

# **BEGINNINGS OF BRISBANE BOTANIC GARDENS MT COOT-THA**

by

Barbara Wintringham and Ray Steward



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## **ABOUT THE AUTHORS**

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## **BEGINNINGS OF BRISBANE BOTANIC GARDENS MT COOT-THA**

As these fine gardens approach their 50<sup>th</sup> year in 2020 have you ever wondered how the Brisbane Botanic Gardens Mt Coot-tha started? It is quite a story and a small miracle that it ever happened. Walking in those lovely gardens today, it is hard to remember that only 50 years ago, these were bare slopes with a few eucalypt regrowth trees. Brisbane now has a world class botanic garden that is attracting large numbers of visitors and we owe so much to those early planners and hard workers who created this unique place.

There are several general accounts of the history of the gardens but none that specifically cover the individuals who brought it to fruition or the bureaucratic environment in which it happened. What follows is a distillation of my own extensive oral and library research into this side of the garden's history, as well as Ray Steward's personal recollections. I have chosen six people to profile who stood out as the most significant contributors, each playing a specific founding role in some aspect of the gardens. Obviously, there were many more.

I was a volunteer guide at the Brisbane Botanic Gardens Mt Coot-tha for 25 years and retired at Christmas 2016. Since then I have been able to chat with a few people who were around in the beginning and knew the main characters involved. With Ray's help, what follows is our account of the people who dreamed, planned and created these special gardens.

In 1967 Ray Steward was Manager Parks Department at Brisbane City Council when Lord Mayor Clem Jones decided that Brisbane needed a new botanic garden to attract more tourists. Since he retired from full-time work in 1992, Ray has been a highly valued volunteer guide at the Gardens – so his knowledge spans the whole life of the Gardens. Ray has provided his memories of the Nursery built at Anzac Park and has been a great help to me with these profiles, as has Ross McKinnon who came to Brisbane in 1972 and worked as Botanic Gardens Supervisor at the City Botanic Gardens. Ross later followed Harold Caulfield as Curator at the Brisbane Botanic Gardens Mt Coot-tha from 1984 to 2014. His memories of the early days have been most helpful. Ross deserves a whole book about his contribution to the continued establishment and appreciation of botanic gardens in Queensland.

Clem Jones was a driven man who worked hard to give Brisbane a proper sewage system and he loved sport, especially cricket. When he became Lord Mayor in 1961, he found an experienced Parks Manager, Harry Oakman, who had worked hard for 15 years beautifying Brisbane parks, streets and gardens. Clem thought Harry was anti-sport and they clashed.

Harry must have dreamt about a new botanic garden for Brisbane. In 1950 he sent a memo to the Deputy Chief Engineer for Works (when Parks was a section of that Department) in which he included a detailed definition of a botanic garden. Harry already had the large area of riverside land at Long Pocket selected for a new botanic garden, however other demands for that land won the day.

*'A botanic garden is an area set aside for the growing and effective display of all the different kinds of worthy ornamental trees, shrubs, vines and other plants that can be grown in a given area; their maintenance, proper labelling and study. It need not necessarily include formal beds or borders of annuals or perennials for display purposes.*

*A botanic garden differs from a park in that in it ACTIVE RECREATION OF ANY KIND IS NOT PERMITTED and that in a botanic garden a serious effort is made to plant extensive collections of many kinds of labelled plants not only for the purpose of display but for critical examination and scientific study. Additional functions are: scientific investigations of various kinds which include plant breeding and hybridization, and maintenance of a large Herbarium and Library; these depending, naturally, on the funds available and the qualifications of the botanic gardens staff, in effect a botanic gardens is a MUSEUM OF LIVING PLANTS... The Brisbane Botanic Gardens are exceptionally poor in the number of species represented.'*

Harry knew funds would be needed for a new botanic garden as well as a Lord Mayor who really wanted one. How ironic that the Lord Mayor who would realise his dream, came in the person of Clem Jones and that they were not able to work together. Fortunately for them both, Harry Oakman moved to Canberra for the next decade.



The Courier Mail captured the happy farewell. (11 September 1963)

Ultimately the decision to build a garden at Mt Coot-tha was made in the late '60s, with a recommendation from the Department, after being advised that a site at Long Pocket was earmarked for other uses. A committee was formed of citizens made up of aldermen, a nursery man, several botanists, representatives of garden clubs, a senior judge, a practicing landscape architect, Harold Caulfield and Ray Steward. In 1971 Deane Miller was appointed Assistant Manager (Landscape) within the Parks Department. By then Lord Mayor Clem Jones had made the decision that Brisbane's main botanic garden should be at the Mt Coot-tha Road site.

From his first meeting with the committee Deane started work on a proper plan. Ray Steward had chosen a large rock that was set up near the entrance with a plaque listing the names of the committee members. This was unveiled by Lord Mayor Clem Jones on 31 March 1970 and can still be seen today. This marked the start of its construction and is regarded as the birth date of the Brisbane Botanic Gardens.



Commemorative stone in its original position 1970



Commemorative stone in Australian Rainforest

Harold Caulfield had been the Curator of the City Botanic Gardens since 1956. In 1970 he was awarded a Churchill Fellowship 'to consult with staff at botanic gardens in the USA, UK and Singapore related to the setting up of a new botanic garden for Queensland.' He wrote a very detailed report on his return and was able to discuss it with Deane Miller early in the planning stages.

The committee disbanded after the masterplan was completed and accepted; many of the committee are now dead. However Dr Ray Specht still takes an interest in the garden. The roads were pegged out and work to clear weeds and rubbish had started. There are a few horticulturalists still employed who were gardeners then and can remember those early days. The workers tell me 'It was fun!' All the buildings including the Administrative Building were designed by the City Architects office led by Jacob De Vries and opened in June 1975 by Lord Mayor Clem Jones just before he retired. The major buildings were a large depot to house staff and machinery and the admin building with offices, a library, laboratory, auditorium and a Curator's residence. The gardens were officially opened to members of the public on 5 March 1976.

Barry Dangerfield was the first Curator of the Brisbane Botanic Gardens Mt Coot-tha from November 1975. He lived for four years in the residential section of the Administration Building. He worked hard to enhance the natural creek lines with rocks and he created a waterfall that is much admired to this day. He collected plants and made significant planting in the new garden.

The foundation Librarian was Dawn Conderlag. Dawn set a tone of calm scholarship in that small specialist library for 20 years from 1976 to 1996. The Queensland Education Department seconded a succession of teachers to the gardens from 1976 but ceased the practice in 1994. In November 1994 the Council appointed Janelle Hatherly as their first Visitor Services Coordinator.

All these remarkable people worked in difficult circumstances but they all contributed to a great enterprise – to make the Brisbane Botanic Gardens Mt Coot-tha the very best they could be. We owe them so much for their hard work and care. We hope these profiles will help you get to know them a little better.

## **CLEM JONES AO**

Lord Mayor 1961 to 1975 (14 years)

Born 16 January 1918 Died 15 December 2007 (89 years)

When he went into politics, aged 43, Clem Jones was already wealthy as a successful surveyor. He headed a Labor Party that swept into power with a huge majority. Brisbane badly needed proper sewerage as the majority of homes had a backyard dunny and relied on regular night soil collection. Clem was a driven man who had 'a weakness for doing things', as he once confessed, and he set to work with ruthless energy. He drove his staff with a rule of fear, much like the big town mayors he encountered in the United States of America where he studied on a Fulbright Scholarship. But Clem knew how to foster good relations with the local residents, giving a weekly radio talk in which he would take questions and complaints. People loved this and Brisbane has much to thank him for.

One person he could not get on with was the Manager Parks, Harry Oakman, who had been in Council since 1946 and in 15 years had built up this Department to 300 staff. Harry Oakman had worked hard to care for all the parks and to plant hundreds of street trees that help make Brisbane such a pleasant city. Clem was more interested in sports fields, especially cricket pitches and Harry Oakman had to defend his record when accused of being 'anti-sport'. When Harry became Chief Landscape Architect in Canberra he was able to move on in September 1963 which must have been a relief to them both.

The idea that Brisbane needed a second botanic garden must have taken root in the late 1960s and it is interesting to speculate how much of the establishment of the Brisbane Botanic Gardens at Mt Coot-tha should be attributed to Clem Jones. Certainly, as Lord Mayor, he was empowered to make decisions and endorse actions that had a significant impact on the city at the time and for years to come. Yet, as a leader he would have been influenced by the legacy of his predecessors, taken counsel from individuals he respected and considered the needs and wishes of the constituents who he was elected to serve.



Paluma (ship) aground in the Botanic Gardens, Brisbane 1893

Although they were established in 1842 and considered to be 'the cradle of Queensland agriculture and horticulture', everyone was aware of the inappropriateness of the City Botanic Gardens as the State's premier botanic garden.

Eight major floods between 1870 and 1974 caused the Brisbane River to burst its banks on numerous occasions. This resulted in severe inundation that caused damage and loss in the living collections and destroyed extensive plant records and rich accounts of colonial history. Images of large ships beached on its Bunya (*Araucaria bidwillii*) Walk are etched in Brisbane's civic memory. In the 1974 flood, water rose up to 4.6 metres in the centre of the gardens. Whole plant collections were destroyed and the gardens closed for ten weeks. After this flood, a series of flood mitigation measures were implemented throughout Southeast Queensland.

Clem would have been influenced by individuals such as Lord Mayor John Chandler, Brisbane's longest serving Mayor (1940-52). He would have appreciated the merits of Chandler's preference for another garden at Long Pocket on the banks of the Brisbane River. He also knew others saw the convenience of converting Anzac Park at Toowong. Clem Jones made the final call that the Brisbane Botanic Gardens should be located at the Mt Coot-tha Road site.

The idea that Brisbane really did need a second botanic garden must have taken root in the late 1960s and once landscape construction was underway in 1970. Clem Jones would occasionally send the Manager Parks a 'hurry up' note, possibly prompted by a letter from Harry Oakman who loved Brisbane and planned to return in 1973 to retire. While not really interested in plants, Clem Jones had realised that the new botanic gardens would be a big tourist attraction, bringing visitors who would stay a night or two in Brisbane. Developing the Master plan proceeded with roadways and facilities located and approved by the Lord Mayor and Council who were keen to make the garden a tourist attraction. Clem was particularly interested in the development of the Geodesic Dome planned and developed in USA and Canada by Buckminster Fuller to grow Giant Water Lilies (*Victoria amazonica*).

A works depot, an administration building with library, an auditorium, curator's residence and offices were designed, and project-managed by the City Council Architects Branch under the leadership of Jacob De Vries. This was officially opened by Clem Jones on 28 June 1975 just two weeks before he retired as Lord Mayor. Clem congratulated Deane Miller on his planning work.

Clem Jones is remembered with gratitude as a driven, hard-working Mayor who managed to give Brisbane much better sewerage and roads as well as a very fine botanic garden worthy of Harry Oakman's definition.

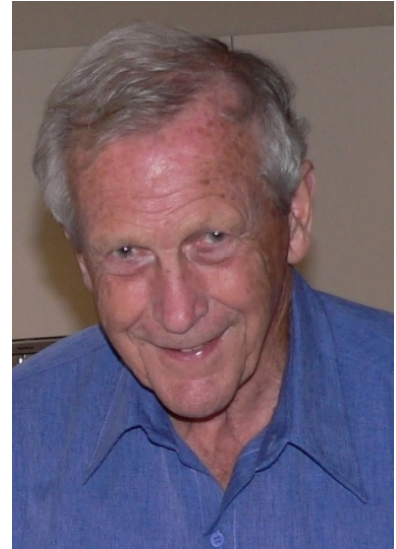


Lord Mayor Clem Jones at opening of the Administration Building.  
(28 June 1975)

## **RAY STEWARD**

Assistant Parks Manager 1967 Parks Manager 1970 to 1992

Ray Steward came to Brisbane with his wife Ruth and three sons Paul, Neil and Alan in 1967. He was 36 and had experience working at the Royal Botanic Gardens Sydney, the Adelaide Botanic Gardens and the Albury City Council Parks Department. He worked for the Brisbane City Council as Parks Manager until 1992 when, after 25 years, he retired and soon became a volunteer guide at Brisbane Botanic Gardens Mt Coot-tha.



Ray is still helping there today and his knowledge and helpfulness are legendary. To walk with him in his beloved gardens is a delight and a great education. Ray was there from the start when Harold Caulfield planned in detail for them to be at Anzac Park but Clem Jones said 'No. They must be at the Mt Coot-tha Road site'. Clem was a man everyone obeyed.

It must have been hard at first as the Parks Department had all the other parks in Brisbane to manage and maintain. No doubt they sent work parties to the new botanic garden site when they could but Ray admits 'progress was slow ... but there was progress'.

Ray is very fair and gives Clem Jones full credit for pushing the project along. He acknowledges that Deane Miller's detailed plans meant that road, bridge and path works could start properly. Ray got on well with Barry Dangerfield, the first Curator, and did all he could to assist as the new gardens gradually took shape. He was disappointed when the Council decided to no longer finance the large nursery in Anzac Park that had supplied a great many plants over the years.

Ray is a true plantsman and his knowledge of the plants and their whereabouts in the Brisbane Botanic Gardens Mt Coot-tha is unrivalled. He is also a considerable botanical artist. For many years he was president of the Botanical Artists' Society of Queensland where he is still their 'garden guru', though no longer president. He exhibits his excellent paintings at their annual show and still enjoys painting and keeping his eye open for suitable plant subjects in the gardens.

Ray said that when things got too much he would go and enjoy Scout activities. From the age of seven he was a Cub, then a Scout and Scout Leader. He only hung up his scarf and woggle when he turned 80, after ten years on their Executive.

Ray has been a member for over 60 years and an honorary life member for 20 years of the Parks and Leisure Australia (PLA) which was originally the Royal Australian Institute of Parks and Recreation and was national President in 1979-80.

Ray is also an active member of his local Anglican Church and for many years regularly walked with their bush walking group. He has been friend and mentor to botanic garden curators, staff and volunteers and still takes a great interest in them all. In 1996 he gave the guides a fascinating talk about the start of the Brisbane Botanic Gardens Mt Coot-tha and how well and how hard the gardening staff worked to bring it to life. He was very keen that the workers should be remembered as we all owe them so much. Ray's name is among them as a man of great integrity.

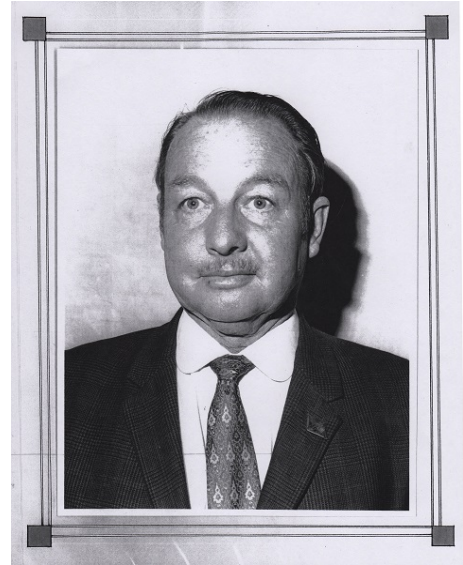
## **HAROLD CAULFIELD AM**

Curator City Botanic Gardens 1956 to 1979

Curator Brisbane Botanic Gardens Mt Coot-tha 1979 to 1982

Born Melbourne 1918 Died Brisbane 1994 (76 years)

Harold was 38 when he came to Brisbane with his wife Pauline, daughter Susan and son Allan to take up the position of Curator at Brisbane City Botanic Gardens in 1956. He and his family lived onsite in the Curator's cottage. Harold had started work in the Melbourne Botanic Gardens in the 1930s. During WW II he joined 2/11 Field Artillery Regiment and was promoted to Sergeant. He returned to Melbourne Botanic Gardens but then became a plant propagator at Adelaide Botanic Gardens.



In 1961 Clem Jones became Lord Mayor in a Labor landslide so had virtual control of the city. There was a desperate need for sewerage and better roads and Clem set to work with a will. For some reason he disliked Harold Caulfield and even sacked him three times, which was upsetting for a man with a family who lived on the job. Always the dismissal was reversed by Clem's secretary the following day but it made for a difficult relationship.

Harold Caulfield worked with Harry Oakman who was Parks Superintendent and then Parks Manager from 1946 to 1963. As Curator of a botanic garden, Harold was in an autonomous position. Professionally he was expected to get on with the work of managing the botanic garden so that it was a place of interest, learning and beauty for all who visited. His main constraints were the number of staff, their enthusiasm and expertise as well as a hard-to-define budget. Council was challenged to determine how much money was needed to maintain and improve a botanic garden as well as be prepared for and deal with unpredictable weather events. The city gardens were hit hard in January 1974 when Southeast Queensland suffered its worst flood of the century. In total, there were 14 fatalities, 300 people injured, 8000 homes destroyed and an estimated A\$68 million in damages.

When Harold Caulfield became Curator there was a small and rather sad remnant of a zoo. This ramshackle structure was quite costly and unsafe for both animals and people. With the support of Harry Oakman he closed it down and found new homes for the remaining animals. One was an ancient Galapagos Tortoise that had somehow landed in Brisbane.

The tortoise was named Harry by the garden staff to annoy Harry Oakman who really disliked the creature's love of hibiscus leaves. When Harry (the tortoise) was re-homed at Fleay's Fauna Sanctuary on the Gold Coast it was discovered that he was actually a 'she' so became Harriet for the rest of her happy life, probably eating all the hibiscus leaves she could find. Harriet lived out the last two decades of her life at Australia Zoo in Beerwah on the Sunshine Coast. According to their website, Harriet was collected from the Galapagos Islands in 1835 by Sir Charles Darwin when she was just the size of a dinner plate. This means that she probably hatched somewhere around the year 1830. She was therefore 175 years old when she died.

In 1970 Harold was awarded a Churchill Fellowship and his brief was 'to consult with staff in USA, UK and Singapore botanic gardens related to the setting up of a new botanic garden for



Queensland'. On his return he wrote an eight-page report entitled 'Proposal for a new botanic garden'. His plan was to base the new garden at Anzac Park, Toowong, where work had already started on roads and sites for plants including an arid zone and some trees had been planted. The Brisbane City Council already had a large nursery at Manly that provided many plants for parks and streets throughout Brisbane. A new nursery built in Anzac Park for the new botanic garden was completed and production of plants suitable for a new botanic garden got underway.

The State Government already planned to route the Western Freeway around two sides of Anzac Park so Harold suggested a tunnel for visitors to walk under the freeway. This was considered feasible and planning for it by both BCC staff and Main Roads staff was proceeding when Lord Mayor Clem Jones made the executive decision that the main botanic garden should be at the larger site. The Mt Coot-tha site has proven to be quite right, growing to its present 56 hectares with easy access to the hills behind. The only downside to this decision was the isolated position of the nursery, however staff managed to overcome that problem for ten years when it was taken away.

Harold Caulfield must have expected to be appointed Curator of the new botanic garden but Barry Dangerfield was installed in 1975. When Barry left in 1980 Harold was in fact appointed there before retiring in 1982. He was a rather serious man who never forgot that he had once been a sergeant in the army. He loved plants and really cared about his gardens. One little story illustrates this. Driving a Council photographer up to some new area of the Brisbane Botanic Gardens Mt Coot-tha to take photos, Harold stopped several times to get out of the car and to pull out some weeds and tidy up around a plant. The drive took about 30 minutes instead of the usual ten.

Harold was the Foundation President for the Society for Growing Australian Plants in Queensland and often gave talks to Garden Clubs as well as writing a column in the local papers. He is remembered at the Brisbane Botanic Gardens Mt Coot-tha by a fine pergola beside the main lagoon donated by the Queensland Council of Garden Clubs. He was awarded an Order of Australia (AM) for 'services to horticulture' in 1992.

## **DEANE MILLER**

Assistant Director (Landscape), 1971 to 1977

As Assistant Director (Landscape) within the Parks Department, Deane was responsible for landscape development in all the parks system of the Brisbane City Council from 1971 to 1977. Born in Adelaide, Deane Miller was 42 when he came to Brisbane to take up this position on 1 July 1971 and became one of a very few parks planners working in Queensland.

Deane gained experience as a student at the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh, the University of London Botanical Supply Unit in Surrey, the National Arboretum of France and the botanic garden of Berlin-Dahlem in Germany. When he returned to Australia, he worked as the Landscape Officer with the Highways Department of South Australia before moving to Brisbane. Although he had not qualified as a landscape architect overseas, Deane had the experience and background needed to plan and design a true botanic garden for Brisbane. In addition, from 1972 to 1974 he undertook the diploma course for professional landscape architects at the Queensland Institute of Technology.



At first his only staff member was a Tracer, Anne Voller, but she was able to organise a 100:1 plan of the area so that Deane could work from an accurate base. Deane read Harold Caulfield's report and walked the area with him. Deane had a clear idea that the new gardens should be a true botanic garden with 'a living library of plants for the public to learn their names', as Linnaeus proposed. So, he planned a demonstration garden, fragrance, flower and courtyard gardens in addition to the main themed gardens: plants of the tropical rainforest, wet tropics, dry tropics, marsh, bog and aquatics and an arid zone.

Anzac Park, Dean Street, was initially planned to be Stage 1, devoted to exotic plants. A production nursery was completed and substantial earthworks were undertaken there before Lord Mayor Clem Jones changed it to the one, present day site. Here, Stage 1 of the plan covered 22 hectares and an area for further development called Stage 2 was allocated where Australian plants could be grown around a small lagoon created by a dam across a creek. Work on site started properly in 1974 and Deane oversaw the pegging out of roads, footbridges, walkways and bedding areas. More progress was made when a work scheme for unemployed men provided labour needed to clear lantana, other weeds and rubbish.

Deane wrote away for the specifications of a Geodesic Dome that had been spotted in an architectural journal that had been built in the Queen Elizabeth Gardens in Vancouver, Canada. As a result, approval to build the Tropical Dome was granted. We have Deane to thank for the excellent overall layout of Brisbane Botanic Gardens Mt Coot-tha and for his carefully laid out plans for a world class botanic gardens to educate and refresh all who visit. The layout and subsequent works have been well received by the visitors over the first 40 years.

In November 1975 Barry Dangerfield was appointed the first Curator of the new Brisbane Botanic Gardens Mt Coot-tha and continued the development of the garden within the guidelines of the masterplan. It is only now, 40 years later, that progressive planning is being contemplated. Deane Miller moved on again in 1977.

## **BARRY DANGERFIELD**

First Curator of Brisbane Botanic Gardens Mt Coot-tha 1975 to 1980

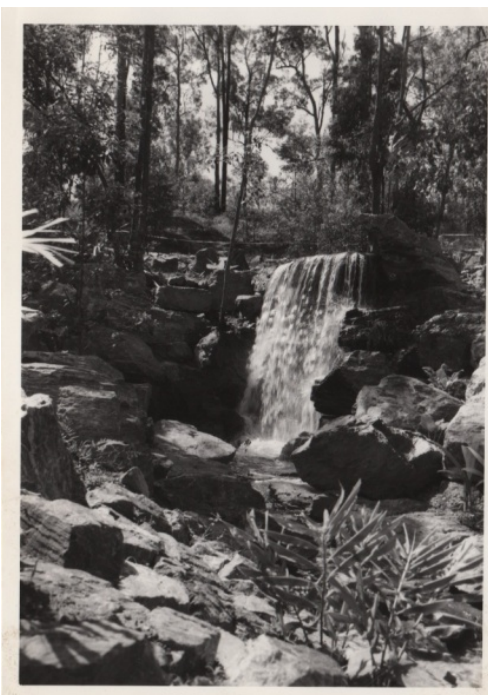
Born 1933 Died 2005 (72 years)

Barry Dangerfield was 42 when he was appointed as the first Curator of the new Brisbane Botanic Gardens Mt Coot-tha in 1975. He must have been surprised to find that work was only starting on the roads, paths and waterways. Plans had been drawn up by Deane Miller and labour provided by 'jobs for the unemployed' schemes but progress was slow.

Curators of botanic gardens are in an unusually independent position. Their exact role is hard to define and they are expected to be an expert in botany and in the local growing conditions as well as be able to make the gardens attractive to the general public and useful to botanists and students. At the same time, they must work with a restricted budget and with variable support from changing administrations. To create Brisbane Botanic Gardens Mt Coot-tha from a site of weed and rubbish-infested bush alongside a working quarry must have been a herculean task in 1970s.

Barry lived in the Curator's residence attached to the main administration building and took a great personal interest in the placement of rocks along waterways, and the replacement of wooden bridges by stone constructions. In fact those working with him felt sure he had a number on each rock and knew if they moved one to a different position from the one he selected. He was truly 'Lord of the Rocks' and in his four year tenure he worked hard to set up a sound framework for the future gardens.

Barry was responsible for collecting plants and production of plant species for the garden and started planting the trees and shrubs. He developed a super mulching technique for improving what was a very impoverished soil, basically known as Brisbane Schist. The areas for planting were deep cultivated then spread with mulch collected from all corners of the city some from street tree chippers and some organic waste from industry like husks from food plants and dried sewerage sludge. He was also responsible for developing the first accessioning and registering of all plantings in the gardens. He always maintained that the first plant in the garden was a *Datura* species but who knows!



Left: Barry's waterfall.  
Right: Barry looks towards his garden.

Barry was a cultured man who had been well educated at Burnley Horticultural College where he later lectured. He loved music, his church, and he sang in two choirs while in Brisbane. He wrote poetry and his poems were published in a book entitled 'Turn of the Tide', (Peacock Publication, Adelaide) in 2005 – the year Barry died. This haiku poem he wrote while Curator at Brisbane Botanic Gardens gives you a flavour of the man.

*With a sigh, the clouds  
Heavy, quick, spilling with rain,  
Flood the land with life.*

True to the pattern of his life Barry moved on after four years but left a lasting impression. The waterfall deep in the Exotic Rainforest is a testament to his eye and careful placement of rocks. Barry always had a deep affection for the garden and returned to Brisbane regularly to visit it.

## **DAWN CONDERLAG**

Foundation Librarian 1976 to 1996

Dawn was educated at Methodist College a private girls' school in Colombo, Sri Lanka, where she rose to the rank of Head Prefect. She then attended University where she secured a BA with Honours in History, Literature and Classical Culture. She married shortly after and migrated to Australia with her husband in 1971.

Following in the footsteps of her mother who was Music Librarian at the British Council, Colombo, Dawn applied for her first job with the Brisbane City Council library service and was hired to start work the following week as a library assistant at Ashgrove Library. She continued her studies while working and was granted Associate membership of the Library Association of Australia.

She was promoted to the position of Librarian at Council's Administration Centre where she gained experience in all aspects of library work. It was while working here that she was selected to be Librarian of the recently-built library at Brisbane's new botanic gardens at Mt Coot-tha.

The Gardens were so fortunate to have such a hardworking and very literate first Librarian who loved books as well as horticulture. There must have been some empty shelves when Dawn first saw the library. She remembers going, in her own time, with Barry Dangerfield (the first Curator) to speak at garden clubs and many other organisations to promote the gardens and their embryonic library. Many of these, such as the Queensland Herbarium, the Queensland Royal Horticultural Society and the Kenmore Garden Club, helped by donating valuable books which were out of print.

During her annual leave Dawn visited libraries at botanic gardens such as Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide, Singapore, Sri Lanka and Kew. She also organised some lovely displays in the Library and always helped with special events in the Gardens. She built the Library up into the unique collection that exists today. Ross McKinnon, (retired Curator) remembers it was a highlight of his month when Dawn brought him a list of new books they might order. He says she was the most literate person he had ever met.

At her farewell in 1996, Ray Steward, in his role as President of the Gardens' Volunteer Guides, said Dawn had helped to build the library into a special place for all those patrons who were interested in natural history, botany, horticulture and landscape gardening. He observed that Dawn helped Barry Dangerfield, Harold Caulfield and Ross McKinnon and staff in their pursuit of establishing a new botanic garden and library for the people of Brisbane. He also thanked her on behalf of the guides for her patient introduction to the library and help in finding obscure information on plants.

Dawn says she loved the library and it was a privilege to have worked there. Brisbane was so fortunate to have a person of her calibre to start our unique Botanic Gardens Library.



Dawn Conderlag's Farewell Party on 10 October 1996.

Left to Right: Tony Rainsforth, Pam Fisher, Penny Davis, Dawn Conderlag, Harry Oakman, Ray Steward and John Daly.

## **THE WORKERS**

From 1970 onwards

We will never know how many men wielded picks and shovels, spades and forks, crowbars, axes and saws to create the circuit of roads, network of paths and bridges over creeks after clearing loads of weeds and rubbish from an unlikely hillside on the bushy lower slopes of Mt Coot-tha.

Some expert craftsmen were employed to build stone retaining walls while others laboured to unload masses of good soil and mulch for the new beds. Hours were spent planting seedlings, keeping down the weeds and watering. All this work of creating a botanic garden out of a featureless bushland was done by hand and it took some years.

Ray Steward can remember certain characters that stand out. Two men had been airmen on opposite sides in WW2 and became good friends. Some men started as labourers and then were able to take a Horticultural Diploma on the job and have worked here ever since.

The Technical Officers, Phil Cameron and Brian Cooney have worked in the laboratory from the start. They have made plant selections, kept the records of plantings up to date and done their best with the everlasting task of plant labelling. They have answered innumerable identification queries for plants spotted by guides and visitors.

Gardeners and their supervisors are the backbone of any botanic garden and their daily efforts go unnoticed as their horticultural knowledge and expertise ensures all plants grow healthily, garden beds are pest and weed-free and lawns are mowed and well-watered. They are often the first people to field queries from visitors as they work and have to be polite, respectful and good humoured.

Botanic gardens are special places and can be hard task masters with storms occasionally wreaking havoc. There is always something needing attention in 56 hectares of mixed trees and shrubs. It is also home to a large number of animals with the bird count being varied and quite high.

To everyone who helped to clear rubbish, shovel soil, move rocks, make paths and beds, build bridges and stone walls we say 'thank you'. Your hard work has helped to give us the very special gardens we enjoy today.



Geodesic Dome, Mt Coot-tha, 1977  
Slide collection of Robin Barron.

## THE NURSERY

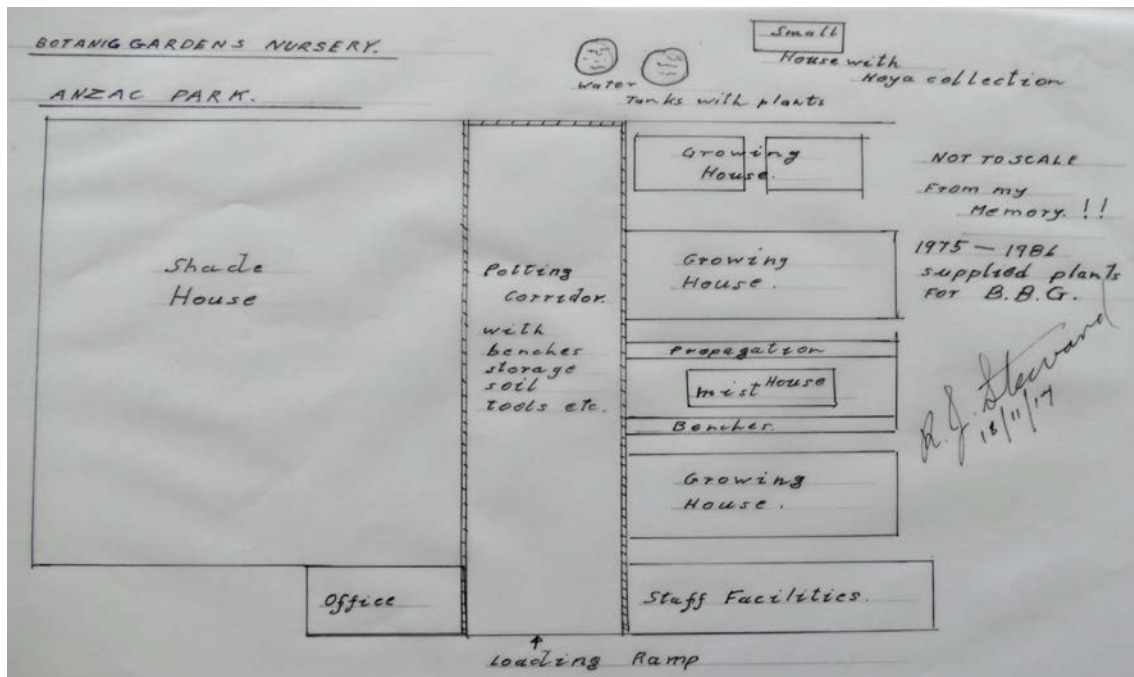
Most of us have forgotten the Council Plant Nursery built in the early 1970s in Anzac Park for the new botanic garden to be built on the lower slopes of Mt Coot-tha. It was located where the dog park is today.



Plant nursery construction 1977

The nursery was designed by the Park Branch and built by the Architects Branch of Brisbane City Council with technical instructions from the Park Branch. At that time the nursery included many of the design features used in a modern production nursery of the 1970s.

The nursery was built with a large central covered work area called the potting corridor with facilities for propagating, potting and growing plants. On the southern side was a large area under shade for growing on the plant collections; on the northern side a glasshouse section was built, while on the western side there was a space for expansion and various propagation activities, such as creating temporary ponds for water plants. The eastern side (by the access road) had an office and staff accommodation and access to the potting hall via a loading ramp.



Sketch plan of the layout of the nursery built by the Parks Department of the Brisbane City Council in 1975 and used until 1986-87.



The propagation house had properly designed benches with an inbuilt watering system and heated benches. It had a central bench with a misting system which proved to be of great benefit for both seed and cutting production. In addition to this house there were two growing houses of the same size constructed with benches suitable for growing plants and two smaller houses.

The nursery was used for at least ten years and production of plants for the gardens was supervised by the Curator of the City Botanic Garden for a short time until Barry Dangerfield was appointed as the first Curator of the Brisbane Botanic Gardens Mt Coot-tha. For the last years of its life it was administered by Ross McKinnon and the specialist staff who were extremely disappointed with the closing of the nursery.

The nursery was closed down by Brisbane City Council around 1987 as a cost-cutting measure and as a safeguard against structural problems encountered in one wall, that could have been easily remedied. From that date onward plants had to be sourced from the nursery trade and the Council's Manly Nursery and any other source with suitable plants for a developing botanic garden that the staff could find. The Gardens Accession Records will tell the story of the Council Plant Nursery's value.

The loss of the specialist nursery was a big blow to the ongoing collection of plants and staff have undertaken some holding and production of plants in temporary facilities for many years.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS & SOURCES**

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Dr Jeannie Sim, B,DesSt, BArch, GradDipLandArch, MA (Conservation Studies), Phd., is a garden historian and landscape architect. She was a Senior Lecturer in the School of Design (1997-2016) until she retired. She has had numerous papers on tropical garden design history published. Jeannie is a founding Director of the new Friends of Brisbane Botanic Gardens and Sherwood Arboretum and a founding member of the Lord Mayor's Advisory Committee on Parks and Botanic Gardens. Jeannie was able to give me important details about the Landscape Architecture Diploma course that Deane Miller took in the 1970s at the Queensland Institute of Technology.

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## Image Credits

Harry Oakman & Lord Mayor Clem Jones: Fryer Library. Courier Mail 11 September 1963

Commemorative Stone: Ray Steward

Paluma (ship): State Library of Queensland

Lord Mayor Clem Jones opening Administration Building: BCC Archives

Ray Steward: BGANZ The Botanic Gardener Issue 45

Deane Miller: Own photograph

Tropical Dome: <http://queenslandplaces.com.au/mount-coot-tha>

Harold Caulfield: BCC Archives

Barry Dangerfield (two photos): BCC Archives

Dawn Conderlag's Farewell: BCC Archives

Nursery images: BCC Archives and Ray Steward

Barbara Wintringham: BCC Library staff



Barbara Wintringham in her favourite place of study and research at Mt Coot-tha Library  
(August 2004)