

# Friends of Coolart News

Winter 2020



FRIENDS OF  
COOLART

## After 35 years at Coolart, Brian & Jenny Thomas call time



*Dear Friends of Coolart*

*The 5th of August 2020 will be the last day of work at Coolart for Jenny and myself after which we will be joining the ranks of the retirees. Coolart was preserved by the state government for "Conservation and Education purposes" and through our time at Coolart we have tried to keep these two goals front and centre while managing the property. The Friends of Coolart have been such a big part of our lives and have helped us so much and have contributed in so many different ways in the preservation of Coolart that it is difficult to express just how profound that assistance has been and continues to be. We look back on our time and experiences with the friends and volunteers with great affection and gratitude. To have worked in such a beautiful and very special place with wonderful people is quite a privilege. Thank you all.*

*The very kindest regards*

*Brian & Jenny*

*PS The accompanying article by Sally was written well before we had told anyone of our plans to retire but turned out to be very timely. Jenny and I wrote our pieces separately and were surprised (though perhaps we shouldn't have been) at how uncannily similar our replies to her questions were.*

The following article, re-printed with permission from Somers paper Nautilus is now the full-stop on careers that spanned 35 years at Coolart. In their own words, Brian and Jenny spoke to FOC Vice President Sally Holdsworth about their "Lifetime's work in Paradise".

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*Brian and Jenny Thomas are park rangers at Coolart Wetlands and Homestead. They have been together as life partners, and work colleagues, for over forty years.*

**Brian:** We met in the Alice Springs Youth Hostel. I

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was travelling with a Scottish friend, Eddie, and we were driving his old Holden from Townsville round the northwest to Perth. Jen was on holiday from her job in Fremantle. Jen introduced herself and I remember thinking 'Oh my! She's gorgeous.' I soon found out that she had a lovely personality too and was a lot of fun. We had a long-distance romance by correspondence for about a year before we finally met up again.

I started working at Coolart in 1985. I've worked at a lot of different jobs; one of them, when I lived in Wales, was looking after a private collection of birds including several species of Australian cockatoos which drew my interest to Australian wildlife. When I moved to Australia and saw these birds flying free in the wild my focus changed; I became more interested in conservation rather than breeding them in captivity. All I know about plants and animals I've learned as I've gone along. There's a small part of me that regrets not having a formal education in conservation but perhaps I have a different perspective because of that, which might sometimes be beneficial.

We lived at Coolart for a couple of years from about 1994 and it was a lovely place to live. Our boys Sean and Owen were thirteen and ten. We had the upstairs part of the house - the servants' quarters - partitioned off from the main part, which was open to the public. The house felt cosy and homely, despite its size.

The hardest part was the lack of privacy. Members of the public didn't always read the NO ENTRY signs - and there were no doors that we could lock - so



Jenny (left) talks to Dawn Cameron, one of the original Friends. During their tenure Jenny & Brian worked with every management group and Friends Committee at Coolart.

we would be sitting relaxing when a head would appear at the top of the stairs, 'Just having a look'. The best part was when the gates closed, and we had the place to ourselves. It was wonderful to be able to walk around the wetlands without anyone else being there. I remember one Christmas Day Jen and I were just sitting quietly together in the observatory watching a Latham's Snipe poking around outside - it was magic, and the privilege was not lost on us.

When I think about it, it's remarkable how much time Jen and I have spent together and how well we

get on, probably due to Jen's patience and forgiving nature. I think her talents have been underrated or not noticed because she just quietly goes about getting the job done. She has a talent for facilitating events and exhibitions, and for connecting people so that the final product is much improved.

My favourite spot is the lagoon. To be able to sit quietly and watch, unobserved, the birds going about their daily business - from basking sleepily in the sun, to courting, nest building and raising chicks - is a very special experience.

When people ask about the best time to visit Coolart I will often say, choose a nice sunny day in winter. The days are short so the birds are active getting as much food as they can while the weather is fine. The garden has a special beauty with the bare limbs of the deciduous trees making filigreed patterns against the sky.

Evening is a lovely time of day, there's peacefulness as birds settle down to roost and on the lagoon different species of birds will fly in to rest for the night. One of my favourite sights is when there is an indigo, rain-filled sky behind the homestead and the house itself is lit up in sunshine, it's a very pretty picture.

My job is to look after the property and present it in the best possible light to visitors. I always like to think of it a bit like sheep shearing - it looks easy until you give it a go and find the sheep isn't always cooperative and it's harder than it looks.

The greatest changes have probably been the restoring of paddocks back to woodland and the establishment of new wetlands and seeing how that has benefitted wildlife. But plants have also benefitted as our revegetation and weed control programs have tipped the balance and natural regeneration has occurred too. The management of Coolart has changed too, from a Committee of Management to Melbourne Parks and Waterways to Parks Victoria ... and it's been interesting to ride the waves of all three.

So many people have been involved with Coolart over the years and the contribution that Jen and I have made is just a small part of that. I'd like to acknowledge all the people that have gone before and who have made their mark, right up to the team we work with at present - including volunteers and the Friends of Coolart, who have always been an amazing support through the years. We have had the pleasure of making friends with so many lovely people and those memories are very special.

Coolart was set aside for conservation and education and these two things have been my guiding principles. I would like future managers to keep those aims in mind. I would love to see a greater involvement with the Bunurong, whose traditional lands include Coolart; we have taken tentative steps in this direction, hoping that a mutually beneficial relationship can be developed.

I think Coolart is a healing place, I've seen many people come to Coolart who have been going through

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## After 35 years at Coolart, Brian & Jenny Thomas call time *(continued)*

some personal trauma and have had it eased by the stillness and spirit of the place. May it always be allowed to do that for people.



**Jenny:** Brian and I met such a long time ago, in Alice Springs. I was drawn by Brian's gorgeous eyes and he was very handsome - he spent the first ten minutes of our meeting by stirring the daylight out of me. I realised he had a good sense of humour, and I remember thinking 'mmm this could be fun!'

I've had many different roles during my working life - including farm, factory, shop, as a deckhand and office worker - in Australia and overseas. Work at Coolart has been varied; I would describe the work that I do today as that of a small museum and gallery assistant.

It doesn't matter who you work with or for how long you have known them, but how you work together. Brian's the loveliest person I have ever met so I like working with him, except when he's right about something, which doesn't happen all that often so it's not a problem!

We lived in the big house for a couple of years. It really was a beautiful place to live. So quiet at night, and in the wee hours we could hear the waves breaking on the beach.

It was just a short period, but our boys enjoyed living at Coolart very much, and their mates enjoyed it as well. They had fun with a dinghy on the creek when it was flowing fast in winter (yes there was plenty of water in the creek in those days). All the boys would gather at the homestead on a Saturday morning, check the tide times, and with backpacks full of food and water, carry surfboards through the woodland and then walk all the way along the beach to Point Leo, returning very late in the afternoon or early evening, with sunburnt faces, sun-bleached hair, and happily worn out.

It was good to call Coolart our home - it always felt safe and peaceful - even though we were extremely busy at the time. But I remember moving back to our house in Balnarring and letting out a huge sigh of relief, as now work could happen between defined hours instead of 24/7.

So many places in Coolart have meaning for me, mainly within nature, as opposed to within buildings. But my favourite building is the Barracks. I feel that it is a very significant part of the history of Coolart and the Mornington Peninsula.

All the seasons are beautiful at Coolart! I love the very early morning when the dew is on the ground and I love winter sunsets when the elms have lost their leaves and the dark branches reach up into a pink and grey sky.

When there has been enough rain for the lagoon to fill, and the day is cold and dry with low-hanging grey clouds, there is a special effect with the light bouncing off the surface of the water. The lagoon looks to be filled with Indian ink - it is a

deep blue - what a beautiful picture.

The future is always hard to predict, but I'd like to see Coolart continue being used for education and conservation purposes - and I'd like to see it funded adequately to enable it to flourish in the way it could. Better wheelchair access around the park would be wonderful to enable people who are living with a disability to enjoy nature and fresh air as much as anyone else.

I would like to see a growing involvement from Aboriginal elders in the management and custodianship of Coolart. We all have such a lot to learn if we open our ears and eyes, and our hearts and minds.

My happiest moments in life are when our little family, which now includes daughters-in-law and grandchildren, gathers for a walk and picnic together in this beautiful space. I am looking forward to more time with my beautiful husband, family and friends. Just playing with the grandchildren.

Over 40 years ago, when we were courting, Brian and I came to Coolart. I remember stretching out on the soft green lawn in front of the big house, looking up at the tower surrounded by the bright blue of the sky, and just feeling a sense of peace there. I never dreamed that one day we would be fortunate enough to work in such a lovely place, and now, every day that we have worked here I have been grateful.

**Sally Holdsworth**

*Brian and Jenny's last day will be Wednesday, 5th August. Unsurprisingly, they plan to quietly retire without fanfare and the current pandemic lockdown will mean that any farewell we would like to hold will have to wait. When we are allowed, we will coax them back so that Friends, volunteers and all who have worked alongside them at Coolart can share some time with them one last time.*



## Pedestrian Access to Coolart Now Open at Balnarring Beach

Many of you would be familiar with climbing over the gate at Balnarring Beach Road to enter or leave Coolart from the Balnarring beach side. The gate has existed to provide access for fire trucks and nothing more, particularly during the early days of public ownership when an entry fee was payable. (The original sign is still there!) Changing the access has been brought up on many occasions to no effect so it came as a surprise to hear from Lawrence Reddaway via our website that a new pedestrian stile has recently been installed. Lawrence, I have tracked down who was responsible for what you called 'this minor (but important) step of progress' so that we can thank Parks Vic Rangers Tegan, Amy, Harry and Casey for finally creating a safe walking entry into Coolart from Balnarring Beach—no more need to climb the gate!



## Coronavirus Update

We find ourselves once again locked down in stage 3 restrictions due to the Coronavirus. Consequently Parks Victoria have again ceased all volunteer activities at Coolart and picnic facilities and buildings are closed. However, Coolart is still open for visitors to walk and explore the site – there are still many things to discover and enjoy at Coolart during winter.

Also thanks to the efforts of volunteers Loie Sharpe and Laraine Proctor and Parks Vic staff, a healthy little plant shop has been running outside The Barracks generating an income for Friends of Coolart that in these unusual times was not expected. Loie and Laraine have been busy potting up a continuous supply of plants and flowers for purchase via an honesty box and visit everyday to check plants, water if necessary and collect money. I'd also like to thank local resident Lindsay Pullin for his large donation of plants that were snapped up very quickly.

If you are walking down at Coolart, bring along some small change cash and pick up a bargain plant. All proceeds will go back into projects at Coolart.

## Homestead Renovations Commencing

Finally, I am delighted to report that preparations are underway to commence the significant internal renovation works of the homestead! All rooms have been emptied of furniture ready for workmen to move in this week.

The works funded by a Pick My Project grant secured by the Friends in 2018 will aim to repair and rectify as much of the homestead plasterwork as money permits. A separate permit for painting has been cleared through heritage however the cost and funding of this work remains unknown.

The work has previously been delayed by waiting for the roof to be repaired and then the internal plasterwork needed to dry out for six months. Following this, the works needed to be scoped and tendered, and then the bushfires at the start of the year redirected resources and then the pandemic hit—nothing happens quickly. We can only wait with bated breath to see the outcome. Needless to say, the homestead is closed for renovations until further notice.

The Friends of Coolart have established a tax deductible fund for donations towards projects at Coolart. If you would like to make a donation you can do so via our website <https://www.coolart.org.au/donate/> These funds will go into our secure sub-fund held by Australian Communities Foundation.

## FRIENDS OF COOLART INC

Friends of Coolart is a volunteer organisation that was formed to assist Parks Victoria in the preservation and enhancement of the environmental, cultural and educational values of Coolart Wetlands and Homestead.

The work carried out by the Friends of Coolart compliments Parks Victoria's management of the reserve and adds value to both the essential qualities of the property and the visitor experience.

### For more information or enquiries:

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