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1950'S

Article prepared for Toni Lea Howie for The Ballarat Courier on Tom Beaumont and the Ballarat Botanical Gardens. Researched by Roy Mosman, Historical Convenor of the Friends of the Botanical Gardens referring to the working life of Thomas Charles Beaumont.

Young Tom Beaumont started work at the Ballarat Botanical Gardens as a lad gardener under the then curator Thomas Toop on 12<sup>th</sup> December 1924 at the age of 13 years and 9 months. He had been interviewed for the job by Tom Toop in the presence of his wife; and it was reported that Tom Toop (a tall, lean man of ~~some~~ <sup>OVER</sup> 6 feet 183) cm and Tom Beaumont, a very slender short lad) said to him, "But you're very small". His wife who must have been suitably impressed replied, "But dear, he will grow"; so he got the job. However, Tom Beaumont as a man never grew very tall or big physically, but in his years at his one and only job he achieved national and world wide acclaim in his chosen profession.

His mentor, Tom Toop who had been at the gardens since 1890 during the time of the first curator George Longley and himself the son and grandson of English gardeners was thoroughly trained in all aspects of horticulture had been held in very high regard as a horticulturist and a thorough gentleman was appointed curator in 1914. Tom Toop had taken a fatherly and intense interest in the training of Tom Beaumont for those who knew Mr Toop well all knew of this, an interest which was also shared by young Tom Beaumont in his keenness to learn his profession.

As the years rolled on it became most evident that Tom Beaumont was so keen to learn he would never be satisfied to be just another one of the garden's staff, but was destined for leadership at the top; such was his keenness to learn in his search for knowledge and experience.

During the years he was employed at the gardens vast changes occurred. In his early days from 1924 the trees were very much smaller than the giants we see today. In very early times the south end had a propagation plot and nursery glass houses. Later there were still glass houses at the nurseries at both the north and the south ends. In 1927 the south end was abandoned and demolished with the north end glass houses being extended and enlarged where they are still located today. The first fernery was very large 460 feet by 63 feet and completely covered the area from east to west. In these early days not only ferns but also many exotic plants such as azaleas, fuchsias, camellias, ericas and various climbing plants were grown, some even showing through the highest rafters of the roof. Until 1926 the fernery was locked every night at sunset and re-opened every morning. The large fernery was pulled down by Tom Beaumont and the other staff in 1926 and a new one built, two thirds of the original size. Many years later in the 1970s this fernery fell into disrepair and was replaced by another one, one third of the original size which again is now badly in need of attention or replacement.

The gardens area at this time was surrounded by a low expanded metal fence with a capping on the top. It had some 12 or 13 old style cyclone gates which Tom Beaumont had to open every morning and close at sunset. He could recall the days when it was his job to boil water in a wood fired outdoor copper and sold for 2 pence (2 cents) for 2 quarts (2¼ litres) for which picnickers lined up with their billies and teapots containing tea. Even in those early days the north and south parklands or reserves were totally closed with galvanised iron fencing which in Tom Beaumont's day were removed from the parklands.

Tom Toop followed on from the early days of the 1890s the pioneering of the now world famous tuberous begonias in the nursery glass-houses and conservatories for public viewing with new varieties arriving yearly from Blackmore & Langdon of Bath in England. Tom Beaumont became involved in this culture with him at a very early age learning the art of propagation from cuttings taken from the mother plants when they grew in early spring.

In the year 1934 the Adam Lindsay Gordon Cottage was removed from the rear of Craig's Hotel to a site behind the fernery then replacing the parrot and cockatoo cages which were there. This is now used as a craft cottage open at weekends and holidays and is of great interest to tourists.

The garden's curators of those days also had the care and maintenance of the Lake Wendouree foreshore trees, so that when it became necessary to move the tramway 7 or 8 feet (210 - 240 cms) towards the lake a big row of pine trees (*Pinus Radiata*) had to grubbed out by hand methods by Tom Beaumont and some older employees of the gardens staff using mattocks and shovels, axes and cross cut saws.

In 1937 it was arranged to bring in a pair of squirrels from the Nathan's property known as Rippon-Lea. Tom Beaumont recalled the day well on Saturday 1<sup>st</sup> November when he had to bring them up to the gardens on his bike in a box from the railway station. On arrival Tom Toop was trying to get an obstinate one from the box and its sharp teeth went quickly through his finger. On the second attempt he grabbed the squirrel by its fluffy tail which came off in his hand. For years the squirrels at the gardens were a great delight to the public, adults and children alike. They would stand erect with their fluffy tails and nibbling on acorns and any other food that was there. They took up residence in the high *Sequoiadendron*, otherwise known as Mammoth trees, on the east pathway and the oak trees nearby. Tom Beaumont fed them every second day with whole maize and their numbers increased to between 30 or 40 over the years. They would bury the maize and acorns first biting off the growing tip so they would not germinate. Sadly feral cats attacked these fascinating animals until they were ultimately completely wiped out.

In 1938 the low fence surrounding the gardens was removed opening up the entire area completely to the public; in the same year sewerage arrived at the gardens and the north and south toilet blocks were erected.

Tom Toop and Tom Beaumont together grafted the two in-arched weeping American Elms just off the east pathway. Tom Beaumont vividly remembered holding the two elm branches together while his "boss" did the graft of the two together. This tree is now sometimes referred to as the "Bridal Tree" due <sup>to</sup> its being very popular for wedding photographs.

Together these men were responsible for many beautiful displays in the glass houses with the tuberous begonias, hanging baskets of begonias, cyclamen, Gloxinia, Streptocarpus, geranium and pelargoniums, cinerarias, schizanthus, calceolaria interspersed at times with trailing blue lobelia and ferns, and these were in the east west conservatory built in 1906 at the north end of the gardens and also the smaller glass houses at the south end. It is interesting to note that some of these flowers have not been grown in recent years at the gardens.

The outdoor flower bed displays were greatly improved by the removal of a huge cypress tree many metres across and branches falling right down to the lawn level and this opened up a complete new vista of the whole north area to the many and varied displays of colour through all the seasons of the year.

Tom Beaumont recalled the Quercus Robusta Oak tree adjacent to the east path being so unusually low for an oak of this type <sup>and</sup> ~~was~~ said it was grown from an acorn from Sir Winston Churchill's country estate at Chartwell but it is so shaped because a possum nipped out the centre growing stem while it was very young and it never grew another central stem.

Tom Toop retired in December 1943 when aged 77 years but lived on at the gardens in the original curator's residence next to the fernery until his death aged 91 years in 1957.

Tom Beaumont was on active service during the World War II years. During his absence William Lindsay who had been a foreman at the Gardens for many years and latterly believed to be a Parks and Gardens staff supervisor, was Acting Curator and quite an old man at the time, but with limited staff in the war years had difficulties in keeping the gardens presentable; however Tom Beaumont returned to the gardens when discharged from active service and was appointed Superintendent in 1947. It was to his credit that he was always willing to be out with his staff doing the manual work as well as his planning and administration duties.

The Begonia Festival was started in 1953, after the late Edgar Bartrop had returned from an overseas trip, having witnessed several festivals and very keen to start a festival in Ballarat. Tom Beaumont attended the first meeting of the Begonia Festival Association and it was to his delight that it was named after his then famous begonias, which each year of the begonia festival he continued to produce an outstanding display of colour in the old 1906 "Keel" Conservatory, (Keel being the shape of an upturned boat, hence the name). This was located at the north end of the gardens. This Conservatory provided viewing on the south side and east end only. The whole roof, north side and west end had to be whitewashed prior to the summer hot weather every year, which was part of Tom Beaumont and the gardeners duties.

In 1954 at the time of the second Begonia Festival Queen Elizabeth and Prince Phillip visited Ballarat, with the Botanical Gardens being the only place the Queen visited at Ballarat and where the official reception took place. People took up vantage points from 10 pm the night before and stayed all night. Others arrived as early as 7 am to get a good view of the Queen and Prince Phillip when they arrived about 10 am. Tom Beaumont's Begonias were a magnificent sight as also were the colourful garden beds proudly displayed and protected by wire fencing in case of a stampede of people who had arrived by the thousands. The lawns suffered badly with so many people walking and standing for so long but recovered later after a thorough watering. This event proved to be a proud time for Tom Beaumont.

In 1957 the Royal visit was followed by the Queen Mother's visit, again during the Begonia Festival. The Queen Mother is reported to have told Tom Beaumont and the Mayor Cr Jack Chisholm on a walk through the conservatory begonias, "We grow them like saucers, you grow them like plates".

New and novelty tuberous begonias hybridised by Blackmore & Langdon, England, would be ordered every year. Cuttings were taken as growth began in the spring. Tom Toop trained Tom Beaumont in the skill required and three or four cuttings were able to be grown from the new varieties each season. However Tom Beaumont improved on the methods used <sup>so</sup> that as a result he was able to get 20 to 25 cuttings each time by changing the method. His old "boss" came out at one time and asked, "What did you do that for"; he returned each day to see the result and finally he said, "Oh well you live and learn". Tom Toop was supposed to be a real master at that sort of work. Tom Beaumont had been successful in changing the propagation method and said that in a talk he gave to the Rotary Club, "I haven't lost one yet".

The Prime Minister's Avenue commenced on 2<sup>nd</sup> March 1940 when some of the first twelve busts were unveiled by the Governor Sir Winston Duggan from funds originally donated by Colonel R. A. Crouch, Federal politician, solicitor, benefactor and also had a distinguished war service in the Middle East during the 1914-18 War. When the original funds were exhausted the Council has taken up the finance continuing to provide busts every time there is a new Prime Minister.

The original conservatory which had served the gardens well since 1906 was dismantled in 1959 and a modern larger conservatory, two and a half times the size, was built. This had a louvred verandah completely around the whole glass house allowing public viewing on all four sides. It was opened on 2<sup>nd</sup> March 1960 and was made possible by a bequest from the John H. Cuthbert Estate and also a generous gift from his widow, Mabel Cuthbert. The new conservatory became known as the Begonia House as it enabled Tom Beaumont to further develop his skills as a grower and propagator of tuberous begonias so his displays during the Begonia Festival extended greatly together with all other seasonal potted displays, all greatly admired by the thousands of visitors, tourists and Ballarat citizens.

It was during Tom Beaumont's time that the Reflection Bowl near the main entrance was presented on 22<sup>nd</sup> October 1938. It had a chrome plated bowl and central pedestal and this was at the Biennial Conference of the Protestant Alliance Friendly Society of Australasia and the 70<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the founding of the Society in Ballarat. The Wishing Well was provided by the Ballarat Rotary Club and during its early years raised over \$1,000 annually for distribution to various worthy causes.

Many commemorative trees still flourish in the gardens today were planted during this time. To name a few - The Coronation Oak of 1937 honouring King George VI and Queen Elizabeth accession to the throne, The Queen Elizabeth, beautiful Pin Oak (*Quercus Palustris*) planted by the Country Women's Association to honour Princess Elizabeth's 21st birthday in 1947. The Aleppo Pine planted in 1965 from seed obtained from Lone Pine, Gallipoli stands at the ~~East~~ end. The *Taxodium Distichum* commonly known as Swamp Cypress at the south end to commemorate the marriage of Prince Charles and Princess Diana. The Liquidamber Festeri planted in memory of Harvey Coulter on his 100<sup>th</sup> birthday having worked for many years at the gardens and retired at the age of 84.

Tom Beaumont was a member of the Ballarat Rotary Club and was awarded the ~~MBE~~ <sup>BEM IN 1969</sup> for his outstanding work at the gardens particularly his great skill in cultivation and breathtaking displays of the begonias always at their peak of perfection at the time of the Begonia Festival. He resided in the brick veneer residence built in 1958/59 when the original curator's residence was demolished in 1957. Tom Beaumont would work long

hours at weekends as well and even after dark he would be found in the glass houses or in the summer months shifting hoses around the lawns and garden beds. It was not until years later a sprinkler system was installed.

He deplored the constant vandalism which occurred at the gardens and remembered with horror the vandalism which occurred the night before the Queen Mother's visit in 1957 and the repeated destruction of the maze in the North Reserve culminating in the burning of the centre rotunda and much of the hedges of the maze which resulted sadly in its final removal.

Tom Beaumont was always available to judge at the Ballarat Horticultural Society shows and for many years judged the dahlias and other flowers at annual autumn shows held during the Begonia Festival. He liberally talked at the Horticultural Society's monthly meetings of members and excelled in answering all questions which members would put to him regarding gardening problems. He was a founding member of the Friends of the Botanical Gardens in 1983 after his retirement as superintendent in December 1978. In his retirement he continued to cultivate begonias in a glass house at his home, and when his health failed in later years he was helped by his friends to keep his interest going. He died in June 1989 after a life-long career at the Ballarat Botanical Gardens and was well known for his devotion to the job. He achieved the gratitude of all the visitors to the gardens and the citizens of Ballarat for his well known horticultural achievements at Ballarat's best and finest tourist attraction. Much credit also goes to a loyal garden staff who devoted up to 50 years of their working lives with both Tom Toop and Tom Beaumont.