

This is a video recording of an interview with Bob Whitehead on the 7th February 2007.

Bob has had a significant role in the management and development of the Ballarat Botanical Gardens having been the Director of the Parks and Gardens from 1978 to 1989.

I am John Garner and am interviewing Bob on behalf of the Oral History Programme of the Friends of the Ballarat Botanical Gardens.

Bob on behalf of the Friends I would like to thank you for agreeing to participate.

Now can you tell me when did you develop your interest in gardens and gardening?

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 garden. She was so keen that. They lived in Black Rock and there was a vacant block next door to the house. So they bought that so that he could extend the garden onto the vacant block. Along with aviaries, birds and so on. It was always a trouble to get grandma into a meal from the garden. You called her half an hour early and you might get her there on time. But the gardening side of it I just never wanted to be anything else but a gardener. After primary school I went to Burnley Horticultural School as it was in those days, not a College and it was a two year full time course. I've been involved in horticulture through Melbourne City Council, Hawthorn City Council, and then on to Ballarat.

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

December 1978 the position was created of Director Parks and Gardens on the advice of Kevin Heinze. We both worked for the Melbourne City Council and as you well know he worked himself up into a well-known horticultural person. Pending retirement of Tom Beaumont the Council then 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 of the rest of the City. Kevin's advice was to appoint a Director of Parks and Gardens over the whole City. That advice was accepted and acted upon by Council.

So it was rather an extended job that you entered into.

Yes prior to coming here I was Director of Parks and Gardens or Curator as it was called in those days for City of Hawthorn and prior to that I worked for something like 21 years for the Melbourne City Council and their nursery situated in the Fitzroy Gardens so it has been a very enjoyable, challenging career.

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

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 Melbourne Botanical Gardens for the Melbourne City Council and chose Melbourne City Council for various reasons and then went on to apply for the position at Hawthorn and there for eleven years I think it was, seventeen years, something like that, and then I was invited to apply for this position. A newly formed position.

And who did you take over from?

No-one actually – it was a new position. There was nobody here in charge of the whole City. Tom Beaumont was in charge of the Botanical Gardens and another fellow involved with the 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 – median strips Botanical Gardens – it call came under my direction.

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?

Not in the organisation of it but I guess heavily involved in the fact that the gardens were centre of the Festival and they needed to be right on top during that time.

What would you say were the significant events during your tenure and your particular association with the Botanical Gardens.

I think probably, and I don't say that in a derogatory fashion, but perhaps bringing up techniques, more modern techniques. Tom had grown up in this position from a boy of 13 when he started here and I guess being in the country had its drawbacks in as much that you weren't able to keep up with modern developments that were going on in the capital cities around Australia. 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. Certainly not derogatory remark to anybody. But we went from changing sprinklers etc by hand and moving hoses on sprinklers on stands to putting in automatic watering systems. We introduced new mowing equipment. We mowed the gardens in one or two days instead of a week. And that extended out into sports grounds as well. Two hours mowing a sports ground down to twenty minutes. So those sort of techniques were introduced. We developed a listing of all the seed trees in such a fashion that, before computers I guess. But looking at computers coming on we developed a listing that could be put on a computer. Now whether there was or not I don't know.

What were the major challenges apart from that during your tenure? Anything else particularly?

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. When saying improving, that is not a derogatory remark on the people at that time but maintaining and perhaps improving the standards.

What about the characters that you came across during this time, would you like to comment on any of them?

Ah no, I don't think there were any that were outstanding, but perhaps one that sticks in my mind, I didn't ever know but I can remember Tom Beaumont telling me about Tom Toop coming out each morning and issuing instructions to each of his staff. One morning he came out and said to two people "Today you will start painting the fernery." They looked at Mr Toop and said "But Mr Toop that is a very high building, how are we going to paint that?" "That's easy" he said "You will stand on one side with a pot of paint and you will tie the end of this piece of rope around your waist. You'll 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."

Looking around you now, at the gardens as they are, what are your thoughts about the whole situation?

I'm concerned about the Redwoods of course – they're the backbone of these gardens. The history there, I'm very concerned. And I just hope there is some way found to get them through this crisis they are enduring at the moment. The Conservatory of course is an amazing building. Some would say it is out of character with the Gardens. Probably a personal opinion. But for Robert Clarke to provide the amount of money that he did. It happened after my time of course. When you consider the old Conservatory, there were two of them actually, one was the old Keel House which looked like a boat turned upside down and I suppose that's where it got its name from. The next one was good but you could only view things from outside. You were not

allowed inside. We altered the display of that in such a way that you could see more of the display of begonias. And with this one here people can walk in here and get right up close to see the display.

And the situation with the statues?

Yes, well that's been ongoing. In my time there was more than one occasion when the statues have been pulled off their stands and vandalised. It is certainly a depressing situation. The beauty of the statues and history attached to them and the history attached to the gardens. And there is a lot of history here. We see the Redwoods but they are only babies compared with the ones growing in California. Sad to see them deteriorating as they are.

You were here when the Friends were set up which would be nearly twenty years ago. Is that correct?

Yes I am first and foremost aFor me it is something that you can look back on and see how far you have travelled and what the Friends are doing today. It's just wonderful to think that one's had the privilege of being involved in setting up such a very successful group of people and to see that interest carrying on. It's really great and satisfying. I have personally resigned from the Friends when I retired for the simple reason that I didn't want to be seen as influencing anybody from behind as it were. I retired and that's it. Reluctantly I pulled out. But the Friends did run gardening talks once a month starting at the Town Hall in the supper room then moving up here to the Clarke Centre. They were well received by the public. We had speakers from all walks of life – horticultural. The other thing we did apart from the Friends at this stage we introduced other people into displaying in the Gardens. We started off with the Cacti and Succulent Society. We 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.

And how do you see the future of the Gardens?

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

Is there anything else you would like to say to finish of this interview as it were?

Oh just to say that I've been privileged to be appointed the first Director of Parks and Gardens in such a wonderful city as Ballarat and to be involved in the horticultural aspect of this fine city and it is certainly well known for its horticultural facilities throughout Australia. Indeed throughout the world. It has attracted royalty, we know that the Queen has been here on more than one occasion. I personally had the privilege of escorting the Duke of Kent through the older conservatory. So the Gardens are well known by people right across the spectrum, and it has been a privilege to have been involved.

Well thank you very much Bob in giving up your time and talking to us. It is certainly very important from the Friend's point of view that we record all these pieces of information about the past as well as recording what is going on in the present. I thank you once again for participating.

Thank you John, it's been a pleasure.