

**INTERVIEW WITH MR BOB WHITEHEAD**

**DIRECTOR OF PARKS & GARDENS FOR  
THE CITY OF BALLARAT**

**BY DR JOHN GARNER**

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**JOHN GARNER** This is a video recording of an interview with Bob Whitehead on 7 February 2007. Bob has had a significant role in the management and development of the Ballarat Botanical Gardens having been the Director of Parks and Gardens from 1978-1989. I am John Garner and will interview Bob on behalf of the Oral History Project of the Friends of the Ballarat Botanical Gardens.

**JOHN GARNER** Bob, on behalf of the Friends I would like to thank you for agreeing to participate. Can you tell me, when did you develop your interest in gardens and gardening?

**BOB WHITEHEAD** I think it has always been there John. My grandmother was a very very keen gardener and so were all her offspring including my father. They were all very keen on their gardens. She was so keen and there was a vacant block next door to the house, so they bought that so she could extend the garden to the vacant block. Along with aviaries and birds and so on, but it was a trouble to get Grandma in to a meal from the garden. Call her half an hour early and you might get her there in time, but the gardening side of it, I've never wanted to be anything else but a gardener. So after primary school I went to Burnley Horticultural School as it was in those days, not a college, and did a two-year full-time course. I've been involved in horticulture through Melbourne City Council, Hawthorn City Council and then on to Ballarat.

**JOHN GARNER** When did you move to Ballarat, was it at the time that you took on this position?

**BOB WHITEHEAD** December 1978. The position was created as Director of Parks & Gardens on the advice of Kevin Heinze, we both worked together on Melbourne City Council, and as we all know he worked himself up into a well-known horticultural person. On the pending retirement of Tom Beaumont, the then Council invited Kevin up to ask what they should do to replace Tom. Tom was the Superintendent of the Botanical Gardens and there was another Superintendent for the rest of the city. Kevin's advice was to appoint a Director of Parks & Gardens over the whole of the city and that advice was accepted and acted upon by the council.

**JOHN GARNER** So it was a rather extended job that you entered in to.

**BOB WHITEHEAD** Yes, prior to coming here I worked at Parks & Gardens, as curator as it was in those days, at the City of Hawthorn and prior to that I worked for something like twenty-one years for Melbourne City Council in their nurseries situated in the Fitzroy Gardens. It has been a very enjoyable, challenging career.

**JOHN GARNER** Yes indeed. You weren't born in Ballarat, but you have been in Ballarat ever since you took on this particular position.

**BOB WHITEHEAD** Yes I was born in Footscray actually and lived most of my life in Box Hill. I had the choice after Burnley of going to the Melbourne Botanic Gardens or the Melbourne City Council, and chose MCC for various reasons and then went on to apply for the position at Hawthorn and was there for 11 years I think it was, or 17 years, something like that. Then I was invited to apply for this position here, a newly formed position.

**JOHN GARNER** And who did you take over from?

**BOB WHITEHEAD** No one actually. It was a new position and there was nobody here in charge of the whole city. Tom Beaumont retired from the Botanic Gardens and the other fellow involved was for sports grounds, street trees and the rest. It was my job to manage the Botanical Gardens and everything green in the city of Ballarat. Sports grounds, street trees, nature strips whatever, Botanical Gardens all came under my direction.

**JOHN GARNER** As far as the Gardens were concerned, the Begonia Festival I suppose was the major event of the year. Were you heavily involved in that too?

**BOB WHITEHEAD** Not in the organisation of it. I guess heavily involved in the fact that the Gardens were the centre of the festival and they needed to be right on top during that time.

**JOHN GARNER** What would you say were the significant events during your tenure, particularly associated with the Botanical Gardens, or in particular associated with the Botanical Gardens?

**BOB WHITEHEAD** I think probably, I don't say this in a derogatory fashion, but perhaps freeing up techniques, more modern techniques. Tom had grown up in this position from a boy, I think he was thirteen when he started here, and I guess being in the country had its drawbacks inasmuch as you weren't able to keep up with modern developments going on in the capital cities around Australia. So we were able to include or introduce new methods and new developments to make the running of the Gardens so much easier and more efficient in a sense. That's certainly not a derogatory remark towards anybody, but we went from changing sprinklers etc by hand and moving hoses and sprinklers on stands to putting in a fully automatic watering system. We introduced new mowing equipment, mowed the Gardens in perhaps about one day or two days against a week and that extended out into the sports grounds as well from two hours to mow a sports ground down to about twenty minutes. So, those sort of techniques were introduced. We developed a listing of all the street trees in such a fashion that it, before computers I guess, but looking at computers coming on felt that we would try to develop a listing so that it could be included on a computer. Now whether there was or not I don't know because I left in the meantime.

**JOHN GARNER** Yes, yes, quite. What were the major challenges apart from that during your tenure? Anything else particularly?

**BOB WHITEHEAD** I think generally getting the whole department onto a more efficient track and maintaining the high standard of the Gardens in particular that Tom had set, and throughout the city improving the upkeep of the city itself. As I say improving again, that's not a derogatory remark against the people at the time, but maintaining perhaps improving the standards.

**JOHN GARNER** What about the characters that you came across during this time? Would you like to comment on any of them?

**BOB WHITEHEAD** No, I don't think there was any outstanding, though perhaps the one that sticks in my mind I didn't ever know but can remember Tom

Beaumont telling me about Tom Toop coming out each morning and issuing instructions to each of his staff and one morning he came out and said to two people, today you will start painting the Fernery. One looked at Mr Toop and said, Mr Toop, that's a very high building how are we going to paint that? And he said, that's easy, you will stand on one side with a pot of paint and you will take the end of a piece of rope around your waist. You will throw it over the top of the Fernery and he will tie that end around his waist and as you paint oop, he will paint doon. Hahah. Tickled me that one over the years.

**JOHN GARNER** Looking around you now, at the Gardens as they are, what are your thoughts about the whole situation.

**BOB WHITEHEAD** I'm concerned about the Redwoods of course. They are the backbone of these gardens, there is history there and I am very concerned. I just hope there is some way found to get them through this crisis that they are enduring at this moment. The Fernery of course is an amazing building, some would say it is out of character with the Gardens that's probably a personal thing. But for Robert Clark to provide the amount of money which he did must have happened after my time of course.

**JOHN GARNER** That is the Conservatory that we are sitting in now, that's what you are talking about?

**BOB WHITEHEAD** Yes. I consider that the old conservatory, there were two of them you know, one was the old Keel House which looked like a boat turned upside down and that's where it got its name from. The next one was good but you could only view things from outside, you weren't allowed inside. We altered the display of that in such a way that people could see more of the displays, more of the begonias. This one here will fit more in here and you can get right up close to everythings, it's just great.

**JOHN GARNER** Yes. And the situation with the statues?

**BOB WHITEHEAD** Yes well that's been ongoing. In my time on more than one occasion we had to deal with statues that had been pulled off their stands, vandalised and it was certainly a depressing situation because of the beauty of the statues and the history attached to them, the history attached to the Gardens. There is a lot of history here. You've seen the redwoods and they are really only babies compared to the ones growing in California in the United States. It is sad to see them deteriorate like they are.

**JOHN GARNER** Yes, yes, it is indeed. You were here when the Friends set up originally which would be nearly twenty years ago?

**BOB WHITEHEAD** Yes, well Ian Smith, the former Town Clerk and myself were instrumental in setting up the Friends and to me it is one of those things we can look back on and see how far they have travelled and what the Friends are doing today. It is just wonderful to think one has had the privilege of being involved in setting up such a very successful and prove to people that the organisation benefited and to see that interest carrying on, it is really great and satisfying. I have personally resigned from the Friends when I retired for the simple reason I didn't want it to be seen that I was influencing anybody from behind as it were, and I thought once I retired, that's it. Reluctantly I pulled out. The Friends give garden talks once a month starting at the Town Hall supper room and then moving up here to the Clark Centre and they were well received by the public with speakers from all walks of life and horticulture. The other thing we did apart from the Friends at that stage, we introduced other people displaying in the Gardens, started off principally with the Cacti & Succulent Society and let them have one side of the old Conservatory for their displays. I think that was carried on I'm not sure. It was a good way of

broadening the displays of the Gardens and letting others share their expertise with the public.

**JOHN GARNER** How do you see the future of the Gardens?

**BOB WHITEHEAD** I think there is a great future here, great challenges, and if those challenges can be met these Gardens should go on and on and be of great public interest to not only the residents of Ballarat but to visitors, many of whom come to this place regardless themselves so it is certainly well known.

**JOHN GARNER** Exactly. Is there anything else you'd like to say to finish off this interview as it were?

**BOB WHITEHEAD** I think probably just to say that I've been privileged to be appointed the first Director of Parks & Gardens for such a wonderful city as Ballarat and to be involved in the horticulture aspect of this fine city. It is certainly well known for its horticultural facilities throughout Australia and indeed throughout the world. It has attracted royalty. We know the Queen has been here I think on more than one occasion. I personally had the privilege of escorting the Duke of Kent through the old Conservatories so the Gardens are well know by people right across the spectrum and it has been a privilege to have been involved.

**JOHN GARNER** Well thank you very much Bob for giving up your time and talking to us in this way. It is certainly very important from the Friends point of view that we record all these piece of information about the past and indeed record what's going on in the present and so on their behalf I'd like to thank you once again for participating and maybe you'd like a cup of coffee?

**BOB WHITEHEAD** Thank you John it has been a pleasure.

End of interview

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