



## City of Port Phillip Living Heritage Project

Edited transcript – Roger Backway

Interviewee: Roger Backway [RB]

Interviewer: Sarah Rood, Way Back When Consulting Historians [SR]

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## A collector

58:45

**RB:** This one particular day we stood there and watched the storm come in - loved the storms, the white water and waves, the beach changed again - we're standing on the foreshore with a lady from the next street, Anne ... and I looked down and in the sand here's a 20 cent piece. I thought, geez that's good, I'll have that. The next wave came, there's sixpence. Maxine said, "Look, I've got one here too," and then Anne said, "I've got one over here." In the next ten minutes of water washing up we picked up a dozen coins between the three of us. [*Chuckling.*] This beach is a nice place to come to. We were married, got a bit of an income, it's only a few bob.

Then as we were walking off the beach and we gathered up our clothes - there'd been a lot of wind - here's another coin sitting on the sand, on a little pyramid of sand about that high. The sand had been blown away and the coin sat there, sat on this little pyramid. We picked up the coin and as we walked on, there's another one over there. Gee we better go for a walk so we walked the whole entire beach and picked up a few coins. This led us to thinking a little bit about it. A lot of people been coming to this beach for a long, long time, 100,000 people on the beach, they all wanted to lean up against the wall didn't they, so their pockets emptied. So for the next couple of years we spent a lot of time walking the beach. Picked up a surprising amount of stuff.

**SR:** Money mostly?

**RB:** Money, a couple of watches, a little bit of gold here and there, a gold ring, gold things. Then one day we walked down to the beach, it's all been changed again and here's the clay, the clay base that I could remember. I said to Maxine, "Look there's the clay. Look this is what you can do." I shovelled some and I made a little shape that was a bit like a sausage and she said, "Where'd you learn to do that?" I said, "We used to do it as kids." There was an area exposed probably as big as this whole area, all the clay - sorry, 20 metres by 20 metres - of all the clay and a few little ripples in the clay with rocks in them and everything. I said, "Look at the coin - look at that coin - " and there's another one, there's another one, there's another one. So the system is that people lose money out of their pockets into the sand as the sand moves the coin just goes straight down, sits on the clay, and it gets covered up. So we learnt to be at the beach every time there was a little bit of clay. We learnt that okay, we've been doing this on the sand, and on the sand one day there was a bloke had come down to the beach that we'd never seen before. He was down on his hands and knees and he had a device that he could put into the sand, a sifter, and pull it up like that, and pull it up like that, shake it all out, the sand would go, and there's the coins. Of course he was going along the wall where all the people had been sitting for the last hundred years.

1:02:44

**SR: Did you find any heritage-y things?**

**RB:** Hang on. We then decided that Roger and Maxine should have one of these devices so I went and built one. We spent a lot of time especially with the kids after school every day going there doing the sand sifting. The coins were coming out depending on how much sand there was on the beach, depended on the age of the coins. We started to work all this out. This was a tidy little bit of pocket money for the kids and it kept me busy with the kids at the beach. All of a sudden we remembered that we'd found these coins on the shore washing up there, and here's coins on the clay that had been lost in the water, and here's a gold ring that had been lost in the water sitting on the clay. I wonder what's out a little bit further, so the mask and snorkels came out and we spent the next 30 years snorkelling around Elwood beach to the tune of about 300 pieces of gold of all manner and sizes ... We learnt that although you couldn't see the clay if you just had an inch of sand you could wipe it with your hand like that and move the sand away and see what you can find. We found thousands of coins and I estimated about 300 pieces of gold of one sort or another...

...

**SR: What's the earliest dated coins that you found?**

**RB:** I tried to find them the other day but I can't. One day I'm down there and there's only a little bit of sand, I'm just gently going along shifting the sand, there's a coin, looks like it's a two dollar coin, gold. Oh, it's the wrong shape, hm. It's a sovereign. 1898. You get this business you think - you've been doing this for an hour - if I could only find one more I'll go home. And I found the one more and I put it in my pocket. I learnt that I had to have a pair of togs with pockets. Geez I wonder if there's another one. Ah, there's another one, there's another one! I got three sovereigns in just a few minutes, all much the same dates, all in just about perfect conditions. I've still got them but they're away somewhere. I've got them, they're somewhere.

1:06:56

**SR: So that's what you wanted me to remind of?**

**RB:** Yes. So all those experiences as a kid came into play 30 years later, and then I taught my kids to do it. One of them, Graeme, became quite good at it too. Elwood had a diving platform just about 100 metres off the beach and it was the big thing for kids to swim out and climb up, there's a ladder you could climb, and then dive in... And that was in ten foot of water. At the extreme north end of Elwood beach at what we call Head Street, in the late 1900s there was a rifle range there, a government rifle range, with the butts right on the beach. So they fired from inland into the targets in front of the butts. Some of the shots would go over and land in the sea. I think they must have bulldozed - at the end of the life of the rifle range they must have bulldozed all the butts down onto the beach and spread it all around. We learnt how to find all the projectiles that had been fired out of the rifles. Some of them were quite big heavy - from Martini Henry 450 577 rifles that I know all about, and 450 diameter is almost half an inch, big heavy bullets.

**SR: Pardon my ignorance, is that something special to collect?**

**RB:** It is when it's 100 years old. How many 100 year old projectiles have you got that have been fired in Elwood? [*Laughs.*]

**SR: Not many.**

**RB:** Not many. To a lot of people these are pretty good things and they're two dollars each. And when you come out with handfuls of them and your pocket's full, then you learn to get a bigger bucket. [*Laughs.*] A nice little source of income thank you very much. Not as good as a gold ring, but in quantity.

**SR: Did you know all this about Elwood before or did you find something and then do a bit of research and find out about it?**

**RB:** As a kid in those days we didn't have anything so collecting matchboxes, collecting cigarette boxes: in the cigarette boxes they used to put cigarette cards and people would collect them. We would scour around the streets. You'd go down the street to our shopping centre which had a building called the Maison Deluxe which was a dance hall, and of course people would go outside and smoke and throw their cigarette packets away. Which is a good thing because they're not all the same, they're all different, there's Lucky Strikes, and there's Capstans, Turf cigarettes. You'd take them home, squash them down, and put them between pieces of paper, and later on you'd buy albums to put them in and you'd make collections. This is what we did. Some kids collected stamps, some kids that had money collected coins. So this business of collecting stuff was inbred to me at an early age.

**1:11:00**

**RB:** My father had a rifle that we used to go shooting with. When I got married we were down in Bay Street, Brighton and here's an antique shop and they've got an old gun. I said to Maxine, "Wouldn't this look lovely over our mantelpiece?" A nice old 150 year old gun that went bang with black smoke and everything. So this then introduced me to old guns, which introduced me to a gun collecting club - who's name I've just forgotten - which I joined, and introduced me to a whole different avenue of people, and led me to collect numerous firearms. Of course I went to work as an electrician and you'd be putting up a light fitting in the living room of a house, and there'd always be a wardrobe in the old houses, and there'd always be a shotgun and a 22 on top. A lot, a lot of people had firearms in their houses in those days for one reason or another. I'd often say, "What about these old guns here?" "Oh I don't want them anymore, you can take them." Or sometimes they'd say, "Yeah, they're worth a few dollars," and I'd say, "Look I'll put this light fitting up for nothing if I can have the guns." This became my source of building up a collection. I built up a collection of almost 100 firearms of all various different sizes and quantities, calibres, and what have you, became to know about gun collecting. So when I went down to the beach and here's 100 year old projectiles it all fell into place. They all got collected, went along to gun club, some of them were given away, some of them donated, and some of them were sold. Others later on that I couldn't do all that with went to the Sunday market and they were gladly snapped up by other people with the same collecting interests to me. And unless you're a collector you've got no hope of understanding it whatsoever and I can't explain it to you.

**SR: You're doing a pretty good job I think. Because I'm not a collector and I get it listening to you, and I can see your face come to light when you talk about collecting. And I should say also, we'll get to it later hopefully, that bottle**

**collecting and the connection to St Kilda, how you found those, is also another step. Should we skip to that now? Tell me how that happened, your first experience of finding a bottle.**

1:13:47

**RB:** I'll just get this right. What is now St Kilda Road used to be High Street, St Kilda, which ran from Carlisle Street to St Kilda Junction along the road hill. [?] It had trams in the middle of it, it was decided to widen it out. So they pulled down the entire west side of High Street, all of the houses. At the time I was going to a real estate agent on the right hand side for my electrical work. When they pulled down the houses and they were excavating a lot of the soil out of it for the new road works, the road widening works - there was a bulldozer driver there that was an expert in his field of driving a bulldozer - one Saturday I took my eldest son Lee over there just to watch the bulldozer driving working. He was loading a truck up and a bottle fell off the back of the truck right beneath the truck's wheels. I thought, if he goes backwards he'll run over that and break it and maybe damage his tyres. So I went and picked it up and saw that it was all wonky and I thought, this is a hand-made bottle, this'll go together with one of my guns very nicely. Another one fell off and I went and picked that up too and it was a similar shape and size but quite different. Then I decided, two of those, I've got a bottle collection. They were similar but both different, and when you've got two of anything you're a collector so the interest was born there. When the trucks all knocked off that day we went home and got shovels and came back and decided to find out where they were coming from, and we found other bottles. That was the very start of bottle collecting for us.

**SR: Have you since dated those bottles?**

**RB:** Yes. On the second day - I went back there on the second day after work to see if I could find any more because the bug had bitten me. I found a hole and I dug up some bottles, what today we'd call quite ordinary - they were very old bottles - but amongst them was what we call a Pratt jar which is a coloured jar with a battle scene from the Crimea War on it that once contained fish paste. This is quite different to any other old thing that I'd seen. It had the charge of the Scots Greys on it. I collect firearms and here I am digging something up that's connected with the Crimea War - what sort of coincidence is this? The heart's going about a million miles an hour when I find this thing. So I decided I had to know more about it.

Just by chance there was an advertisement in the paper for bottle collectors having a swap and sell day out at the Lilydale Showgrounds in conjunction with some sort of show out there so I said, "We've got to go." I took my jar out there and I showed it to some people and they almost fell over. I was introduced to other people that collected bottles with exactly the same connotations - is that the word, I don't know - exactly the same feelings as I've got. We swapped names and addresses and then all of a sudden there was a letter there saying 'we're considering forming a club, would you like to come along and give us your ideas' so I did and we did that, and we formed one of the first bottle clubs - certainly the first one in Melbourne - one of the first ones in Australia which ran for 40 years.

1:18:22

**SR: The bottles that you were finding there on that site, what did they tell you about the area?**

**RB:** I couldn't quite understand why these bottles were in the ground, especially this good Pratt jar with the Crimea War scene on it. This was a valuable thing to me and here it was in the ground. I asked exactly the same question myself, why are they here? Before municipal rubbish collections people buried their rubbish in their backyards or they had to walk to somewhere to dispose of it, so they dug holes in their backyards and buried it. A lot of the backyards had wells in them that when water reticulation came the wells were receptacles for rubbish so everything went down the well including old bottles and everything that you can think of. In the old High Street, St Kilda, there were numbers of terraced houses. When the houses were cleared off and the road was getting ready, they'd taken all the topsoil away, we found these little brick pits about two foot square I suppose on the inside measurements with a brick in the bottom of them. Quite well constructed brick pits. Couldn't work out for a little while what they were until we did a bit of reading and a bit of researching. I found one in one backyard and said oh yeah, there's been a row of houses here, I wonder if there's another in the next backyard, and of course there was, and went around and dug the whole 12 of them up. They all had bottles in them, mostly of no value but some of some interest. We think, through discussing, they were early refrigerated butter coolers and milk coolers and the brick on the bottom would be to sit your bottle or container on, and you'd have a depth of that much of water in them with a lid on the top which would keep your dairy goods for some days I guess.

**SR:** **All this is happening at the time of pre-internet as well so it's not like research where you type it into Google.**

**RB:** No. The form of information in that day for me - St Kilda Library had a few books but not very much - I soon learnt about the La Trobe library in the city. It took a little while to get to understand it. The only time I had available was after work, after dinner at night, so I'd truck in there and get the necessary books and quite often be woken by the sounding of the bell at ten o'clock at night to go home. But this is where we did our research, and it was long, and it was hard, and it was very difficult, time consuming; trying to get the people that ran the place to understand what you wanted, then even more so as to why you wanted it. They didn't always give away information very easily. As soon as I would say to them that I belonged to such-and-such an organisation and I'm doing research for records and I'm going to write articles for magazines, which I did, they became a lot friendlier and sometimes they'd give me clues that I hadn't even thought of.

**1:22:57**

**SR:** **How old were you here, probably 30, 40?**

**RB:** Something like that.

**SR:** **Last time we spoke you told me that you really didn't like school at all.**

**RB:** No school was a bad place.

**SR:** **And yet here you are 20-30 years in the future happily researching, learning.**

**RB:** The difference is that --- school for me wasn't a pleasant place, I wasn't a very smart person. I wasn't taught how to learn. Let's say the teachers weren't quite up to speed. It's not all their fault, I wasn't a smart person.

**SR:** **I find that very hard to believe.**

**RB:** Well I learnt later on by experience, that changed. I'm still not very smart, I still don't know what nine times nine is.

**SR:** **That doesn't mean you're not smart.**

**RB:** But here I was at school doing something that I didn't like; all of a sudden later on here is something that I liked doing. And here I am being able to pass on information from one person to another that didn't know what they had. People were coming to me at club meetings and saying 'I've got this funny shaped bottle, why won't this bottle stand up?' and I was able to tell them. A bit of a show-off I guess. And it's still there, I still enjoy - I can stand up in front of a crowd of 40 bottle collectors and talk for as long as you like until they go to sleep.

**SR:** **Was there anything about the bottles you were finding in St Kilda and this area that was different? Because you mentioned you'd go out to the country and you'd walk the landscape and you'd be able to read where they were: is there anything that made the bottles in this area different?**

**RB:** St Kilda - no not really. They were bottles that we could find in St Kilda or we could find in the goldfields at Maryborough.

**1:25:34**

**SR:** **Did they tell you what people were consuming here?**

**RB:** Yes.

**SR:** **What was in them?**

*[pause in recording]*

**SR:** **Roger's just brought a beautiful bottle to the table which I'm photographing. Why did you bring this one out?**

**RB:** This is a type of bottle, it's called a case gin. It's called a case gin because it's a square bottle, they mainly came from England and from Holland that were both big gin producers, and they're square so that they can be packed into a case, into a wooden case, with straw around them, so they get the name case gin. In the early days of Melbourne, in colonial days, when the gold rush had started and the populace was coming from all over the world in huge numbers, numbers that we don't understand, they had to be fed and they wanted drinks. Gin was the very popular drink of the day and we had gin palaces in Melbourne. When all the gold rush people started coming back to Melbourne, Melbourne was exploding, we had gin palaces. And strange as it may seem we had oyster bars. I think most of the oysters came down from Sydney somehow - I'm not really quite sure how they did that, but they came down - and the popular thing was to go and buy a dozen oysters and a bottle of gin and go and sit in the parks and have a picnic. That was the popular drink of the day. As you can see the very fine sides - you can handle it if you like. To us it's called a pig snout gin. I can't quite describe the pleasure of being able to dig one of those out of the ground. That bottle is about 1840-something/1850. The seal on it which has been applied separately denotes who sold it. To be able to dig something out of the ground is exactly the same as going to the goldfields and digging out a blob of gold, or walking through a paddock and picking a bucket full of mushrooms. It's nothing, you don't have to pay for it, and it's a little bit of living history that's been handled by a quantity of people from the other side of the world all



those years ago. And here, I've got it, it's mine, it's my pleasure, and that's not something that a lot of people experience and it's just a little bit hard to project that.

1:28:55

**SR: Where was that found, do you remember?**

**RB:** That one was found on the south bank of the Yarra behind the Arts Centre when all the redevelopment of that south bank went ahead. Pulled all the old factories down and we were able to get in there for some time and dig. There was an area in there, a swamp area, and the rubbish used to come across the old Princes Bridge in horse and drays and be dumped into the swamp. It was called La Trobe's Folly - Batman - sorry it's gone. So yes we were able to dig that particular one out. We could dig that particular shape of bottle, case gins, all over the colony, that was the popular drink of the time.

**SR: So these would have been found in the St Kilda area as well?**

**RB:** They'd be found in the St Kilda area. I can show you one that was dug in St Kilda.

*[pause in recording]*

**SR: We've got two more bottles coming over.**

**RB:** On the south bank of the river where that case gin came, this bottle which is called a black horse bottle for obvious reasons.

**SR: It's got a black horse on it.**

**RB:** That's one of our prize - every bottle collector wants one of those. Although they're an English made bottle they're very desirable. When they reached \$100 I thought crikey, how far can they go? Even though there have been thousands of them found in the last 40 years they're now fetching up to \$800 each, everybody wants one.

**SR: What's this other one?**

**RB:** This is another case gin of the 1860s, this was found in St Kilda not far from the High Street in what had been a backyard dump and there'd been some redevelopment done. That's a baby case gin, that's a fairly highly prized possession.

**SR: It's fascinating.**

**RB:** In the dumps when we first started digging, and in St Kilda, we would find that type of bottle. There's a horse on it.

1:31:53

**SR: So what's that? This is a lighter blue colour.**

**RB:** It's not worth a real lot of money. It's P.G. Dixon & Co, Rosslyn Street, Melbourne, which is in North Melbourne actually. It was an aerated water bottle, lemonade.

*[Sarah takes a photo of Roger holding the bottle]*

When Germany discovered mineral water in the 1820s or something like that - this is a slightly effervescent gaseous drink - they put it into little bottles, little dumpy bottles that didn't hold much so there wasn't much pressure, and they began importing it into England. The English people thought, well if they can do it why can't we sell it, so they started making their own aerated water by carbonating it and made bigger bottles; of course more pressure so the pressure would pop the corks out. So they then invented this bottle, Mr Hamilton invented this type of bottle that had to lay down, that kept the cork moist and wouldn't push the cork out. This idea went through - there are long sausage bottles and there's all various types. This is a fairly difficult thing to have on your dining room table so they had to make special stands for them. Then some smart bloke came along and said if we put a different sort of stopper in them - so they made bottles with sticks with a rubber washer on them and the gas kept the rubber washer up against the lip inside. Then a man called Hiram Codd came along and he said that's silly, I can do better, and he made one with a little alley in it and they became Codd bottles. Then they could stand them up.

*[pause in recording while Roger gets a drink]*

**SR: We've just found a fabulous photo I'm going to take a snap of, down at Elwood beach. I'm going to get you, Roger, to talk through maybe left to right, who's in it.**

**1:34:51**

**RB:** Left to right is Peggy Baldock, Uncle Jack Baldock's wife; next one is Isla Cahill, [?] my mother's sister; the head is Nana Baldock; the gentleman is Jack Baldock, my uncle, my mother's youngest brother; and my mother is to the extreme right.

**SR: And in the background we can see that it says Elwood. And this seems to be the beach too.**

**RB:** That's Roger at Elwood beach. There's a ramp running down there, this is the ramp that they used to launch their boats off in front of the club. I think I was told - could I be four there?

**SR: I reckon, maybe three.**

**RB:** I think these are shots of my mother before she was married.

**SR: So what we might come back and do is scan some of these because they're great photos. Look at little Roger!**

**RB:** Look at that! *[Laughs.]* There's my father, but later on, when he was working at the SEC and when he became a photographer. He's proud as punch.

**SR: I might just grab that one of your mum there. Who's your mum with, do you know, in that photo?**

**RB:** No I'm not 100% sure. The other one is Father's side.

*[pause in recording]*

I've just got a photo on my phone of one of Pop, Reginald Backway Snr, with a bird that he's shot, and the next one is Bill Owens with a swag of rabbits.



**SR: We've decided that we've been going for nearly two hours, we're going to call it a day today. We've made another time for the 11th September and we're going to come and do session two. Thank you so much, Roger, because we've sat here for hours. Thank you.**

**1:37:45**