

**INTERVIEW WITH MR IAN SMITH
BALLARAT CITY COUNCIL TOWN CLERK
& BALLARAT BOTANICAL GARDENS**

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JOHN GARNER This is an interview with Ian Smith who had a significant role in the history of the Ballarat Botanical Gardens and the Friends Group. I'm John Garner and I 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 the oral history programme. Can I begin by asking you when did your interest in the Botanical Gardens commence?

IAN SMITH Well I suppose of course it was part and parcel of my role at the Council. I came here in 1969 to be the deputy to Frank Rogers with the understanding that I would succeed him in due course as Town Clerk. Though I have memories back from a small boy of the Ballarat Gardens. My parents were very close friends of Sid Weir and his wife and I can recall coming to Ballarat a couple of times as a child and even attending the wedding of Sid's daughter. I recall that the wedding breakfast was held in what we now know as Lake Lodge.

JOHN GARNER Very interesting, so you weren't born in Ballarat. Where about did you start off?

IAN SMITH I was born in Camberwell and lived there. My father died in 1944 and we had to sell the family home and move to Box Hill and then I went to the country. I joined the bank when I first left school and I was transferred to Horsham in 1953. It was there I discovered that there wasn't much money in banking and I had the opportunity of going into local government and I discovered there wasn't much more money in local government either but there I stayed for nearly the next forty years, in local government.

JOHN GARNER Yes, and you moved to Ballarat in 1969. Did you have an interest in horticulture and history before you came?

IAN SMITH Well, heh, I've had an interest in horticulture mainly from the point of view of trying to have a garden but I've certainly had an interest in history for a long while. I think I owe that to a history teacher we had in secondary school in about form four I think, who on his first day marched into the room, wrote up on the board "we learn from history that we do not learn from history". And you know it took me nearly forty years be I understood what that was all about. I think he was a good teacher and I think that stirred an interest in history and that.

JOHN GARNER And as far as the Botanical Gardens are concerned, were you involved in it when you were involved in Horsham?

IAN SMITH No. Other than the fact that they were part of the council's activity I didn't have any intrinsic interest in them, such as I've had with the Ballarat Gardens.

JOHN GARNER What were the particular things you remember about the Botanical Gardens in association with your work at the council?

IAN SMITH Of course, when I came here in 1969 the Botanical Gardens and the rest of the horticultural elements of the city were two quite distinct departments. Tom Beaumont was the superintendent of the Botanical Gardens and Tom's activities and interest extended no further than the boundaries of the Botanical Gardens. Everything else – all the Parks, Victoria Park and the like, Eureka, street trees, street plantations, the ovals – they were all under the supervision of what was called the Superintendent of Parklands who in those days was Peter Hetherington. This had been a pattern, I discovered, probably for the whole of the existence of both the city and the old town of Ballarat East. Tom was heading towards retiring age and as I recall the council were a bit concerned about what was going to happen if and when Tom retired. What's going to happen to the Begonias? What's going to happen to the Gardens? Now I had the distinct advantage as did few others on the staff of council, of not being a Ballarat person and therefore could see thing from a different perspective. Jessie Scott who was elected to the council in 1972 of course latched onto the horticultural elements of the city which is expected Jessie would, she had always had a strong interest and association with them. And I think it was during her term as mayor if I remember rightly, I'd have to look the dates up, that the question of Tom's retirement really started to be considered. Jessie, as she did in so many areas, had the foresight to realise that the whole of the horticultural elements of the city needed to be brought under one umbrella, one man. It so happened that she was fairly friendly with Kevin Heinze and we consulted Kevin. Did he know of anybody who we might perhaps think about and even talk to, who might be able to fulfil the role as the superintendent of Parks and Gardens. He gave us a particular name. I was detailed to contact this person which I did after hours where a.) I couldn't be heard in the office speaking to this person and b.) where they wouldn't be heard by anybody in their office speaking to me. The decision was then taken because Tom indicated that he was ready to retire. He'd never been able to take his long service leave because if he had he would have had to move out of the residence of the Gardens because if he said, if he tried to take his long service leave and was living in the Gardens it would be impossible. He'd been on the staff of course since 1925 or something, he was an institution and almost a law unto himself. By the mid seventies he had come to the decision it was time to retire. So Jessie was able to persuade the council to meld the horticultural elements of the city into one department with one person as the overall leader of it. And so the position was advertised. The result of course was that Bob Whitehead was appointed. Now I haven't mentioned the name of the person Kevin Heinze gave us but I don't need to, we all know who it was, heheh, Bob Whitehead. So Bob came and took over and he had the task of integrating the whole of the horticultural elements of the city into one.

JOHN GARNER I interviewed Bob last week, or a couple of weeks ago, and that sort of all fits together.

IAN SMITH Good, good. You see, that was a major change because, well as far back as the, again I'd have to look to get precise dates, certainly as far back as the latter parts of the nineteenth century you had the superintendent of the Botanical Gardens, you had the superintendent or curators as they were called in those days of the ovals, the curator of Parks. I think Victoria Park had a separate curator. So this change in the 1970s was a major shift, a major change from the way things had been for close to a hundred years. At one stage of course, in the early history of the Gardens as you know, the Botanical Gardens was divided in two. You had a supervisor of the north end and a supervisor at the south end, or east and west I've forgotten which.

JOHN GARNER When Bob came there were quite a few changes made to the Gardens as well as within the city?

IAN SMITH Yes. A bit of modernisation. After all, as you would know from your own interest, that gardens are a living changing thing and of course they changed. I've often thought when George Longley planted out the Gardens, just what did he envisage in his mind? Was he trying to see them twenty, fifty and a hundred years down the track?

JOHN GARNER Yes, because he'd be aware of all that had gone on in the English gardens during that time.

IAN SMITH Yes, that's right. Even in recent times we have noted the sort of "errors" that Longley made. There was that clutch of pine trees just behind the wishing well which we recognised were planted too close together. Longley obviously hadn't anticipated them having that length of life.

JOHN GARNER Exactly. I've been fortunate enough to be looking at a lot of documents coming from the city council over the years down in the archives. I noticed during your time, you were quite a scribe. You wrote off quite a few letters including some about the Prime Ministers' heads and so forth. Do you recall those?

IAN SMITH Yes, yes. The incident that I do recall particularly with the Prime Ministers' Avenue, was when the new parliament house in Canberra was well under construction, we received a letter from the Parliament House Construction Authority, I think they called themselves, saying that as part of the development they were proposing to have a Prime Ministers' – I've forgotten the word they used, it wasn't avenue, it wasn't walk – the Prime Ministers' Way leading up to or leading into the building. I've forgotten now whether they asked us whether we would give them all our collection or whether they were asking did we have the original casts and could we lend them to them for making casts. Well the council nearly had a fit. The thought of a duplicate set being produced. We realised that the Ballarat ones were unique and as far as I know I have never seen anything like it anywhere else in the world, there may be. I can't recall ever having seen anything like that anywhere else in the world. Anyway. So we wrote back to the Parliament House Authority and said that yes, they could make copies and when the copies were made the casts from which they'd been made were to be destroyed, and under no circumstances were any duplicates, at any time, were any duplicates to be produced. And that, in a very prominent position acknowledgement would be made of the generosity of the City of Ballarat. We never heard from them again. Just as an aside, the same thing nearly happened with the Queen Victoria statue in Sturt Street. When the Queen Victoria Building in Sydney, when its restoration and regeneration was nearly complete, I had a phone call at home one night from the personal assistant of the Lord Mayor of Sydney saying that he was calling on behalf of the Lord Mayor. The Queen Victoria Building work and restoration was nearly completed and they were anxious to obtain a statue of Queen Victoria to place in front of it, between the Queen Victoria Building and The Town Hall in the square there. The Lord Mayor wonders whether Ballarat would be prepared to give its statue of Queen Victoria. My response to the personal assistant was "Have you got a vacancy on your staff?" He said, "What for?" I said, "For me. If I suggested to the council that we got rid of our Queen Victoria I would have to look for a new job." They ultimately got one that had been in the archives in Dublin almost since the Easter rebellion I think.

JOHN GARNER The Queen Victoria statue is interesting. It's supposedly a very large one isn't it?

IAN SMITH Yes.

JOHN GARNER The other thing which interests me, which is a bit off the Botanical Gardens but I have been wanting to ask you, that orb that the Queen is holding is not part of the crown jewels. It's completely different.

IAN SMITH It is completely different from the coronation orb, yes. And the one she is holding is not the original. And it was not the original that got stolen.

JOHN GARNER Can you explain why we have got that angel or whatever?

IAN SMITH I don't know, I don't know John. The coronation orb has the cross on it. I assume it is 'Winged Victory' but I suppose perhaps because at the time the statue went up the Boer War was on, or had been on....my memory might be playing tricks with me. But the unveiling of one of the Sturt Street statues occurred either the day after or the day before Mafeking was relieved. Again I'd have to look it up.

JOHN GARNER It has interested me because I've thought that's wrong, it shouldn't be that. I looked up and Jenny Burrell got me some pictures of the jewels that London use and it's not on any of the other ones. There is actually a miniature of the Queen Victoria statue somewhere in Melbourne. Not at the State Gallery but maybe at the other one, the Ian Potter Gallery which was made by the same person who designed that one. I haven't been able to catch up with that.

IAN SMITH Well it's a bit like poor old George V on the corner of Dublin and Sturt Street with the chair leg in his hand, heheh.

JOHN GARNER No we'd better get back to the Friends. Can you relate when the idea or concept of a Friends group started?

IAN SMITH I have been thinking about this since you rang me to say you'd like to come and talk. I can't remember what the occasion was, nor can I remember the date, but it certainly had to be post 1978 after Bob Whitehead arrived. There was some function on at Lake Lodge during the day and I was walking back to the car and Bob I suppose was going back to the Gardens, and we were chatting. I said to him. "We ought to do something about guided tours of the Gardens". Somewhere I'd been in the period prior to that I think I'd seen something about taking part in a guided walk or something that triggered the thought off in my mind. If memory serves me, we agreed we would think about it, so we did, and Bob came up with a few ideas. We decided the best thing to do would be to put together, have a meeting with a few selected people. We invited, Jessie was on top of the list, Heather Dick, Roy Mosman, Ann (it will come back to me), Jack and Eleanor Chisholm, there were probably one or two others too. Um, to see what they thought. The notion seemed to have an attraction but they made the decision that before they could proceed with implementing anything we needed to know something about the history of the Gardens. Now whether Roy volunteered or was catapulted, I can't remember, I think Roy volunteered to take it on.

JOHN GARNER I think he was happy to take it on wasn't he, looking through his papers.

IAN SMITH Yes and do some research. I recall him saying to me he didn't realise when he made that offer just how much was going to be involved. Anyway he set to and then a few other people volunteered or deputed to have a look at the horticultural elements and sort of identify the important ones and so on. So people went off in their various directions and did these things. The question then arose well how do we put all this together. So it was thought it would be better to have a tape recording made of a walk so somebody I've forgotten who, wrote a script or prepared a script of a walk and if I remember rightly we had a dry run one time. Just the members of the committee and probably made some adjustments to it. Then we decided well we'd better get some guineapigs and try it out. Again we hand-picked people we knew, not necessarily with any particular interest in horticulture but people we knew. Somewhere or other I have got a photo of us all up in the Gardens the day

we did that, it was a cold winter's day as I remember. We tried it out and the result of that was fruitful, a few problems or a few ideas, and the folk who had taken part had some suggestions to make. So, we then invited Geoff Knott from 3BA, or asked Geoff whether he would be prepared to tape the itinerary we set, which he was more than happy to do and which he did. When we really got going we found that it was an impractical thing. The only way it was going to effectively work, you'd have to make half a dozen copies and supply the walkers with a Walkman and so then used, as I recall, used the script as the basis of an itinerary for the guides to come to grips with and then or course it just developed wonderfully since then.

- JOHN GARNER** Do you know where the tape is?
- IAN SMITH** I have no idea.
- JOHN GARNER** I haven't been able to trace it, there should be a copy around somewhere.
- IAN SMITH** Is there a copy of the text?
- JOHN GARNER** There are plenty of copies of the histories. I've got Roy Mossman's written thing and his typed ones. Jack Chisholm's things. I've got all of them, most of those...
- IAN SMITH** Yes, but is there a copy of the text that we put onto the tape?
- JOHN GARNER** Not one that specifically states it is the tape. I will try to follow that up.
- IAN SMITH** I have no idea where the tapes themselves went.
- JOHN GARNER** They were a pretty powerful group weren't they that you got together originally, and they really got going.
- IAN SMITH** Well, Frank Rogers. Frank & Enid Rogers. Frank acted as the secretary of the committee for a few years, and when he died I took it on as part and parcel of my work.
- JOHN GARNER** Well you fed Roy quite a lot of stuff from council records didn't you?
- IAN SMITH** Oh yes, it was amazing the stuff that would suddenly appear, that you would find when looking for something else.
- JOHN GARNER** And you followed up a fellow called Cruikshank?
- IAN SMITH** Yes, but I drew a blank. My wife and I were in Aberdeen and we went to the Gardens, called the Cruikshank Gardens and they were right next to the university. I managed to find, it was summer holiday time, I found a fellow working in the Gardens and asked him did he know anything of Cruikshank, who was he and was there any written material that I could obtain. He was quite apologetic and said it was holiday time and the horticultural college or whatever it was called, the students were all away. He said, "I'll just go and find out there may be somebody there". So off he went and he came back and he said, "Oh yes, if you'd like to come with me one of the lecturers was there". So I went and met this lady and told her the story and she said from what you tell me it doesn't sound as if it is the same Cruikshank the Gardens are named after but she very kindly rummaged through a cupboard – insisted on doing it – and found a potted history which I brought home and I passed it on to Roy or somebody. As I recall we couldn't find a connection.
- JOHN GARNER** And there wasn't a connection with the person associated with Dickens either? No. No. It was a sideline wasn't it.
- IAN SMITH** The Dickens illustrations, yes, I'd forgotten about that.

JOHN GARNER So anyway this group got things going and so on. How did things go after that Ian?

IAN SMITH Well it just sort of wandered along, we didn't see our role as being anything more than providing the guided tours and perhaps being an unofficial advisory, more suggestive group rather than advisory group to the council. Numbers started to drop off amongst the group due to age, frailty and people moving away. Jessie scouted around and found a few more people including Joan I think, and they brought new blood and fresh ideas, and my recollection is that as the result we decided to have a public meeting I think and things took off from there. I think the development and the part that the Friends have played and are playing; I think that's been remarkable. When they started talking about sales I was horrified, both from the point of view of competition with the existing nurseries and have we got the impetus to keep it going. People would say, oh Geelong do it, and Geelong do this and Geelong do that. I'm glad I was proved wrong.

JOHN GARNER Well they've got that, and the machine as well for labelling the plants.

IAN SMITH When I see the revenue that they have produced in the sales over the years it is just unbelievable.

JOHN GARNER So you have spoken about Jessie and so forth as a real character. Jack Chisholm seemed to play a big part as well in my reading, would that be correct?

IAN SMITH Yes. Jack was always an innovator. He was always an ideas man. Not only did he get the ideas, he invariably was involved in putting them into effect. You could always tell when Jack had got a bee in his bonnet, an idea of some sort because when he was on the council anyway, he would come into the office and if he would address you by your title, "Now Mr Town Clerk", you knew perfectly well that there was some hair-brained scheme about to be dropped on the table. I don't think that he ever came up with any really hair-brained schemes, no, he was an innovator. Of course he could open doors which were closed to other people.

JOHN GARNER It's one of the things that seems to have been important for botanical gardens is to have council support. Doesn't matter where you go, whether you go to Brisbane, Adelaide or wherever, unless you've got somebody there rooting for you...

IAN SMITH We were fortunate because we had both Jessie and Jack. I have to confess I was a bit apprehensive when they both retired from the council, as to what the future relationship might be between the council and particularly with the Botanical Gardens. I don't think there was ever any deleterious effect. Perhaps the enthusiasm may not be there that was there before while Jack and Jessie were still on the council but I mean the Friends over the years have proved themselves to be a worthwhile body and one that the council or the Gardens could not operate successfully without.

JOHN GARNER Very interesting. What are your thoughts on the present situation at the Gardens?

IAN SMITH In what way?

JOHN GARNER Well first of all the physical aspects of what's going on, the ability to keep the trees, to keep the place looking as though it is attractive and so forth.

IAN SMITH Yes, yes. It is hard to know how to answer that question. They have certainly changed. I wonder whether there are not too many cooks. I think

the acquisition of the Clark Centre and the Conservatory is magnificent. I couldn't subscribe to the view of a number of people that these are modern and not heritage blah blah blah. I mean that is the story of the Gardens, it is a living growing thing. Even the wishing well gets lambasted. I mean, it was something of its era! Just because it wasn't a marble thing standing on a plinth, it represented the community as it did things at that time, just the same as the statues did. Just the same now as the Clark Centre does.

JOHN GARNER And what are your feelings about the Fernery, the Friends have put aside over \$50,000 for essentially I think to make sure the statues are suitably housed, but do you think the Fernery is actually ever going to exist again?

IAN SMITH Not in its original form I wouldn't think. I think you've got physical problems to start with because of the encroachment on some of the area. It would be nice perhaps to try to bring back some semblance of the style of the earlier one, but I would prefer that the money would be spent on a proper and adequate place for housing and displaying the statues. I rather like the statues where they are in the Conservatory itself, but I realise that they can be a bit of an encumbrance there as far as the facility for varying of display and so on in the Conservatory.

JOHN GARNER They are certainly looking very good at the moment after Jude's attentions aren't they?

IAN SMITH Oh yes.

JOHN GARNER And the Claxton statue memorial as well.

IAN SMITH Yes, keep your fingers crossed, heheh.

JOHN GARNER Well, it strikes me it is a bit exposed there.

IAN SMITH Yes. The other interesting thing of course is the Craft Centre in the Lindsay Gordon cottage. I mean, as a museum you couldn't have designed a worse one if you'd tried. I mean here you had a building that had no ventilation, was sat flat on the ground with no sub-floor, it was a fire hazard, it was vulnerable to theft and vandalism, and it was isolated. Yet it survived. It's conversion to the Craft Centre I think is one of the success stories of the century.

JOHN GARNER Yes it is very good isn't it. Now there is another sideline I wanted to ask you about. What about the weighing machine in the statuary pavilion? Can you recall anything about that?

IAN SMITH The only thing I can recall about it is that it was there.

JOHN GARNER You don't know where it went?

IAN SMITH No recollection.

JOHN GARNER I ask because I came across this letter when 1966 came and we switched over to decimal thing, this was in imperial weights and the Office of Weights and Measures caught up with the council and said what are you going to do about it? And then the firm that had made it had apparently gone into the ether, gone. Then it is not there now and I wondered if you knew where it had gone to.

IAN SMITH No. I think it disappeared after my time.

JOHN GARNER It would have been a little while after that.

IAN SMITH It was certainly there in my early years here.

JOHN GARNER It is quite a museum piece now.

IAN SMITH Yes.

JOHN GARNER Now are there any other people, characters that you would like to mention involved with the Gardens over the time you have been there?

IAN SMITH Well, I can't think of characters but I can think of one or two instances with Tom Beaumont. For instance the day of the Creswick bushfires. Very hot strong north winds as I remember and it was a Saturday. Tom had walked down to the Prime Ministers' Avenue area late in the afternoon and shifted the hoses. We didn't have underground systems in those days, all done by hand. When he went back a few hours later to turn them off, was when he found.....was it a White Cedar... can't think of the name of the tree. That huge tree had gone over in the wind, left an enormous, very wide crater but very shallow. That indicated how shallow rooted it was, we sort of heaved a sigh of relief when we saw that and realised that it could have possibly at some other time have fallen onto people. This enormous crater. Then the time (hah hah) that the mental home ambulance got bogged in one of the beds near the Statuary Pavilion. Somebody had pinched the mental home ambulance and somehow had got round into the Gardens, got into the garden. It must have been between plantings because the beds, there were no plants in the beds as they'd all been prepared for planting you see, so the soil was all nice and banked up and nice and soft, and this bloody ambulance up to its axle. Tom wondered what on earth. I remember my wife even commenting that from time to time in the summer after we had put in the sprinkler system, he and Ruth would hear excited squeals in the middle of the night from young ladies and gentlemen friends who'd been enjoying themselves on the lawns and the sprinklers would come on. Heheh.

JOHN GARNER Very good. Ian that's been quite an interview and so we might take a break here.

IAN SMITH Yes.

END OF INTERVIEW _____