

## INTERVIEW WITH MR IAN ROSSITER

CITY OF BALLARAT

MANAGER OF STRATEGY DEVELOPMENT & CORPORATE PROJECTS  
& BALLARAT BOTANICAL GARDENS

BY DR JOHN GARNER

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**JOHN GARNER** This is an interview with Ian Rossiter, who has had a significant role in the history of the Ballarat Botanical Gardens. I am John Garner and will interview Ian on behalf of the Friends of the Ballarat Botanical Gardens. Ian, on behalf of the Friends, I would like to thank you for agreeing to participate in their oral history programme. Can we begin by asking you, what is your present position as far as the Gardens is concerned?

**IAN ROSSITER** John, currently my role with the Council is Manager of Strategy Development & Corporate Projects so I have actually very little to do with the Botanical Gardens other than the implementation of some major precinct plans for the lake and the gardens over the next few years.

**JOHN GARNER** So how did you come to Ballarat as it were, and when did you become involved with the Gardens in the first place?

**IAN ROSSITER** When I was around in my early twenties I woke up one morning and decided that I wanted to be a horticulturist because up until then I wasn't really sure I'd pursue study in botany, it hadn't really worked for me. So in my mid twenties I went to Burnley Horticulture College as a mature-age student and studied full time for three years and found myself working as a landscape designer contractor at the end of that period jobs through doing many jobs and working part-time as a nursery person all through those years. It was then that my wife and I decided to start a family and the income stream from landscape design and contracting was a bit questionable to say the least and I looked for a job working for an employer. I found myself working at first of all Mentone Grammar School while they were implemented a major reconstruction of their grounds and shortly after that I took a job with the Monash University Botany Department and it was while I was working there that a colleague of mine who I went through Burnley Horticulture College came to me and said, "Ian, I want you to come and work with me in local government." I said, "No way, I'm never going to work for local government." He kept at me and eventually I spent an evening with this Superintendent of the Gardens at Sandringham City Council and he explained to me about the long-lasting legacy you can achieve when you work for local government with our public open space. I took it hook, line and sinker and worked for about three years at the City of Sandringham in a very native dominated landscape with lots of coast dune areas so very different to Ballarat. My wife and I had always aspired to live in a regional city, we recognised that we were from cities ourselves but both really hankered for more of a rural lifestyle and so on one particular weekend I saw two jobs advertised. One at Coffs Harbour Botanic Garden and the second one at the City of Ballarat and I applied for them both. As destiny would have it I ended up here and I am absolutely thankful I did. The role I was appointed to was as Senior Parks Officer for the City of Ballarat. From that moment on I had line responsibility for Ballarat Botanical Gardens for a period of twelve or thirteen years, fourteen years I guess it is now since 1990.

**JOHN GARNER** It has been a period of a lot of change as well which you have been heavily involved with. What would you say were the important things that happened during the time of, what should I say, your reign as it were?

**IAN ROSSITER** I quite vividly remember a particular day at the time the Director of Parks and Gardens, who was Philip Clingin and he took a phone call. The phone call was from the Chief Executive Officer, and David Pehle was on the other end of the line saying, "We have an offer of up to two million dollars for a benevolent bequest, have you got any major projects in mind?" From that moment on it just gained momentum and what I was of course talking about is the Robert Clark Centre. So two years later, two to three years later, we saw the unveiling of the Robert Clark Conservatory. We saw the implementation of the first stages of a Master Plan for re-landscaping of this sector of the Gardens. We saw the development of the Horticultural Centre as being a base for all of our gardening and clubs that have an affinity to this area. To me that was a major turn in direction because for every day it has now meant that there is a Customer Service presence here at the Botanical Gardens whereas in the past the focus was on maintaining the Gardens as a botanic gardens but not necessarily engaging with the visitors coming in. We weren't resourced to do that. The other thing that I vividly remember was arriving here in 1990 shortly after the hailstorms. So the nurseries that we had here were an absolutely mess. I think they dated back to the 1910s, 1920s and so what seemed to be a disaster at the time, the hailstorm actually created a whole lot of lasting benefit to these Gardens. Through the insurance money that came from the loss of those facilities and also with the injection of major capital funds from Council, we had a state of the art production nursery here that is very much the envy of other Botanical Gardens. I suppose, John, those were two key things that happened. I also think that in the later stages the creation of the North Gardens Wetland, the co-location of the University of Ballarat Horticulture campus, and the arrival of the Australian Prisoner of War memorial have created a real sense of place, in that it is not just about the Central Gardens now. People can see the Gardens as a whole and understand the inter-connections between the North Gardens, the Central Gardens and the South Gardens Reserve.

**JOHN GARNER** It has all been, as I said before, a time of great change. What are the things that you look forward to in future as far as the Gardens are concerned?

**IAN ROSSITER** I think to me John, there's a feeling that the team I have worked with has played, and the various teams over the years, have played a really important process in actually solidifying the Master Plan for these Gardens. So that once and for all there seems to be a plan or a blueprint that we are working towards with the Friends, with the community and all the other groups involved in the Gardens. A common understanding of what we are here to achieve, and how the Gardens are going to change over time. To me I look forward to perhaps coming back in twenty year's time and seeing some more elements of the Master Plan being implemented. I also have a tremendous belief that the Fernery will be the next landmark project for these Gardens and to see that reconstructed and to see many of the plantings that have been done in recent years mature, will just be an amazing ride to see it from concept, to getting done, to getting implemented and then mature.

**JOHN GARNER** The Friends have put aside some \$50,000 plus associated with the statuary area as it were in the closed Fernery. Is that a correct assessment and how long do you think it is likely to be before we start to see some movement from that point of view?

**IAN ROSSITER** It is a correct assessment John. The Friends have committed \$50,000 and I understand have the intention to continue to fund raise for that purpose. Council certainly sees this as a project potentially as one with huge

community support. We already have many thousands of dollars in the Botanical Gardens' Trust Fund which have been pledged for this purpose as well. We have a concept design, so I think we are at the stage where we are ready to take that concept into full design documentation so that we can show the community this is how we are going to do it. Council have notionally made an allocation two years from now in the capital works programme to fund with, partly support from obviously government and community fund raising, to deliver the project which we think is about a half a million dollars. So it is an exciting time again working towards the time when you can see that project enacted

**JOHN GARNER** (interview temporarily suspended) The Gardens aren't static and we have just experienced the movement that goes on continually within the Gardens which is a credit to our staff so I will just pause a bit until he goes a bit further away. Just talk about the Prisoner of War Memorial, there has been a little bit of trouble at the base of the slabs I understand. Is that going to be easy to renovate as it were, or is it going to be a continual difficulty?

**IAN ROSSITER** We believe that the remedy has been put in place. The movement within the granite and the fracturing was evidenced within the first summer period of its situation and there has been a relief line put through to allow expansion of the polished granite, so I'm fairly confident that it has now been address because there is a saw-cut that has been put along at the base of each of the slabs and it has been corked and filled to allow for any movement. But obviously is a watching brief for us and we need to keep an eye on that and ensure that it has been fully rectified. We are blessed in that with the Australia Prisoner of War Memorial the trustees are holding suitable amount of money in trust, in recognition that somewhere down the track whether it is ten years or one hundred years from now, that we may have to significantly invest in a major restoration or extension to the Prison of War Memorial

**JOHN GARNER** Good. The other question concerns the Sequoias which are having a bad time, so how do you see that panning out in future?

**IAN ROSSITER** It is hard one to 'crystal ball gaze' John. Clearly we have been seeing the effects of lowered rainfall and the Cyprus canker being a fungal infection on the trees, have taken effect. And if you look reasonably, it is happening everywhere whether it is in windrows on farms or in these Botanic Gardens. In terms of a fix for it, it is an interesting one. Will we ever get the disease under control enough that the trees can resiliently grow out of it has yet to be shown? If it is at a stage where it is going to impact negatively on the trees, how many will be affected and will they need to be removed is the question. It is certainly a great concern and it is something that needs to be recognised as not just a Ballarat problem and that we get the best advice nationally as to how to treat these trees given that the disease isn't known in this particular species overseas.

**JOHN GARNER** Do you think that because of these sorts of changes there is going to be any review of the Master Plan, does that necessitate it or would it be desirable?

**IAN ROSSITER** John I think normally it is common practice to review a Master Plan say every ten to twenty years, and the plan is now a little over ten years old. There have been minor amendments to the plan in response to the Prisoner of War Memorial and the like and I think given the amount of implementation of the Lake Master Plan that is going on over the next three years will impact on the Gardens in terms of increased usage and pressures. I would say to you it is fairly likely that in about five year's time we will be wanting to review that Master Plan and take stock of particular things like how are we cope with traffic flows, the pedestrian usage and the high density usage associated with such a major destination. In terms of the Botanical element, apart from the *Sequoiadendron*, I'm not aware of too many other

issues that need to be really thrown up there, other than to think about our environmental sustainability and the use of water. So there are a couple of things that might drive us to review how we manage the landscape.

**JOHN GARNER** If we move further afield to the Wetlands, what is the situation there? That is very much associated with water and control of water isn't it?

**IAN ROSSITER** Very much so, but the Wetlands were established to protect Lake Wendouree. More than a third of the inflows to Lake Wendouree is processed through that Wetland and there has always been concern about Lake Wendouree sedimentation and the capacity of it to deal with the nutrient loading of inflows. So the Wetlands has achieved really four things. It has improved the water quality, improved the habitat for particularly the birds of Lake Wendouree precinct, and it has also added a really interesting element to the visitor experience here by providing a very indigenous wild area which is to become the site of future collections of indigenous plants that the *Wathaurong* Aboriginal people used. I see it as a very vital element to experiencing the Ballarat Botanical Gardens. In terms of the water management it is a relatively small area by comparison to Lake Wendouree. Lake Wendouree is a 226 hectare water body; the water bodies of the Wetlands occupy less than two hectares. If people have concerns that the Wetlands is holding back water or consuming water, when you look at the water balance of Lake Wendouree it is not really significant.

**JOHN GARNER** Very good. Ian, those are really the matters I was so hoping you would be able to address, so now are there any bits and pieces you would like to mention?

**IAN ROSSITER** Well, look, John, living and working in this environment has taken I suppose a large part of my life. There are some incredibly memorable experiences, some funny and some sad. I can vividly remember living in the house and one of the first Saturday mornings that the family and I were there. There was a knock at the front door and there were some American tourists asking if we could sell them some *Coca Cola*<sup>TM</sup>. There were numerous requests by brides and grooms about whether they could go into the Conservatory for their wedding photographs because the old Conservatory was a 'View Only' from the outside experience. Another time I had some colleagues up for a conference and we decided that they being from a parks background that it would be interesting to go for a walk around the Gardens early in the morning before we went to the conference on the Sunday, only to find a car bogged up to its axels in the south end of the Gardens. While we organised for Council By-Laws Officers to come up and get the car towed away, a young lady came running up saying "Oh, they've found my car!" She was claiming that the car had been stolen and we of course made it known to her that the thieves must have been very considerate because they not only stole the car but they locked it after they managed to bog it in the Gardens! So look there were many experiences like that. The Begonia Festivals that I have worked on were just a marvellous time because you put your heart and soul and passion into these Gardens and then to see people come and actually engage with the Gardens is just fantastic and it has been a long tradition and I hope it continues to be an even longer tradition. Living in the house, I also had fears at times because I had two young daughters and at that time there was a mental hospital over the road, Lakeside hospital. We had many visitors from the patients; at least we assumed they were patients, who were quite odd in their behaviour. They would wander into your house, they would wander into your backyard, and they would stand at the window and knock and try to see what was going on. But we had to, you know, gently humour them back over the road, or casually ring for the psychiatric nurses to come over.

**JOHN GARNER** I should point out at this stage, that you were in fact living in the Curator's House, actually in the Gardens over there where the Robert Clark Centre is now or nearby.

**IAN ROSSITER** That's right. I think I would be right in saying that we were the last people to live in residence. The residence was used for a Begonia Festival office in the last year before it was demolished and of course that house has now been relocated to Eureka Street so it is quite interesting for my daughters and my wife to drive past occasionally and look at that house. It is still there in Eureka Street and it brings back a few memories. Luckily for us we had a very large German shepherd dog and even though there wasn't a bad bone in her body it was very useful on many occasions to have that dog when I had to go out at night because of a ruckus going on out in the Gardens. Sometimes it was boy scouts just out doing activities, other times it was things that were less innocent and so it was just quite a remarkable place. It was also difficult because living in the Gardens you were accessible twenty-four hours a day, by anyone. Living in your workplace is something that I think people can only do for a limited period of time and it was good for us to actually make the move to build a house out in Buninyong and actually have somewhere else to go when we wanted to. Our memories of living here with such a magnificent garden and just seeing the things that went on here, it was just remarkable.

**JOHN GARNER** In living within the Gardens and with as you say, people coming in, brings us back to where we are sitting and talking, which is in the Statuary pavilion. We have had so much trouble with the statues that are actually outside in the Gardens. They are now looking absolutely marvellous I think, and would you like to comment on vandalism generally?

**IAN ROSSITER** Well, I'm not so much going to comment on vandalism because it is something that has been around since Adam was a boy, but certainly I think the decision to house the statues in an indoor environment so that just like this magnificent collection here it can be preserved for the longest possible time is incredibly important. The Stoddart bequest of statues in the Gardens was a fantastic statement at the time, but I do feel that those statues were never really designed to have a life outside for hundreds of years and to have seen them painstakingly restored by Jude Schlahinger and others who have been working on them over the years I think is a fantastic legacy that we are now going to produce a purpose-built environment to put them in. The challenge for us is not such much about vandalism but our challenge about what do we want to pass on to the next generation, to think about what it is we are going to replace those statues with out in the Gardens in terms of a twenty-first century statement that is going to still strike a chord with the heritage value of these Gardens but also be bold enough to say that this is the Ballarat Botanical Gardens and it is a bit of a statement about them. So I am looking forward to that and it is clearly a debate which is going to be engaging.

**JOHN GARNER** What are your thoughts?

**IAN ROSSITER** My thoughts, John, are that the Ballarat Botanical Gardens has got a number of things, and I would be very keen to see things that emulate the life cycles. By that I mean things like seasons, and the relationship to plants and animals. Perhaps less keen to see figures of people and more keen to see artistic expressions that somehow convey the natural elements, life and death, growth cycles, and all those sorts of things. I would hate to contain our artistry to too tight a thing and I think, you know, Ballarat has always been an incredibly creative community and I am sure we could come up with some great statements that will really put Ballarat's statue collection back on the map, not as a standing collection that we are holding but as something of a collection that would actually grow over time.

**JOHN GARNER** Very good, and any other comments?

**IAN ROSSITER** I would just like to conclude by saying, how fortunate I have felt to be able to participate in the history of the Ballarat Botanical Gardens because my family history has a long series of cycles in association with this place. I am just astounded about my own sense of spirit-place, and what this place means to me, meaning Ballarat the region. Moving to Ballarat perhaps in one mind might have seemed like perhaps a ten year journey at the time we moved and to me it is now terminal. I honestly believe this is the place I will remain and travel away from and come back to for the rest of my life, so I think the Ballarat culture, the spirit of the place is just something quite extraordinary. I think the Friends of the Gardens really express that, it is about that nurturing, that inclusiveness, that working partnership and working together we can achieve incredible things.

**JOHN GARNER** Ian, I must say this has been the most revealing interview. Thank you very much on behalf of the Friends. It has taken a good deal of your time and I am really most impressed by what you have had to say, and as you know the Friends are always looking forward to seeing you and working with you in the future. I would just like to take a picture of you now as you wander around. (Ian is now looking at some of the statues in the Statuary. *Modesty*, and of course our magnificent *Flight from Pompeii*.) Thank you very much Ian, that's really great.

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