

## Middle Park History Group

### Interview with Audrey Pruis (nee Dowsett) born 17 November 1926

by Annette Robinson from Middle Park History Group

10.00am on Wednesday January 24<sup>th</sup> 2017 at The Emerald Hill Residence Napier Street South Melbourne

(Audrey has been living in care since Nov 2016 and formerly lived at 274 Beaconsfield Parade Middle Park. Helen Pruis, Audrey's daughter-in-law was also present)

#### Early Life and Family

My father was English, my maiden name was Dowsett. He was born in Chelmsford UK and was in the British army, serving for 11 years in India. He started as a drummer boy and finished up as Lieutenant. My father took his discharge from the British army in Australia, and joined the Australian Army. My mother was Australian, and her forebears were of German heritage. My parents met and were married in Melbourne.

I was born in North Fitzroy, Victoria. Prior to my arrival my parents had lived at the Fort in Williamstown, and they later moved to North Fitzroy. My mother used to travel across by ferry from Williamstown to Port Melbourne so that she could go to South Melbourne market.

When she lived in Williamstown, Mum had an iron horse that she said had been purchased at the market on one of those trips, so it wasn't just fruit, and vegetables.

Such was the shortage of men during the war that my father was plucked out of retirement and put into an administrative role at Victoria barracks St Kilda Road.

I had started school in North Fitzroy at the local primary, but we moved to Beaconsfield Parade Middle Park when I was about 6 years old. I was the baby of the family, and had an older sister, and two older brothers, all of whom were teenagers. I suppose because of that I was a bit spoilt by my parents and siblings.

I had a very happy childhood growing up in Middle Park.

#### School

Although I had started school in North Fitzroy, after we moved, I went to Middle Park Central School, and afterwards to MacRobertson Girls High. My sons Gerrit and Jan went to Middle Park School too, and then on to Melbourne High School. My grandchildren also went to Middle Park Primary, so we had three generations attending that school. We didn't wear a uniform at primary school, but at MacRob we had to, including a hat which we did not like much. Girls were always getting into trouble for not wearing their hats!

At primary school we had a slate and slate pencil to write with, later a pen and nib dipped into ink. Each desk had an inkwell which was filled daily by the ink monitor. I can remember some of the teachers : Miss Zevenboom (means 7 trees in Dutch). My mother was a teacher and she had known

Miss Zevenboom at North Fitzroy school. I can remember Sam Brown who was a few years older than I was.

We had a wonderful classical education. We studied Latin and French at Middle Park school. I can recall that when the Latin teacher (Mr Honan) came in he greeted us "Salve discipuli" (greetings students) and we had to reply "Salve magister" (greetings master or teacher)! No married women could be employed in those days. Females had to retire when they married, my mother had to!

Classes were big. I enjoyed school and did well at my studies. We walked to school, nobody came by car. We had school assembly in the hall, and recited "I love God and my country, I honour the flag, I will serve the King, and cheerfully obey my parents, teachers and the laws!"

The Principal at MacRob was Mary Hutton, to whom we referred as Hairy Mutton! I would go to MacRob by tram. I rarely walked as was usually running a bit late, and even today I can still hear the South Melbourne Town Hall clock chiming outside my window.

We all walked everywhere, no-one had cars in those days. Later on when I was older I had a bike.

During the War we had to leave MacRob as it was taken over by the military as offices. At that time I went on to study architectural drawing at what is now RMIT. I have always loved drawing and painting, both in oils and watercolours and have exhibited and sold my work.

### Factories & Other Businesses

#### Asbestos Glove factory

Middle Park was so different then to now. Many of the smaller streets and lanes were home to small manufacturing businesses. There was the asbestos glove factory on the corner of Ashworth and Langridge Streets. The wind used to whistle down the lane and blow the dust around. We never suffered any ill effects. I don't know how. That place employed quite a lot of people.

A couple of doors up from "the lane" was a milk bar. The Martin family used to own the asbestos factory. Jean Martin and her brother Alan went to Middle Park School too.

Jean still lives in Patterson Street, between McGregor and Langridge and I remember before she moved to Paterson Street, she lived a couple of doors up from us In Beaconsfield Parade.

#### Net Factory

Then there was the "Net factory" in the lane across Langridge St towards St Kilda which made nets for all sorts of uses.

#### Hat Factory

I also remember Honeybones hat factory which made blocks for hats.

#### House

We rented the house at 274 Beaconsfield Parade Middle Park, and when the block of terrace houses came on to the market we were able to buy our house from Mr Rose.

## Shops

Middle Park in the thirties and forties was so different to now. Every corner had a shop, often a collection of little shops. There were also many horse drawn carts and vehicles delivering goods and taking away items. Ashworth Street now, but which we used to call "the lane" behind our house had so many hoof marks worn into the cobblestones due to the large number of horse drawn carts. We had the milkman, who delivered milk by horse and cart, as long as you put out your billy can.

There was a Chinese greengrocer who grew his vegetables in the market gardens further up in the Eastern suburbs. His horse would clop along towards the market where he would sell his produce. They always travelled right in the very middle of the road; they both knew they had the "right of way!" He slept on the way home but you could rouse him, if you wanted to buy a cauliflower or carrots.

Then there was the iceman. The ice deliveries were made by Mr Lockett and his sister Miss Lockett, I believe they are the same family as Tony Lockett the St Kilda and Swans footballer. They would carry the heavy blocks of ice on their shoulders and bring them right in to the ice chest. I particularly remember thinking how strong Miss Lockett looked with the huge ice-block on her shoulders.

There were many other hawkers delivering items. I can remember that one old bloke called out "Aim, aim", I don't know what that meant. Bottles, perhaps?. They also collected rags, scrap metal, bottles, other items

We did not go to the city much, as everything was available within a block or two. People used to come across from Williamstown and other paces to do business in South Melbourne, especially the market. There was the ferry "The Edina", and later there was also a newer ferry "The Weeroona". On weekends and holidays people would go for outings on the ferry to Mornington, Point Cook etc.

Later on I remember Bert Jones had the grocer shop on corner of Richardson and Langridge. They lived 2 doors up from us in Beaconsfield Parade. Mary McKeown is another neighbour, a wonderful lady, her mother Terese has now passed away, but we've been neighbours for years. Terese had a wicked sense of humour and a wonderful Irish accent.

I have always been a great animal lover as was my husband Kees. We always seemed to have a house full of much loved pets..birds, dogs,cats. All my children and grandchildren love animals.

We never travelled much as we could never bear to leave our animals. Later we bought a block of land at Apollo Bay and that was our escape from the city.

## Other Hobbies and Interests

I have always loved drawing and painting. I've exhibited a lot of work, and sold quite a few paintings too. I still like to practice my art.

I also taught myself a basic level of Dutch language. My husband's friends would come around and I wanted to be able to communicate, so I bought myself a Dutch dictionary and taught myself. It is not the easiest language to learn either. My sons never spoke much Dutch, but they do know all the swear words and how to use them! Kees always insisted that English was their language, and only English, but I was keen for them to have a little Dutch.

I pitied Kees's family back in Holland, particularly his mother who really never saw her son again. I used to write letters giving some family news to his brother occasionally as he could read English. Later on though, we re-established connections with the family relatives in Holland. My granddaughter Kate ( Gerrit and Helen's daughter ) and her husband Daniel went back to Holland for a year renting an apartment and re-acquainting themselves with some of Kees's family there. They want to return one day with their three children, now aged from 2 to 8 years.

After the war Kees trained at South Melbourne Technical School as a carpenter, under the "rehabilitation for ex service personnel scheme". He worked for APM at Southbank as a maintenance carpenter. He rode his bike to work every day, and stayed with the one company until he was in his 80's. He carried so much stuff on that bike, logs of wood, ladders and other heavy loads. He was physically very strong.

### Armstrong Street Shops

Middle Park was a bustling shopping centre, with several banks, drapers, chemist, butchers, boot repairs etc. The station was nearby, although we rarely went anywhere by train as the tram was more convenient.

### Teenage Years

I was a bit wild I suppose. I met my husband at Luna Park. I was supposed to be at the pictures at either The Palais or The Victory, but I had sneaked out at interval and gone to Luna Park. I remember that I was standing outside the Giggle Palace under the clock, when a group of Dutch sailors came up to me , and one young man said "Can you tell me the time please?" with quite a Dutch accent.

Dad was there later, waiting to take me home from the pictures, and he finished up bringing me and my new date home to our house. My new friend was Gijsbertus Pruis. I was 17 at the time, and he was about ten years older. He was on leave from the Dutch navy which was evacuating from the Dutch East Indies (Indonesia). He went back to England, but very soon after came back to Australia.

We got married in 1943 during the war in the Methodist Church near the corner of Richardson and Armstrong Streets ( now apartments known as The Abbey). Gijsbertus became known to us as "Kees " (sounds like Case). I later found out that Kees was also the name of a well known Dutch singer.

He had to go off to war working up north in the islands doing terrible training on torpedo boats. I was expecting Gerrit, and luckily could stay living with my parents in the big family home. When Kees came back on leave, our second son was conceived. Gerrit was born in 1945, and Jan in 1946

At one stage we had my parents, me and my 2 boys, my sister and all her family all living there. They were big houses though with huge rooms, and high ceilings. I can't remember where we all slept, but we were comfortable and never lonely.

We had boys from the Air Force boarding with our neighbours at that time. In an interesting coincidence I have a photo of Gerrit on the median strip of Beaconsfield Parade when he is about 2 years old. In the background you can clearly see the house at 283 Beaconsfield Parade which he bought 25 years later in 1976 and in which he lives today.

Gerrit married Helen and they first lived in East Brighton. Gerrit was always keen to get back to Middle Park, and when the house came on the market Gerrit was desperate to get it. Helen was horrified as it had been a boarding house, divided into little flats each with kitchenette etc.

### Middle Park Beach

I went to the beach nearly every day of my life, as did our children. We loved swimming . However I had a bit of a bumpy start. I nearly drowned once when I got out of my depth, before I could swim. My mother insisted that my older brothers teach me how to swim to prevent that happening again. After that I never stopped. There wasn't much traffic on Beaconsfield Parade then, and you could quickly skip across from our front door to the sand. My family also played cricket on the wide median strip, which you couldn't do today with all the traffic.

We went ice skating at St Moritz, and can remember getting fish and chips in the vaults across the road on the Esplanade.

Sometime after I had Gerrit, and was still only a teenager, and Kees was away with the Netherlands Navy my mother used to encourage me to still skate. I can remember my mother with Gerrit in her arms watching me from the balcony while I skated happily around.

### Sea Baths

There was a big old diving board opposite McGregor Street and we would swim from that to the baths and back. There was a caretaker at the baths, everyone called him Sacky. He was a Scotsman and quite a fun and likeable character. He used to ensure that everyone was behaving themselves, and kept everything happy and safe. He used to dress up in a kilt and bagpipes for the Old Buffers.

Middle Park School held the swimming sports for years until the disastrous storm which swept everything away including the baths and diving board. I can't remember the date, but that storm really traumatised us .From my recollection, the boys were still at school.

### Other Recreation

Pat Hannah who was a local identity involved in stage and other entrepreneurial activities lived nearby. On Saturday mornings he would string up a badminton net in Ashworth St, and local kids would play badminton.

When I was a bit older and had a bike, we were allowed to roam all around from Port Melbourne up to South Bank, as long as we were home for tea, or by dark. We used to go along the Yarra, find old hulks of ships moored in the Yarra, and scramble on to them and sit for ages talking and laughing. Even the Polly Woodside, when she was the coal barge called the Rona was one of these hulks. Later on they took Rona away and back came the beautiful Polly!

We also had a theatre at the top end of Armstrong Street near the lane. We kids used to see films on Saturday afternoons, and it was also used later for serious theatrical performances especially by

Frank Thring and his various productions. The local kids used to call it "The Flea House" but just to be cheeky! It was originally "The Memorial" and later "The Arrow"

### Old Buffers

Old Buffers was a highlight of the year for us all. They came up Armstrong Street and then to the park for the famous football match. It never was the same after they moved it away to Kerferd Road, and it fizzled out in the 70's.

When our children were young, we had our own boat and had one of the first moorings at St Kilda pier. The anchor was attached to a huge, heavy old wheel from some sort of heavy vehicle. Kees used to love sailing, having been in the navy I suppose. We had a lot of family fun sailing in the Bay and beyond, until the boys were taken away by their chosen sport, baseball. Then we had to give the boat up, get a car and drive them around to all the matches. But they did love the sport and excelled at it.

They played for the Port Melbourne Baseball Club whose most active members were the Longstaff family of Middle Park. Kevin and his wife Sandra worked tirelessly for the club. They named the baseball field after them. It is now the "Kevin and Sandra Longstaff Oval"! All four of the Longstaff boys went to Middle Park School too.



Audrey with husband Kees in front  
of 274 Beaconsfield Parade



Audrey on beach front aged about  
15 or 16