bed.

LW In previous interviews a couple of people have mentioned buffalo lawns and how they were so robust. In that intervening period then, were the buffalo lawns removed?

SW Apparently there was a sprinkler system that was put in – I would think in the mid nineteen-nineties, I’m not exactly sure. It appeared that there seemed to be a lot of tractors going all over the place and so the lawns were totally decimated but rather than reinstate them as buffalo lawns, for some reason they put fine grasses, ryes and fescues that really weed through. The buffalo at the Gardens were renowned and I actually remember during my apprenticeship listening to one of the gardening programmes on the radio and the person, I don’t know who it was, but they were talking about lawns and that person said if you want to see magnificent lawns go to Williamstown Botanic Gardens. Just prior to me leaving the Gardens I recall there was a turf expert brought in and he took samples of all of the soils of each lawn, numbered every lawn and wrote a programme for how to maintain the buffalo on each of those lawns. That was the standard that was expected in the Gardens at the time. That was beginning to be undertaken but I don’t know what happened to that with the finer grasses going through. So the buffalo lawns are really an important part of the Gardens and we’re slowly reintroducing those. The interesting thing is that when I returned to the Gardens and Michael Wilkins had returned also – he’d been there in the late 1980s I think or through the nineties – we both recalled that during the winter period – there was about a six week break where you didn’t have to do the lawns because they didn’t grow but they still looked really neat. When we both returned there didn’t seem to be that break and we couldn’t work out what was going on. Later as soon as we reintroduced one of the main lawns as a buffalo lawn we realised that there was that six week period that you didn’t have to touch that lawn and it still looked fantastic. All the more reason to reintroduce buffalo into the Gardens once again. It’s really important.

43.24 Back to the main path. Projects and teams during the replanting of that main path which was a really large job, all of the horticultural staff from the Council were brought in to undertake that. So for a whole day there were just people beaver away and planting all the plants. So if there’s a project like that and its very specific and it’s a time frame we may

get a bit of help in the Gardens but more often than not it's the staff doing the other than arborists coming in.

LW Can we talk about when you came back and the Landscape Advisory Group had some influence with the Council – can you talk a bit about that and the importance of that to the Gardens?

SW From my perspective it was really important to educate up. I don't mean that in a condescending way but I think with amalgamation people were so busy just trying to get their head around these amalgamations and all that that encapsulated that they really couldn't focus on some things and unfortunately the Botanic Gardens seemed to fall by the wayside. When the Landscape Advisory came together there was always a Councillor on the committee for a time and the gentleman who was in charge from a horticultural component would bring different projects that were happening around the municipality. So we would often view landscape jobs that were undertaken or park restorations prior to them

LW Can I just interrupt once again, I'm sorry – just for clarification for me. So the Landscape Advisory Group wasn't just focusing on the Gardens?

SW Initially they were put together because there was a bigger picture about all the trees going on and they recognised there were people within their area that could possibly offer some assistance. Then out of that came a very strong push to get the Gardens back on track. They tried to start up a sub-committee to be involved in the Gardens. I think there were a couple of meetings with that. Then when I came back in 2006 I asked that those people become the Williamstown Botanic Gardens Advisory Group. So the Landscape Advisory Group for the Council still remained but by that time people had been on that group for quite a long time and I think it was time to change so people who had initially been on the Landscape Advisory Group tended to come across to the Gardens Advisory Group and there were different people on the [Council] advisory Group. That's probably very confusing but it started off as a sub-committee and then became an advisory group of its own entity just in regard to the Williamstown Botanic Gardens.

46.30 Ian Brown who is the manager of Parks certainly was a major player in having that occur. Stephen Thorpe was his boss and he really pushed to have the Gardens highlighted. Then when Ian became the Parks manager he sat in on the meetings and was so supportive and really positive about getting the Gardens back on track. So, I've come back at a really great time.

LW So there was a lot of positive change

SW Absolutely. With the feedback from the community about things like the gates happening and the main path happening – we started raking paths again – it sounds ridiculous but those details are what makes the Gardens present well. People were starting to come back to the Gardens. People came back saying they hadn't been to the Gardens for years because it was too depressing. They stopped bringing people. We actually had Jane Edmonston, who is a horticultural writer and often on TV – as part of a programme she used to go to different gardens and she actually came to the Gardens as part of the horticultural writers association or the media association I think they were called. They all came for a picnic in the Gardens in 2007, Christmas 2007, and she mentioned to me that she had brought a crew to come into the Gardens and do some filming and she arrived after the film crew and they met her at the front gate and said 'Not sure why you've come here but we won't be filming

here'. She said she walked in and said 'No' and they left. What a missed opportunity and what a tragedy. I think that reflects the chaos that was. Council is fantastic in turning it around and are really doing good things with the Gardens.

LW Stemming out of the Landscape advisory Group there is now a Friends Group operating

SW And for that we're truly grateful.

LW So that is very important to the functioning, not every day functioning but the public perception?

SW Absolutely, yes. In the master plan in 2001 it was recommended that we have a friends group set up. At the time there was too much going on and they were just trying to re-establish the Gardens and once we started to get things rolling with the main path and different projects, Stephen Thorpe initiated that we have a meeting about a friends group – get the community back and engaged with the Gardens. Out of that Sue Murray put her hand up to be presidents of the friends group and got the ball rolling. It has been fantastic in such a short space of time because out of that has come a couple of women who were very involved in the school programmes and they started up an education group. Out of that has come a reading corner and story time. Reading Corner is a delightful little set up – like an informal picnic library if you like. They set up each day in the Gardens over school holidays on a sunny day and people just walk along through the Gardens and discover this lovely place to relax and read gardening books for the parents and little books for the children. It's wonderful as a gardener to go out there and just see these families sitting quietly in the shade of a tree enjoying these wonderful books.

Storytime is great for the garden staff because it is generally a Friday once a month from October to about February/March. There will be a theme set – it might be about the pond, it might be insects, it could be teddy bears picnic, it might be Santa's coming. There's always a gardens associated story for the day and it occurs under the golden elm tree. A gentleman from the library comes and he's often dressed as an ant and he plays a guitar. Anja, who is one of the women, who initiated this reads the story books and is very animated with the children. Generally it's pre-school children so it's really focusing on that younger group of children. They learn about the gardens generally, they learn about association of gardens. Sublimely they learn about how wonderful this garden is, how to respect it, how to be part of it and to just really enjoy it. It's wonderful because, as I said earlier, from a gardener's perspective, you see all the parents come in about 10 o'clock, there's generally about three hundred people there – they all sit on one lawn. The prams are there, the babies are there, the young children are there. Everyone's contained and absorbed in the people with music and song. Following up they will generally have a little activity which might be making a little concertina caterpillar or making little bears ears. Then of course young children need morning sleep so they've all gone by lunchtime and parents being parents, they've cleaned up. So for us it's minimum impact. There's a lot of people coming into the Garden at one point in time. There's young children being educated in a wonderful way about this fantastic place and I think the parents are often educated through the children about the Gardens as well. So it really has been a fantastic programme.

52.32 There's a propagation group that we started up but unfortunately at this stage the site within the depot area is not set up to run a good nursery and there became a few occupational and health concerns. So that's on hold for a little time. There's the archive

group, Lindy Wallace whom I'm speaking with has set up the archive with Loraine Callow, who is actually employed by Hobsons Bay City Council. They have found some amazing history about the Gardens which is fantastic but also collating all of that information has been fantastic. My concern was, I'm a bit of a collector so during my time at the Gardens as a younger person I'd gathered little mementos or letters or things that were given to me – maps and things - that's I'd just put in a pile or a box – or articles if there ever articles in a newspaper or magazine – just kept those. I was always concerned that they would be lost and it was me that would enjoy them. Luckily you've set up this archive that people in the future will know what was going on before, what's going on currently. Hopefully someone will continue the archive for the future and really know a solid future about the Gardens.

Williamstown Botanic Gardens is lucky because there are a lot of photos of the Gardens over the periods of time so having them collated is fantastic and is being put on the Victorian Collections data base/web site. It's great because it will be there for ever for people to enjoy and it really gives a true history of the Gardens and how people relate to the Gardens, how the Curators have always been very very passionate about what they do and how it can continue for another hundred and fifty-four years.

LW Yes, hiding your light under a bush doesn't do you any favours in the long term.

SW Yes, it's a shame because those Gardens do have a fabulous history and they should be very proud. The community is very proud but people should know what goes on with the Gardens. The Friends being set up has been fantastic for the Gardens because they're a wonderful advocate for the Gardens. They can advocate to Council but also to share the stories and also to allay concerns within the community about what's going on in the Gardens. Certainly from my perspective it's been fantastic to address the Friends about what current projects are coming up and why we're doing something and what benefit it is to the Gardens. Hearing that relayed back to me when I'm shopping down the street by someone who's spoken to someone – so those words get out into the community. They can understand: a) why the Gardens are so important and b) what we're doing to make sure they are sustained and remain significant.

LW It's interesting that you say that you speak to people down the street. Do you think with you living locally makes a big difference to how you feel at work in the Gardens?

SW Yes. For me personally it's quite funny because in lots of ways I do get to relay messages down the street or give subliminal messages in conversations about the Gardens and what's going on and why it's significant. I often get stopped about what's happening with trees around the municipality or whatever and it's nothing to do with me. But also my husband and son used to find it funny and now they're sick of it so they won't come shopping with me, it's quite funny. I love working locally, it's very important to me. That connection with the Gardens is so special so I don't mind working locally. Although I do tend not to go down to the Gardens at the weekend. Working is such a beautiful space I can't remember the last time I had my lunch out there, which is ridiculous. I think if you're out there you tend to look at the weeds or you look at some child running over a garden or something. You have to detach.

57.22

LW Shelley, since you've been there – you talked about during your apprenticeship there were a lot of annual displays – have the plantings changed and if they have why do you think they have?

SW Well, there's been the reintroduction of the palms which is the obvious one. As far as shrubbery, we've certainly changed a lot of the planting in some areas. Where the annuals were, I think it's important to mention that we've just been through ten years of drought and we've come out of that – and because of staffing levels – there's a whole lot of reasons but we still try to have a small component of annual planting – it's an expectation of the botanic garden and people that visit. Now it's sort of an educational role that the botanic gardens have and that is to educate people on what is sustainable and environmentally what is appropriate and also introducing people into different plants and styles. What were vast displays of annuals may have become in some situations a border plant – just a green border of ground cover or a small succulent and then maybe a little bit of annual planting and then it would go into perennials and longer term shrubberies. It had to evolve a little bit because of the climate, because of the economic climate and because of the way Council is trying to keep the Gardens going but really has to watch their funding. I don't know that we would ever introduce such vast areas of annuals again. That was a fashion and as a botanic garden that's 154 years old we try not to caught up in fashion of the day. We wouldn't introduce the latest and greatest and brightest and biggest best azalea just because it is the biggest and brightest. If it didn't work with the plant palette or it wasn't appropriate to an Edwardian garden we may not introduce it.

That's an important thing too. The Gardens are significant as an Edwardian garden although set up much earlier. During the Edwardian period the curator Samuel Thake came on board and he apparently really structured the Gardens in a fabulous way. He introduced all the rock work, he introduced the palms to the Gardens and really made them a very formal place to visit as far as I understand from all of the history. That is the period of significance because that's what remains so strongly today. We work to a heritage frame work to ensure we are being respectful of an Edwardian garden but we're also working to a horticultural frame work that is about a botanic garden and treating plants as they should be and presenting in the most appropriate and best possible form.

LW I'm just aware of the time because I know you have to get away. If there's nothing else you want to talk about would you like to talk about some of the significant trees?

SW We do have – for Williamstown we have some quite significant trees but in Victoria they're probably not as significant. So just in relevance to the Gardens – there were two large cypress stumps that were only about a metre and a half high in a couple of the garden beds and we've actually tried to keep one of those – one just rotted away – but we've tried to keep one to show people that the large cypress and pines that were originally planted around the boundary of the gardens and often within the Gardens – were planted to really protect the Gardens from the south, those incredible southerly winds that we get. The Pinetum is definitely part of that protection barrier. John Hawker from Heritage Victoria who put together the initial significant tree register for the State says that without the Pinetum the Gardens would never have been created because of those salt winds and that protection that it offered. A pinetum also in the UK – if you go to Bournemouth in England, there is a pinetum there but it's a hangover from the Victorian times – strolling through the garden, taking in the sea air, the very clear air and also taking in the scent of the pine. It was very much about getting the industry out of your system and getting that fresh air in. So

Williamstown was known as a health resort and I certainly think the pinetum was a big part of that. So the Pinetum as a whole is quite significant.

Within the Gardens proper, or the ornamental garden I've already mentioned all of the palms throughout the Gardens. There's a couple of interesting trees that have been introduced in the eighties to Council. There's a lovely Taxodium, specimen of a Taxodium, which is quite near the pond. It's just a beautiful specimen so it's best to have a look at that.

The Blue Gum, there's a Eucalyptus Globulus on the same lawn as the Taxodium. I believe that was planted – it has some connection with Adam Lindsay Gordon. I'm not exactly sure, I think it was planted to commemorate Adam Lindsay Gordon. I think somewhere there must be a reference to that, I'm not sure. There's also a large Eucalyptus Citriodora over near Twyford Street, which is now called it think it is Corymbia Citriodora, that I believe, I remember as an apprentice reading a very small article in an old newspaper about the 1940s and it stated that that it was planted by some minister or someone of the clergy. I can't find that and I don't know how factual that is but that's in the back of my head somewhere. There are some gorgeous specimens throughout the Gardens but I'm not sure specifically – nothing's coming to mind at the moment. Oh the Moreton Bay circle around the statue is quite delightful.

I think it's important to point out that there's currently a fence that runs through the Gardens and divides the ornamental garden from the Pinetum. In the future master plan it's hoped that that fence will be removed once we've got enough protection in the pinetum from those southerlies. It's important to remove that to reinterpret the Gardens as a whole and not two halves. People often interpret the Gardens as – oh the Botanic Gardens and that old crabby park. So I think we need to re-educate people about the Botanic Gardens as the whole site with the statue right in the centre of the Gardens with the Moreton Bay circle around it and then the surmount of lawn. So there's quite a large parterre if you like that surrounded that central garden. As part of the master plan that's about to be launched, they've suggested that fence come down. The statue, the outer circle of figs and then that outer lawn area really become once again the central focus of the Gardens – to really tell people about that connection.

LW Were those figs there originally?

SW In very earlier photos they appear. I've seen a photo taken of the statue looking south and the figs and the pines are all there and very small so probably only about three or four metres high so it does appear that they were planted very early. It's interesting because they're not very large comparatively to Moreton Bay Figs in the state. We believe that because they were planted so close it's probably just because of their competition that they're quite small – I suppose the southerly winds as well – certainly they are the closest ficus I've ever seen planted in an area like that. They probably just haven't been able to develop in the way that Moreton Bay usually would.

LW Are there any peppercorn trees there?

SW There are two peppercorns. If you're standing with your back to the statue and looking towards Osborne Street, there's one either side, just before the palm garden beds start. So apparently there's been always been two peppercorns, one either side. They were clipped as a rectangular box as a bit of statement to the entrance near the statue to probably frame the statue.



I do recall my mum saying she and Chic used to hide in them. They had big green caterpillars in them that they would collect. They would hide in them and watch the lovers walking through the Gardens. So they were a bit of a good hidey spot. Another thing I can tell you I remember is that Mum had a dreadful scar on the back of her leg, really awful scar a couple of inches long and about an inch high. She said it was because there used to be barbed wire on stakes all through the garden beds so that children wouldn't run through the garden beds and she and Chic Anderson had been naughty and were playing on the statue - so they'd climbed over the fence - it was a pipe rail fence - they'd climbed over the fence and were playing on the statue. Archie Matthews who at that stage was a much younger man had warned them to get off and they were being cheeky and they didn't so he hosed them and Mum ran off and obviously ran through a garden bed. This may be why I never did because I was petrified. But she ran through a garden bed and got caught in the barbed wire. So there you go. Archie Matthews is the most passive gorgeous man I have ever met so they must have really riled him to get him to hose them. But they were a bit wicked I think. So the peppercorns were definitely there for a long long long time. I should say Mum was born in the 1930s and I think chic was around the same time.

A lovely story about Chic Anderson - when I came back to the Gardens - so this was probably about 2007 - and the Gardens were still very sad and tired - it may have been 2006 because we had not yet done the gates - there used to be a little aviary near the depot, on the boundary of the depot area. Apparently when Mum was little it was full of birds and guinea pigs and quail. People always came to look at the aviary. As a young girl I remember being taken to look at the birds in the aviary, it was always very exciting. Over a period of time the aviary had become a (unclear), there were birds in there that the rats used to get in. We came in one morning and forty finches and budgerigars had been decimated by rats. As horticulturists I think that aviary dated back to a time when Victorian gardens always had aviaries or animals in a certain contained area. I remember going to Bendigo and we used to go and see the monkeys at Bendigo. It was always very exciting. So people came to see the aviary. It had become quite dilapidated and there were very few birds in there and as part of the master plan there was a recommendation to demolish it because it was not the original one which was over near Gifford Street.

Michael came in quite huffy and said 'Oh, there's a lady in the Gardens and she's having a bit of a complaint, she said she used to live here and her dad was in charge and she's never seen the Gardens looking so sad, so dreadful'. I just looked at him and said 'Michael, of course they're looking dreadful, we know they're looking dreadful, that's why this change is so important - and that would be Chic Anderson, Mum's friend'. I just flew out there to find her. I think he mentioned that she'd come down from Queensland and I knew Barry Heath had told me Chic Anderson lived in Queensland so there was a connection. So we flew out into the Gardens, couldn't find Chic anywhere. We got into the ute to drive around Willy and we hunted her down across near the beach sitting on a park bench giving her granddaughter an ice-cream. I ran up saying 'I'm very embarrassed and sorry to say this to you but are you Chic Anderson, the reason I'm asking is that I'm Margaret McLean's daughter and she said 'Darling I was Chic Anderson forty years ago' I remember Margaret McLean'. So then I explained my relationship and what was happening in the Gardens. I said to her 'they are looking dreadful and yes you're right and it's really important we speak to you about your memories and we make this connection and we try and get the Gardens back on track'. Chic was delightful in sending me some photos which I know you now have in the archives and we've been lucky enough you've been able to interview Chic and her

memories of the Gardens as a little girl which to me is so delightful – a) knowing that Chic Anderson really existed – but for me to chat with Chic was so exciting and then for her to relate back with you I think was such a wonderful thing and really reflects her passion for the Gardens and her commitment to the Gardens and her pride in her father's work I think is so important. It actually makes me a bit emotional. It is fantastic and a huge thankyou to Chic for being so generous with her time and photographs and memories. It's terrific.

LW I know there's lots more we can talk about but I do know you have to get going. Do you want to finish the interview here and we can pick it up another time?

SW If we can

LW As I've been saying to everybody – on behalf of the Friends of Williamstown Botanic Gardens thanks Shelley, I appreciate the time you've given us.