



CITY OF SYDNEY

SHELTER

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Interviewee: Robert McEntyre

Date: 12 May 2011

Place: Town Hall House

Interviewer: Margo Beasley

Recorder: Marantz PMD 620

TRANSCRIPT

0.00 **MB:** This is an interview with Robert McEntyre. It's taking place in Town Hall House in the City of Sydney. The date is the 12th of May 2011. My name is Margo Beasley and the project is the Shelter Oral History Project which is being conducted on behalf of the City of Sydney's History Programme.

Now, Robert, if you don't mind could you tell me where and when you were born? Just the year is fine.

RE: Yes, 1951, born in Sydney at the Mater Hospital at Crows Nest.

MB: And we're here to talk today about your childhood on the rooftop in Sydney.

RE: That's correct.

MB: So were you living in that rooftop at the time - - -

RE: Yes.

MB: - - - at the time when you were brought home as a baby that's where you went to?

RE: Correct. And the building's in Angel Place and it was the building that was demolished in the late 1990s to make way for the new building which houses the Recital Theatre [City Recital Hall]. The original building was approximately six stories, it was an office block. My grandfather came to Sydney in the late 1930s and acquired a job as the building's caretaker.

MB: Did the building have a name?

RE: Wingello House.

MB: Wingello House.

RE: And the name of the building was after the town of Wingello which is just north of Goulburn in New South Wales.

MB: Was there any reason for that connection with that place, do you know?

RE: Yes, there's a long story. My grandfather on my mother's side of the family's surname is Holt and the history of the Holt family on that side of the family, my great, great, great grandfather, Thomas Holt, was the first colonial treasurer of New South Wales and that part of the family was a very wealthy part of the family. Wingello House was actually owned by the Holt family or one part of the Holt family and a number of members of the family who owned the building had properties at Wingello, just north of Goulburn.

2.09 So that's where the name of that building came from. As I mentioned, the building was an office block. On the ground level of the building around Angel Place there were a series of shops. On the corner of Angel Place – and I forget the name of the street - - -

MB: George or Pitt?

RE: No, just as – it'll come to me after – it's the one that runs – when you enter Angel Place from George Street it runs - - -

MB: A little narrow street?

RE: Yes.

MB: Yes – never mind.

RE: On that corner of the building was a milk bar. Along the main part of the building there were a number of small shops, including to the best of my knowledge there was a bootmaker, there was a lingerie shop where my sister and I used to, not play, but we'd go down and unpack stuff in school holidays and after school. There were two entrances to the building. One entrance was on the Challis House side of Angel Place, Challis House entrance is in Martin Place, it was a building – it may still be owned by Sydney University but at that time it was owned by Sydney University - so there was a main entrance there. And the second entrance to the building is where the Angel Place entrance is to the Recital Theatre now. But on the corner of the building next to the first entrance there was an electronics shop and beside the second entrance at the very end of the building there was a barber shop.

MB: Angel Place I think in general was fairly lively as Sydney laneways go.

RE: Yes.

MB: Is that your memory of it?

RE: Well, I was born in 1951. I lived there - on top of the building my grandfather had an office and there was also a house.

4.04 **MB: Can I ask how it came to be that your grandfather was the caretaker there?**

RE: He and some members of his family came to Sydney in the '30s. He was a grazier and a stock and station agent. I think they went through tough times in the '30s, came to Sydney. The other part of the Holt family gave him the job as a caretaker and that was just before World War II, so that's where my mother and he resided.

MB: So your grandfather was there with his daughter - - -

RE: Yes.

MB: - - - who was your mother, and his own wife?

RE: No, they'd separated in the 1930s which was probably a little unusual at that time as well. My grandmother also came to Sydney but she lived in a unit at Bellevue Hill.

MB: So there was a reason for him not only needing work but also - -
-

RE: A place to live.

MB: - - - possibly needing to be housed?

RE: That's correct.

MB: So the house that was on the roof, was that there when he arrived?

RE: Look, to the best of my knowledge, but I also understand that my father made some additions to the house. So my recollection of the house – I was born in _____1951, I lived there or we lived there until February 1961, so I was nine when we left – but my recollection of the house was a loungeroom, kitchen, a bathroom and three bedrooms. I have an older sister and my older sister and I shared a bedroom, my grandfather had his own bedroom and my parents had a bedroom.

MB: And what was the house made of?

RE: That's a good question. It was either made of timber and/or fibro.

MB: It would have been fairly light then - - -

RE: It was.

MB: - - - to be supported by a roof?

RE: Yes. I don't remember what sort of roof it had on it, whether it was a flat roof or – that's stretching the memory .

6.03 **MB: And can you remember what kind of standard it was? I'm just curious about whether it conformed to what you might generally think of as an acceptable standard for a house at that time.**

RE: I would have thought so. I'd say it was a small suburban house equivalent. I remember the kitchen was quite large, the loungeroom was quite large and then off the loungeroom there was a door that went into a small hallway and that led to the three bedrooms. The bedroom my sister and I shared was probably a medium size bedroom and our outlook was out, looking over the AWA tower which is still in Sydney and around the rooftop of the building there was a five foot wall, so our play area was the actual rooftop. Again, my recollection of the area, it was about the size of three or four tennis courts and I learned to ride a bike, we used to play cricket, we used to play tennis and my father built a cubby house house for us – I think that was built out of fibro - and it had communication equipment from disposals of World War II that linked the cubby house with the kitchen.

MB: So like a walkie-talkie?

RE: They were walkie-talkies, so if my mother wanted us to come in for lunch or dinner we'd get a message at the cubby house.

MB: So your father hooked this up for you, did he?

RE: Yes, he was very electronics oriented for the day . So he was very good with carpentry, he was very good with electronics, so he built the cubby house and he fitted it out with this electronic – well, these walkie-talkies that I think he bought at army disposals at the time.

MB: How did it come to be that you were all living there since it was your grandfather who was actually the caretaker, not your father?

7.55 RE: Yes, that's correct. My father was from southern New South Wales off a farm and he was one of nine children and he came to Sydney after the Great Depression. He had an interest in cars, so what brought him to Sydney was working in the automobile industry, which he did at Rushcutters Bay. And my parents were married – I don't know when they met, I assume it was during the 1930s – they were married, I think in 1941 or '43, during WWII. So that was home for them.

MB: So your mother would have been living there at the time and your father moved in as well once they were married?

RE: Correct, that's correct. And I think when my older sister was four years old I think there may have been extensions to the house – and this is stretching the memory – at that time.

MB: So you think perhaps the house was smaller - - -

RE: Originally, yes.

MB: - - - and your father may have extended it to accommodate the family?

RE: Correct, correct.

MB: And how did your parents – well, do you recall them having any particular feelings either way about living there? It's unusual - I mean even for the time there would have been other caretaker families around the city.

RE: There were a lot of people living in the city at that time; there were lots of buildings with lots of caretaker families. My sister and I went to primary school at Fort Street Primary School next to Observatory Hill - the school still exists. There would have been in those days, the mid to late '50s, early '60s when I was there – I did kindergarten through to and including third class – and there would have been several hundred children at the school. For us, living on the rooftop

was a norm. We used to have friends who were from other buildings, so we'd get together from time to time or we'd wave to them across the building from the rooftop.

9.59 One of the recollections I have – and I'm digressing a little here – is that we used to celebrate Guy Fawkes Night in November. On our rooftop we had an elaborate garden that my grandfather and mother set up and the elaborate garden was made out of forty four gallon drums cut in half and my father used to get those from where he worked at Rushcutters Bay, he'd bring them home - I don't recollect how it was set up; it was set up before I was born – but the forty four gallon drums had soil and plants in them and some shrubs and there was a frangipani tree in one of them, they were painted different colours and that was the rooftop garden which actually attracted a *Woman's Day* article in late 1958, what life on the rooftop was. So the immediate friends were caretaker families from other buildings. With my sister and I being at Fort Street Primary School, my daytime friends mostly lived in The Rocks or Millers Point as we referred to it then. A lot of families in that area, the fathers were wharfies, wharf labourers because that was a very intensive industry at the time. I used to have sleepovers with a friend – this may have been uncommon in those days but a friend of mine lived in Harrington Street just behind the hotel complex there now. The house, the original house is still there - it's been turned into an office, I believe - but I used to stay weekends in Harrington Street. So the school friends were typically the sons and daughters of wharfies. Some of them used to come back to the rooftop to play – that was a novelty.

MB: For them?

RE: For them. And if I was staying down in Harrington Street we used to go to the King George V park which still exists, I think in Grosvenor Street or close by; so that was the play area. So fundamentally two groups of friends: the school friends and the caretaker family friends. But on Guy Fawkes Night.

12.15 **MB: Excuse me. Was it called Guy Fawkes Night or was it Empire Day?**

RE: No, we used to call it Cracker Night .

MB: Cracker Night, Cracker Night.

RE: Cracker Night. So on Cracker Night in November we'd invite all the other caretaker families over and some other friends that my parents had and my father would set up the fireworks, particularly say skyrockets, the Catherine wheels, he'd set them up in the half forty four gallon drums of soil for safety but he always took great delight in pointing skyrockets over the top of Challis House so where they ended up, they either ended up on the roof of Challis House or in

Martin Place but that was always great amusement for us all at the time, where these skyrockets were going.

MB: So Challis House was taller than Wingello House?

RE: Oh, Challis House, I think it's pretty much the same now as what it was; it'd be at least another six stories taller than Wingello House was at least.

MB: So hence the interest in firing the rocket over it?

RE: Correct, and they went over .

MB: So there wouldn't have been very many buildings much higher than you around you at that time, would there?

RE: No, the tall icon was the AWA Tower at the time. Most buildings in the city at that stage were fairly low level, of the ilk of Wingello House or Challis House being a little bit taller, so it was very much low rise in terms of office buildings. An icon at the time was the GPO where the Westin Hotel is now, that was a major icon in Martin Place. Back in the '50s Martin Place had two way traffic up and down, from George Street up to Macquarie Street, so it was a genuine vehicle thoroughfare.

14.07 On ANZAC Day, I think when I was the age of six or seven, my father took me to the ANZAC Day marches and given that was around the mid '50s, only ten years after the end of WWII ANZAC Day in Martin Place was full-on in terms of the number of spectators. And Dad used to take a ladder down and we used to put the ladder just outside the entrance of Challis House and I used to go halfway up the ladder so that I could see the march and we did that for a number of years. My mother was – I won't say she was an overly religious woman but mum and dad were married at St Stephen's Church in Macquarie Street and Mum used to take my sister and I – I didn't enjoy it much – to Sunday school on Sunday mornings up to St Stephen's in Macquarie Street and we did that for a number of years until we left the city. But even when we left the city in 1961 we still retained for a number of years the link to St Stephen's; we used to come in on the train on Sunday mornings to St Stephen's. And, interestingly, churchgoing on the '50s was a significant event, not a social event but certainly the church typically would have been full on a Sunday morning.

MB: So what about then your parents' personal relationships around them or your grandfather as well, did your mother have friends in the neighbourhood so to speak?

RE: No, not immediately. When Mum came to Sydney in the '30s she was trained as a nurse and I think she worked as a nurse for a

number of years – how many, no idea. I think she lived at the YWCA for a period of time when she came to Sydney and she met a number of other women who became close personal friends, some of whom are still alive - one lives at Avalon, one lives in Wollongong – and we would either have them come in to Wingello House or drive down to Avalon in the late 1950s and Avalon in the late 1950s was fairly sparse in terms of a lot of bushland.

16.27 My father, in the early 1950s my father bought a 1939 long wheel based Austin Windsor car that a fellow had brought out to Australia after WWII. It's still in Sydney – it's a total refurbishment – but that was Dad's pride and joy: long wheel base, it was a seven seater, it had occasional seats that rolled out from the back of the front seats, it had afternoon tea trays that pulled out from the back of the front seat. And if we went on holidays we'd drive up to the Blue Mountains or we'd go down to one of Mum's cousins – this is one of the Holts – that had a property in Bowral and we would stay down there. Dad used to keep the car down where he worked at Rushcutters Bay but he also fitted the car with an air raid siren – that was also a giggle – because getting out of Sydney in the 1950s, there were no freeways. If we were going down to Bowral you'd go out through Picton and up – I forget the name of the hill or mountain as it was – it was a very slow ride or if we're going up to the Blue Mountains you'd wind your way up and he'd invariably put the air raid siren on and everybody would pull over. Probably one of the entertaining parts of the air raid siren was we're in Bowral proper one day and it went off accidentally and the police took a very strong interest in where this siren was coming from.

MB: Were there any repercussions?

18.00 RE: No, no, they couldn't detect from which vehicle. But the other thing Dad did with the vehicle, he'd always fly the Union Jack off the front of it. So it was a British car, long wheel base, it was black, so it had a regal – it wasn't a Rolls-Royce but it had a regal touch to it so he had the Union Jack flying on the front and then he'd switch on this air raid siren .

MB: So everybody would think it was a very important - - -

RE: Correct, person .

MB: - - - person, visiting Australia on behalf of the Empire?

RE: Correct.

MB: Now, what about things like the weather on the top of the building?

RE: Top of the building?

MB: Was it hotter, colder, wetter than another - - -

RE: That's a good question – I don't recollect at all what it was like. It's a very good question because I don't remember weather patterns per se, living in the rooftop; because of the buildings around it was sheltered and so there was shade coming from Challis House particularly at certain times of the day. When the sun was overhead we got direct sunlight but I know on one side, in the eastern side there was another building so there was blockage there and to a certain extent by Challis House as well but I don't have any real recollection of hot, cold or otherwise.

MB: I just wondered whether it was more exposed or more protected maybe than other - - -

RE: No, certainly protected from wind because of the building – Challis House and an adjoining building that faced out to Pitt Street were taller buildings. There would have been – and I don't recollect this so I'm probably not conscious of it – would have been a wind tunnel effect if there were strong winds blowing through Angel Place from George and Pitt Street but never really conscious of that. I think the other interesting part of life then was trams in George Street, acknowledging the City of Sydney plan for 2030 and light rail projected to come back into the city.

20.03 When my sister and I went to and from school we'd jump on a tram in George Street not far from Wynyard Station and we'd tram it down to where the bus terminus is at The Rocks now; that's where the trams used to turn around and come back. So the trams went right down the full length of George Street, under the Harbour Bridge and then up to that terminus and then we'd just walk up the outside of Observatory Hill to school. Dad used to catch a tram to work to Rushcutters Bay because the Bondi – there was always the Bondi tram – and then the other tram ride we used to take was to Balmoral Beach. The tram line went over the Harbour Bridge on what is now the Cahill Expressway side of the Harbour Bridge and if we'd have an outing to the beach we'd go to two beaches; we'd either get on the ferry and go to Manly - and the ferry was a ten minute walk down Pitt Street – or we'd jump on the tram and go over to Balmoral Beach.

MB: So your orientation was northerly a lot of the time?

RE: That's correct. So the personal friends of my mother – there was the Avalon friend and then there was a group that actually lived in the eastern suburbs around Waverley, Bondi Junction and more often than not they'd come into the city – I think they enjoyed the rooftop . So from the southern side of Sydney I don't recollect – there may have been friends but I don't necessarily recollect them.

MB: I wondered too if the reason over the long term for your parents staying there was the post-war housing shortage in Sydney. There was a great shortage of housing - - -

RE: O.K.

MB: - - - particularly in relation to the baby boom – you and your sister would have been right in the centre of that - - -

RE: That's right.

MB: - - - and it may have been that your parents couldn't find any other housing anyway. It was in very short supply, so perhaps given that there was the family connection and so on the family would have just said "Why not stay there?"

22.06 **RE:** Live here, that well could have been the case.

MB: So how many other families were you aware of around about, caretaker families?

RE: Oh, probably at least half a dozen.

MB: And you were personally acquainted with them?

RE: Yes, we saw them from time to time; there were a couple of families. There was a building on the Pitt Street side of Angel Place where a little bit taller than Wingello House. It wasn't a rooftop premise, it was like an apartment on the top floor of the building and we were fairly close to that family – we could wave to them because I think we could see their kitchen. But there'd be sporadic contact with these families simply because there's a smallish group of people that were living an unusual style of life.

MB: And they were your neighbours in fact.

RE: They were the neighbours. The school friends from down in The Rocks area, the parents typically didn't come back, it was always the children; there weren't many parents that came back. The fellow, the friend that I had in Harrington Street, his parents would come up from time to time. He had a couple of sisters so they'd all come up from time to time but more often than not it was just the children visiting rather than the parents.

MB: Which was probably also more the convention for that time anyway after school - - -

RE: Probably, yes.

MB: - - - that there was less parental involvement than there is now - - -

RE: That's right, yes.

MB: - - - in the children's social relationships.

RE: The other – if I may digress a little here – the other interesting thing about the building or buildings at the time was in today's world with elevators that are electronic, in those days there were lift drivers, so the elevators were manually driven.

24.05 At an early age my sister and I learnt how to drive these lifts because when we were playing on the rooftop the balls dropped over into Angel Place and we simply got in the lift, drove it down, got the balls and drove the lift back up to the top. So I'm not sure in terms of industrial relations or OH&S today that would be acceptable but I think I learnt to drive a lift at the age of six or seven .

MB: And I suppose the lift driver wasn't always there anyway.

RE: Not at the weekends. The lift driver – because it was an office block it was always – there were two – that's a good question – there were either two or three lifts, there may have been more, may have been four, but there were always lift drivers during business hours. So during business hours we didn't drive the lifts but at the weekends people did come into the offices but they then had access that I think would have been organised through my grandfather as caretaker and my sister, Jill, and I, if we needed to go up and down we'd just drive up and down in the lifts.

MB: And did you know much about your grandfather's work in the building?

RE: No. All I knew was he was a caretaker. Did I understand what that was at the time? No idea. He had this office and he would spend his day in the office or going, doing things in the building or organising things to be done in the building but, no, I didn't have much to do with that. My father, as I mentioned, he'd head off to Rushcutters Bay.

MB: What sort of work did he do?

RE: It was a motor business and I visited the place several times. I think they did a lot of repair work and spraypainting; it was probably a motor business of jack of all trades. And as I mentioned earlier he developed a strong interest in cars as I understand when he was a boy and lost interest in working on a farm and then decided to come to Sydney to pursue the interest in the motor industry.

26.15 **MB: And were relationships between your parents and your grandfather fairly harmonious?**

RE: Yes, from what I can reflect, yes.

MB: It seemed a very acceptable arrangement all round?

RE: Well, yes, that's an interesting question because I accepted the grandfather living with us – that's how I viewed it – was normal practice because I had no experience of anything else. So when we moved out of the building because my grandparents were – well, had been divorced since the 1930s, when we moved from the building out into the inner west at Croydon my grandfather came with us and I just assumed that was normal practice, normal family practice.

MB: Did you have contact with your grandmother when she was in Bellevue Hill?

RE: Yes, yes. No, we used to go out and see her.

MB: So the divorce didn't affect your relationship with her?

RE: No, no, no.

MB: But your mother, presumably, was closer to her father than to her mother?

RE: That's a good question. I saw my mother on Mother's Day [most recent] – Mum's ninety six now in a nursing home – I told her about all this and she was very enthusiastic.

MB: That's nice.

RE: Because she also told me – when I talked about the Woman's Day article she said "Did you realise I was interviewed on television?"

MB: Gee.

RE: And this was last Sunday and I said "No, I didn't". She said "We didn't have a television" – I'll come back to that one – but one of the channels, whoever the channels were in those days, came and did a story on the rooftop – and I don't recollect that part at all – and it was aired on television.

27.53 But when television first came into Australia in the late 1950s, '57, '58, and the electronic shop that I referred to, they had the first televisions, black and white, small, in the shop, and after school my sister and I would go down to the electronic shop, sit on these big cartons and watch the first television shows in Australia. What I can remember about those television shows is they were the same show repeated

daily so there wasn't a lot of scope or a lot of breadth in the programs run and I have no idea what channels existed in those days or channel but that's where we watched our first television. I also recollect – and I'm stretching the memory on this one – that we did get a television while we were at Wingello House. So that would have been – given we left in February '61 that would have been maybe 1959, 1960 because I remember in our lounge room there was a television set at some stage.

MB: So you must have been able to get reasonable reception there.

RE: Yes, and I think so because we were high up, I think that was a plus. But I don't even remember in those days where the television stations were; I assume they were at Artarmon where they are now or something like that .

MB: And what about around the city on the weekends? I think Sydney was probably a lot quieter then than it is now.

RE: Well, maybe yes and no. I recollect a lot of people used to come into the city because in those days there weren't sort of suburban shopping centres. We would do our shopping – there used to be a range of stores up and down Pitt and George Street. There was a shop in Pitt Street called McIlwraith's, McIlwraith's, and my father and I would typically go up there on Saturday morning and buy biscuits, and biscuits used to be weighed out and put in paper bags.

30.04 **MB: So it was a grocer's?**

RE: Grocery store. Fruit and vegetables we used to buy off the fruit and veggie barrows around the city and they're still there now albeit in a modern form but there used to be those huge – they were huge - elaborate fruit and vegetable barrows; I think that's where my mother used to get all the fruit and veggies from. In terms of eating meat, I know there were butcher shops around. I think there may have been one close by in Pitt Street – but again that's stretching the memory. So shopping for us, being my mother certainly not working – she was a classical housewife in those days, in the 1950s – but she'd go out during the day. There was also a Woolworths – I think it's Hosking Lane if I'm thinking of the right lane that runs off the side of Angel Place but when you went down that street there was a Woolworths. I don't think Woolworths then sold food but they sold a lot of other stuff and we used to go down to the Woolworths store as well, yes.

MB: For household supplies of various kinds?

RE: Household supplies.

MB: And of course then most people weren't shopping in supermarkets then anyway; that was a later phenomenon, really.

RE: That's correct, it was the smaller stores.

MB: And are you nostalgic about your time on the rooftop, do you remember it fondly?

RE: Well, I guess the trigger has been the Lord Mayor injecting funds recently to refurbish Angel Place and last week I wandered down after work through Angel Place and to me Angel Place today is no different to Angel Place in the 1950s. Even though the buildings have changed and the shops have changed and part of the redevelopment is going to be putting back cobblestones – and I talked to my mother about that on Sunday because I didn't recollect whether there was a cobblestone road and we both think there was at the time, so that was taken out and just paved over at some stage.

32.13 But nostalgic, it's interesting revisiting it fifty years later, half a century later because I think as a child then moving to the suburbs was a different experience. And somebody asked me, one of my colleagues here at the City of Sydney where I'm working on a project at the present, asked me "Did you ever go to a park to play?" and I had to think about that one because today if you're living in the suburbs there are lots of parks and children and family can go and do a lot of things in a lot of parks, I don't believe I ever went to what would be today a traditional park with perhaps the exception of Centennial Park because I think we used to go out to Centennial Park sometimes and have picnics and feed the ducks .

MB: This is when you were still living in the city?

RE: Still living at Wingello House. But in terms of going to a park and kicking a ball around, I don't have any recollection of that until we moved to the suburbs at Croydon. So life was very much on that rooftop; that was the park.

MB: It was reasonably spacious, wasn't it?

RE: It was, yes. From memory, it was around the three to four tennis court size but it was spacious enough that you could play ball games quite easily. But the surface was an undulating surface, it was quite an unusual surface; it wasn't just a smooth concrete surface, it was a roughish surface but that's something we got used to.

MB: What was it made of?

RE: Not sure, not sure on that one.

34.04 **MB: When we talked about this on another occasion, you also talked about how your grandfather – you talked in more detail about how your grandfather came to be caretaker there. I wondered if**

you'd like to talk about that again now – are you interested in doing that?

RE: What did I say .

MB: Well, it was an interesting story really about the fluidity of class, about people who may have come from wealth.

RE: Oh yes, yes.

MB: As in your grandfather's case ending up as a caretaker - - -

RE: Yep, yep, yep.

MB: - - - which is not normally associated with somebody with that sort of background.

RE: Yes, yes. Yes, see if we go back to the whole family, as I mentioned my great, great grandfather, great, great, great grandfather was Thomas Holt, the first colonial treasurer in New South Wales, English, came out to Australia – I was only looking at this yesterday – around I think the 1850s or '40s or '50s, a businessman, a merchant, very wealthy. The Holt family owned an enormous amount of land in Sydney. They owned at one stage all the land from Sydney Hospital down to Pitt Street, which in today's terms would be a fortune, and they also owned an enormous amount of land out at Sutherland where there is a series of homes now for the elderly. And they had a property at Marrickville called 'The Warren' which is still there, the property to the best of my knowledge is still there, but being a traditional English family the inheritance always went to the eldest son. My grandfather was not the eldest son, so with that side of the family – I think my grandfather was one of five or six children – when their father died the eldest son inherited all the money and all the others were pretty poor.

36.05 And to the best of my knowledge with the stories told, the eldest son wasn't generous in sharing the funds around so the eldest son became the wealthy member of the family. So given my grandfather was up out of Warialda [rural town in NSW] on a property and I think went through tough times and then he worked as a stock and station agent, he couldn't have much money, came to Sydney and the wealthy side of the family that owned Wingello House gave him the job; that's how that came about. Now, that wealthy part still generates itself today because my mother's cousin who passed away forty years ago was also a Thomas Holt and he inherited all the money – so that was, yes, my mother's first cousin – and when he passed away thirty or forty years ago there were only two children but I think there was a son and a daughter and I think they shared equitably in all that arrangement. But certainly going back to that

historical period with a very traditional wealthy English family, the eldest son inherited the lot.

MB: Yes, it's interesting the way those things turn out because presumably things may have been different for your grandfather but for the Depression. He was on the land, I think you said - - -

RE: That's correct, yes.

MB: - - - so if he'd had some property that he would have maybe go off in different circumstances he may not have ended up - - -

RE: In the city.

MB: - - - necessarily impoverished in the city.

RE: That's correct.

MB: Now, if we could just go back a bit to your childhood again, can you remember what sort of games you played?

RE: We played in the cubby house, we've just played cricket on the rooftop, we played tennis on the rooftop, so we had all the gear.

38.06 I don't know what we used for stumps or what we used for tennis nets – I have no recollection of that – and we rode the bikes around the rooftop, so they were the general gist. When I went to school at Fort Street Primary School, because there were so many children there in those days we used to use Observatory Hill as the playground. So we'd go over there say at lunchtime and for the boys particularly the big ticket game was racing marbles. So if you've ever been to Observatory Hill it's sloped – there's a path that slopes and for marble races this was sensational . So the boys, the younger boys would always bring a bag of marbles to school and if we're over there during the lunch break we would have these marble races. I had the fastest marble; it was a little blue marble, it was a blue – and I don't really remember what marbles are made of – glass, I guess.

MB: Glass.

RE: Glass. This one was partially clear and partially light blue but for whatever reason it was very quick , it rolled quickly.

MB: And highly prized of course.

RE: And highly prized . So on Observatory Hill there wasn't much else you could do because it's not a flat block of land but I do remember when I was in third class they actually took a high jump set over - I don't know how they did this given it's not a flat block of land – and we actually did high jumping on one part of Observatory Hill.

MB: And what about the observations about King and country and so on. Do you remember much of that at school?

RE: Yes, we were very much – well, when was Queen Elizabeth II, early 1950s?

40.00 **MB: Yes.**

RE: It was very much singing 'God Save the Queen' because I know – well for a good period of time if you went to the theatre in Sydney – I don't know about other capital cities – you'd always stand up and sing 'God Save the Queen'.

MB: Yes. You're talking about the cinema?

RE: Yes, the cinema at the beginning of a session. I know when I was at Fort Street Primary School a member of the royal family came out – and I don't remember who it was at the time, whether it was one of the Queen's sisters or it was the Queen Mother. Because Fort Street Primary School looked out onto the Harbour Bridge the entourage was coming out of the city to go across the Harbour Bridge and the school had obviously been made aware of this, so the whole school lined up to face the Harbour Bridge and waved as the entourage went past with a member of the royal family.

MB: Now, you moved in 1961.

RE: That's right.

MB: What brought that about?

RE: The Holt family sold the building and we had to go .

MB: And you went to -?

RE: Croydon.

MB: And how did that come about?

RE: Well, because my grandfather and parents didn't have much money, the Holts put up the money to buy a house. So they basically said to my parents as I understand "Here's a certain amount of money. Go and find yourself a house" so that's what we did but part of the condition of that was my grandfather was to live with us. Now, I didn't know any of this till later, later in life, so given that there were five of us we fundamentally had to find a house with four bedrooms. My sister and I then had our separate bedrooms, my parents had a bedroom, my grandfather he had a room as well.

MB: And how did you find Concord then, did you like it?

RE: Croydon, Croydon.

42.00 **MB: Croydon, I beg your pardon, Croydon, did you like it out there?**

RE: Yes. Well, not knowing Sydney other than the city it was new. The house is still there. In fact, my nephew and his wife bought the house a few years ago and they've subsequently refurbished the house. The house was build just after WWII, either 1919 or early 1920s. I would describe the house as – well it's a post-war double brick house; certainly with the refurbishment of it it's fantastic, given the age of the house. But where the house is was opposite what was – not is there now – the Western Suburbs Hospital. The Western Suburbs Hospital on our side had a huge parkland. There were two parts of the parkland; there was a top part that was quite flat and then there was a bottom part that had several rows of trees through it. Our play area - when we're now talking about playing in a park - there were a lot of children around the area at the time, including some blocks of old units just up from the house where there were a lot of families with children and we'd go and play in the top area, grassed area, which was quite large, it would have been the size of half a rugby field, we'd go and play there after school and the weekends; we'd take our cricket gear over and we'd set up a full cricket pitch. One of the fellows that live in one of the old units, he was a first grade cricket player with the Western Suburbs Club at the time – he would have been in his early twenties – he used to come over and we'd be there endlessly for hours, playing cricket or we'd take a rugby ball over. Most of the children or the boys at that time played rugby league and I played rugby union as well and we'd just kick a ball.

44.02 And even in my teenage years I'd take a rugby ball over there. The hospital had set up netball posts for the staff to play netball and I used to practice kicking, aiming at one of these netball posts. Cricket was interesting because we'd either play with a real cricket ball and/or a tennis ball and depending on what stroke you'd play we actually smashed a few windows at the hospital. Any time we did that we'd pack up stumps quickly and disappear .

MB: So you enjoyed having more space around you?

RE: It was a different space. I think having moved from a rooftop where you could do all those things but "Don't fall over" on a rooftop to suddenly you've got this grass area. And when we moved to Croydon in '61 I then did my fourth, fifth and sixth class at Enfield Primary School, which is a suburb away so it was different going to a school that had a big play area – that school's still there. And then not far away there was the – this is still there to be the best of my knowledge – an Olympic swimming pool and a huge parkland. So suddenly I went from a school which was limited – that is, Fort Street

Primary School – in space to a school which had access to the local suburban parkland where you could go and play cricket on a real cricket pitch of go and play – at school in those days we used to play rugby league; it was part of the Western Suburbs Junior Rugby League Competition. So you had access to totally different spaces and I think that was really the big difference. Still a lot of children to play with but just from not living in small houses in The Rocks but living in what was then suburbia of the early 1960s in the inner west.

45.57 **MB: And perhaps more mixed occupations amongst the fathers. You were saying most of the kids at - - -**

RE: Fort Street.

MB: - - - Fort Street, their parents were wharf labourers, their fathers were.

RE: Wharfies, typically, yes. Yes, inner west in the 1960s would have been a lower socioeconomic group. I'm just thinking of what the parents – I don't recollect what many of the parents did. I know one of my good friends at primary school, her father had a printing business locally and that business doesn't exist any more, but for many of the other parents – there was a doctor, so it was a very mixed group, predominantly white Anglo-Saxon. One of my good friends was a Jewish boy who lived very close to the school and I think his father was the doctor. It was interesting, a Jewish family being in the inner west at that stage but I think – I'm just recollecting the early '60s then – most of the other families were white Anglo-Saxons.

MB: And they would have been mostly white Anglo-Saxon in the inner city as well?

RE: Oh, absolutely, yes, yep, yes.

MB: If you wouldn't mind, I'd just like to talk a little bit about the cubby house that your father made for you. What can you remember about that?

RE: It had at least, I think, two windows that opened out or in, it had a door, it had a proper angle-shaped roof so it looked like a mini house. I think as I mentioned earlier it was made of fibro to the best of my recollection - it had the two-way walkie-talkie set up inside. I know we had pieces of furniture inside and I don't recollect what was there; I don't know whether we had a mattress or small tables because I don't know what my sister had set up there but I know there were some – this is really stretching the memory – there was some types of small furniture in that cubby house.

48.07 **MB: Did you spend much time in it?**

RE: A reasonable amount, yep.

MB: Could you see into the house from the cubby?

RE: No, no, the way the building was structured, there was a lift, I think the lift well separated the house from where the cubby house was. So when we walked out the front door of the house we'd walk straight. Yes, if you turned right you ended up in the lift area but if we went past that area we then turned right again and turned right again to get around to the main part of the roof space and that's where the cubby house was situated; it was on the large part of the roof space.

MB: And can you recall if you spent much time daydreaming as a child? It just struck me that being on a rooftop would give you a lot to gaze at.

RE: That's an interesting one because when I looked outside my bedroom sometimes I'd have nightmares of these spooks outside the bedroom window but I could always see the AWA Tower. Daydreaming, no, I don't recollect much about doing the daydreaming but I recollect sometimes having a fear of these spooks being outside, outside the window.

MB: So you could see the AWA Tower from your bedroom window - -

RE: Clearly, yes.

MB: - - - but what else did you look out on?

RE: Just onto some other buildings.

MB: So basically over the wall of the - - -

RE: Of the Wingello House building, yes, yes. So on the bedroom side of the house where we were, we didn't have much view at all but certainly the icon was the AWA Tower. But, no, daydreaming I don't - -

50.01 **MB: Perhaps you weren't a child who did much of that.**

RE: No, the other thing we did talk about before, my father and I used to go fishing. So given where Wingello House is in Angel Place, ten minute walk, leisurely walk down to Circular Quay. There was no Opera House in the late '50s, early '60s but where the Opera House was was a tram depot, one of the main tram depots of Sydney on Bennelong Point and a lot of people used to go fishing on Bennelong Point, including ourselves. If we went fishing we'd either take - Dad had a fishing basket which I still have and we'd take the fishing

baskets and sometimes a couple of small rods, we'd wander down George Street on a Sunday, which you wouldn't necessarily – not George Street, Pitt Street, on a Sunday – which you wouldn't necessarily do today with fishing gear and we'd wander around to Bennelong Point and fish. What we caught in the harbour then were leatherjackets, I think some small tailor or small bream. We also had a cat, pet cat, so anything we caught we brought home and Dad used to scale and do what you do with fish and the cat would get the food. So that was a part of lifestyle which changed. When it was mooted there was going to be an opera house – this was before we left – dad and I were very concerned that we wouldn't be able to go fishing off Bennelong Point .

MB: Well, you weren't wrong there.

RE: That's correct, yes.

MB: But at that time presumably fishing was quite a common activity at Bennelong Point?

RE: Oh it was, yes.

MB: And there were a lot of people there doing it?

RE: I think on a busy day there would have been fifty or sixty people.

MB: Can you remember what sort of fish you caught?

RE: Yes, the leatherjackets.

MB: It was the leatherjackets, I'm sorry, you said that.

51.50 RE: Yes, and small tailors and the little silver bream. But I think the river probably wasn't – we weren't cognisant of pollution but the upper parts of the Parramatta River up to where the Shell Refinery is, that became very polluted and it may well have been polluted in those days but because we were far removed from that end of the river - down under the Harbour Bridge there's a fair bit of tidal activity then and now – we weren't really conscious of that. Just related to that, if we go to the other side of the city where Cockle Bay and Darling Harbour is, the Pyrmont Bridge as it was, as it is, that used to be a vehicle thoroughfare so if you wanted to go to the inner western suburbs you'd drive out over the Pyrmont Bridge. Where Darling Harbour is today, they were rail yards back in the '50 and early '60s, so sometimes my father and I would wander down to Pyrmont Bridge and you could walk over on the footpath side of the bridge and we'd just watch the trains. But thinking back to what it was like then, it was pretty murky.

MB: The water?

RE: No, no, just the whole area.

MB: It was a goods yard.

RE: It was a goods yard and it was just pretty down; it was a depressing sight but that was part of our weekend entertainment as well.

MB: And there were wharves all along there too - - -

RE: Yes, very heavily wharfed area.

MB: - - - along the Sussex Street side.

RE: That's right. So Sussex Street, The Rocks, very much old style wharf and wharf labouring activities.

MB: Did you wander around there very much?

RE: No, no, we didn't. Going down to Bennelong Point, Manly, Balmoral Beach - I learnt to swim at North Sydney pool. My mother used to take me to swimming lessons typically after school. I'd come home from school and we'd wander down to Wynyard, get the train over to Milsons Point, we'd wander down to the North Sydney pool and they have swimming lessons.

54.01 And the highlight for me after the swimming lessons was, as with any pool they have a shop, and my Mum used to buy me these either pink or lime must sticks, then we'd come back to the city. But again it was very easy, because of the tram and train situation it was very easy to get around. There wasn't a lot of traffic in the city, given it was – dare I say it – half a century ago, there wasn't a lot of traffic and getting around by tram and train was very easy to do.

MB: And your father had a car - - -

RE: The Austin, yep.

MB: - - - which you mentioned; but where did he garage the car?

RE: That was down at Rushcutters Bay where he worked. So at the weekends, on the Friday night if we were going to do anything at the weekend he'd either bring it home on the Friday night – or when I say home – bring it to Wingello House and park it - I'm not sure whether this is legal but he'd park it at the end of Wingello House outside the barber shop - that's near where the entrance of the theatre is today – or he'd go down to Rushcutters Bay on the Saturday morning and he'd bring it back on a Saturday morning and then we'd go out over the day and he'd take it back, I think he would either take it back when he went to work on the Monday or he'd take it back on the

Sunday evening, he'd just store it. But where he worked at Rushcutters Bay - I only visited a couple of times but it was a huge facility. I remember it was a place where probably had twenty or thirty cars, so there was a huge facility in it. It was near - where he worked would have been near where Weigall Oval [playing fields] is today, Sydney Grammar's sportsground was in that vicinity - Weigall was there but round that area there was light industry at the time.

MB: Are there other things we should talk about? We've covered a lot of territory.

56.01 RE: Yes, I'm just trying to - we used to go to the movies.

MB: Where did you go - was that in the - - -

RE: The State Theatre, the State Theatre. I'm not sure what other theatres were around at the time, not sure, but the State Theatre was an icon certainly. And drinking milkshakes was a big ticket item, particularly the milkshake, the shop that was on the corner of the building. No, I think we might have been exhausted .

MB: You think we've about covered it? Well, that's terrific. Thank you very much, Robert, I appreciate it.

Interview ends