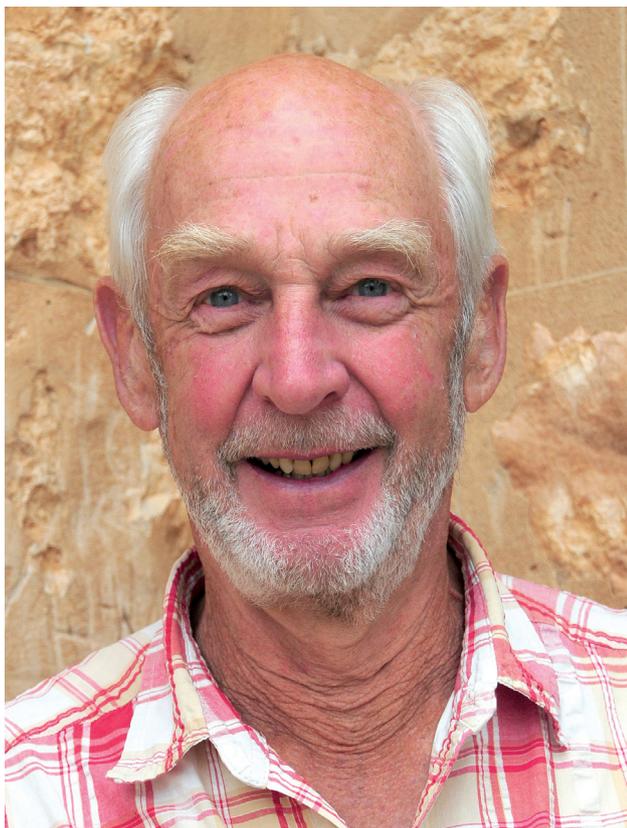


## David Thomas - February 2015



Preparing this profile turned into a most enjoyable trip down Memory Lane. I was a 'garden club widower' for many years before becoming a member in June 2014 with the question of what would happen in the bowling season remaining unresolved!

No problems so far. My family moved from the north of England to the southern seaside town of Bournemouth after the war and my earliest gardening memory is of going on the bus with my father to his allotment on Sunday mornings. I can remember holding the sticks while frames were constructed for growing runner beans and peas - presumably other 'stuff' was grown as well.

It was a community facility and very much a male domain - fathers and sons; thinking about it now the allotment system was, in many ways, an early forerunner of today's men's sheds.

The big move to what became the family home for many years came in 1953. We moved in a few weeks before the coronation and I well remember the excitement of the family settling down by the wireless to take in all the action from London.

The main feature of our new home was a large and productive garden and, led by two keen gardeners in Mum and Dad, all three children were involved - whether they wanted to be or not.

It was here that Dad's life-long passion for roses really bloomed (pardon the pun).

An early job was to remove the scant remains of a side fence and, with the agreement of our neighbour, replacing it with a beech hedge. Fences (and sheds) will be a recurring theme.

The hedge became the backdrop for a large rose bed - a row of Queen Elizabeth floribundas along the back with many different smaller bush and hybrid tea roses in front. In addition there were trellises with a variety of climbing/rambling roses. Not satisfied with this, a couple of years later a large section of the front lawn was dug out and yet another rose bed planted.

With knowledge gleaned from the Gardener's Question Time radio programme and numerous books and magazines, Dad started entering his roses in competitions and, just occasionally, prize cards were proudly displayed on the mantelpiece.

One sister recently told me that two roses he gave her 45 years ago are still going strong.

Dahlias were another favourite and one of my jobs was digging them up each autumn and covering them with ash for the winter before they were replanted the following year. Bulbs of every type pushed up from the lawn and garden beds - snowdrops, daffodils and tulips and possibly others as well.

The rear of the garden was devoted to produce. Pear and apple trees and several fruiting bushes - gooseberry, red currant and black currant were firm favourites for jams and puddings, supplemented by annual trips to go blackberrying. Other fruits were bought and preserved for winter use - no wonder I developed a sweet tooth. Again we had the peas and beans but there was no need to grow onions as the French onion sellers came across from Brittany each year. I never remember water being a problem - it just used to fall out of the sky and if there were water bills then I never got to hear about them.

After finishing school I spent many years at sea or working abroad so gardening was off the agenda and it wasn't until 1985 that I again took up the trowel in earnest.

Jenny and I bought our first home together in inner-west Sydney, no doubt partially attracted by what one shy and retiring real estate agent described as a 'large, sunny backyard'.

Once we got rid of the hills hoist, a shed and a sleep-out we found we had room for a small sitting area shaded by an extremely vigorous bougainvillea and were able to plant a lemon tree and a few native shrubs.

This was another house with a falling down fence - this time at the back and in agreement with yet another friendly neighbour it was pulled down, but not replaced. As our respective shrubs grew we were both able to enjoy a 'green' back fence which had the effect of making both our yards appear much larger than they really were. When we moved in we brought with us a very small Port Jackson Fig Tree that had seeded itself in the sandstone wall of Jenny's former home. It was put in a pot and became an accidental bonsai - thirty years later it is still with us. Once again there were no worries about water whilst we were there.

In 1996 when the traffic, people, planes etc got too much (particularly for me) we made the move to Strathalbyn and purchased 23 Commercial Road, establishing Hamilton House Bed & Breakfast.

We quickly realised that we would need to become serious gardeners and would have to forget all we remembered from England and Sydney and learn to cope with harsh South Australian conditions. We quickly learnt that any rain that fell was precious and that a rain gauge was essential if you wanted to join in any conversation about gardening. No doubt we looked very confused when we first asked "how many points last night?"

In the front was one of Strath's finest rose gardens and it was with some trepidation that we did our first pruning soon after moving in. We got plenty of advice and Dad would have been smiling when we won a first prize at the Strath Show the following year.

More fencing issues - we removed the rather forbidding cyclone mesh fence that surrounded the front yard leaving an open view of the roses.

The back yard was to be a most rewarding project. There were numerous fruit trees, some in poor health which had to go, but not a lot else. It needed a plan and first off we created some paths to give structure which in turn led to different garden beds.

Had we had time in that first winter we would have cut down the 'dead' tree that was in the way of one proposed path.

A close call - it turned out to be a very attractive Crepe Myrtle, something we were not familiar with at the time. A very large shed was 'pruned' of its various add-ons and then we did the very un-Australian thing of reducing the whole thing by about one quarter. This opened up the central area but what to do with a very large and rusting rain water tank that divided the garden in two was the next problem.

It went and we built a rotunda on the remaining base - an ideal spot to sit and contemplate. A selection of natives was planted but try as might we could never get a banksia to grow, though a lilac tree planted in 1997 is now very much a feature.

The remaining fruit trees were productive and a vegie area was developed - broad beans, broccoli, onions, beetroot, lettuce etc grew well, but rhubarb was a continual disappointment.

It was a delight watching the garden develop and mature but the time was coming when we needed to think about down-sizing - could we bear to leave and what would happen to 'our' garden which was still very much a work in progress.

We need not have worried - it could not have ended up in better hands. Joy and Chris Bourne picked up where we left off with imagination and enthusiasm and it is always a pleasure to go back and visit and see what they have accomplished, including putting up a front fence - a period design that enhances the property but they still have trouble with rhubarb.

We moved to Taylors Lane to an irregular shaped block; apart from a flowering gum in one corner we really did start with a blank canvas. The first decision, in agreement with more neighbours, was to plant a Duranta hedge. Other boundaries were fenced with wire mesh so that we would end up with 'green' boundaries.

"Where are you going to put the shed?" was an early question from the builder who went away scratching his head when we replied "we aren't having a shed". State Flora at Murray Bridge was visited several times and we bought mainly tube stock, most of which we were able to plant in the winter before moving in.

We have a predominately water-wise native garden but a small bed of roses continues the family tradition. One thing really pleased us - we are finally able to grow banksias.

At the rear we have established a vegie garden with apricot, pear, plum and peach trees. It is productive though the rhubarb still struggles at times and a foolish attempt to grow raspberries resulted in the predictable "I told you so." Life is busy with garden, bowling and book clubs, not to mention Meals on Wheels, yoga and dog walking but like all gardeners we can always find something to do and more importantly can always find space for yet another plant - and then, of course, we can just sit back with a cuppa and enjoy looking.