

Helen Stacey Bunton - July 2018



For those of us who have grown up in the Strathalbyn district and moved away there comes a time when the 'homing instinct' kicks in.

Some 30 years ago I was living in the Riverland and had transitioned from art teaching to being a full time artist.

I had built a simple neo-Federation style home with red brick quoins and cottage blend bricks from Littlehampton and created a garden on a sloping block of virgin soil - rich in red sand and red clay!

My parents, Colin and Joy, were generous with visiting and getting the garden in shape, helping lay red gum sleepers and putting in native plants, roses and daisy bushes - all designed to withstand the hot Riverland summers - aided by an automatic sprinkler system.

I recall sleeping on the tiled kitchen floor on very hot summer nights trying to keep cool.

However, the 'homing instinct' hit whenever I crossed the Murray River at Murray Bridge, crested the rise overlooking Callington and saw the enigmatic profile of Mount Barker.

So, in the latter part of 1990 I searched Strath for a block, venturing almost by accident into what I now know as Old Strathalbyn, off North Parade, where there are many early settler workers' cottages and the lanes are too narrow for footpaths.

In the 1970s I recall visiting Fran and Graham McGilivray in Melville Street when they were renting what is now Mary Sandercock's old heritage home with its bushland entrance and tall gums. It then seemed marooned in a sea of tiny paddocks with the odd sheep.

I discovered a strange block opposite Mary's home, angling over a corner with irregular boundaries, original axe-split, hand hewn fence posts, heavy 12 gauge rusted wire - and almond trees - this became 'Almond Grove' where the almond trees dictated the placement of the house and the garden layout.

My energetic father carefully dug out all the old posts, straightened heavy wire, repositioned the best posts to remake the fence and we created a wide inviting entrance to the home-gallery-studio.

A near replica of my Riverland home that suited this heritage precinct was built by John Lamshed and son Craig.

The garden wound around the almond trees and house with paths bedded with loads of aged apricot shell from Pearson's on South Terrace (now no more).

Not one piece of lawn to be mowed - ever!

My mother loved gardening and from her I learnt what grew well in this area and so designed my garden with 'nether regions' for Australian native trees and shrubs.

Then in the more 'civilised' areas around the house I selected roses, daisies, geraniums, lavenders and other hardy perennials along with spring bulbs, succulents and violets.

The violets include a pink variety which my grandmother, May, said came out on the early settlers' ship, The Rajasthan, with her great grandmother.

I have taken its root stock with me where ever I have lived - some rarer bulbs, like salmon flowered veltheimia, also originated from Gran's garden.

After two years of trying to contain a burgeoning garden from over-running paths I resolved to have garden borders like my Grandmother Eichner had on their Angas Plains farm, using local stones.

My cousin Marian Harvey at Hartley had mounds of beautifully weathered white stones under mallee trees by the roadside - the stones dated from when the land was first cleared and roads such as Chauncey's Line were surveyed in 1851 by William Chauncey.

Several trailer loads later - again aided by my parents - the garden was transformed. It now had definition!

Dark paths, foliage and flowers were offset by light coloured stone borders - pea straw bedded down the garden before each summer.

The garden decor benefited by my father's other contributions - he installed two historic hand pumps, a metal wheel symbolising the transition on his childhood farm from horses to mechanisation, a single long-armed furrow plough share and his pride and joy, a massive metal vice on an ancient redgum sleeper, originally from Grandpa Laurie Eichner - it is now embedded in the garden, totally unmovable. He confidently said to my husband - 'I expect you find a use for that every day, David!'

Other sculptural features include four, six foot high giant galahs on long metal poles made from old galvanised iron, painted and inserted in the garden.

These were made for the 2014 Alexandrina Farm Gate Festival and 14 of them were installed at 'Alexandrina Cheese' near Mount Compass - their cows took a few days to adjust to them.

Twenty years later the Lamshed father-and-son team, now Craig Lamshed and his son, Sam, built 'Almond Grove B&B', a contemporary studio apartment seamlessly linked to the house via a pergola-like structure - and, yes, Littlehampton were still making cottage blend bricks!

Here a courtyard-style garden was called for, using succulents, a pink-peach bougainvillea, canna, kiss-me-quick, winter bulbs and a giant stand of sword fern below a large almond tree.

These plants coped with poorer soil and a hotter, more arid mini-eco-system in this part of the garden.

Thus the garden has many facets - a bush garden, a cottage garden and a walled courtyard-style garden.

It has survived rabbits, possums, bush rats and one snake - that I know of!

David and I have now been married for seven years and he is yet to exhibit any sign of garden-mania.

After he braved mosquitos to help water the garden by hand for one summer he decided his permanent contribution would be the installation of a watering system.

I am forever grateful!