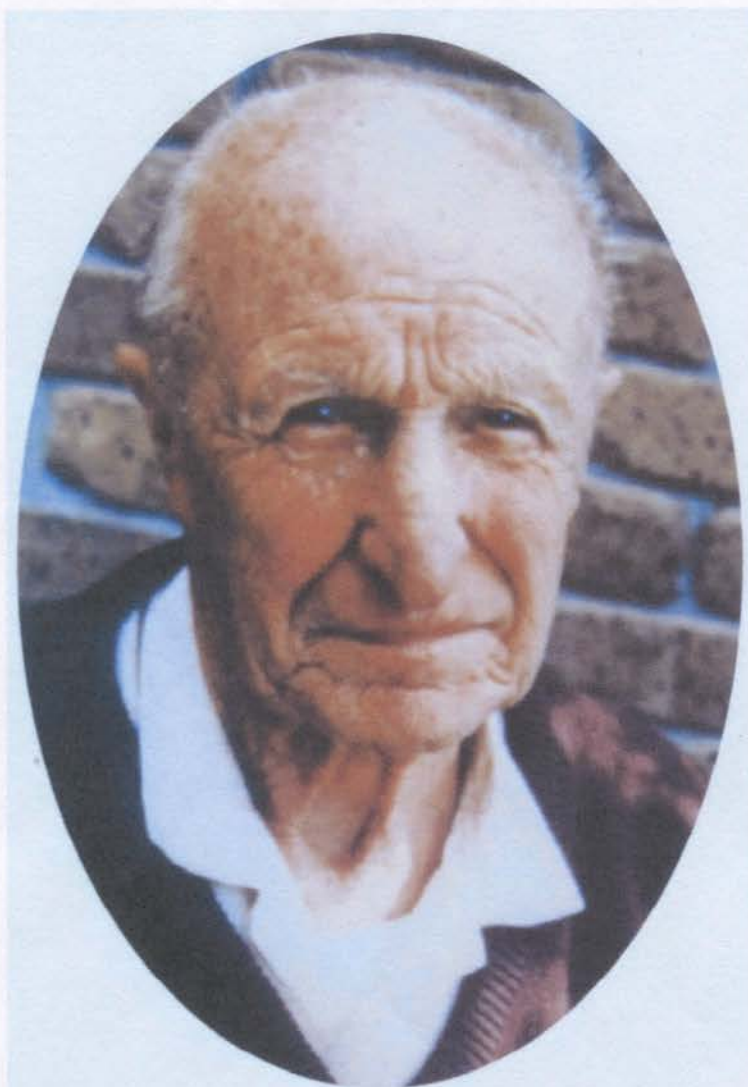


**INTERVIEW WITH MR GEORGE SEDDON**

**EX GARDENER AND FOREMAN AT THE  
BALLARAT BOTANICAL GARDENS**

**BY DR JOHN GARNER**

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**JOHN GARNER** This is a video recording with George Seddon who has had a significant role in the past and present history of the BBG. George, I'm John Garner and on behalf of the Friends of the Ballarat Botanical Gardens I'd like to thank you for agreeing to participate in the oral history programme. This interview is taking place in the verandah of George's house in Cobden Street on a delightful Autumn morning.

**JOHN GARNER** George, again thank you for participating. Can I ask you first of all when you were born and where?

**GEORGE SEDDON** Yes, I was born on 25<sup>th</sup> July 1910 at the Ballarat Water Commission in Grenville Street.

**JOHN GARNER** And did you go to school in Ballarat?

**GEORGE SEDDON** Yes, I went to the Golden Point School and from there I went to the Technical School.

**JOHN GARNER** And how old were you when you left school?

**GEORGE SEDDON** Thirteen.

**JOHN GARNER** Did you study gardening when you were at school?

**GEORGE SEDDON** No. There were no subjects on gardening at that time.

**JOHN GARNER** But your family had a history in gardening?

**GEORGE SEDDON** Oh yes. My father was a great gardener and he taught me quite a lot.

**JOHN GARNER** And did you have a lot of practical experience in your own garden then?

**GEORGE SEDDON** Yes.

**JOHN GARNER** After you left school did you go straight on to gardening?

**GEORGE SEDDON** No I had a couple of jobs that I tried myself out on. I worked for a baker for a while until I stood in one of his cakes and that finished that. Heheh.

**JOHN GARNER** You didn't have your cake and eat it, you left!

**GEORGE SEDDON** And I got a job at the Ballarat Pottery and I was there for nineteen years at the pottery.

**JOHN GARNER** What sort of work did you do there?

**GEORGE SEDDON** I was a fireman and I used to stoke the kilns.



- JOHN GARNER** And you had a lot of, a deal of technical experience there?
- GEORGE SEDDON** Oh yes.
- JOHN GARNER** And you left when you were nineteen but you didn't go into gardening then?
- GEORGE SEDDON** No I worked for nineteen, I'm not sure how old I was. I must have been around the twenty-seven mark then.
- JOHN GARNER** Yes. When you left the pottery you were called up or did you join up?
- GEORGE SEDDON** No, I volunteered. Had the Police Sergeant here checking on me and all sorts of things.
- JOHN GARNER** And what did he find?
- GEORGE SEDDON** He went up to the corner shop and asked them about me, whether I had a good reputation. Of course that was alright, my uncle owned the shop. Heheh.
- JOHN GARNER** Which Service did you join?
- GEORGE SEDDON** I was with the RAAF. We started off in Adelaide, then we moved up to Tocumwal. I had pretty good marks there and I was transferred down to Laverton. And from Laverton, I got posted over to New Guinea.
- JOHN GARNER** And how long were you in New Guinea?
- GEORGE SEDDON** Just on five years.
- JOHN GARNER** You were servicing aeroplanes?
- GEORGE SEDDON** Yes. No. Lancaster Construction Squadron – used to put in the strips or do any building or anything that they required.
- JOHN GARNER** General sort of work?
- GEORGE SEDDON** General strip work.
- JOHN GARNER** Then when you finished in the Air Force in New Guinea you came back to Ballarat?
- GEORGE SEDDON** I came back to Ballarat. And I went to the City Hall and I met George, Colonel Morton.
- JOHN GARNER** And what did he have to say to you.
- GEORGE SEDDON** Well he was quite pleased to think that I'd been away and was a Returned Soldier and he give me a job at the Gardens.
- JOHN GARNER** As a gardener?
- GEORGE SEDDON** Yes, at the Gardens.
- JOHN GARNER** And who was the Curator at that time?
- GEORGE SEDDON** Tom Toop was the former curator but he'd retired. But he still lived in the house there outside the Fernery. But Tom Beaumont had taken over from him. I worked with Tom because he was a pretty good fella and we got on terrific together. Tom had never hammered a nail in his life I don't think, he was a gardener, a true gardener, that's all he'd done. I found for the job as the maintenance. And that's right, the old tin shed we used to live in, or have our lunch in, was pretty dilapidated, ever had a floor in it even. So that was my first job, I got to work and put a floor in. Built a table and put some lino on it and we had a decent little room there to have our lunch.



- JOHN GARNER** Very good. So everyone was pleased to see you back?
- GEORGE SEDDON** That's right. I done most of the maintenance, all the houses were in bad repair and hadn't had any maintenance for some time I don't think.
- JOHN GARNER** The glasshouses?
- GEORGE SEDDON** Yeah, they were all leaking like sieves. Some of them I stripped the glass right out and repainted it and then re-puttied the glass in. Others I put new eh, what would you call them? Metal runners that you can slide the glass in and that was a big help and saved quite a bit of water. Then I used to have to paint the glasshouses. The big show house out in the Gardens of course was the old-time one and shaped like a boat.
- JOHN GARNER** Like an upturned boat, the Keel House did they call it?
- GEORGE SEDDON** I had an awful job to paint that because there was no way you could put a ladder on it so we used to have to put up trestles and then a ladder from the trestle onto the top of the glasshouse and hang over that to paint the glass and it was pretty dangerous I can tell you.
- JOHN GARNER** No occupational health and safety work in evidence?
- GEORGE SEDDON** I got the job then eventually of pulling that glasshouse down and Toop built another one there.
- JOHN GARNER** So what year would that be George, can you remember?
- GEORGE SEDDON** The late 1960s because the Queen visited the old one, she was in 56 and that was still the old one.
- JOHN GARNER** I think it might have been the end of the fifties because when I arrived in Ballarat the new one was up.
- GEORGE SEDDON** Oh well then, about the end of the fifties. Yes.
- JOHN GARNER** And how did you get on with maintaining that house?
- GEORGE SEDDON** Heh heheh....that leaked like a sieve from the day it was bought. Heheheh. They didn't know much about it in those days those builders. They put border holes in the deluge channels to screw it down to the roof so all the deluge channels leaked heheh, oh dear.
- JOHN GARNER** Did you manage to stop them at all?
- GEORGE SEDDON** No, there was no way you could overcome that really.
- JOHN GARNER** And you got on well with Tom Beaumont?
- GEORGE SEDDON** Yes. He was a great friend of mine. In fact Tom has stayed here with me a couple of times. He was so far away, if he wanted to go to Melbourne to see one of the nurseries there it was a long way to go from his place up at the government Gardens down to the station. In the early days there were no early trams at that time so he come and stopped with me for the night before he went to Melbourne.
- JOHN GARNER** He was a great gardener but his great passion was the begonias, is that correct?
- GEORGE SEDDON** Yes. Yes, his passion was begonias.
- JOHN GARNER** Where did he get them from?
- GEORGE SEDDON** We imported all the new varieties from Blackmore & Langdon's in England. They used to come out and had to go through Quarantine and all that sort of business. So eventually we built a quarantine – a little place of our



own at the Gardens. I think I told you before the curator of the Burnley Horticultural come up and he said he didn't know a cabbage from a begonia. Heheheh.

**JOHN GARNER** And he was assessing you was he?

**GEORGE SEDDON** Yes he was supposed to check to see that everything was alright.

**JOHN GARNER** And what was the secret of Tom's success with the begonias?

**GEORGE SEDDON** I think more or less it was the mixture that we used to make up. We used to go from here out to Dunnstown a place called Green's Lane and we used to cut it out in layers just like you would turf a lawn out. We never had any conveyances of our own in those days so we had to hire a contractor with a truck to come out and get them. He'd bring in two loads and tip them up at the Gardens.

**JOHN GARNER** And then you made up your own formula?

**GEORGE SEDDON** Yeah, well we stacked that soil up until it started to rot down and then we made up a mixture of three parts soil, one and a half leaf mould, and three quarters manure, and that was the mixture that the begonias used to grow in. If you put any more manure in you would get what they call a stem cancer, they'd burst and start to run. So you couldn't overdo it with manure.

**JOHN GARNER** And did you have any trouble with the oil that you brought in.

**GEORGE SEDDON** Yes, from Dunnstown of course it was potato country, heheh, we had potato grubs in it heheheh. They got into the tubers there for a while. Took a bit of work to get those out of the tubers.

**JOHN GARNER** And Tom got you working on the begonias then after you'd done all the maintenance?

**GEORGE SEDDON** Yes, he reckoned that it was time that I started to do it. I used to go in every Thursday afternoon and I'd wire up the back rows right around and reset the flowers and then Friday Tom would come in with me and we'd do the whole house. We'd take off all the old blooms, rewire and then he'd go outside the door and he'd look and he'd say "We'll shift that one to there. We mustn't put a pink one next to a white, it kills one another's colour". So we used to stage them so that we never had a light one up against another light one.

**JOHN GARNER** That's important. And you had the Royal Family come on several occasions?

**GEORGE SEDDON** Well yeah. I met the Duke on the first one. He was the one that asked me if we could breed a red carnation, heheh. He said we didn't have one, we had a good scarlet but not a good red. I said no our climate mightn't be suitable to grow the red carnation.

**JOHN GARNER** Did you have much to do with the other plants or trees in the Gardens?

**GEORGE SEDDON** Me? Oh yes. I become to the stage where I used to do most of the pricking orf in the Nursery, all the seedlings and that. I didn't know a lot about the trees because I never had chance to get in and learn those. I knew the big Sequoias, the Wellington, the Wellingtonias and all those fellows, only loquats and carob beans and all those trees, but I wasn't a great man on trees, I've got to admit that. My job basically was in the Nursery, or doing all the maintenance.

**JOHN GARNER** So he gave you enough to do Tom, when he was there?



**GEORGE SEDDON** Oh yes, I'd never run out of work. Repaired broken or leaking water pipes and all that sort of stuff. And I built a complete new house there, the brickwork and all. Yes.

**JOHN GARNER** Which new house was that? That was the new glasshouse?

**GEORGE SEDDON** Glasshouse, yes, in the Nursery.

**JOHN GARNER** You had the statues in the Prime Ministers' Avenue to look after too.

**GEORGE SEDDON** They got finished up, couple were found in the Lily pond. Eventually we got them back but they were a job to clean. Magpies used to love them, heheh.

**JOHN GARNER** I know, because we do some of the cleaning now.

**GEORGE SEDDON** Do you, all those statues?

**JOHN GARNER** We don't do the marble statues, did you do the marble statues as well?

**GEORGE SEDDON** Yes, yes. They were villains of things. And I used to have to repair that big one down in the front of the Claxton, you know Claxton?

**JOHN GARNER** Yes.

**GEORGE SEDDON** They used to knock the arms and heads off that, and I used to have to pick up all that and fix it again.

**JOHN GARNER** So what did you use to clean the marble statues?

**GEORGE SEDDON** Oooh, I dunno. We used to get our mixture from the paint shop. They had a special mixture there for cleaning that sort of stuff. I can't remember much.

**JOHN GARNER** So most of your time would have been spent with Tom, is that right, when you were working?

**GEORGE SEDDON** Yes, yes. He classified me as his foreman but he never ever said so.

**JOHN GARNER** Did you get paid for it?

**GEORGE SEDDON** No, heheh. Pay was pretty miserable in those days.

**JOHN GARNER** You knew a few of the people around the place who sort of had an interest in the Gardens even if they weren't part of it, as it were?

**GEORGE SEDDON** Oh yes. I knew most of the Mayors and they used to come up there and visit us, and Ern Shiels was a great friend of ours, Dr Shiels, used to come up and check on all the fellas if they were crook he'd write out a script on the spot, he was a real character Ern.

**JOHN GARNER** He was indeed wasn't he? He helped you out on a few occasions.

**GEORGE SEDDON** Yes, at one stage, when the Queen was about to arrive, the bed out the front of the glasshouse was all full of bedding begonias. Some vandals got in pulled them all out and threw them all over the place. So at eight o'clock in the morning Tom must have rung Ernie and of course he generally had a bed full of them and they went down and took all Ernie's bedding begonias out, brought them up to the Gardens, planted those and what that was good of the ones laying around and watered them in. You'd never have known they'd been out when the Queen arrived.



**JOHN GARNER** Is that right? Yes. Who of the other guys on the council and so forth that you had anything to do with?

**GEORGE SEDDON** Oh, good old Morton had gone by then and there was Harold Maddern had taken over, he was the Town Clerk. And George Mulwood, he was the Engineer. They were quite good fellas, I got on alright with them. I used to have to ride my bike down to the City Hall every Wednesday to get the pay dockets, for making up the pay. One day there I was talking to Harold Maddern and Mulwood out on the steps of the front and an old bloke ran past bouncing his ball. Mulwood looked at me and he said "How did he get past without a civic reception?" Heheh. Oh, they were funny days those days. Heheh.

**JOHN GARNER** And Jack Chisholm had a deal to do with the Gardens?

**GEORGE SEDDON** Jack Chisholm was there when I was there and Arthur, was it Arthur Nicholson?

**JOHN GARNER** Yes.

**GEORGE SEDDON** He was Mayor several times.

**JOHN GARNER** Yes, and they had an interest in the Gardens?

**GEORGE SEDDON** Oh yeah. Yes. We had a big policeman who was interested in it too. John Press used to ride the motorbike, he was a great gardener, he'd come up there quite often.

**JOHN GARNER** I didn't realise that, he had quite a time there. So, generally, your involvement with the Gardens went for twenty-five?

**GEORGE SEDDON** Twenty-five years.

**JOHN GARNER** Twenty-five years. And did you retire before Tom retired?

**GEORGE SEDDON** Yeah I retired about twelve months before Tom. I got out when I was sixty-three.

**JOHN GARNER** And now you are?

**GEORGE SEDDON** Ninety-six.

**JOHN GARNER** And nobody would believe it. I think that's about covered most of the things we wanted to talk about except for your involvement with the Begonia Festival. I bet you enjoyed that.

**GEORGE SEDDON** Oh yes. That was quite a headache that one. I had begonias scattered all around the town. Down the Alfred Hall. In these little glasshouses out the front of City Hall and of course it was me, I had to go and water the things of a night. Had to trudge right up the back of the City Hall there to get a bucket of water.

**JOHN GARNER** Well it was on your way home.

**GEORGE SEDDON** No, I'd been home, this was seven o'clock at night in the dark, heheh.

**JOHN GARNER** George are there any other bits and pieces that you can think of. There's a few photographs that we have to photograph at this stage.

**GEORGE SEDDON** Oh you want the photos, might shut that off then.

**JOHN GARNER** I'll shut this off. What's that one George?

**GEORGE SEDDON** That's the nurses from the hospital up there, snowballing.

**JOHN GARNER** Yes I can see that, with the old veils on.

**GEORGE SEDDON** Yes.



**JOHN GARNER** What year would that be about, do you think?  
**GEORGE SEDDON** Oooh, I don't know.  
**JOHN GARNER** About the late 1940s I should think, or mid 50s.  
**GEORGE SEDDON** Yeah, that'd be right.  
**JOHN GARNER** Because of the uniform. And the other one is of the Queen.  
**GEORGE SEDDON** The Queen's visit in 1956. That's me standing there.  
**JOHN GARNER** I can see you standing there as well.  
**GEORGE SEDDON** I opened the doors of the house for her. Frank Cutts was the Mayor at that time.  
**JOHN GARNER** Oh, was he? Very good. Thank you very much, it is really great to be able to have that.  
 This is the end of the interview at George Seddon's home.

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John Garner continued the interview with George Seddon at the Ballarat Botanic Gardens on 16<sup>th</sup> May 2006. George was driven around by Lorraine Powell, (History Convenor FBBG), in the 'green machine'.

**JOHN GARNER** Now we are up in the Gardens on the 16<sup>th</sup> May 2006 standing around, and Lorraine is right down the end of the Western Bed with the green machine showing him some of the plants and so forth that has just been completed.  
**JOHN GARNER** What do you reckon, a few changes?  
**GEORGE SEDDON** Yes, a lot of changes.  
**JOHN GARNER** What in particular on the Western Bed?  
**GEORGE SEDDON** Back wall is totally different. All the different varieties in different sections, very good.  
**JOHN GARNER** In the old days it used to be what, a bit of a horticultural rubbish?  
**GEORGE SEDDON** Waterlogged and rubbish.  
**JOHN GARNER** And it's been fenced.  
**GEORGE SEDDON** Oh yes, it looks good, looks very good.  
**JOHN GARNER** What about the trees in the Avenue?  
**GEORGE SEDDON** Very very very good. The old Sequoias are still going well.  
**JOHN GARNER** Some are going better than others I think.  
**GEORGE SEDDON** There was one outside the gate at the back there that we had to take down, right on the edge of the road. They cut it up and the chap that got bees, he got up and he made all the boxes out of it for the beehives. He said it was beautiful wood to work with. Of course we know it was, it was red pine.  
**JOHN GARNER** That glasshouse that you've passed George, that was there in your day was it?



**GEORGE SEDDON** No that was built in my day. I pulled down the two that were up there and the council built that one on where I pulled the others down. The other two were old and falling to bits. I found the docket of one, it was sixty-eight feet long and it had two wings on it and was built for sixty-eight pounds. Heheh.

**JOHN GARNER** So what year was it built in have you any idea?

**GEORGE SEDDON** No, it was way back before Tom Tooop's time.

**JOHN GARNER** Very good. And these were the fish ponds?

**GEORGE SEDDON** The fish ponds.

**JOHN GARNER** They were just inside the entrance to the fernery here?

**GEORGE SEDDON** Yes, on either side.

**JOHN GARNER** Now George originally when you came this fernery was different and bigger?

**GEORGE SEDDON** Oh yes, it was the full length.

**JOHN GARNER** How long would it be altogether?

**GEORGE SEDDON** Oh, it was the full length of the garden. The far end.

**JOHN GARNER** The complete width of the garden. And how tall?

**GEORGE SEDDON** As tall as what's in there now only the turrets were bigger. The far end of the garden was all covered in Clematis, the far end, that used to go through there into Tom's backyard.

**JOHN GARNER** So where is Tom's house?

**GEORGE SEDDON** Tom's house would be in the trees over there.

**JOHN GARNER** Over there? Right.

**GEORGE SEDDON** Toop's house was here right on the corner of the fernery.

**JOHN GARNER** Toop's house right here, and his ashes?

**GEORGE SEDDON** On that outcrop.

**JOHN GARNER** On that outcrop. And those Silver Birches were brought in to sort of fill up after you took the fernery down is that right?

**GEORGE SEDDON** Heheh.

**JOHN GARNER** Remarkable. The Claxton monument, and these are the figures around it and the Friends did in fact spend some thousands of dollars putting this together again about ten years ago but it is now again been the subject of further vandalism. George, you know this statue pretty well?

**GEORGE SEDDON** I'll say I do. I'm just trying to find out which one I put the arm on.

**JOHN GARNER** Which one you put the arm on?

**GEORGE SEDDON** The head was off at one stage, that's gone, or is that the head up the top?

**JOHN GARNER** Yes, that's the head up the top.

**GEORGE SEDDON** That section up there wasn't there in my day, the white part.

**JOHN GARNER** Wasn't it?

**GEORGE SEDDON** No.



**JOHN GARNER** I thought that was....what the head...

**GEORGE SEDDON** The head was sitting on that.

**JOHN GARNER** The head wasn't sitting that high?

**GEORGE SEDDON** No, it was on that.

**JOHN GARNER** So that extra bit of marble has been put there, is that correct?  
In the last twenty-five years?

**GEORGE SEDDON** Well, not in my time it wasn't there.

**JOHN GARNER** Right. What about these figures, how did you used to mend them? With a cement?

**GEORGE SEDDON** Yes. We used to mix up white cement, and bore a hole in them and put a steel pin in and stick them on. There's a, that's the way the things used to be put together.

**JOHN GARNER** Right.

**GEORGE SEDDON** These fountains used to work in my day.

**JOHN GARNER** Right, they're not working now.

**GEORGE SEDDON** No. That used to be a lily pond.

**JOHN GARNER** Oh had it. Nothing there today. Well that's interesting about that extra marble piece, that must have been put on to protect the head I suppose.

**GEORGE SEDDON** It wasn't there in my day.

**JOHN GARNER** So rubberised paint in places did you, that brighten it up?

**GEORGE SEDDON** Yes and we also used rubberised paint...we built the little swimming place over there for the children outside the back gate. Do you remember over there?

**JOHN GARNER** Oh yes I do remember that! A paddling pool.

**GEORGE SEDDON** Used to a little toddler's pool. I used to paint the bottom of that with a rubberised paint.

**JOHN GARNER** This grass that they're mowing now George, how did you fix it all up?

**GEORGE SEDDON** Well when we first came here the boys had to mow it with hand mowers, there was no motor mowers.

**JOHN GARNER** And how long would it have been then?

**GEORGE SEDDON** Oh he'd wait until the grass was three or four inches long before he had it cut it was shocking job to do it.

**JOHN GARNER** It'd keep you fit.

**GEORGE SEDDON** When Tom took over, that was the first job I said to him, we've got to get a motor mower. You'll be killing the boys mucking around with a hand mower, so we got an English mower. One that used to, you could chop up to the thing, pull the handle and tip the grass out, you know. It was automatic, that was marvellous?

END OF INTERVIEW \_\_\_\_\_



John and George speaking casually about George's begonias in his verahdah (24/04/2006):

**JOHN GARNER** Here, there were blooms on your begonias.

**GEORGE SEDDON** Yes, they were full bloom.

**JOHN GARNER** What happened between times?

**GEORGE SEDDON** Well, yesterday was Anzac Day and that was my day every year to cut the flowers off and give them a spell. I'd only water them once more.

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