

Frescati House Heritage Day at Willow Court

I: Ok, we might get started here. My name is Inga. I'm with friends of Frescati Community Garden and I would like to warmly welcome Margaret Richards who has come, travelled down from Melbourne to be with us today. We are ever so grateful that you could come. We are really pleased to see you, Margaret lived here at Frescati House when she was a little girl, and she has kindly agreed to tell us a little bit about what it was like to be here.

And you know we are a garden community, so one of the things we are keen to hear about is the garden. And I know you were here yesterday and have already shared some of that information but we would love to hear some of it again. And we would love to hear some of the human, the stories, the things you remember from some of that social history from when you were here. So thank you very much for coming.

M: Thank you for asking me to be here today. I have come today with my two daughters, but only one is here with me this afternoon, and a friend also from Melbourne. And we are very pleased to be here. It's great to see the old house again. Even though it is in its present state. I know you girls are working hard, or not just the girls but the fellas too. And there is a lot of work.

I: Maybe you could start by telling us when you lived here?

M: Ok, Mum and Dad came here, Dad came here as the medical superintendent back in, oh golly, 1935, I was 9 months old and we were here until 1946 and I was 11 when we left, went to Hobart.

I: And who was your father?

M: Charles Brothers.

I: Charles Brothers, so he was one of the medical –

M: Medical superintendent, yeah.

I: And the whole family. How many were there here in your family?

M: Well Peter, he's my older brother. And he was five years older than I was, and I had a younger brother and who was born here in New Norfolk, and he is now deceased too, and he was three years younger than me.

I: And you kindly spotted one of your photo's, there was your brother standing next to the pond.

M: That's Tony.

I: We never knew who that was, so that was fantastic.

M: And I think Tony you were named after Tony.

I: Is that true? That is fantastic.

M: Or he was named after you.

T: Tony was a little bit older than me.

M: Well, there you go. My mum and Tony's mum were great friends, and Dad, his too Dad.

I: Well Margaret maybe you could, I am not sure where to start, maybe share some of your memory of what it was like to be in this house, when you lived here this was a, well, it was a mental institution.

M: Well, yes. Being a child, the only part I ever saw was the administrative buildings. We were never taken into any of the hospital part of the place, and never saw that really. And we lived here, it was a lovely place, lovely garden, lovely home. And we had lots of fun, very happy, kids being here.

I: So you had quite a big area that you could roam around?

M: Ah yes, and I'd be traipsing around with Mum and Dad in the garden, helping them. And I can probably remember quite a lot where things were planted.

I: Did you go down on the flats by the river as well?

M: No, oh well we went down there but it didn't belong to the house. There was a track down there, and we had a chook shed down the track, down the side and we used to go wandering along the creek, of course, And round to the big walnut tree, which I believe is still there. They were lovely walnuts. Us kids we used to help ourselves.

I: Of course. So, did you have connection, or any interaction with people that lived on site?

M: We were friends and we used to visit there was Dr Williams and her mum. They lived in a house which is now demolished, and it's the car park just here. And the Crabbes who were in the top house, near the gates, just inside the gates.

I: So this was other staff, what about the..?

M: There was one little boy, he was about Tony's age, and so they were mates. But as far as girls, there weren't, I don't think, from memory.

I: What about the patients?

M: Well, there were two patients that we had who helped here. One fellow used to help with the garden and chopped the wood and do all the 'man-ish' things, and we had a nurse that used to come over and help my mum with the kitchen work and things like that, in the house.

I: I heard you tell some ladies earlier that there was, it was quite a restrictive area, in some ways to live?

M: Yes, I felt that way since. At the time, it didn't really ring a bell at the time, but now looking back it was possibly a community thing where parents didn't allow their children to enter the grounds of the mental hospital. So I didn't have any friends to really visit, one or two maybe, I had, You know like I had Diedre, she used to come. I can't really remember too many of them, but yes, I had friends outside the place.

I: So you went and visited your friends outside more than they really came in here?

M: That's right.

I: So someone was talking that there were people at the gate so you had to clock in and out.

M: Check us in and out.

T: With good reason.

I: But that didn't include the families as well?

M: Well I don't know, we didn't have to go in or anything, they would just see us coming and going. Knew who we were, so no, but we would go in there and have a chat to them occasionally, nothing better to do with our time.

I: So you were allowed to walk around the whole place?

M: Yeah, had free roam, except as I say we never went behind the walls, into the ward areas. Some of them were open, there was a wire, not a wire, a metal frame fence around some of the wards and you could see some of the patients. And we had free access to the football games around on the football oval, so that was a bonus. And my younger brother Tony, he and George Ackers from across the creek, his Dad must have been a ward attendant-

T: He was Chief Attendant. Jack Ackers, was Chief Attendant.

M: Well, they were friends and they used to go fishing down there at the creek, and lying on their tummies, catching, trying to catch fish. And they had lots of fun and they also got into trouble. Oh, yes, there was a farmer who lived up the hill, along past the sawmill. Do you know the saw mill?

T: Yes,

I: Just up the back out here?

M: Yes, and there was a road that went along and there was a farmer who lived along there with an apple orchard. The boys knew when the apples were ready and of course they got sprung. I don't know the farmers name but he used to come out with a shotgun, and fire the shot gun and the kids were scared stiff. And then if I ever walked, which I did, I walked out to Diedre's place- I think it's about a three-mile walk along a dirt road out to the Lachlan where she lived - and if I heard a horse and trap coming, I'd duck behind the bushes there, I was a bit wary of him too, by then. But I'd walk all the way out there and you'd never see a soul. No cars, no nothing.

And then getting back to cars and things, we were here during the war years. And I mentioned yesterday about the trap door in my parents' bedroom, which went down into a cellar.

I: Ok, was that in the corner?

M: Yeah In the bedroom.

I: Yeah, we were just looking at the hole, so that was a little cellar down there?

M: Yeah

I: It was speculated that that was a tunnel

M: Well, we tunnelled it through, to the rest of the area, which was under the old bathroom/shower recess. I don't think it went any further than that.

I: Why did you do that?

M: Because of the war years, that was our air raid shelter. And we had some supplies and things down there, not that it would have been any good probably but that's what we did. My parents did anyway, and of course all the, during the war, all the windows were blacked out and covered with, you know, strips, so that if they were broken that wouldn't break in sheets.

I: What was it like during that time?

M: Well to us, it didn't really phase us because we were only quite young. I was only 5 or 6, and we just carried on as normal. But my Dad, he was very interested in what was going on in the war, and he wasn't allowed to join up. He wanted to join and they wouldn't let him, the government wouldn't let him.

I: Because he was needed here on site?

M: He was needed here. But anyway he would listen to the news every night in his favourite chair, and he'd have a map on the wall behind him of Europe and he had his pins and he would pin point all the areas where the troops were advancing, and you know, push back and all the rest of it. So yes, he followed it like that, and I'd watch, could see the search lights from Brighton Camp. He'd go to Brighton Camp too, he looked after the returned servicemen at Brighton and at Melba for hours. That was his duty, instead of allowing him to go.

I: What's it like now looking at the house?

M: It's sad seeing it as it is because it was such a beautiful place. You've seen the photo's I bet.

I: Yeah, some gorgeous photos.

M: Yeah, it was beautiful and it was a lovely place to live.

I: So it was kept well and then, obviously your family looked after it, and you had help to look after it as well, because it's a big place.

M: Yeah it is. No we loved it.

I: So, there's have been some rooms added as well, since you were here?

M: Some of the rooms, the dining room behind here, that's been divided into half and so has the living room, that's been divided. They were two big rooms, and a few other little alterations, I think, with the bathroom situation. Another bedroom that was on here this end I think, and the laundry. I can't remember where we are now. This is the forecourt, is it? Outside?

I: This is the veranda out the back.

M: And this is the back part. And the kitchen came out further, I think it was, the laundry. We had a tank stand. I've got some photos, I could show you later.

I: Yeah, I'd love to see your photos.

M: So things have been changed and things have been taken down.

I: Do you remember the old grape vine?

M: I do.

I: We like to think that it's the oldest one in Australia. But do you think that is true?

M: Well, it's quite a possibility because it was here and growing very well and hearty when we were here, but the grapes never ripened did they, they were sour.

I: You didn't make wine?

M: No, no. But what I did wonder about, why did they pull the stables down? They were beautiful stables, made of stone, two stalls.

I: Where were they?

M: They were just on the corner here.

I: They were just on the little flats, just there.

M: Just on the corner, as they come around the drive, right here, I think, I can't tell where I am coming in from this direction.

I: And you have the hedge coming down the driveway.

M: Yes, that was really a great place to play, too. Upstairs was the hay loft and the two horse mangers and the tack room.

I: So, we're quite taken with the hedge, and you know now it is actually listed, heritage listed?

M: How about that?

I: How about that.

M: Yeah, loved our hawthorns.

I: It's quite a bit of work to look after it, it's quite big.

M: It is, that's right.

I: So that was looking fine when you were here? And that was used as a driveway?

M: Oh yes, the driveway ran right around the house and up the side.

I: and it was actively used?

M: Oh yes, but as I say there weren't too many cars in those days, and I could see Dad coming home when he went to Hobart on Tuesdays, to the Royal Hobart to work, and I could always tell when he was coming home because I'd see the car lights coming up the highway, from the living room.

I: Not too many lights?

M: No, on the way. He wasn't far away. You can't see the highway I believe, now from the living room area.

I: So you had a good walk around the garden yesterday?

M: I did.

I: What was the, of course you've seen the pond. We were quite excited about finding that pond.

M: My Dad built that.

I: Your Dad built the pond?

M: Dad built the pond.

I: So, can you tell us what was in the middle of the pond?

M: In the middle of the pond was just like a, I don't know if you'd call it a fountain but it was like the shape of an upturned porridge bowl, you know, with a hole in the top, but metal.

I: Was there water?

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M: And water, there was a tap. I'm sure there was no power to it, I think it was just put his hand down into a hole somewhere in the ground and turned a tap, and the water recirculated around, came out over the -

I: And you had the plants growing around?

M: Water lillies in the pond, fish.

I: We'd like to get some water lillies back there, maybe even some fish. Did you have something covering the pond?

M: Nothing.

I: That was before the days where we had to worry about -

M: You don't have kookaburras here do you, and water birds like that

T: Heron

I: And that would some, for insurance purposes in case somebody should fall in.

M: Well that's all changed hasn't it?

I: There would definitely be something about that.

M: You might have to have a fence around it.

I: Well, maybe some metal, some, what are we calling it?

M: Reinforcing?

I: Some wiring just lying above it. So, we'll have to do some nice planting to try and cover it.

M: That's a shame isn't it. That's the way things are now.

I: But it was a lovely surprise for us to find it. Well, not a find, we knew that it was there somewhere so we were quite excited to find it.

M: Oh gosh. How many years had it not been attended to, I wonder. Quite a few by the sound of it.

I: Quite a few. The periwinkles had taken over. Yeah, we've been finding lots of bulbs, lots of things are coming up around the place. There was quite a lot of flowers when you were there? Did you mum or your dad really enjoy the garden?

M: Oh yes, the old fashioned ones I suppose. Lots of irises, roses, hydrangeas

I: So was there dedicated little rose garden or..?

M: Well there was a rose garden here, this little hedge towards the avenue. Mostly trees there though, and this half circular rose bed.

I: Sorry, Margaret so the other side of the hedge we are talking about? There was a rose garden?

M: Yeah, but you also had, some poppies up there too. But that was about the only garden. I can't remember if there was garden along the fence line, there possibly was but I can't remember, non-descriptive things along there.

I: Well, you'll be pleased to know that we are thinking of establishing a rose garden –

M: That's lovely.

I: - and we had been thinking out the front and we didn't know there was one. So thank you for sharing that.

M: That's good.

I: We like to get some of the old heritage, the old varieties from around the valley.

M: Yes, that would be great.

I: We might have to consult you again when we get a little bit closer.

M: Well, I don't know the exact ones, but yeah, I just know them as roses.

I: So who really looked after the garden? Was that your Mum and Dad?

M: Mum and Dad, with the help of the male patient, yes.

I: 'Cos it would have been a lot of work, it's a large garden. Just looking after the hedge would have been a –

M: It was huge. I suppose you would spend a lot of time on it. But this fellow from the ward seemed to come over about 7 o'clock in the morning. They'd let him out, and he'd bring over two chunks of bread, you know, about that thick. And his first job would be to light the stove, we had a wooden stove in the kitchen and get that going and that would also be heating our hot water. And he would cook this bread on top of the stove, toast it, and when that was done he'd come over to my bedroom window and I'd be awake of course, and he'd knock on the window and pass me a -'Here you are, missy' and every morning, you know, I'd have this toast given to me at 7 o'clock. He was a nice old man.

I: So he was sort of dedicated to your family, or worked with your family for all the years that you were here?

M: All the time I can remember.

I: He was a great help with the garden?

M: Oh, yes, he also looked after the chooks down below.

I: So that was down on the flats you had chooks?

M: Just at the bottom of the hill. There was a chook shed.

I: On the little bank?

M: Just in front of the, from here, the chestnut tree to the right of it, the chestnut tree, yep.

I: So you had your own eggs and chooks?

M: Yes.

I: Did you have, did your family grow vegetables as well?

M: This is the story where we used to get a lot of our vegetables from the farm which was across the creek – Nicholson's farm it was, too, another Nicholson – and that would come over and be put into a shed which was just over here. And us children would get to it first, and if there were pumpkins

and swedes and turnips they disappeared quickly, down the track, rolled down the track and into the creek.

I: Oh, that kind of disappeared?

M: That kind of disappeared. Yes we really didn't like those sort of vegies at that stage.

I: Not many children do.

M: So that was very naughty, but you know my parents didn't work it out for a while, that's what we were doing. My Mum would ring up and say 'I didn't get any pumpkins this week'. So that was one naughty thing we did do.

I: I am sure there were a few others.

M: Probably.

Q: Knocking on the door somewhere and running?

M: Oh, knocking on the door, ringing door bells. On the wall around the corner there was a door into the wards or somewhere it went. It had a bell on it, and us kids would be coming home through there from somewhere through there, and we would press the doorbell and run like hell, just in case someone came and opened it to see who was at the door, but it was us being naughty, again.

I: We had an excellent question about where you went to school, Margaret.

M: I went to primary school here in New Norfolk. I think it was about Grade 6 when I left.

T: Mr Cole would have been headmaster then, there wouldn't he?

M: No, I had Mr Green and Mr Solomon.

Barry: You must be the same age as me.

M: What's your name?

B: Barry Lathy. I was there when Mr Solomon was there and Mr Green was there.

M: We were probably there together.

B: And Miss Clarke.

M: She was a tartar, wasn't she? I shouldn't say that.

T: Don't worry she still was when I was there.

M: Was she? Miss Bollen was lovely. Remember, Miss Bollen?

B: No

M: She was the class mistress for grade, I think it would have been 4/5.

B: A bell in the old gum tree.

M: And the shop, Thomas' shop, tuck shop.

B: Mr Thomas, he'd count the lollies out.

M: Oh, yeah.

W: Dryden Thomas.

I: With the house, do you remember very many people visiting your family here at the house? Was it kind of a social place? Were there grand parties going on?

M: Not very frequently but Mum did entertain, and I suppose Mum and Dad did entertain. The Governor came to our school one day, and it may have been that day that the Governor's wife came with him and she was entertained here for afternoon tea.

I: So this was sort of the?

M: She entertained him here. But I didn't see her because we were at school. But the Governor did give us a holiday, do you remember that?

B: What was that?

M: The governor coming to visit at the school and giving us a public holiday the next day.

B: No. I can remember the milk bottles that they used to give us.

M: And the apples, the apples were good, each week we'd get a box of apples. Yeah, but that's about all I can remember. Any entertaining was done, probably during the day when I was at school. But Mum was very keen on helping with the war effort. She was heavily involved with the comforts fund, and they would be making nets for camouflage nets and making all sorts of things. Sending food packages and clothes packages to England and all this sort of thing during the war. She was quite a busy lady in those days.

I: It sounds like it was a lovely place to grow up?

M: It was, we were happy and it was a lovely home.

I: Do you know why the family left?

M: Our family?

I: Yeah.

M: Dad was made Director of Mental Hygiene for the state of Tasmania, and we moved to Hobart.

I: Ok, when you were about 11. Did you come out and visit much, after you'd left?

M: No, because by the time I'd finished school he was then given a position in Victoria as Deputy Chairman for Mental Health in Victoria and I was went on to do nursing, myself, and then I went to Adelaide to do midwifery. And from then on time got away and I got married and has my family, and we went overseas after, I suppose it was 10 years of marriage, we went overseas for 5 years and came back.

I: So have you been back at all?

M: Yes I have, I have paid several visits. Very quietly and just had a peep around. I came back two or three years ago and it was winter, and the hedge as you say needed attention.

I: Oh, it was out of control.

M: It was out of control and the grass was knee high, almost, and it had been raining like crazy. We had umbrellas, and I was just so determined, my daughter stopped said 'I'm not going any more', it

was just so wet and I said 'Well I'm going' and I headed off right around the house, I didn't care, I just wanted to see it. So, I was determined.

I: Well I hope you think it looks a little better now?

M: Yeah, it does. You've done wonders so far and hopefully, if I come back again, if I can come back again, be more progressed

I: Well, certainly, we'd like to keep you informed with what we're doing. Hopefully get some water lilies in that pond, maybe a fish or two.

M: Yes, I'm sure you will.

W: Someone was asking to hear the teeth story.

M: Oh the tooth story, for goodness sakes. You know you lose your teeth when you are about 5, or something, and they'd be put in a glass and the fairies would come. OK, well this was done in the bathroom and I put my tooth there and kept popping back to see if the fairies had come. No, no, eventually it would come and there'd be something there and the tooth would be gone of course. And it would be tipped down the sink, and there was a door just out of the bathroom to the gully trap outside. You could go straight outside. Ok, my brother and I worked out, this is Tony, we worked out that you could turn the tap on and catch the tooth as it came through.

T: Double dipping.

M: Yeah,

I: How long did that work?

M: Oh, two or three times. And then they woke up to that. I wasn't losing so many teeth so frequently.

I: Good while it lasted.

M: It was good, and get threepence or sixpence or whatever it was. That was just another little story.

I: Do you have any other stories that you would like to share about the house? Or living here?

M: Oh golly, I can't think off-hand. I think I was staying with Deidre one weekend, I was out there, my friend out there at the Lachlan. I call it the Lachlan but I don't know who called it the Lachlan.

I: So many doubts?

M: Well, that's where it was and it was Saturday and I got a tummy ache that night and Deidre's Mum, Joyce, thought it would be best if I came home. So I came home and that night a patient escaped from the hospital. I don't think he had escaped for very long. I think they soon caught him. I don't know where or when, but it was the same night that I'd come home.

I: So the whole place was on alert?

M: I don't know if I should say this....

I: Do share.

T: No tell 'em.

M: When they got home their house had been broken into. It wasn't the patient who did it, it was someone else. I won't say who it is. So, just as well I didn't go back home to their place that night, it would have been a bit scary.

I: Well, it would have been a very special place to live. I guess as a child you know nothing else, and that's normal and that's home but looking at it now it seems like a very unique place to live.

M: Oh, yes, and another little story was that when we did leave here, we took the lass who used to help us in the kitchen, she came to live with us.

I: To Hobart?

M: Yes, I don't know for how long she was with us, but it was understood, supervision from my Dad, and all the rest, and she had to abide by rules and regulations still, and anyway, she went missing one day. And she'd taken off with the local butcher who'd used deliver meat to the house where we lived. And they soon got her but I never saw her again, she was bought back here, which was sad for her, but that's the way it was.

I: Yeah, there's are a lot of sad stories from the place. So it's wonderful to hear some nice stories from you.

M: Oh thank you. Well, I remember it as a happy place and you know, it wasn't sad for me here, it was a happy place.

I: That's lovely to hear.

W: And Peggy?

M: Oh, Peggy yes, that was another little story. During the war we had an evacuee from England she was here with us for, oh gosh, 4 or 5 years I guess during the war. That was good, it was like having another an older sister, and I always wanted a sister and never had one, so she was my big sister.

I: Oh lovely. Did you keep in contact with her after the war?

M: Yes, we did and I visited her in England, but she has recently passed away in the last couple of years.

I: So you had an older sister?

M: Yes, I did.

I: Oh, lovely. I'd like to ask if there's anyone has any questions for Margaret? Anything?

Q: One question, it's a source of unending controversy here, Margaret. Is it Frescati or Frascati?

M: Frascati with an 'a', thank you.

I: That is great to hear. It's what we have been saying all along. And could I just get you to –

Q: And what does it mean, do you know? No?

M: Well, I believe it's an Italian name. I was just told yesterday that this grapevine possibly came from there. I don't know and I don't know the history of it going back that far and who was here.

Woman: There's gardens in Italy called Frascati Gardens.

I: We'll, Tony might be able to tell us a little bit.

M: Do you know anything about it?

T: No, I don't know the district, of this one.

I: Oh, sorry the Frascati connection. Frascati is a place where supposedly the popes summer residence north of Rome, and that was where they got the name from. And we always thought it was spelt with an 'a' but lots of people think it is spelt with an 'e'.

M: No.

I: That is great news, now we'll say 'Well Margaret says'

T: Was that the name when Burnett had it, do you know?

M: Whose Burnett? No, I don't know.

T: Well, he's the original owner.

M: Oh, I don't know.

I: The colonial secretary that had the house was built.

M: I don't know that part of the history. In fact I don't really know much of the history at all before our time.

I: Well, thanks for having a look around. Well, Margaret, unless there is any more questions or anything else you would like to tell us about?

M: I think I have covered a fair bit.

I: Thank you very much for walking around with people here yesterday, and I gather there was a lot learned about the garden yesterday, which our group is in particular interested in.

M: Good

I: Well, we hope to certainly take some of your idea of, you memory of what happened. So thank you very much for coming today, and sharing your story with us.

M: It's been a pleasure. I enjoyed it. Thank you.