



Matilda 'Tilly' Thompson MBE

Tilly Thompson enjoyed celebrity status in Ballarat as a successful career woman and an enthusiastic community worker. She was a colourful character with a lively personality who inspired her generation in many ways during World War 1 and the aftermath.

In response to tributes at a Civic Reception on her 83rd birthday in 1954 Mrs Thompson attributed her success to "the habit of happiness and being born with pink glasses instead of blue. I believe we are here to serve our generation, and we can do that best with sunshine in our hearts and homes". When she spoke at a rally in Melbourne for the New War Loan for WW2 it was reported that, "She gave us a taste of her ability and drive. 'Here is another day,' she said. 'What are we going to pack into it? Shall we look back tomorrow with satisfaction or regret?'"

Matilda Louise Clennell was born at Ballarat in 1871, the daughter of John Clennell, an engine driver, and Matilda nee McIntosh. In 1914 when Tilly was in her early 40s she married 56 year old William Daniel Thompson. When he died at the age of 68 in 1927 after a marriage of only 13 years and no offspring, Tilly became a widow and was known as Mrs WD Thompson until her death on 7 April 1959 at the age of 87 years. Her brother Mr Harry Clennell and her sister Mrs T Quayle visited Ballarat for special occasions as did Tilly's three neices.

Matilda Clennell was an early pupil of Wendouree State School, started work at the age of 15 and became a buyer for Tyler's Drapery in Bridge Street. Through her work she became

a good friend of Mrs Eleanor Lucas whose 'Busy Bee' business was still a cottage industry. Later in 1905 Mrs Lucas's son recruited Tilly, 'the female dynamo' for the firm of E Lucas and Co Pty Ltd. As a girl she rose rapidly and made history as Australia's first woman commercial traveller. She became the firm's interstate representative, taking its models and lingerie to other States and successfully selling to the big department stores. One of the highest compliments ever paid to Mrs Thompson in her commercial life came from a seasoned business man who said, 'She was the only one I can remember who could handle nine different buyers and keep them all happy.'

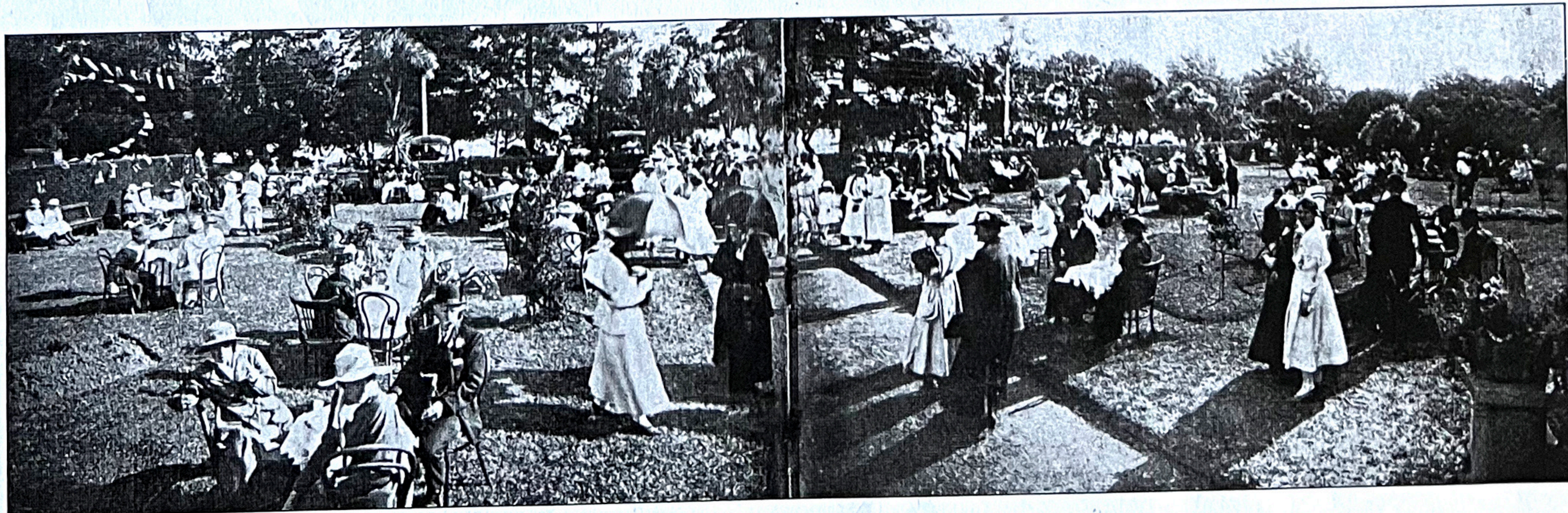
Mrs Thompson made a trip abroad as a buyer for the firm and became Managing Director of the Lucas Company with more than 500 girl employees to do her bidding. As the local 'generalissimo' of this willing army and the citizens of Ballarat in general she rallied the community into action in support of the war effort. She organised cheery homecomings for returned soldiers and is famous for instigating the Avenue of Honour and the Arch of Victory. For her philanthropic work for returned servicemen Tilly was presented with a gold medal and a Certificate of Appreciation from the RSL Federal executive of Australia, an annual award to one woman chosen in the Commonwealth.

Tilly Thompson is famous for the Avenue of Honor and the Arch of Victory

In 1928 at the age of 60, after 45 years in business, Mrs Thompson retired from the Lucas Company and went overseas to Britain, the Continent and the Middle East. She had a number of farewell functions including one for the Ballarat Limbless Soldiers' Association of Ballarat to wish her 'God-speed' on her trip abroad. Her farewell garden party for the Lucas girls was reported in the *Courier*.

"On Saturday afternoon Mrs WD Thompson, at her residence, 'Homeleigh', (510-12 Wendouree Parade which Tilly later sold to the Pescotts) afforded opportunity for the Lucas girls to meet her prior to her departure to the Homeland. It is quite safe to say that the gathering was unique in every respect, made only possible by the personality of Mrs Thompson herself. Brilliant sunshine made the always beautiful environment of 'Homeleigh' fairly radiant. The blue of the skies was reflected in the Lake as it lay encircled with green with here and there the golden tints of autumn gleaming. From out of this vision of natural beauty came steamers and rowing boats bearing some five or six hundred of the Lucas girls all in the glory of summer dresses and faces bright with beauty.

Within the grounds every provision had been made for the comfort and entertainment of the guests. A delightful



Garden party at 'Sunways', the home of Mrs WD Thompson, 418 Wendouree Parade, Ballarat, some time after her return in 1933

programme of music was supplied by an orchestra, the members of which came from the ranks of the girls. To this musical accompaniment dancers enjoyed themselves on the lawns and a programme of races was entered into with much zest, and greatly enjoyed by both competitors and spectators."

The Mayor presented Mrs Thompson with a travelling bag inscribed 'with love from the Lucas Girls' as well as a wreath of everlasting flowers and gumnuts to place on the Centotaph in London. At this point the girls stood to attention and sang the Doxology (*Praise God From Whom All Blessings Flow* to the tune of the *Old Hundredth*). The girls then formed three great rings on the lawns and the whole company sang *Auld Lang Syne*.

When Mrs Thompson departed from the railway station on the 6 o'clock Special to Melbourne to meet up with the Scottish Delegation there were more tributes, much singing and band music provided by returned soldiers.

Tilly's welcome home to Ballarat on a Saturday night in 1933 was just as gratifying. A huge crowd of personal friends and leading citizens was waiting at the railway station and the bridge swarmed with Lucas girls. The Soldiers' and Sailors' Memorial Band played *Home Sweet Home*, *For She's a Jolly Good Lassie* and *Ballaarat*. With such a multitude thronging to catch a glimpse of Mrs Thompson, Mr Stan Walker lifted her bodily above the heads of the 'surging sea' who cheered enthusiastically. It was quite some time before she could be extricated and conveyed to the waiting car. The felicitations continued late into the night at 'Homeleigh'. (Paraphrased from an undated report in the *Courier*.)

Tilly's own scrap book, kindly loaned by Alan Rogers, contains newspaper clippings, her philosophy of health and typed notes of her popular and chatty 'Travel Talks'. It seems that Tilly gave dozens of these fund raisers for the people of Ballarat and illustrated them with a fine selection of 'moving pictures' of her meanderings in 24 countries over five and a half years. She said, "You young people, I would advise to do as I did - decide you will see the world - when my salary was raised to a pound a week I insured my life so as to travel when I was 40; but could not go, reinsured for 60, a £1000, so off I went at 60 and busted up the £1000 in travel. Take my advice and start when you are earning and insure."

Mrs Thompson took with her several letters of introduction enabling her to attend regal and other official functions in the Old Country. She visited various charitable institutions overseas and showed great interest in their work.

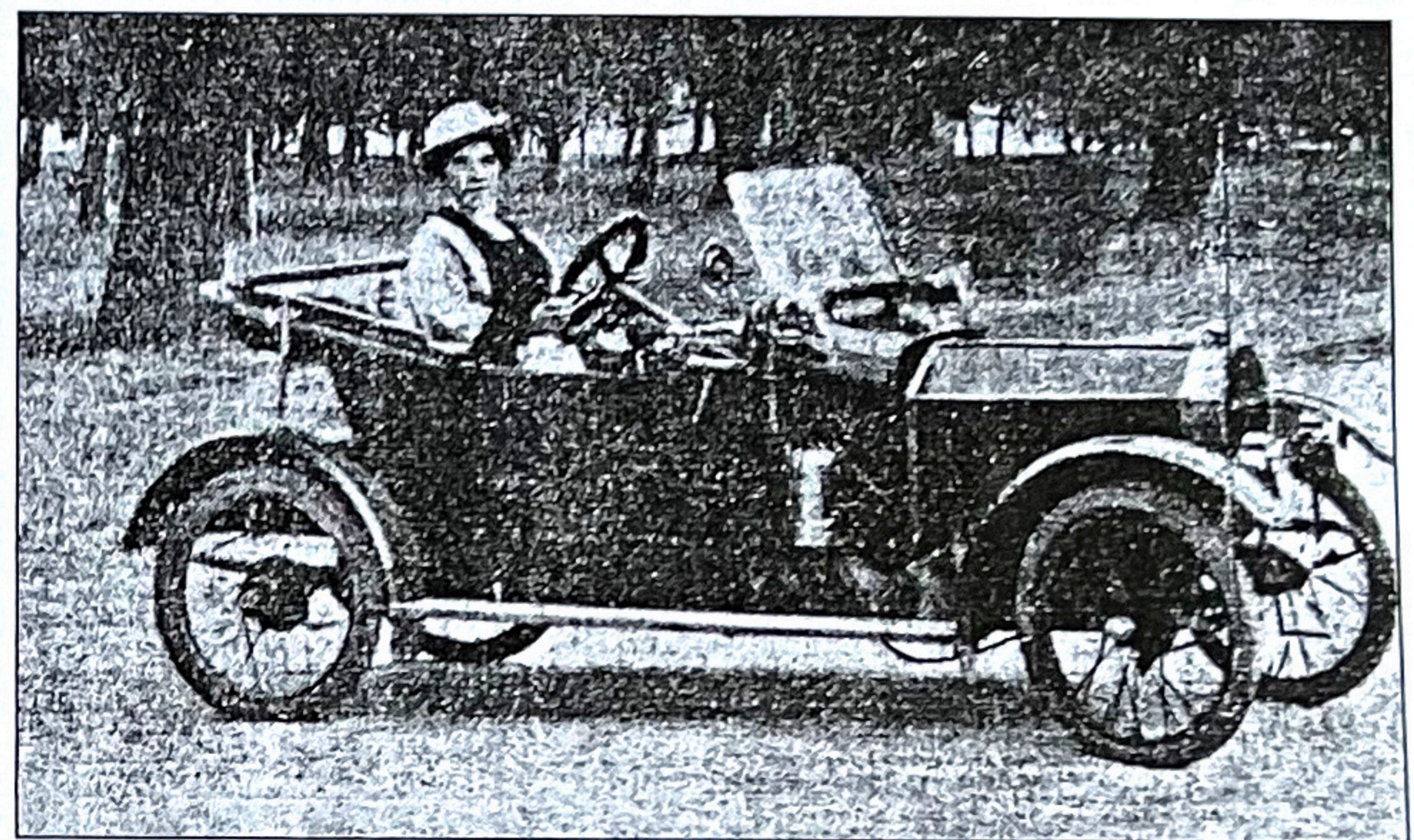
In London Tilly became interested in the Bagot-Stack system of exercises and on her return to Ballarat she conducted large classes for women. In their black bloomers 'elderly dames turned somersaults and performed contortionist feats' that men were forbidden to witness. At the end of each weekly session Tilly would give the 'seasonable diet' which advocated 'herbs for health'. She was known to 'bathe in the dew on the grass in her birthday dress' and eat boiled dandelion roots.

In June 1934 it was reported in a Melbourne paper in an article about Tilly, that 'membership of the League of Health and Breath totals 400 and is growing apace'. Proceeds from the classes were used to construct the Roll of Honor near the Arch of Victory.

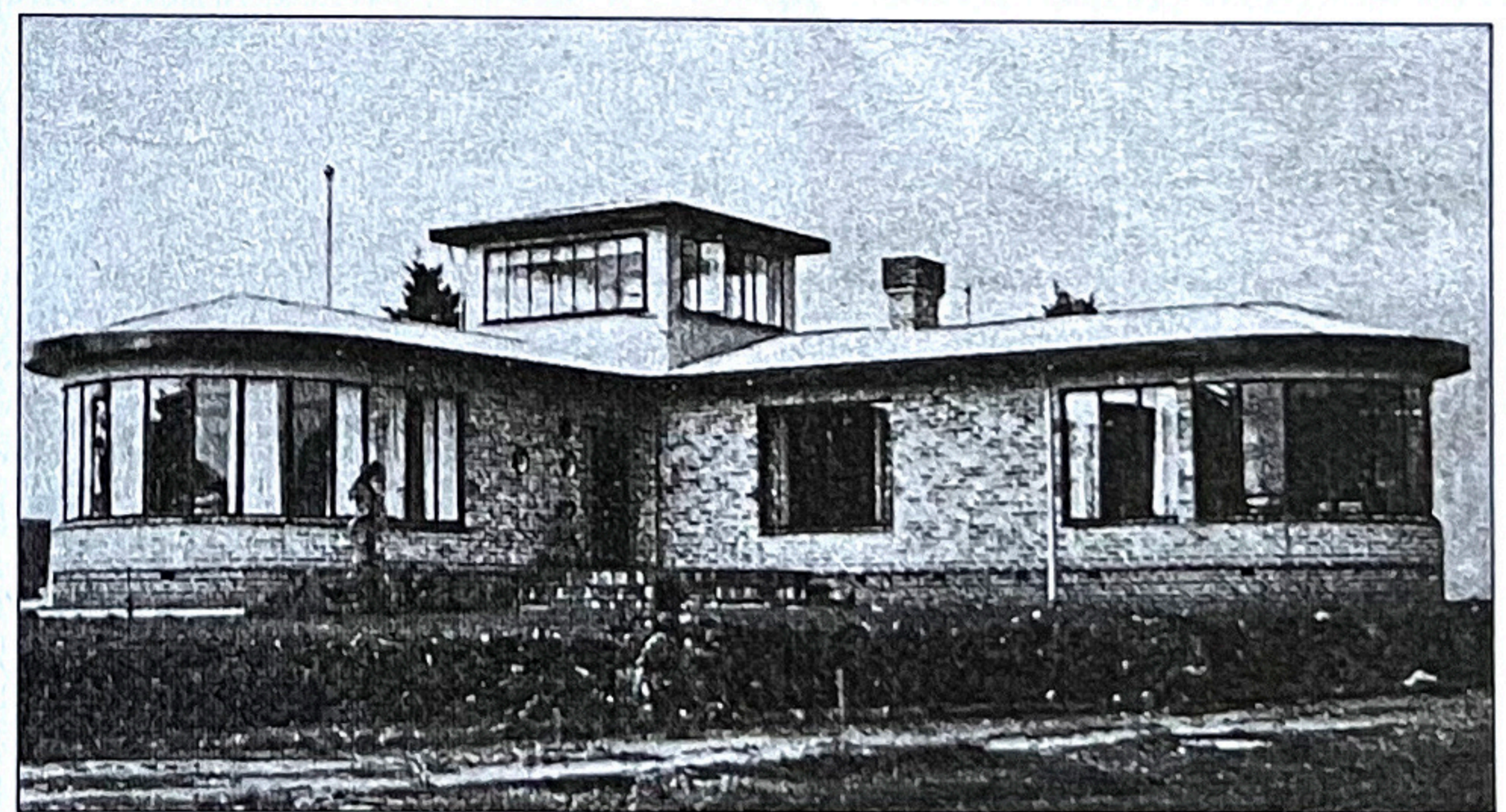
Throughout her life Mrs Thompson was associated with the Jubilee Methodist Church and was 'regular in her attendance and devotions'. Her late husband was remembered as a church leader, trustee, Sunday School Superintendent and choir master. Tilly leased part of her 'Homeleigh' property to form the Jubilee Tennis Club and later gave the land to the church.



Tilly shown exercising (left) and late in life from the Order of Service of Remembrance and Thanksgiving, held at Wendouree Methodist (Jubilee) Church, Anzac Sunday 26 April 1959, 7 pm



Tilly Thompson in her motor car from The Australian Women's Weekly Pictorial 22 April 1939 "Mrs Thompson was the first woman car-driver in Ballarat, Australia's first woman commercial traveller and a company director when ladies were not supposed to know anything outside the home"



The home of Mrs WD Thompson 'Sunways' 418 Wendouree Parade, Ballarat, as featured in 'The Australian Home Beautiful', 1 April 1939 built by Mr David S Quayle to Tilly's original design on the site where she was born.

Features include 86 windows with no blinds, a spiral staircase to the sleep-out and a sunroom 'like the glassed-in deck of an ocean liner'

Tilly bequeathed 'Sunways' to the Methodist Church Another large bequest from Miss Gertrude Adelaide Dawson enabled the purchase of an adjacent property at 422 Wendouree Parade and with additional funding a modern complex for the elderly was built and officially opened on 18 April 1971