

TRANSCRIPT: Ian and the Grapevine

INTERVIEWER: How did you come to be looking after this vine?

IAN: Accident. Purely by accident. I started with the Western Australian department of Agriculture back in 1967, in ancient times, and back then we used to get the weirdest of inquiries to follow up and my boss at the time got this call from the Museum saying will you come and settle and argument...

INTERVIEWER: and was this, was this when they were planning the old building?

IAN: aah, yeah - this was when that building was being remodelled, they got rid of the wall, they left the supporting pillars, they put a big steel thing across - this vine, used to go all the way out to about here. And the Italian gardener who watered the plants and looked after the trees in the area absolutely refused, he said, you cut that through there and it's die. And Bill Jameson said, I was the young kid off the block just turned up, and I'd had a lot of work with this variety over in the eastern states where I came from, and he said 'Oh Ian, come with me and see if we can settle this argument'. So the only way I could shut this gardener up, was I said 'I've got a saw - I'll prune it' he said 'you prune touch that vine now, I never touch it again' and he never touched it again.

From then on, every year, if I remembered I would come back and prune it and spray it and look after it, then sometimes the Museum staff would remember to contact me, not very often but sometimes, and it just got in to a habit.

I just come back on my own, and no one has ever refused me. I turn up at the museum with a pair of secateurs in my hand or a spray can in my hand and no one's ever said get out of here - and I seem to be allowed to come and go and they usually say 'oh some doddering old fool keeps coming in and looking at our grapevine' but I've never been challenged yet!

INTERVIEWER: So what makes this vine special?

IAN: It is quite amazing that a vine of this age can actually still produce nearly two hundred bunches of grapes, and they would have all ripened. The fact that there is a mystery that no one has a record of this Museum, exactly when it was planted - that picture, taken in the 1890s, for this variety to get that amount of growth it would take a vine to be at least 30 years old to produce that amount of grape, because it's not notoriously a vigorous variety. So this tells me it's been well looked after, well-watered, well fed, and produced a lot of fruit way back in 1890. So it was probably planted about 1850.

Commercially the life of a vine is somewhere between thirty and sixty years, and then the yield drops of etc etc. So that's why this is so important.

People started to study all these old vines. And I said, I got one better than you, I've got the oldest. And that's when the argument started.

Um, the oldest actual living vine was planted by the Henty Brothers in Victoria in about 1840. And we've had an academic argument ever since about who's got the oldest vine. There vine has never produced a bunch of grapes yet.

INTERVIEWER: yep

IAN: And it's the most miserable looking half dead thing you've ever seen. I like to show pictures of this beautiful fruit etc, or me cutting off crop because we've got so much crop we don't know what to do with it.

Tragedy is, and I've asked the Museum staff on numerous occasions, to go through the records of the Old Gaol, see if there are any old diaries that are left there...we would like to get a date when it was put in, and every request has never come up with an answer, so I assume the data's just not there. No one has got those sort of records anymore. So we've just got to accept it's a mystery, you can look at the trunk, you can say that could not keep a bunch alive at all after all those years, from your own eyes - just look at it!

Hopefully, I'll still be invited back next year to prune it for the forty ninth time, cause I am determined to prune this thing for fifty years, even if the bloody thing is dead I'm going to come here and prune it, I want to say I looked after it for fifty years - then I'm going to let it die! No, I'm not.

INTERVIEWER: Will you still be here in twenty twenty? If we come, when the Museum opens...

IAN: I would like to be, maybe I might even get *invited* by the Museum, now that's a rarity to expect such a rare honour, but ah, I was saying the other day when I was here - I don't think there's many people that have done voluntary work for the Museum for fifty years. I haven't done it yet, I've only done forty eight. But I'm hoping I won't fall off the perch in the next two years and these good construction workers will look after this grapevine so that my grandchildren can come here in thirty or forty years and say 'Poppy looked after that for fifty years'.

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