



NATIONAL TRUST OF AUSTRALIA (ACT) John Gale and *Huntly*



John Gale in the Bamboo Room, Huntly

This article originally appeared in Heritage in Trust as John Gale and Life at Huntly in two parts in November 2011 and February 2012 issues.

The article republished here was based on an interview by Di Johnstone with John Gale, owner of the historic property, *Huntly*, and originally published in *Heritage in Trust* in two parts in November 2011 and February 2012 issues. It is republished here in commemoration of John Gale and his contribution to the heritage of the ACT and to the National Trust (ACT) on the occasion of the auction of the contents of the house in February 2016 due to John no longer being able to live at *Huntly*.



Auction catalogue



(Photos this page: Leonard Joel Auction House)

Mark Grey-Smith statue



Part of the "donkey collection"

Members will know John Gale OBE, a long-standing and Life Member of the National Trust ACT, who has most generously opened his home at *Huntly* and its lovely garden for National Trust functions and for many other charities and community organizations. In this interview, which led up to Canberra's Centenary, over tea and home-baked scones in the sun-filled Bamboo Room of *Huntly*, overlooking the garden, John Gale reflects on his life at *Huntly* and in the Canberra District in earlier times and tells some special stories. This account builds on excellent articles by Judith Baskin in 1999 about the garden at *Huntly* and in 2008 about *Huntly* itself. The first part of the article, published in the November 2011 issue, deals with John Gale's early days at *Huntly* and some special stories about *Huntly*. In the second part published in February 2012, John relates more special stories of *Huntly* and recalls the 2003 bushfires on *Huntly*.



Huntly property

(Photo: National Trust ACT)

Why *Huntly*?

Before John's family bought *Huntly*, they owned a property, *Glen Barra*, at Manilla in northern NSW. This was a large and difficult place to run and manage - it was about 17,000 acres - and the family decided to sell it and buy another property. John looked at quite a few, mostly in the north and central west of New South Wales. While he was in Perth visiting his sister at Christmas in 1955, he received a telegram from his Uncle Ray, the senior member of the family (John's father, the oldest son, had died in 1950) saying "We have seen a property in Canberra and we are very interested in it". Shortly after, John received another telegram saying "We have settled and decided to buy *Huntly*". John "hadn't set eyes on it". John's Uncle Ray had been alerted to *Huntly's* availability by Woodgers and Calthorpe, then a leading land agency. It had not been advertised as the owners didn't want publicity.

The family company purchased *Huntly* because Ray Gale, chairman of the family company, had always been interested, as an observer, in the progress of the Federal Capital. He had never intended to live at *Huntly* and after it was purchased merely visited two or three times a year. Many other family members also visited *Huntly* but John was the only Gale family member who lived at *Huntly*. There were no Gale family connections in the area and John's family were not

connected in any way to well-known Queanbeyan newspaper publisher John Gale.

First impressions

After Christmas, John returned from Perth to stay at *Huntly* with the Milsons for two or three days and had his first view of the property, which had been owned by the Milson family since 1933. Part of the present *Huntly* had been a grant in 1836 to Captain E.H. Cliffe, an owner and master of trading ships. Cliffe's grant had been named *Craven Estate* (part of *Craven Estate* is located in present-day *Huntly* and is now known as Cliffe's Paddock). Frederick Campbell had purchased *Yarralumla* in 1881 and Cliffe's grant and surrounding areas (including all the areas of present-day *Huntly*) were incorporated into *Yarralumla*. *Yarralumla* was subsequently acquired by the Commonwealth in 1912 and vacated by Fredrick Campbell in 1913. Some areas of *Yarralumla* became part of a post-WWI soldier settlement scheme. In 1932-33 the Milsons acquired the leases of several failed or relinquished soldier settlement blocks and these land parcels were consolidated into the present-day property which they named *Huntly*. The original house on *Huntly* was built by the Milsons.

Neville Milson and his wife Kathleen had long-standing connections in the district beyond *Huntly*. Prior to his marriage, Neville Milson had lived at *Uriarra* with his two brothers, a property owned by Neville Milson's father. Kathleen was formerly a Retallack and her father owned the property called *Woodstock* over the river from *Huntly*, and it is still owned by the Retallack family today.

When he visited, John liked the area but his first impression of the property was one of disappointment as he felt it was badly watered for running stock. Despite his first impressions, when John moved into the house on 3 February 1956, he recalls that it was with a feeling of excitement. He was then 31 years old and had spent most of his life in the

country. Although then in partnership with his Uncles Ray and Robin Gale, by the early 1970's he would become the full owner of *Huntly*.

Meeting the neighbours

When staying with the Milsons, before coming to live there, John was taken to a rural bushfire brigade meeting held on an adjoining property, *Spring Valley*, owned by Jean McLennan (formerly a member of the National Trust). This was his first introduction to the neighbours who were kind and welcoming. *Huntly* had only three adjoining landholders, unusually few in those days, because two boundaries were mostly rivers. His neighbours were the Tanners at *Piney Creek*; Jean McLennan and her brother Bob Shepherd at *Spring Valley*; and Vernie Buckmaster at *The Rivers*. However the neighbours John came to know best were the Hyles and Retallacks at *Uriarra* and *Woodstock*.

Social life and connections with Canberra

Even in 1956 the district around *Huntly* was a "suburban rural community". With Canberra only 25 minutes away on a mostly tarred road, socialising was largely bound up with people in Canberra. There was no lake then and Civic Centre was the largest shopping area but John liked to shop in Kingston as, "that was more like the country town I was used to". The closest part of Canberra was Banks Street, Yarralumla. Deakin was built to Kent Street and the Campbell family still resided in the homestead at *Yarra Glen*, now under the Yarra Glen roadway beside St Andrews Village.

Local associations/major events in the district

Annual meetings of the bushfire committee were important social events. These were held in members' houses and after the formal meeting there was always supper and a few drinks. In 1956, bushfires were very much in people's minds after the 1952 bushfires that

were second in magnitude only to those that were to come in 2003. In 1952, *Huntly* had been largely burned. Although no buildings were burnt, there were remains of many burnt fences when John arrived.

The other major organization that brought people together was the local Farmers and Graziers Association, whose Molonglo Branch was based in Queanbeyan. However, more important were social events such as the Canberra Picnic Races, held in an area now under Lake Burley Griffin. These were fun and it "was a nice little course" if "a bit stony". After the day-long races, the "matrons" used to hold a "pretty grand cocktail party" in one of the courtyards at the Hotel Canberra and after that would be a black tie ball at the Albert Hall followed by supper in the Hotel Canberra. The Red Cross Blood Bank also held an annual blood donations day in the Albert Hall around this time and John recalls with some amusement that, "one night you would be dancing in the Albert Hall and two days later you would be lying on your back giving blood to the Blood Bank". Other social places for meeting were the Canberra Show, in those days at, "a lovely little rural showground" at the village of Hall, and the Albert Hall where there were concerts, which were rather cold in the wintertime because of poor heating in the Hall. Performers who came to Canberra complained that Canberra audiences were "cold" and "they were, literally".

Water on *Huntly*

John found his initial assessment of the property had been correct. He quickly learnt that Edgar Wheatly, an overseer, who had been with the Milsons since 1933 and stayed on the property, had spent most of his time in summer "going around and trying to find soakages". Having lived for 2-3 years in far west NSW, John knew a good deal about drought conditions and it "seemed to me rather silly" that a property situated on the Murrumbidgee and Molonglo "didn't have access to this water". Within the first year he

had a diesel piston pump installed on the Murrumbidgee River which raised water about 500 feet from the river to supply the property and houses. Ironically, however, 1956 turned out to be an exceedingly wet year and *Huntly* was mainly a “large bog hole”. He remembers that the first year was very hard work although at least he got the fencing done, including repairing fences that had been burnt in the 1952 fires and had not been replaced.

Annual shearing



The Woolshed on Huntly

Until 1961, *Huntly* took the bulk of its sheep to the Yarralumla Woolshed which was built in 1904. Up until the end of WWII, John recalls the government used to run the shearing, and local graziers, including many soldier settlers, took their sheep there. As none of the local properties were very big, shearing for individual properties would be done in a couple of days, as there were 11 shearing stands in the shed. After WWII, local landholders, headed by Neville Milson and George Campbell at *Yarra Glen*, formed a private company with around 6 rural lessees and were allowed to rent the Woolshed and 50 acres around it.

Annual shearing began on the last Monday in October and, as Neville Milson was the Chairman of the company, the *Huntly* sheep always went first. The wether sheep would be mustered over the weekend and moved as close as possible to Yarralumla by the Saturday night. They would be put in the Uriarra stock reserve on the south east boundary of *Huntly*, and were moved there a thousand at a time. John and his staff would

be up before daylight next morning, on horses with their dogs. They would drive the sheep down the Uriarra and Cotter Roads to Yarralumla. The sheep would be shedded on Sunday night and shorn on Monday. The shed managed to shear about 1000 sheep per day. *Huntly's* ewes were shorn on *Huntly*. Sheep that had been shorn the day before would be taken back next day to *Huntly*. The trip back with the shorn sheep took about a quarter the time it took to take the woolly sheep up. On the way back without their wool “they were running all the way to get back”. The last time *Huntly* sheep were shorn at the Yarralumla Woolshed was in 1961. After this the *Huntly* shed was expanded, shearers quarters were built and all sheep were then shorn on the property. Shearing ceased at the Yarralumla Woolshed in 1964.

The historic *Huntly* piano



John Gale sitting at the historic piano at Huntly

Among the many “heritage treasures” at *Huntly* with a special story is the piano. John’s mother had been a talented pianist and John had played piano, “not very well”, from a young age. His father had bought him a “boudoir grand”, a Steinway, now 100 years old. John was told that, when owned by Steinway’s Sydney agents, Nicholson’s, the piano was loaned to Dame Nellie Melba for use in her suite on her visits to Sydney. John brought this piano to *Huntly* with him and started having tuition again. The piano at *Huntly* has been used quite a lot for musical concerts and two notable recitals were performances for charity by John Winther, then Director of the Canberra School of Music

and Margot Anthony, wife of former Deputy Prime Minister, The Rt Hon Doug Anthony AC CH.

Unusual statues in the garden

In 1989 John agreed to have an exhibition of sculptures in the garden, produced mainly by local sculptors, who were asked to make something appropriate for a garden. There were 26 pieces and the exhibition was open to the public over four weekends and attracted many visitors to *Huntly*. The prominent sculptor Mark Grey-Smith, then with a studio at Murrumbateman, produced three large pieces, one of which was a voluptuous female standing-figure that was firmly secured to a large eucalypt in the garden. After a year, Grey-Smith was returning to Perth and asked if he could come to get them back. John decided to purchase the figure attached to the tree, where it still stands. Another was bought by University House.



John Gale in his garden with the Mark Grey-Smith statue

The Donkey Paddock

When John arrived, the paddock at the back of the house was called the Cow Paddock. A delightful story lies behind its change of name. Before John came to *Huntly* his mother and stepfather bought him a pair of small and appealing pottery donkeys. A year or two later another donkey ornament had been bought

for John by his mother from the famous Nymphenburg factory in Munich which produced a classic three porcelain donkey set. On his first overseas trip after moving to *Huntly*, John visited the Munich factory and bought the other two porcelain donkeys in the set and his collecting career began. After that, wherever he went, John collected various donkeys, some 30 of which are now scattered liberally around the house. When John returned to *Huntly* after an overseas trip, a cousin and his wife walked him to the back gate which opened into the Cow Paddock, pointed up the hill and “what do I see, but two donkeys”. They had bought John two real donkeys, a mother, called Samantha who was “rather sweet” and an unnamed foal. The Cow Paddock promptly became the Donkey Paddock. John’s many horses apparently loathed the donkeys and acted up if they could see or smell them, but the donkeys remained at *Huntly* until they eventually died of natural causes in old age.

Animal companions at *Huntly*

When John knew he was to live at *Huntly*, he decided he should have a dog and wanted a collie. With a scrap of paper torn from the “dogs” section of *The Sydney Morning Herald*, and having checked for collies under “C”, John went to see some collie puppies. Sadly those he saw were not in good condition and feeling deflated he went back to the scrap, looked under the next letter, and came across “Dalmatians” for sale. He visited a Dalmatian breeder and bought a puppy the breeder had called Lewis, after Lewis Hoad, the “star turn” in the 1956 Australian tennis championships. The puppy travelled by overnight train and John collected him from Canberra railway station. On the road to *Huntly*, Lewis sat on the front seat with his head on John’s lap. Lewis was a constant companion for the next 13 years. Coincidentally, some years later Lew and Jenny Hoad and their children became friends and stayed at *Huntly*.

John later owned three poodles, who turned out to be “great country dogs”, and a couple of “superannuated sheep dogs”. His last dog was a kelpie/border collie stray called Stripey who lived at *Huntly* for 13 years and was comforting company during and after the terrible 2003 bushfires. Until 10 years ago there were also a few cats and now there are 16 very decorative peacocks, a fascination for visitors. The original peacock was brought to *Huntly* by a gardener, a bird fancier who couldn’t keep it in a Canberra suburb. There is now only one white peacock, down from five, who was born at *Huntly*. This is not an albino but has a white gene. John noted ruefully, however, that foxes are a problem when keeping peacocks.



Peacocks at Huntly

Special visitors

Huntly hosted Prince Charles when he first came to Australia to attend *Timbertop* school in Victoria. Government House arranged for him to ride at *Huntly* and as the prince was being hounded by the press he was “secreted” out there. John rigged up a hitching rail on the two poplar trees by the drive and John, Edgar Wheatley, the manager, Graham Kidd, an RMC cadet, and Prince Charles rode across Uriarra Road to Mt Walker, to get a 360 degree view over the Murrumbidgee. On the ride back, the press discovered the riders and, although not allowed on the property, photographers managed to get long shots of the young prince with telephoto lenses. Prince Charles had

afternoon tea at *Huntly* and was whisked back to Government House. He was 17 at the time.

Memorable events

One of the most memorable events was a Sunday lunch at *Huntly* for the 1981 Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM). Mrs Tamie Fraser had asked John if he could host this lunch during CHOGM, which was being held in Melbourne. The delegates were flown to Canberra for the weekend. Security staff came to *Huntly* beforehand to go over the house “for bombs”, and John suddenly remembered “that we had some old sticks of gelignite in the shed that we had to get rid of”. On the day of the lunch a helicopter was parked in the Donkey Paddock in case someone had a heart attack.

When the many Heads of Government arrived they were welcomed in the Bamboo Room by then Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser, Mrs Fraser and John, and then moved into marquees in the garden for drinks. While drinks were in progress, staff whisked out much of the furniture from the Bamboo and Dining Rooms and quickly set up lunch tables for 90. John was amazed that it was possible in such a small space.

A sheepdog demonstration, with a professional dog trainer, had been organized to entertain the delegates. At a signal the sheep were let out of a yard about 300 metres away and the dogs brought the sheep down the hill to a gate near the garden and through the gate into an adjoining paddock. The sheep had not long been shorn and had a lot of energy; three or four sheep broke away and took off in the wrong direction. They had to be left behind when the mob was brought back through the gate, otherwise the dogs could not have held the big mob. John was standing beside a concerned British Prime Minister, Mrs Margaret Thatcher, who thoughtfully asked John, “Do you think if Denis and I went out after the sheep we could get them back for you?”

Over the years many government departments brought their visiting delegations to *Huntly* and *Huntly* hosted numerous charity events. The first such events were annual Red Cross dinner dances in the garden. Then there were musical events for Koomarri with the Canberra School of Music String Quartet, led by Ernie Llewellyn, and three other professionals on the staff also playing. At the first musical evening, one of the musicians missed the turn onto Uriarra Road and went to *Uriarra*. By the time he turned up, all the provided champagne had been drunk as well as most of John's own liquor supplies. It was a very merry evening. On another occasion held in the garden, an elegantly dressed volunteer had to sit on the side of a pond with her finger over a little "duck fountain" to stop fountain noise competing with the strings. On yet another occasion, the wind blew the sheets of music away and there was a rush to the clothesline to get pegs to hold the music in place on the stands. John remembers with some awe that during one concert held inside the house because of inclement weather, a string quartet, 15 lustily singing members of the Woden Valley Youth Choir, an electric piano and about 100 people packed the house.

John was on the Board of the Australian Opera for five years and when the opera ensemble made their annual trip to Canberra for performances at the Canberra Theatre, John hosted a lunch for them at *Huntly*. Others who had events at *Huntly* included St John's Ambulance, organizations for breast and prostate cancer, the Heart Foundation, The Smith Family, School of Music and Canberra Opera – who would perform an act from an opera or excerpts. The operatic event, rather grandly termed *Glyndebourne at Huntly*, was very popular. Families came and sat in the garden with picnic baskets. This was no longer possible after the damage done by the 2003 bushfires.

John's OBE, conferred at Yarralumla by Sir Zelman Cowan, cited his services to the community which included, of course, his considerable generosity in making *Huntly* available for so many charity occasions.



John Gale in his garden at Huntly

2003 bushfires

These were devastating. There were three fires on *Huntly*. Prior to the main fire day, Saturday 18 January 2003, fires had been burning for 10 days in the mountains in NSW. On the night of 17 January, John went to town to play bridge, thinking the fires would miss *Huntly*. However, on the Saturday morning, he received a report of a change in wind direction and to expect spot fires, as had happened in 1952. He was told two or three tankers were on their way. He drove along Uriarra Road undoing chains and locks on *Huntly's* gates. By the time he turned to return to the house he saw smoke over *Huntly* near Uriarra Crossing. The first of three fires had started. The small *Huntly* unit got there first; then other units and a helicopter arrived.

John and his manager, Margaret Wheatley, worked as fast as they could, without dogs, to move the sheep in the burning paddock to the back of the fire, and then rushed to the *Huntly* woolshed where they managed to get 600-800 weaner lambs into a holding yard, to save them from the fire. Without dogs it was a difficult task as frightened lambs kept ducking behind them.

John then returned home to put fuel in his truck, while Margaret returned to her house to let her dogs off their leashes and shut the doors and windows.

By the time John had driven his refuelled truck back a couple of hundred metres to Uriarra Road, only moments later, the pine trees on both sides of the road were burning from bottom to top. They were “literally exploding”. Across Uriarra Road the old wood sections of the cattle yards, with no vegetation around, were bursting into flames. Surrounded by very heavy smoke, John sheltered briefly with his dog, Stripey, behind silos and then drove through the smoke back to the house where he was shocked to see the Donkey Paddock alight and fire in *Huntly’s* garden. Failing to extinguish the flames he eventually drove the vehicle in beside the house, and then noticed empty feed bags in the back of his truck had caught fire and were in flames. John could not stop the fire in the garden, and, totally exhausted, sought refuge inside the house, only to find as much heavy smoke inside as out. He later noticed a change in the smoke and rushed outside to see something alight on the roof. He thought the house was about to be lost. However, the tankers and light units that had earlier been elsewhere on *Huntly* had arrived at the house, having had to leave their positions in the paddocks as almost everything had been burned, and helped to save the house.

At some stage a helicopter evacuated a fire-fighter suffering from smoke inhalation, and devastating news came through to the fire-fighters on *Huntly* that some of their own houses had been burnt and some cars left at the Cotter Road depot had been destroyed. Around 5pm word came through for all fire units to leave *Huntly* and go immediately into Canberra where fires were out of control. Before they left, the fire-fighters pumped water out of the swimming pool and smothered the house with water and foam.

Huntly became a designated “refuge” and John made up lots of sandwiches just in case, but no one came. The night was eerie, with a risk that fire could return, and no power.

John had lost contact with Margaret Wheatley when she returned to her house and they did not see each other again until late afternoon after the fire brigades’ personnel had left. He discovered then that, very sadly, Margaret, who had lived on *Huntly* all her life, had lost her house, her car and horse float, indeed everything except the clothes she was wearing. Miraculously none of her horses were lost, although several had slightly singed tails. Debbie Crisp, the tenant living in the old shearers’ quarters, managed to save her house although part of this had been burned. Both Margaret and Debbie slept the night at the homestead and Margaret had to live at the homestead for some months until another undestroyed house was ready for her occupation.

There was terrible news the next day when John discovered the extent of the stock, buildings and fencing that had been lost. John recalls that he had never seen a fire of such intensity – it was a “firestorm”. When he had gone to town on the Friday night, he had been asked if he was worried about the fires and had said “not really, because we have nothing to burn”. He would never say that again. “There was nothing to burn but nothing will burn”. Many of the eucalypts on *Huntly* burnt for many days afterwards.

The future of *Huntly*

Looking toward the next 100 years, John would like to think that *Huntly* will go on as a rural property, rather than be subsumed by Canberra’s growth. While it has a heritage listing, he is not confident that this will protect it from development pressures.

He mentioned that in the early 1970s the Federal government decided to extend the pine forest, which then ended at Mount

Stromlo, and the other side of the river was subsequently ripped up and planted with pines as far as *Uriarra Station*. The government also wanted to plant pines on *Huntly* and join these up with the Stromlo pines. John wrote to then Prime Minister William McMahon, protesting about the plan. He pointed out that the government was promoting Canberra as the bush capital and the one remaining road with any semblance of being rural, because it weaves and winds through the countryside, was that through *Huntly*. The best view of the Brindabellas in close proximity to Parliament House was the first view along the Uriarra Road, and yet the government was planning to fill up the valley with exotic pine trees. John thought the Prime Minister must have accepted his arguments as pines were not planted on the *Huntly* side of the Murrumbidgee. John reflects that if the pines had been planted, the outcome of the 2003 fires for *Huntly* would have been a good deal worse.

Involvement in the National Trust



One of the many National Trust functions held at Huntly

John is a Life Member of NSW National Trust, from a period before National Trust ACT became a separate entity for constitutional reasons. He is also a Life Member of the National Trust ACT. He became involved in the ACT National Trust when it was formed, being invited to do so by then President,

Major General Ken Mackay CB MBE, Lady Alison Hay (a later President), Sheila Braund and Ruth Gullett MBE. John formed and chaired a committee for fundraising activities. He thoroughly enjoyed this and thought it very worthwhile. He expressed amazement that it took so long for a National Trust to be formed in Australia, and thought this a pity as a lot more could have been saved if it had been formed sooner. He considers the National Trust ACT a very valid and worthwhile institution and that "it has quite a few brownie points on its slate for the things of heritage value it has saved in the ACT".

Di Johnstone

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(All photos: Di Johnstone unless otherwise ascribed)



Keeping up musical tradition at Huntly. Young musicians playing at National Trust Christmas functions



(Photos this page: National Trust ACT)