Interview with Bruce McBrien
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Transcribed from video

We should start by asking you to tell us a little bit about yourself.

I am 80 years of age. I was born in Melbourne and have lived in Melbourne all my life. I have enjoyed living in Melbourne. There was one stage when I thought I might like to live in England. I was born in Brighton but I was always ill in Brighton because living in Brighton it was always damp with the fog coming in off the sea. I don't know if that still happens. But it was always damp, and I was always getting croup and whooping cough. But that didn't deter my parents from sending me off with my sisters to Firbank Girls Grammar School. I am an old girl of Firbank, believe it or not, even though I was only there for six months. And 74 years later I still get the magazine, they still treat me as an old girl.

As I said, I got desperately ill and the doctor said to my father "Look, Bruce is never going to be well while you live here, you have to get him away from the sea air. And that is how we came to live in the city. My father bought a house in Spring Street, a 19 room house complete with ballroom, and huge garden and stables and facing the Treasury Gardens, but he bought it to convert into offices. It was built about 1904, and this was 1929, so he converted into offices. And he turned the ground floor which used to be dining room, morning room and library and ballroom into offices, and the ballroom became the boardroom, and the first floor which was the principal bedrooms he turned into meeting rooms, but there was still 8 huge guest rooms on the top floor which he wasn't using so he converted that into a flat for us to get me away from the sea air. And we stayed there for 30 years, which was great and grand.

And of course having been at Firbank, and being ill, well my sisters went off to Melbourne Grammar, Merton Hall, and my parents wanted me to go to Melbourne Grammar, but the same doctor said "He's had a very rough time, send him to a state school first to get him roughed up". So I went to Yarra Park State School, which is on the corner of Punt Road and Bridge Road.

I was there for 3 years, and that's when I used to wander home through East Melbourne, through the Fitzroy Gardens, and became friendly with Ola Cohn carving the Fairies Tree, and watched Captain Cook's Cottage being rebuilt in the Gardens. All that sort of history was in front of me. Eventually I'd get home anxious to see how much higher the spires had grown on St. Patrick's Cathedral because they were put on in the late 1930s. That always fascinated me. And to see the fireman at the Eastern Hill Fire Station tower in that little glass room 24 hours a day just looking for fires, and incidentally those men they did four hourly shifts but they weren't allowed to sit down they had to go round and round and punch a button every quarter of an hour. And they'd send a signal down approximately where the fire was and the brigade would go and find it. But it intrigued me – the main spire on St. Patrick's Cathedral, it has got a bronze crucifix on the top of it, and way, way, way on top of it there is a light, and I used to lie in bed and wonder, "How do they manage to change that globe". I eventually found out how they did it - and all those things intrigued me.

I became very involved with the East Melbourne community later on, mainly through the church there, Holy Trinity, in Clarendon Street, and I became very involved with that. And next door to us in Spring Street, on the other corner of Flinders Lane was the Church of England Girls Friendly Society Hostel. There used to be a lot of hostels in Melbourne where girls would stay who had come down from the country to work in offices. That was the Church of England one. The Salvation Army had one in Spring Street called Spring House, the old Scotch College which was where the Peter MacCallum Cancer Hospital now is was the Chalmers Hall Presbyterian Hostel, the Methodists were in Lonsdale Street, next to Wesley Church, it's still there but not used, and the Catholics were up opposite the Exhibition Gardens, in a place called St. Anne's. And I got involved with some of the girls in the Friendly Society. They all went across to the church, the Church of England Fellowship and badminton and all the rest of it.

But in those days East Melbourne was mainly boarding houses, and people were boarding there. There were some residents, of course, but many of the big old houses had become boarding houses, and that didn't change really until well after the war. And people began to realize the advantage of living in East Melbourne and living so close to the city. It was reasonably cheap too.

When my father died my mother and I decided to move out and I bid for a very large house in George Street, mine was the last bid – £10,000, $20,000 – and I was called in to negotiate the sale at £10,500 and I wouldn't go any further. I suppose I didn't know where I was going to find the extra £500. It is the way things have changed so much. So I missed out on that one and someone else bought it, and sold it for a multitude of dollars later on. It has now been demolished.

That's the pity of it. So many of those lovely homes were demolished in the 60s and became ghastly flats. Big houses today – there is a sameness about them which is not attractive. The old houses have got disadvantages of course, and also no parking, no car parking. That is a disadvantage for a lot of people, not only in East Melbourne of course, but South Yarra and all those places too.

But I became very involved with the church and came onto the Vestry and was treasurer, as my father was too. Then I became very involved with the Liberal Party. I've told a little fib - saying I lived there for 30 years – when Japan came into the war, and incidentally I see there is a question here "Do I remember anything of the war" Can I go ahead?

Please do.

The third of September was my thirteenth birthday and on the third of September, I think it was on a Sunday; and I was having a party – behind us was the Herald office and we heard the Herald boys sing out, "Extra, Extra. War declared" and that sort of knocked my party on the head really. And then it progressed and my father turned 50 on the seventh of December 1941 and we were having a party for his 50th and we heard "Extra, Extra. Pearl Harbour bombed". A strange coincidence, actually.

Well, then Japan, of course, swooped down and bombed Darwin and those mini subs got into Sydney Harbour and we understood, although there was great censorship at

the time, but my father was in the know, and we heard that a Japanese reconnaissance plane was flying over Melbourne, to have a look at Melbourne. It has been confirmed. It was launched from a ship out in Bass Strait. It was a bi-plane. And Dad thought, if they bomb Melbourne the family will be the first to go up. So he thought he better get us out of Melbourne, as far away as possible, to safety, so he bought a house at Eaglemont just 6 miles away. And we felt perfectly safe there, because we sat up right on a hill there looking out over Doncaster and Templestowe and there wasn't a house to be seen, and the RAAF used to practise dive-bombing along there because there was nothing they could have hit.

And then we moved back to the city when the war was over. Now what was I leading up to? – While I was there I met a super group of teenagers, because in the city you really didn't have any playmates and I got involved with this group of teenagers and in 1945 we thought we should have some political discussion so about 20 of us got together on 14 August 1945, which was the eve of Japan surrendering and we formed what we called the Heidelberg Liberal Youth Club and on we went. And that actually was the foundation of the Young Liberal Movement of Victoria. We were the first ones, and then two years after that we became the Heidelberg Young Liberals. And I became very involved with politics and I eventually became president of the Melbourne branch, of the senior branch, of the Melbourne Liberal party and that included East Melbourne and we used to meet in a place there. It is still there, behind the Hilton Hotel, an old home. It used to be called Philadelphia House and we used to meet there quite frequently, particularly at election time. I have talked a long time. Are you sure you don't want to ask any questions?

If I may ask a question: what else did you do growing up in terms of enjoyment and leisure and things like that?

Oh a lot of tennis. When we moved out to Eaglemont my father put a tennis court in for us, and in the street behind us there were two tennis courts. The house immediately behind us had a tennis court and the house next to them had a tennis court, so we formed a club but they used to meet at our house and we played a lot of tennis.

Before going out there my father joined my sister and I up at the Royal South Yarra Tennis Club, and he gave us these big tennis cases. They were big things like this and we used to go down to Batman Avenue to pick up the little bus which ran from there. And actually the bus still runs, this bus route still runs, but it doesn't finish up there now. And it was a little seven passenger bus. Just seven passengers with a little rear door with a couple of steps up and we used to get in. But only taking seven passengers and these two big cases, once my sister and I got in there was hardly any room for anybody else. But that's how we got involved with tennis in the first place.

And then when we moved back to the city I took up badminton and that's where I got involved with the church in East Melbourne. They had a very good badminton club there. But I wasn't sport minded other wise. At school, I went to Melbourne Grammar, during summer you had to do either cricket or rowing. You had to. There was nothing else. I hated cricket. Even though I was a tour guide at the Melbourne Cricket Ground I hated cricket and a friend of mine was a great cricketer and he said "You a guide at the cricket ground! You don't know a thing about cricket", which I

don't. So I did rowing, which I hated too. And in winter time you had to play football, there were no ifs or buts about it, you just had to. And I didn't care for playing that either, so I took up tennis instead, and I enjoyed that.

I got involved with the theatre, the non-professional theatre, when we were out at Eaglemont, what was the City of Heidelberg Repertory Company, now the Heidelberg Rep, which was way up there as far as amateur circles are concerned. I joined that – they wanted six young men to take part in a play and we thought that would be fun. And that is what got me involved with amateur theatre. I became their vice-president.

But I was more interested in the musical theatre and I have just retired after 52 years in the non-professional musical theatre, after 150 productions and I just love it, just love it, but that is musicals. I have done straight plays too, but I much prefer to do musicals. And 20 years ago formed what I called the Music Theatre Guild of Victoria and that embodies all the amateur musical companies and there is over 70 of them that belong to it. It is amazing what is going on in Victoria. And they set up an awards scheme to challenge the Oscars, the Tonys, the Logies and they called them the Bruce awards. They are a great bunch of people, they are terrific.

It has given me a wonderful life, a great interest in theatre. But my parents were very theatrical people and took us to absolutely everything in the city, because everything centres in the city. When Chadstone opened that really knocked the city on the head quite a bit. Because I opened a shop in the city two years before Chadstone opened and you felt the effect immediately. It never properly picked up again.

So the theatre and the various societies you have been involved with, would you say that is what has kept you connected with the East Melbourne area?

No, not as far as the theatre is concerned, although next door but one in Spring Street there was a row of three terrace houses, and one of the theatrical conglomerates, J.C. Williamson's, I don't know whether you have heard of them, and Garnet Caroll who ran the Princess Theatre, they used to lodge their chorus members, ballet people, who they brought from interstate. They used to lodge them there and some of their semi-principals, they lodged them there to do the shows. But I got involved with a lot of them because they were just next door and I suppose I was a stage-door Johnny. I used to stand outside the stage-doors and get autographs of all the stars. I have given that collection to the Performing Arts Museum, a big collection of very famous people, really.

And a lot of them were also boarded out in East Melbourne and there used to be a place there called Magnolia Court in Hotham Street, no, Powlett Street. The building is still there but it is not Magnolia Court now. But a lot of them used to stay there. Do you know The Johnston Collection in Hotham Street?

No.

Oh, well it is just sort of behind The Johnston Collection and I used to go over there a lot and spend a lot of time with those theatrical people in East Melbourne.

But as I say I got involved with the East Melbourne Group and that took me over there a lot, trying to preserve the place and stop high rise buildings etcetera.

What buildings were you trying to stop?

Trying to save?

Well either. Were you successful?

No, not at the time. I got highly involved with the National Trust and I joined the National Trust when it first started in 1958, and that was when we had the East Melbourne Group going too. The National Trust, had they come along ten years earlier we would have saved a lot of buildings, but a lot of them did go. We tried desperately to save the place where the Hilton Hotel now stands, Cliveden, which was an absolutely wonderful place. Do you know about Cliveden?

Not much.

No, well I can understand that. It was built for Sir William Clark, who was president of just about everything in Melbourne, and he was president of the Great International Exhibition for which the Exhibition Building was built. And I don't whether you know but it is the only building left in the world that was built for an exhibition, and it is very important, and like the Eiffel Tower, they are structures, they are not buildings. And he lived at Rupertswood, Sunbury and he decided he would build a townhouse, so he built Cliveden. And he thought, "OK I'll be having guests." And he thought he better look after them so he built 23 guest bedrooms, and he had 12 children. It had two ballrooms, one massive ballroom and one smaller one, and a private entrance and a public entrance. And it was a most beautiful place, beautiful.

Then he also was responsible for the Jolimont Railway Station being built where it is, because when he built that house he got information that they were going to alter the train line from Princes Bridge to Clifton Hill, and put it through in Yarra Park where it runs today. And he must have thought to himself, "They've got to put a station here somewhere. What say I pay for it if they put it opposite my front door", and they did. And strangely enough they went to all that trouble to get he and his family and his friends into the city on the train but he died on a tram instead. He died getting off a tram in Collins Street.

But his wife lived on there for quite some years, then it was sold and another storey was put on top of it and it became very exclusive apartments. And I used to go there a lot, visiting people. It was a beautiful place, but we couldn't save it in the end.

And all along Wellington Parade there were some very attractive private houses, little ones, and some bigger ones, but they are practically all gone now, because they built those high rises there. They did call it the East Melbourne Wall, just like the Berlin Wall. It is a shame what has happened there. It was lovely, almost a boulevard in many ways.

And Clarendon Street, it was beautiful too, particularly where the Mercy Hospital built the big maternity hospital, there were two beautiful houses there, absolutely

beautiful houses and in the middle was a row of three storey terraces, joined terrace houses, which were very grand and beautiful too. But they all disappeared to get that big monster of a building built. It should never have happened either, particularly looking over the gardens as it is, and the Hilton Hotel. It was said that the wind that hits that [claps his hands], if you are near it and the wind hits that, it comes down right through the Fitzroy Gardens and can almost blow you off your feet, and it was said that it would probably kill the elm trees, that avenue of elm trees, but it hasn't I noticed, but it is very forceful. It is a great pity.

Of the places you did managed to save which one is the most important to you personally, of the houses that you did save?

Braemar is one, it is in George Street. A very important house. Yes we managed to save that. It was a boarding house, which reverted back to a private residence again. Yes, that's a little beauty that one.

And on the corner of George Street and Powlett Street. I don't know if you can visualise where I am speaking of. George Street is the first one parallel to Wellington Parade. I think it is still called Koorine, a big place on the north west corner. There were four marvellous houses on each corner. That is the only one left now, the others have all gone.

But there was one over on the south east corner which was a beauty and it was on the market for £7,000 and my father bid for that but lost it, and when we decided to move back into the city from Eaglemont there was a house in Clarendon Street looking over the Fitzroy Gardens which was immediately opposite where we were in Spring Street. It was a large red brick house which belonged to people by the name of Tait and it was on the market when we decided to move back into the city, and Dad thought, well, perhaps he might buy that, and move into that, no offices involved etcetera. So that was £7,000, so he put a deposit on it but we hadn't sold the house at Eaglemont, and it was just after the war when you were not allowed to own two houses, because the housing situation was so desperate and all the men coming back from the war and back into the community, housing was very scarce, and Dad had to have the deposit refunded and we lost the sale of that house, because we hadn't sold the one at Eaglemont at the time. But that was demolished, and there is a big apartment block put up where it stood, now.

The Church of England there, Holy Trinity, its vicarage was on the corner of George Street and Clarendon Street and it was lovely Victorian house, and it had a huge block of vacant land beside it with a most wonderful gum tree on it, and I was treasurer of the church and we had so many requests for the sale of that block of land, so many. But the diocesan office of Melbourne wouldn't allow it to be sold so it wasn't, but eventually the whole thing was sold and those blocks of apartments have been put on there.

When you say that there was a restriction on owning two properties what other changes do you remember in relation to the end of the war? Or during the war? In terms of your life style or community, things like that.

It didn't really affect me so much. I just missed out on having to going to war, and so I just went along quite happily somehow. But just after the war was a lovely period

[a short break while he answers the phone]

I was at Melbourne Grammar and the American Army took Melbourne Grammar over and we were transferred down there to our prep school down in Caulfield, and only for half a day because it wasn't big enough to take everybody so you were rostered. Then it was all over, but we didn't realize what danger we were in really, with Japan swooping down on us like they did. So life just went along, even though we had brown-outs and all the car headlights were dimmed of a night time, we had shutters on all the windows to keep the light in, and then it was all over.

And incidentally the day that Japan surrendered which was the 15th was my sister's wedding day which was a problem, everything closed down. Everybody went out into the street and made whoopee. And she flew down to the florist's shop in Australia Arcade and they wouldn't do the flowers, they were having a party, and the church, and we learnt that the churches wouldn't marry anyone on that day or the next day. We never found out why, but they were being married at Scotch College and the reverend decided that he would do it. And then the next problem was that the reception was at 9 Darling Street in South Yarra, and man rang my father and said, "Mr. McBrien, we are delighted that we are going to have you here but we have a big problem because the staff have all gone out to make whoopee and they haven't prepared any food, but (this is true) for emergencies we do keep party pies and sausage rolls in the fridge. So we had a wedding breakfast on party pies and sausage rolls.

But then when it all settled down, it was a nice feeling, it was a lovely feeling because the soldiers were all coming home. I had an uncle a prisoner of war in Italy and we were excited about him coming home. There was excitement altogether and a sigh of relief that it was all over and life started to return to normal. When I say normal, it seemed to be better than ever somehow. And I was a bit older and got involved with a lot of social activities, which I enjoyed, and still do, all these years later.

The Treasury Gardens were turned into air raid shelters, air raid trenches, which killed a lot of the old trees, and it was great to see the likes of that all disappearing, and gardens put back etcetera. Some of them weren't put back the way they were. The Treasury Gardens had a magnificent Japanese Gardens right in the middle. And it wasn't because we were at war with Japan but because they just couldn't maintain them so they all disappeared and never put back again unfortunately.

But the whole 1950s were very exciting. They were really very exciting. In Melbourne and elsewhere. I went to England in 1954 and it was terribly exciting then and it was just beautiful, just beautiful. A lovely lifestyle.

Can I ask, when your uncle came back from Europe, did you have much contact with him?

Yes.

How did you find him? Had he changed much?

No, he hadn't changed much at all really. Except that he was relieved. He was captured by the Italians and was in their prison of war camps, and was then transferred on to Germany and the German prison of war camps, and he much preferred the German prison of war camps. He did not like the Italian prison of war camps at all.

Did he talk about it?

Only that they didn't treat them like they should have done, whereas the Germans did.

I am not sure how you would describe the Australian culture or identity, but do you think that changed?

Culture?

I am talking about my great aunt who lived through WWII as well and she is from English-Irish stock as well and she felt that there was a move away from being traditionally English because in New Guinea there wasn't as much help as they thought they should get. She worked up in the cane fields in Queensland and things like that. Do you think that some elements of WWII changed how most Australians viewed who they were.

Not immediately. It is only more recently that we have heard this business about people thinking Britain should have helped us more. But come to think of it what could they have done. And they had to save themselves there. That little island set up a great force and actually saved the world really, saved the world completely. I can't see how they could have stretched themselves. I am very thankful that the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbour because it brought America into the war and they really saved us. The Coral Sea battle saved us completely. But I think it is a shame that years later people have said so much about Britain not doing what they should have done for us.

I think in her defence, we talked a lot about it, and it has only been in the last five or ten years, she has said, well maybe they could have helped more. It is not an all out denial of what England did do.

Think of the lines of communication. Appalling. So far away.

There has been a lot said about it recently.

Yes, there has.

And the ships they refused to send back to defend, and that's when they all got captured. Up near Indonesia. Is that right? A whole ship of Australian soldiers was captured.

The ones that I know of were actually captured in Singapore.

A lot of them were sunk too of course. A huge battleship was sunk. I think they went through hell. They were there. But the Japanese swooped down so quickly they took everybody by storm. They really did. And yet when we were sitting down here in Melbourne we didn't realize what was going on up there. And of course a lot of news was kept from you. But my father - there was the Australian Red Cross and the Australian Comforts Fund and the Comforts Fund was responsible for sending gift parcels and chocolates and cigarettes to the troops, and my father was in charge of that, he was honorary administrator of the Australian Comforts Fund. So he knew a lot, but of course it was never spoken about. It was all very secret.

Can I ask, in terms of Vietnam or Korea, were you involved in any political stance?

No, I was not involved at all. Perhaps I put my head in the sand.

Not necessarily a bad thing.

We didn't hear a great deal about that. There were rallies and protests in the city. But it was just another protest. Plenty of those going on – still – but they are different. But it didn't affect me. That is a selfish attitude, but it was probably the same for a lot of people. And now the story is coming out. No, life was wonderful.

May I ask you what your occupation was?

Oh, many. Well, in the first place, I didn't marry, so I was able to flip from one thing to another, didn't have that responsibility. I always wanted to be an architect. I don't know what they call it today but we called it Leaving Certificate. Well I got 13 out of 100 for my maths and of course architecture is all maths but it didn't deter me. I don't know how I was accepted into the course at Melbourne Tech but after six months I realized that, "Oh, gee, this wasn't for me". And then a lot of the forces would have been rehabilitated and they had preference over everybody, which was fair enough, and I saw all these young chaps coming in to do architecture and I thought I would have to be good to do something.

So my father put me into a catering business. He joined me up with the son of a great friend of his, who were caterers. And we formed a partnership and we had the sole rights for the catering at the Show Grounds, which was terrific then, and the Exhibition Buildings. But it only occupied me for a short time of the year and soon I set off to look for other things, and eventually, I didn't really enjoy my partnership, and after 10 years I sold out.

What was I going to do now? My father had died and there was a P & O Shipping Company. And they were represented in Melbourne by Macdonald Hamilton. They were in Collins Street, and I was always told that you really had to be a high standard to be employed by Macdonald Hamilton. Anyway I saw an advertisement that they wanted a clerk. So I applied for it and I went along with a reference from the Archbishop of Melbourne. I got the job. I did three years with the P & O Shipping Co. They put me on board the Himalaya, as liaison officer.

Then what happened then? I had always wanted to have a shop in the city and my father used to say, "No, don't touch them." I don't know why. Anyhow I got one.

My mother was widowed and my sister was having a bit of trouble with the marriage and I thought, "I've got these two girls on my hands. What am I going to do?" And I got a shop which was very hard then. You just could not get a shop for love or money in the city. I got one. And then I thought, "Umm, what am I going to put in it?" I had no idea. So the three of us got together, "What are we going to do?" We looked around and there wasn't a great deal of children's wear in the city, except in the stores. So we decided to go into children's wear. Little did I realize what I was letting myself in for, because I didn't think. You have got boy and girl, from babe to 12 years, you've got all these sizes, all these colours, for both boy and girl. I was for ever running off to my bank manager for more money to buy more stock.

But then my mother died suddenly and after 10 years I decided to give it up and put a thing on the window, "Closing Down", or whatever. And I had a phone call from somebody at George's, "See you are closing down. We want to buy it for our children's wear." So I became the buyer for George's children's wear, which was terrific.

But I still wanted to do something else and I wanted to manage an old estate and to cut a very long story short I became the first manager and curator at Ripponlea at Elsternwick. Do you know Ripponlea? I lived there for five years, and managed that for five years.

Then I was transferred up to head office. They wanted a preservation bookshop established. There was only one in the world, that is in Washington. They wanted one established here. So I established that and did that for eight years until I turned 65, and had to go, and they closed the bookshop down. And at 65 – they used to call me their greatest treasure – and I thought I am right for life, but when I turned 65 I wasn't their greatest treasure after all. And then it wasn't mandated to have superannuation, or it was only brought in the year before. So I came out without anything, and I thought I would be alright for five years.

And then I thought, "Oh, I am not sure about the bread and butter". And I met the president of this organization [The English Speaking Union] whom I knew, in Collins Street, and he said he wanted a secretary, and I said, "Oh, I would be interested in that." And he said, "Are you computer literate?" and I said, "No, I've got no idea". And he said, "Well, we can't have you." So a couple of months went by and he rang and he said, "We'll have you without being computer literate." And 10 years later here I am.

And have your computer skills gotten better?

Yes. I've even written a book. So that's my life in a nutshell.

May I ask what your book is about?

Living in Melbourne in the 20th century.

We weren't told you had written a book. We would have rephrased our questions very differently, and we would have taken a whole different avenue.

It's not published yet. I am still trying to get an editor.

Can I ask the English Speaking Union?

Well it is a world wide organization. It started off with a wealthy young Englishman called Heffernan ? He used to travel the world and when he went to parts of the British Empire, that was, he wanted to go somewhere to meet his contemporaries, so he set up what he called The Overseas League, now the Loyal Overseas League, and its got its constitution, and loyalties to the crown and all the rest of it, and when he went to America he wanted to do the same thing but he couldn't because of Independence, so he set up the same thing. But why he called it the English Speaking Union I don't know. And it is all over America, it is everywhere in America, and it's all over the world, Morocco, Japan, Vanuatu, Brazil. It's everywhere. And that was its original intention.

But since then, of course, its in the short term for the promotion and understanding of the English language. Everyone thinks we teach English, which we don't. But we do have conversation classes for people who come to Australia perhaps to reside, or we do get medical people from the Alfred who want to improve their English skills by just talking, so we do that. And we do scholarships, heaps of scholarships, for students, not necessarily students –we sent a policeman to New York to study something over there, things like that. We've got a few at the moment teaching English as a second language; we've got a young farmer because she was having trouble on the farm with her grant. We used to have a huge bridge club here, a huge bridge club, but the instructor rang off with one of the bridge players. So he moved out and he set up his own school, and that eventually folded up. But we have corporate members here, ex-naval associations, merchant navy, mine sweepers, stuff like that, they all use this place as their meeting place. We have got the Jane Austen Society, the Shakespeare Society, the Dickens Fellowship, on it goes, they all come here. But that is the Victorian branch.

We have been in this building for 50 odd years. We own it. But like a lot these organizations, the younger people such as yourselves, or even late 40, 50 year-olds, are not interested. What they are doing, I have no idea.

Working.

Yes, that's true, keeping up with the Joneses

But we are interested in the Jane Austen Society. We both have degrees in English Literature.

But that is the English Speaking Union. They used to be called Loyal Societies. There are still 18 of them in Melbourne.

Can I ask how you became involved in the MCC, the Melbourne Cricket Club?

Yes, now you've asked. When I was born my name was put down to become a member.

I've just become a member?

Have you?

Yes, I was very excited.

Well, my father was a chartered accountant and they were involved in all sorts of things of course and he eventually became secretary of the authorised newsagents, and set up all the rules and regulations, which actually still exist today. But as a boy he lived down in South Melbourne, and used to kick a football about. And he became interested in a little team down there, called the Leopolds, and became their honorary secretary-honorary treasurer. And those little Leopolds became the second team of what was the South Melbourne Football Club, now the Sydney Swans, so he became their honorary secretary-honorary treasurer and then in 1929, and this comes back to how we came to live in Spring Street. He applied for the position what were called secretaries then, CEOs today, secretary of what was the Victorian Football League, now the AFL, and he got the position out of 120 applicants on £500 a year out of which he was expected to pay his staff but it was such a small organization that there wasn't any staff, there was just him. And it was languishing quite a lot, the VFL. Anyway that was when he was at a cream little office in Flinders Street and he said, "You've got to get some headquarters, you won't get anywhere unless you've got some headquarters." And that is how he happened to buy 31 Spring Street, which was the headquarters of the VFL. And that was where we lived.

Can I ask what football team you barrack for?

Need you ask? South Melbourne of course – the Sydney Swans.

Even though they have moved to Sydney?

Oh, there is still that sort of feeling. But you asked how I got involved with the MCC. Well my father had a lot to do with the Melbourne Cricket Ground. And you wouldn't believe it but he had a terrible, terrible struggle with the Melbourne Cricket Ground Trustees to have the finals played there. He struggled and struggled, and then he got a five year term to have them played there for five years. Then he had to struggle to get another ten years, and then he got the 15 year for it, but he did say, he had so much to do with it, he said at that meeting, as secretary of the MCC, "Look, Bruce has got all the advantages of the Melbourne Cricket Ground, don't put him through, when the time comes, don't put him through. Then my father became really ill in 1954 and he said, "With the next intake, put him through". And so I have just been brought in as an over 50-year member. That is how I became involved. But when I had to leave the Trust I did all sorts of things, and I thought I would become a tour guide at the Melbourne Cricket Ground. Which I did, and I did that. I've still got my blazer. I wouldn't be allowed to do it now because I am 80.

Did they cut it off at a certain age?

Because of insurance and everything. 75, actually I think it's 70. So the blazer, all those stripes, is hanging in the wardrobe. I used to enjoy it, although I used to get the schools because nobody else wanted to do the schools.

With good reason, as prospective teachers, we understand.

I used to take them up the Great Western Stand. I used to think that will take almost an hour out of the tour. And they all wanted to go up to the top, which I hated because I suffer from vertigo. Anyhow it was part of history.

What do you think is the purpose of keeping a history of East Melbourne?

Well it was almost the foundation of Melbourne with La Trobe being over there in Jolimont. It all sort of hinged around there. The cathedral was to have been built in Clarendon Street originally, but then was switched over to where it is. And it really was the foundation of Melbourne, East Melbourne. And it is still reasonably intact considering it is so close to the city. Every area has its characteristic, South Yarra has, and it should be retained as much as possible too. It will be, but protection is another thing. We have lost a lot of character. But fortunately it has become very residential again, East Melbourne. So people realize what its character is and endeavour to put it back again, but some of the monstrosities you can't do anything about.

?

Bishopscourt is a worry. You know Bishopscourt in Clarendon Street, the home of the Archbishop? Because the Archbishop doesn't live there anymore and the Anglican diocese wants to sell the whole thing. And you can imagine what would happen if that was sold. And it is a worry.

The one that gets me is the church on Hotham Street, with the black glass and has been turned into apartments, and there is this beautiful church and they have built units inside – this black glass. It's horrible

Oh, Cairns Memorial. Yes, it was a lovely church. Then when it was burnt I couldn't believe it. When my sister was told to take me off to Sunday School, when we were in the city, she made a mistake and went there. We should have gone to Holy Trinity but we went to Cairns Memorial. Then we switched back. Holy Trinity used to have a spire on it too. But it was taken off because it was falling down.

How would you promote East Melbourne, if you had to tell someone about it who didn't know the area? What aspects would you be promoting?

The wide streets. It has got one great disadvantage of course, the parking. It is a real problem. And when there is a football match it really is most, most difficult. But it is difficult at any time unless you have got a permit. The Johnston Collection, you haven't heard of The Johnston Collection?

No, but we'll research it when we get home.

Well, it is in Hotham Street, just near George Street [sic]. Mr. Johnston became an antique dealer, he used to do some terrible things, he'd buy up a lot of estates in England and buy the beautiful drapes and curtains and things and use the curtains as

wrapping around his furniture to get it in duty free. And when he got it back here of course he would recreate the curtains, and he used to take a leg off a chair, or something, and bring it in damaged so he didn't have to pay duty.

Anyway he made a fortune, Mr. Johnston. And he owned a lot of East Melbourne. When my mother and I were thinking of moving out of the city we went to quite a few auctions, but if you saw him there, and another lady, who was a textile designer, Frances Burke, she bought up property in East Melbourne too. If you saw them there there was no point in bidding. You knew they would get them.

Anyway Mr. Johnston eventually died and left his house full of the most magnificent antiques to the National Trust. He left two houses to the National Trust; he left a house in London to the National Trust; and a shop in London to the National Trust; and a big shop in High Street, Armadale to the National Trust, and they made a bit of a mess of it all. The house itself, they set up a separate trust for that and it was to become a house to display the best of his antiques. And it is not a museum house, it is almost a living house. But it is absolutely magnificent and it changes all the time. Government House has got some of his furniture. I was curator of Government House once, I did three years there. Looking after all the furniture and fittings. But some of his furniture is there and they switch it over every now and again. That's The Johnston Collection. And you have got to book, you can't just walk in.

I lectured over there for quite a while and then they did ask me would I become Mr. Johnston, and take people around my house. But not talk about the collection, talk about myself. I did know him, he was a horrible man. And I did that for a while, but I didn't enjoy it.

But it is a very interesting place, and there are some wonderful things going on there. Lecturing, for instance, on ceramics and all that sort of thing. It's a beauty.

How would you sell East Melbourne?

That's hard really. Some people might not be the slightest bit interested in inner city living. It has got atmosphere.

What kind of atmosphere.

There is a feeling there. There is a feeling there. But perhaps that is me, having spent so much time there. But I think if you asked every second person in the street where would you like to live, they would invariably come up with East Melbourne.

People from the Historical Society when they came to speak to us talked about this and we couldn't get our head around a place that is so disorientated but had such a feeling of community.

Being so close to the city and being so close to the gardens is a big advantage, I think.

Thank you very much for speaking with us and sharing your experiences.

We've been all around the bush.

Would you like to say anything else before I switch it off.

No, I feel quite privileged to be invited to contribute, actually. I do. Because so much of this is lost. To find people that are interested is great.