

# **100 Not Out:**

**The Keith Williamson Story**

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the benevolent society

initiating change

## Foreword

### Message from Her Excellency, Professor Marie R Bashir AC, Governor of New South Wales

It is always a great pleasure to acknowledge with appreciation the contribution to our society by individuals who are motivated by a deep sense of care for their fellows.

Keith Williamson is one such man, whose loyal and unselfish commitment over fifty years to The Benevolent Society has earned him the high esteem of his fellow men and women.

His steadfast contribution in different areas of the Society's activities, as it evolved to meet the changing needs within our society, has greatly supported the Society's role in response to those in need. In addition, he has inspired this commitment in his family, having himself gladly accepted the tradition from his father, who had also served the Society for half a century.

Mr Williamson's detailed knowledge of the living history of The Benevolent Society is priceless, an important chapter in Australia's social history. It is no wonder that he is the guardian of the Society's archives.

Mr Williamson's dedication over the years to such wide-ranging endeavours has far reaching implications for good.

Indeed, his efforts illuminate for others the best qualities of being an Australian.

Bravo, Mr Williamson! And thank you.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Marie R Bashir". The signature is written in a cursive style with a horizontal line underneath the name.

Marie R Bashir AC  
Governor of New South Wales

## Preface

Keith Williamson, a Life Governor, completed 50 years of service to The Benevolent Society in 2002. Keith's father, Jack, earlier gave 50 years of service, hence the title of this book, *100 Not Out*. Keith's granddaughter, Kelly Lewis, is continuing the family tradition of working for the Society.

Keith's story is an extraordinary one of service, commitment, loyalty and caring for an institution which has few parallels anywhere. Work, life and family are all intertwined in this story. We see Keith in more roles during his career than one can imagine - from driver to caretaker, administrator, maintenance manager, board host and secretary of the Paddington Site Committee. Then there are the special roles of archivist and keeper of our stories.

The 'songlines' of The Benevolent Society reside with Keith Williamson and people like Ron Rathbone, a former President of the Society. We are so fortunate to have Keith to remind us of where we have come from, how we have evolved in the 50 years of association he has had with The Benevolent Society and our core values of care and compassion. What comes through Keith's personal story are the great changes in Australian society which have occurred over that period and the complementary changes in the services undertaken by the Society. For example, Scarba House was a children's refuge when Keith joined the Society. Today, children's refuges no longer exist. What's unchanged over 50 years is the constancy of purpose of The Benevolent Society in meeting the social needs of the day and the enthusiastic commitment of Keith Williamson to serve the Society and those in need.

*100 Not Out* is a fitting tribute to Keith Williamson and his enormous contribution to The Benevolent Society. Our sincere and ongoing thanks to Keith and his family.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "RJB McLean". The letters are cursive and fluid, with the first letters of each word being capitalized and prominent.

Robert J McLean  
President  
November 2002



## Introduction

This is the story of the 50 years that Keith Williamson has been employed by The Benevolent Society. This noteworthy achievement came on top of another 50 years' service by Keith's father Jack – 100 years from one family and still not out!

This culture of long service to the public sits well within The Benevolent Society, which itself has a history of service going back almost 200 years. It was in 1813 that a 'Meeting of Friends', headed up by Edward Smith Hall, established the first organisation founded by the people of Australia and immediately commenced providing outdoor relief to the 'poor, blind, aged and infirm' within the struggling colony of New South Wales.

Since that time The Benevolent Society has continued to grow with the nation, providing and pioneering medical care and social reform. Keith Williamson has been a vital part of that growth.

During his 50 years with the Society, the world and the Society have changed dramatically. The old manual rope-operated lifts have given way to Sydney's modern high rise elevators, the Edison light bulbs (which never blew out) have been replaced with fluorescents that always seem to be flickering, the head office staff of the Society has grown from 22 to more than 60 and the Society's two motor vehicles have turned into a fleet of 115.

Through all of these changes, Keith Williamson has continued to serve the Society and, through it, the community of NSW.

## Early Days

Keith was born at the Queen Victoria Hospital, Annandale on 18 August, 1933. He was the youngest of John (Jack) and Mabel Williamson's six children, starting life with a ready made family of two sisters and three brothers.

Keith's father Jack was a blacksmith by trade, working first for his father in the NSW country town of Lagan and then in Darlinghurst, Sydney. In 1919, Jack Williamson started working for The Benevolent Society and worked for them for 50 years until his death in 1969.

Keith's mother was a hand chocolate dipper (every child's dream job). During Keith's childhood she spent a lot of time with Keith's sister Joyce, who from age three was known as 'Australia's Shirley Temple'. Joyce travelled Australia tap-dancing and singing. As a consequence, Keith's older sister Olive virtually raised him. It was at this time that Keith learnt to cook, starting with his own breakfast from age five and moving on to helping feed his large family. His cooking skills were to come in handy for the rest of his life.

Keith lived in the inner west of Sydney throughout his childhood, first at Forest Lodge and Balmain, then at Leichhardt from the age of six. The family lived at two addresses in Leichhardt, the first a mansion called Campbell's House in Campbell Avenue, with 18 bedrooms plus servants' quarters. The second was a semi-detached house in the same area.

Keith had always worked for pocket money. Across the road from his home in Leichhardt was Clive Picklin's grocery shop and Keith began to help in the store from the age of 12. He learnt how to weigh and repackage butter, sugar, biscuits and tea, all of which came in bulk in those



Keith as a toddler

days. He learnt to spell 'eschalot' while writing up the order book. He even ran the whole shop for a week one winter when Clive and his wife were sick (for which he received the princely sum of £2).

Another pocket money job was with the Kingkade's milk run, an old horse and cart business. As an early riser, Keith would be up helping to decant the milk into the householders' billy cans, or delivering the

more expensive gold and silver top milk bottles.

From those early days, Keith remembers the traders who walked the streets of Sydney calling their wares – the clothes prop man, the rabbitto and the ice man. There was a mop and broom seller who looked so poor that people bought his wares because they felt sorry for him. Keith later noticed him driving a very smart new car – an early lesson in salesmanship.

Keith started school at the Orange Grove Public School, then went on to Leichhardt Junior Tech.

During the Second World War, when Sydney was thought to be in danger of a Japanese invasion, many families moved out of Sydney for safety. Keith, his cousins, his elder sister Olive and his aunts were evacuated to Crookwell for six months. This was near Lagan, where his grandfather had his blacksmith's shop.

While they were at Crookwell, Keith found another job, which kept the family in potatoes. In payment for digging potatoes after school, he was allowed to take as many potatoes as he could carry in his jumper (he was a large boy by then and could carry up to three kilograms).

In 1951, the family moved into a new house which they had built themselves, at Darwin Street, West Ryde.

## **Meeting Nancye**

Through his sister Olive, Keith met Nancye, who was to become his wife. Olive played A Grade tennis with Nancye's mother Lillian, and Keith met Nancye one Christmas when he was 16 and she was just 12½. He didn't see Nancye again for some years, until 1952 when he was doing his National Service and called to arrange a date with Nancye for one of his mates. Nancye then asked him to be her partner for her debut and it was after this that he and Nancye started going out together "because she saw how handsome I was, having lost all my baby fat and in uniform".

They became engaged in 1953 and were married in 1954. Over the years they have had three children – Colin, Jeannette and Barry – and eight grandchildren.

## **1948 – Early Employment**

Keith left school at 15 and began full time work in the Government bus workshop at Leichhardt as a tally boy – these days it would be called a clerical job in payroll.

One of his jobs was to buy the lunches. The orders were collected by 'Old Bill' and passed on to Keith, who would then catch the tram down to Annandale to pick them up



Keith escorts Nancye to her debut



The big day: Keith and Nancye's wedding, 1954

from Sergeant's Pie Shop. He would usually be rewarded with a free devon and tomato roll for his lunch.

While at the Government bus workshop he was given the opportunity to become an apprentice blacksmith. He transferred to the Randwick tram workshop, where he learnt among other things how to hand weld, making tram pin links. However, he had to give the apprenticeship away because he could not wear the flannel clothes which were compulsory (to maintain constant body heat in order to prevent catching a chill in the kidneys, they were told). He returned to the bus workshops until he began work in the family business.

The family ran a trucking business, J A Williamson and Sons. At age 16½, Keith started at the bottom in the family firm as an offsider doing general carrying. This included carrying 200kg bales of rags with bag hooks on

his back – his weight dropped by 25 kilos in six weeks. A year or so later, Keith obtained his driver's licence in a three-ton Bedford truck so that he could take part in all aspects of the family business.

## 1952 – National Service

Keith was called up to do his compulsory National Service defence training in 1952. National Service had been introduced by the Australian government in 1951, so this was only the second intake. Under National Service, all young men were called up to attend military camp for 3½ months, followed by occasional training at weekends or evenings in the Citizens' Military Forces for a further two years.

Keith's cooking abilities were soon discovered by the Army and he spent most of his time in camp as a cook. He was also one of the few who had a truck driver's licence and he became a driving teacher for the Army.

Although the Korean War broke out in 1954, Keith's only overseas trips with the Army were to Manly and Luna Park.

During his National Service days Keith made many friends, some of whom are still his mates today. They played tennis together and went camping, usually at The Entrance where the prawn fishing was a great attraction.



The handsome soldier



The family trucking business

When Keith was discharged from National Service, Australia was in an economic recession and work was hard to find in the trucking business. Keith and his two brothers decided to sell the trucks and close the family business.

Keith went to work with Tennyson Textiles, bleaching and dyeing materials, then moved to the Everleigh Railway Workshop as a shop boy. All he was allowed to do in the railway workshop was push a broom, so he ended up reading a lot of books.

It was while working at the workshop that a medical examination turned up the fact that he was colour blind. This put an end to any hopes of becoming a train driver.

## **1952 – Coming Home**

In August 1952, Keith started work with The Benevolent Society, a relationship which was to last for the rest of his working life. The Society was 140 years old and Keith was just 19. He felt as though he was coming home – as a child

and a young adult he had spent a lot of time in the Society's Thomas Street building, visiting his father for a cup of tea and a chat. Keith started work as a driver/storeman and was paid £9 a week.

At that time the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of the Society was Walter B Rodd, who was with the Society for 57 years – perhaps an example to Keith of the virtues of a long working relationship. Walter Rodd had started with the Society as a clerk at age 15 and worked his way up to CEO, a position he held from 1932 to 1958. He was the first of seven CEOs Keith has worked with to date.

The Benevolent Society has a tradition of long tenured staff – Keith felt he was just beginning to be accepted after his first 30 years.

The Society's outdoor relief building, circa 1906



During 1952, the Society cared for 33,133 people, with some 203 men, women and children receiving individual assistance through outdoor relief and stores. Keith and his father worked side by side, helping to distribute outdoor relief and stores, including Christmas hampers. It was not the first time Keith had been involved in distributing the Christmas hampers – as a young lad he had often helped his father, who by 1952 had been running this part of the Society’s work for 33 years.

Keith helped his father as a driver, transporting the President and Board members to official functions. The driving team comprised Keith, his father and Charlie Mills. Charlie had lost a lung from mustard gas in the First World War and his health was deteriorating, so Keith soon took over all the night driving. He became a familiar figure in Pitt Street, in his starched grey dust coat, polishing the Humber Snipe while waiting for his passengers to return. There was also a Holden, which Keith maintains could go up a hill in reverse faster than other cars could manage going forwards.

## **The Children of Scarba and Other Jobs**

Keith also worked with the children of Scarba, The Benevolent Society’s House for Children. Scarba had originally been a mansion, built by Malcolm Campbell in the 1880s on a four acre Bondi block. He named it Scarba after the rugged Inner Hebridean island near his Scottish birthplace. Acquired by the NSW Government and subsequently given to The Benevolent Society, Scarba was officially opened in 1917 as the Scarba Welfare House for Women and Children. Over the years it became a children’s refuge – the Scarba House for Children.

Some of Keith's driving duties involved helping the children at Scarba House. He and his father bought fruit and vegetables at the early morning markets for the children's meals. He would often drive the children to Royal Alexandria Hospital to visit specialists and to the Renwick Hospital for check-ups and treatment.

In 1954, he took a truckload of children from Scarba to Moore Park to watch the young Queen Elizabeth II arrive in Australia for her first Royal visit.

As well as driving, Keith became a mechanic and general 'fix-it bloke'. This came in handy on one trip when he dropped Walter Rodd, the CEO, at the railway station, blew a head gasket on the Holden, spent much of the night fixing it and was ready to pick up the CEO on time the next morning. Keith also remembers changing a six-ply tyre with a claw hammer. Improvising was a necessary skill back then.

Keith's duties also included relieving the live-in caretaker, which made for a very long day. He would start at 5am, clean until 9am, then carry out his normal driving duties until 5pm, followed by a further bout of cleaning until 9pm. At least he was paid two meal allowances, which was quite a bonus at the time.

When not helping the caretaker, Keith worked at a second night job in the function room at the Wentworth Hotel in the city. He also worked a second job in his holidays.

The reason for all this extra work was to help Keith and Nancye buy their own home. For 10 years after their marriage, the couple lived with Keith's parents while saving for a home and they never had expensive outings – the family made its own fun. It was during this period that the first two of Keith and Nancye's children were born – Colin in 1961 and Jeanette in 1963. Their third child, Barry, was born in 1966.



Going to the Royal Ball

## The Good Life

There were other non-monetary rewards for all this hard work. Keith and Nancye were invited to the Society's last fund-raising ball at Paddington Town Hall – a very grand affair for the young couple, who were seated at the official table. Not only free tickets and all expenses paid, but Keith was even paid overtime.

Over the years, Keith's position with the Society brought him in touch with several royal occasions. In his part-time job at the Wentworth, he looked after Lord and Lady Mountbatten on their trip to Sydney in the 1960s and in 1983, he and Nancye danced the night away at a Royal Charity Ball at the Wentworth Hotel with Prince Charles and Princess Diana.

## The 1950s

The old building at Thomas Street had two storeys, which not only housed many of the Society's offices but also a dance hall (one of the fastest dance halls in Sydney, second only to the famous Trocadero, according to Keith). It was an old building and among its rather dated features was an old-fashioned hand operated lift, which required the driver to hold a manually controlled brake rope. On one memorable occasion the rope broke, resulting in a major

bang when the lift hit the bottom, but fortunately no injuries. The building also had an old Edison light globe, which never blew out.

Keith's father was responsible for buying fresh vegetables for the hospitals and the Scarba Children's Home and would often take Keith along. The vegetables were bought early in the morning at the original Paddy's markets (where the rats were as big as dogs, according to Keith). At that time, rats were a problem wherever bulk food was kept. At the store there were big metal boxes that the old flour bags were thrown in, to be collected when the box was full by the 'bag man'. When the lid of the bin was opened, all hands stood by with shovels to dispatch the rats which had been disturbed. Another trick Keith learned from his father was how to get rid of weevils in the barley. The barley was laid out on brown paper in the sun and the weevils moved off the edge when they got too hot.

Through the rest of the 1950s, the work of the Society continued to address the needs of the community and continued its search for innovative solutions to social problems. There was growing concern at this time for older people, who were often living in difficult circumstances. The Society was no stranger to helping older people – in 1896 it had formed the Old Age Pension League to agitate for payment of an aged pension. This was introduced in 1901, the first such pension in the world. The Society again began to expand its activities in this area.

At the same time work continued in other areas – a new outpatient's building was opened at the Royal Hospital for Women, the Administration and Stores Department moved from Thomas and Quay Streets to Paddington and the Thomas Street Hospital for Infants and the Restawhile Home were both closed.

In 1958, W L (Bill) Perry was appointed CEO, a position he held until 1966.

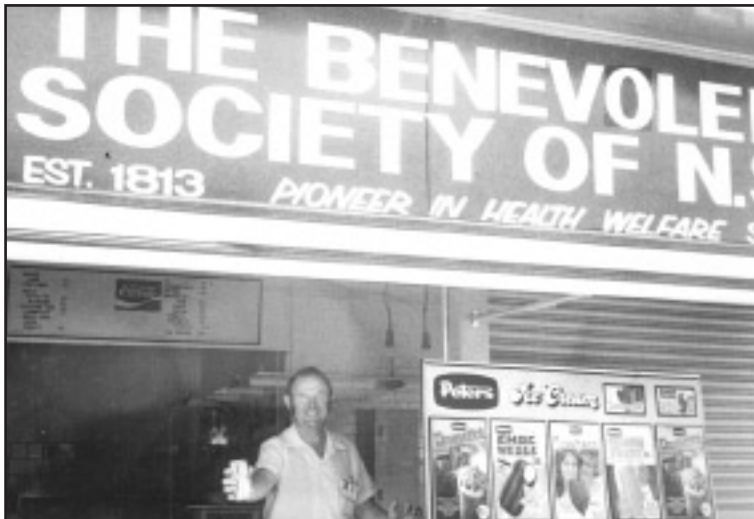
## **Volunteering – A Family Affair**

Volunteering for the Society has always been a family affair for the Williamsons and their extended clan and friends. Keith and Nancye’s children, their in-laws, brother, nephews and nieces all rallied around when needed. Lillian, Nancye’s mother, knitted all sizes of jumpers and jackets for the children at Scarba.

## **The Kiosk at the Royal Easter Show**

Each year since the Second World War, the Society had run a kiosk at the Royal Agricultural Society Show (the Royal Easter Show) as part of its fundraising activities.

The kiosk at the Royal Easter Show



Shortly after Keith joined the Society, the Board passed a vote of thanks to the Auxiliary Committee for this activity. Little did they know that their newest recruit, 19-year-old Keith Williamson, would take over running the kiosk for many years, ultimately receiving recognition as a Life Governor for his efforts.

In 1969 a catering company was brought in to operate the kiosk, but the cost of external management and wages made too much of a dent in profits going to the Society. The following year Keith took charge – he hired a cleaner/handyman, organised the Auxiliaries and co-opted volunteers from his large family. As a result, the 1969 profit of \$400 jumped to a \$2,000 profit in 1970. From that time on Keith retained a supervisory role at the kiosk, employing a manager but also receiving help from Nancye and the relatives, particularly Nancye’s Rumble clan.

It was as a result of this work at the kiosk that the Arncliffe Auxiliary nominated Keith as Life Governor, an award the Society was happy to bestow.

## **The Baby Shop**

In 1992, the Marketing Department moved from the Royal to Hardwick House, leaving the Baby Shop at the hospital untended. The CEO, David Richmond, asked Nancye if she would volunteer to run



Nancye in the Baby Shop

the shop. Nancye took over and ran the shop for the next three years, until the hospital was decommissioned in 1995.

This was far from Nancye's first time at volunteering. As well as helping at the Easter Show kiosk, she had always been in the thick of fetes and had also worked in the hospital kiosk. On top of all that, she often helped Keith in the evenings with his work.

## **Auxiliaries**

Keith and his family were carrying on a long history of volunteering. Keith talks with admiration of the work of the Auxiliaries, which had started back in 1932 at Renwick Hospital for Infants. Two people in particular were prominent volunteers then – Doreen Low (MBE) and Jack Riley. Doreen Low ran the Arncliffe auxiliary, which raised over \$1 million for the Society over the years and presented it with a mini bus in 1980. As recognition, their names feature in various buildings – for example, the Doreen Low Cottage at Allambie and the lift in the Margaret Lim U Hostel dedicated to Jack Riley.

## **The 1960s**

By the 1960s the Society had moved premises, first to Hereford House for six months and then to Renwick House in Paddington, which was to become the site of Paddington House, The Benevolent Society's present head office. Keith was involved in moving the offices, enlisting the help of some of his friends to keep down costs for the Society.

The 1960s saw a rapid expansion of The Benevolent Society's services for both older people and children. By 1964, work had commenced on 12 sites designed for

retirement villages, hostels, nursing homes and child care centres. By the end of the 1960s, a Medical Reference Library and new ultrasound equipment had been installed at the Royal Hospital for Women, a new labour ward was completed and the Sir Edward Ford Hospital for the care of patients with psychiatric and psychosocial problems associated with childbirth opened.

Throughout all this activity, Keith continued to play a vital part, particularly at the hospital. He began to be more involved in hospital transport, taking instruments out to be sharpened, doing pay runs, delivering pathology slides and taking premature babies to the Prince of Wales Hospital for more intensive care. In all this activity, it's no wonder there was a celebrated occasion when Keith forgot to deliver the nurses' pay. "I was off to Queensland but didn't quite make it," said Keith. The nurses were not amused.

Some years later Keith would also collect the radon and radium from the hospital, transporting them in very expensive gold tubes. These he would put in the passenger seat beside him so they wouldn't fall over. After a few years, hospitals realised how dangerous this radioactive material was. The gold tubes were encased in lead and concrete and drivers were advised to carry the rods as far away from themselves as possible – which meant in the boot.

The hospital also needed a driver to collect live animals, usually mice and guinea pigs, for its pregnancy testing and other work. Keith remembers hopping into his car after one such delivery, only to find a forgotten guinea pig wandering around the back seat.

Keith was involved in many different activities – sending out the Annual Reports, taking 1,000 or more of them to the GPO in the three-ton truck, helping to choose printing equipment, shopping around for the

# A man of many parts...





Keith with Doreen Low MBE

cheapest goods. By the time the Society moved to Hardwick House in 1969, many of these activities were automated – a printing department was set up with large commercial printers, guillotine plates and staff with a commercial printing background. Soon he was to purchase the Society's first electric typewriter.

Another of Keith's duties was catering for Board meetings. Using expertise

he had acquired from his 14 years working at his second job at the Wentworth, he became the Board Host, an activity he still continues. He began to organise and serve three-course meals for the Board – this was one of the ways Reg Della Bosca, the CEO at the time, thanked the Board for the time and effort they donated. At about that time, Keith met Reg Della Bosca's 12 year old son John – who was heading for a life of politics even then and was subsequently to become the Special Minister of State in the NSW Government.

In 1969 Keith's father Jack died after a bout of flu, while still employed by The Benevolent Society. He had clocked up 50 years with the Society.

## **Archivist and Historian**

One of Keith's most vivid memories was the day the basement of Renwick House flooded. The basement was

used to store all the steam pumps as well as the hospital patients' records. As luck would have it, one of the pumps exploded and flooded the basement. Keith worked at trying to sort out all the water-affected records, but only six out of 60 years' records were salvaged. These are now housed in the Mitchell Library.

Keith had worked on the mildewed archives for several weeks without a mask, causing him to feel sicker than ever before – but it was the start of his archive days. Subsequently Keith manually maintained the total card system for the hospital, plus the Society's head office and Scarba telephones.

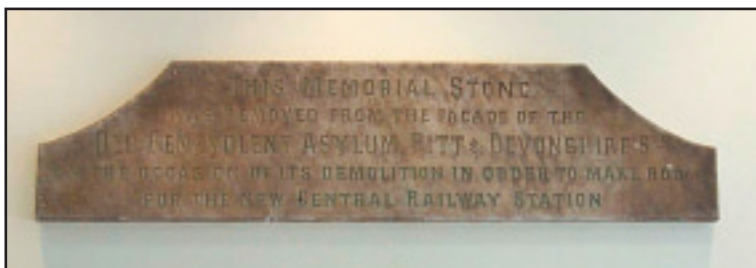
The Society had been approached in the late 1960s by the Mitchell Library to provide the Society's records and make them available to the general public. Keith organised a first round of archives when Reg Della Bosca was CEO and a second round under the auspices of David Richmond. After the second round Keith, together with the library's Curator and its Archivist, catalogued everything and produced the *Guide to the Records of The Benevolent Society of New South Wales in the Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW*. The public can now access these records, after making a request to the Society.

Research into the history of the Asylum foundation stone was another of Keith's interests. The stone has a long history – it was originally part of the façade of The Benevolent Society's first building, erected at the direction of Governor Lachlan Macquarie in 1820. That building was demolished in 1901 to make way for Sydney's Central Railway Station. The stone has remained with the Society ever since.

In 2001 the Society moved into its new headquarters, Paddington House, marking 100 years on the same site.



The foundation stone from the 1820 Asylum (left) and a memorial stone from its facade (below), on display in the foyer of Paddington House



Paddington House today



Keith organised for the stone to be erected in the foyer of Paddington House, where it can now be seen by all who enter the building.

Keith continues to administer the archives and to take a keen interest in the Society's evolving history to this day. He is currently working on a museum exhibition for Paddington House, including items such as the MBE presented to Doreen Low for her volunteer work for the Society.

## **The Elvis Presley Cadillac Adventure**

In 1969 The Benevolent Society's then Marketing Manager, Bob Hanran, arranged for the Society to borrow one of Elvis Presley's cadillacs to help raise funds all over Australia. Elvis Presley was famous for his flamboyant and exotic cars. This car was a stretch Cadillac, seven feet wide, with crushed pearl shell paint and a gold bumper bar. Because the Society was a NSW charity, registered charities in other states were also involved, but towards the end of the tour Keith took over as manager of the whole enterprise, following some concerns about the existing management. He flew to Broken Hill to take over the show and then flew on to Perth for the last showing.

In Perth, where the Society was sharing proceeds with the Freedom from Hunger Campaign, the cadillac was booked to be on display at a drive-in theatre where the Elvis Presley film *Clambake* was showing. When they tried to start the car, however, they discovered that the battery was flat. The Perth RAC kindly offered to jump-start the car – Elvis Presley was not of course a member of any Australian motoring organisation, so the help was voluntary. Once the engine was running, Keith drove the



Elvis' Cadillac

car along the Perth Esplanade to its date with the drive-in. History does not record whether he sang as he drove, but rumour has it that strains of 'You ain't nothin' but a hound dog' wafted down The Esplanade and across the Swan River.

This adventure raised \$135,000 for the Society, a very large sum in those days. In recognition of the loan of the Cadillac, Elvis Presley and Colonel Tom Parker, his manager, were made Life Governors of The Benevolent Society – Keith sent them the Annual Report each year and the Life Governor's certificate is still mounted on the wall at Graceland.

## **Mirrabooka – 1969**

Keith's first major facilities project was the furnishing of Mirrabooka retirement village, which opened in 1969. Mirrabooka had a difficult start in life. It



Keith with an original resident of Mirrabooka Village

was sometimes referred to as ‘Cavanaugh’s Folly’, named after the architect whose original designs led to huge cost over-runs. His replacement left shortly afterwards because the Senior Citizens’ Committee would not approve her colour scheme. Among other requirements, the Committee wanted two separate locks on the front door of the married units, one inside and one outside. This was impractical, as it effectively locked the residents in or out. One of

Keith’s first actions when he took over the furnishing of the village was to rectify this.

Keith recounts an argument he had with the Chairman of the Senior Citizens’ Committee, who did not want Keith to buy a second lounge chair for each of the married units. After a certain amount of behind-the-scenes lobbying on Keith’s part, he was allowed to buy the extra chairs. Four senior couples could now sit in peace without an argument about who got The Chair.

It was at Mirrabooka that Keith also tried his hand at electrical matters. At the opening celebrations for the Mirrabooka retirement village in 1969, Keith tried to avoid a power overload by placing two urns on opposite sides of the hall to better distribute the power. However, he had reckoned without the laterally



Proud parents

thinking electrician, who had already spaced the potential load. They both chose the same power switch. Tea for the official opening was slightly delayed while the power was reconnected.

## The 1970s

Keith's management of Mirrabooka must have been impressive, in spite of these early teething problems. It certainly impressed the Rockdale Council. The Council had purchased an annex of the Rachel Forster Hospital, where they intended to build a senior citizens complex to celebrate the Council's centenary. The Mayor of Rockdale visited some 70 retirement villages, including Mirrabooka, before deciding to invite The Benevolent Society to run the proposed complex. The Rockdale Centenary Village opened in 1972, with the Council organising a centenary celebration, including a parade through Rockdale. Keith dressed up the hospital's Holden ute for the parade, with a frame showing a model of what was to be built on the Bexley site and a model of the original Benevolent Asylum (located where Central Railway Station is today). The ute was one of the hits of the parade.

The most significant advances in the Society's services during the 1970s were in the areas of child care and child welfare, but there was also an expansion of services for older people. Over the decade the Society opened five retirement villages and hostels, the Maurice O'Sullivan

Children's Day Care Centre at Bondi, a gynaecological ward, a theatre block and an undergraduate teaching block at the hospital.

## **The Liaison Officer**

During the 1970s Keith progressed into administration, becoming the Liaison Officer for the retirement villages and Scarba. He had in fact been liaising in these areas for some time, assisting with his knowledge and practical advice. He was in much demand, being the only person who staff could ask for advice without needing to bother the CEO.

His formal duties now included responsibility for liaison between the hospital maintenance staff and the retirement villages, finding nursing home accommodation and liaising with doctors. He picked up rent from the villages and handled problems such as their leaking roofs and furniture removals. In one day, for example, he carried on his back 11 refrigerators, each five cubic feet, up to the first floor. Two new drivers were employed to assist him in his ongoing driving duties.

During this period Keith joined the Board of the Amicable Credit Union and six months later he was voted into the Chair for 12 months. Keith had already been appointed a Justice of the Peace in 1959.

## **The Peakhurst Community Centre**

By 1972 the Society had decided to build and run the Peakhurst Community Centre. Keith was given the task of managing the nine acre site associated with the Centre. To do this, he used the Government's scheme to encourage employment at that time, thus helping both the Society

and the unemployed. He also needed a ceremonial spade for turning the first sod for the building, and discovered that such a thing was sold at the old Knock & Kirby's hardware store. The Centre was subsequently handed over to Hurstville Council as it was decided that this type of centre lay outside the Society's charter.

## **Hostels at Bexley and Bondi**

In 1975 Dick Gould was appointed CEO, a position he held until 1984. He was the fourth CEO since Keith had first joined the Society. During this time, in 1976, the Chapman House Hostel in Bondi and the Margaret Lim U Hostel at Bexley were both opened. With upgrades to the nursing home and motel styles of accommodation at Margaret Lim U, the Society could for the first time offer three different grades of care for older people – village self-care units, hostels and nursing homes.

Keith was involved in getting these sites up and running, although there was a minor hiccup at the opening of Chapman House. The opening plaque for Chapman House was all prepared for the official unveiling when the current Minister for Health lost his seat in the elections on the Saturday prior to the official opening. To this day, the official plaque has a sliver of bronze glued over his lost title.

## **The Magic Landlord**

By this time, Keith was working entirely as an administrator connected with head office, with the new title of Executive Assistant. The Department of Welfare Services had been established in 1980, and in the aged care area social workers were becoming more involved in



Governor Roden Cutler and Lady Cutler visit Mirrabooka Village, 1970

the work of interviewing and choosing potential clients, and visiting them when they were settled. Caretakers were being made redundant.

Keith considered himself more the landlord of the aged care establishments, concerned with their ongoing renovations and refurbishment. This involved learning about all manner of different industries – ordering curtains, what was the fire safe content of carpets, why prices fluctuated so much, how to write a watertight specification, how to negotiate contracts for window cleaning and how to meet the fire regulations.

Keith was on call 24 hours a day, seven days a week in this role. The Society cared for more than 400 older people, all of whom felt free to call on Keith at any time. He became the person who knew all the latest gossip.

Keith was on call for building maintenance, setting

up cleaners for the common rooms and arranging maintenance of the grounds. For example, when the Walter Cavill Village was being built, Keith had to organise the removal of an old tram which had been placed at the back of the children's play room at Scarba, to make room for a new 'adventure playground'. The tram had been a gift from the public transport department and had remained a great source of fun for the children who loved climbing all over it. It reminded Keith of when he was 12, selling papers by hopping on and off the running board of such trams.

Before air conditioning was available, Keith remembers buying huge blocks of ice to put in front of fans in the hostel, to help residents deal with Sydney's heat waves.

Another example of his caretaker role occurred in 1982, after the Rotary Court hostel at Alexandria had been open for only six months. Sydney had one of its spectacular storms, with so much rain that a Holden car was seen floating in Alexander Street just outside the hostel. One of the residents phoned Keith at around 10:30 that night and he went straight to the hostel, finding that five of the units had been flooded. For a time that was the extent of the disaster. Then a neighbour came and opened a door to the village, allowing all the floodwater in Alexander Street to rush through the complex to the rear lane, which was on a lower level and fortunately contained a storm water drain.

Keith remained on the site until the early hours, sweeping water out of the affected units. By this time the residents were ready to party, but Keith contented himself with a cup of tea. Back home, he rang a carpet cleaning contractor at 5am (the poor man had trustingly given Keith his home number) and they were on site cleaning the carpets by 6:30am. Some landlord!

At the same time his role was extending from the aged care area to child care at Scarba and transport for the Royal Hospital for Women.

## **The 1980s**

By the mid 1980s, Carol Davis was the CEO of The Benevolent Society and Keith was the Maintenance Manager for all the Society's sites. He had the first mobile phone in the Society, allowing him to be on call 24 hours a day, seven days a week. He arranged outsourcing of plumbing, electrical and building maintenance and painting, as the Health Department would no longer allow the Society's maintenance team to do this type of work.

Keith set up his own painting team, with a very skilled master painter in charge. All the units were cleaned and repainted, much to the residents' delight. When the master painter moved to Tasmania (all good things must come to an end), Keith discovered Sid, who had been a driver at the Royal for some time but had decided to return to his original trade of painting. This was a great find – painters needed to be trusted not to abscond with the paint – and Sid was not only honest but 'a nice bloke', as well as being a very good painter. He still carries out a lot of the painting contracts for the Society today. Sid was replaced as driver by Peter Simpson, who had previously been a courier.

In 1989, the management of the Society was split in two, with David Richmond appointed as Executive Officer of the Society and Vaughan Howell as Executive Officer of the Hospital and Secretary to the Board. This dual management lasted until the hospital was relinquished in 1992.

Keith had been thinking of leaving the Society, but David Richmond convinced him to stay on with the title of Manager Properties. His main priority was to reinstate the exterior of the Society's buildings. These were in some disrepair – the exterior surface of the Sir Philip Baxter child care centre, for example, was no longer repelling rainwater. Once this problem was fixed, Keith placed all the heritage buildings on a programme of three-year on-going maintenance. This was the first time that this type of maintenance was carried out to a timetable, instead of an ad hoc response when the problems became too obvious. The Society's buildings have greatly benefited from this more regular care.

At this time the Health Department also closed the Royal Hospital for Women's laundry, outsourcing this service. This turned out to be a big problem for the Society – not only did the cost of outsourcing the hospital's laundry cause a major budget blow-out, but the Society's other residential sites had trouble finding suitable alternatives. Many large hotels were opening in the Sydney Central Business District and they were dominating the local laundry scene. At one stage Keith was doing a regular run twice a week to a laundry at Greenacre, an hour and a half round trip from head office.

In 1987 the residential facilities at Scarba were closed. In their place, the Scarba Family Centre extended its early intervention and community programs. Keith had to decommission the residential facility in terms of staffing, as well as reorganise its maintenance by outsourcing. Keith and Adrian Ford, the manager of Scarba, worked together to sort out the operational issues associated with the building.



Keith with his Properties team, Barbara Wittig and Peter Simpson

## The 1990s

In the early 1990s, Keith extended his skills to quasi-architecture. The Society expressed interest in building an aged care facility on a site in Sans Souci. Keith produced a plan for building the hostel and, after the usual to and fro, the Society received approval plus government funding. The Sans Souci Gardens hostel became a reality.

Keith subsequently made several submissions for funding, all of which were approved in principle.



The Royal Hospital for Women, 1910

The Royal Hospital for Women shortly before its demolition



## Closure of the Royal Hospital for Women

The Royal Hospital for Women had been the jewel in The Benevolent Society's crown since the early years of last century. It received Royal patronage in 1904 and in 1905 its new premises at Paddington were officially opened. The hospital had been in existence ever since, gaining world-wide recognition for excellence in both its medical work and its teaching.

The eventual closure of the Royal Hospital for Women at Paddington was therefore a sad event. It had been a long time coming.

In the early to mid 1970s, Australia was suffering from an economic recession and the Government began to reassess all bodies that received public funding. As part of this process, the NSW Government began a programme of hospital bed closures in NSW public hospitals.

By 1979, the government's rationalisation of hospital services was well under way. Beds began to close in NSW hospitals and the viability of future services at The Royal Hospital for Women came into question. Over the following three or four years the hospital suffered increasing strains through budget cuts, with the situation made worse because of increased demand caused by the closure of Crown Street Women's Hospital.

The Board of The Benevolent Society eventually began to look at giving up the management of the Royal, signing the contract to transfer management to the Government in 1992. The hospital was subsequently decommissioned. Keith was invaluable throughout this process, being perhaps the only person who knew where everything was turned on and off.

He sorted out the multitude of records and equipment stored at the hospital. He was involved, together with David Richmond, the CEO at the time, in the rezoning. He was Secretary to the Paddington Site Committee, ensuring that all queries of the committee were followed up.

## **Semi-Retirement**

In 1994, Keith formally retired as Manager Properties following an internal reorganisation and took Nancye, Jeanette and five grandchildren to Disneyland. However, Keith never really retired; he just reinvented himself. He came back as Special Projects Manager, doing anything that needed doing. This included being an archivist, car salesman, historian, bequest liaison, shop proprietor back-up and, of course, the Society's Chief Barbequer.

Nancye receiving the President's Award, 1998





Keith's official 'retirement'

Keith continues to host the Board meetings, as he has done since 1962.

By the end of the 1990s the Society had become a limited company, and the corporate team had been restructured and updated. Jane Schwager had been appointed CEO in 1995. Keith remained on the corporate team – adding photography to all his other skills. He organised the photos for a montage exhibition of the Royal as part of public consultations.

Technically semi-retired, Keith still works on a largely voluntary basis with the Society for some 20 hours a week. Among his more recent jobs he has taken on the role of Occupational Health and Safety watchdog, auditing all sites and helping managers to keep up-to-date with requirements. He also took over as fleet manager for a time when the Society was short staffed – a fleet of 115 vehicles, compared to the two when he started. Archiving remains a major interest and he controls not only the records at the Mitchell Library but also the current off-site records. He is a passionate champion of the appropriate treatment of these valuable memorabilia and is currently working on a permanent display.

A barbeque for Keith and Nancye was held at Paddington House for his 50th anniversary of starting work with The Benevolent Society. Following tributes from Rob



Still the Society's Chief Barbequer!

McLean, President of The Benevolent Society, and Jane Schwager, the CEO, Ann Browne (Keith's old boss) treated the staff to a video she had made covering the major events of Keith's life.

Among the staff who helped Keith celebrate was Kelly Lewis, Keith's granddaughter, who now works for The Benevolent Society – so the extraordinary Williamson tradition goes on.

As Her Excellency Professor Marie Bashir AC said in her message at the start of this book:

*“Mr Williamson’s dedication over the years to such wide-ranging endeavours has far-reaching implications for good. Indeed, his efforts illuminate for others the best qualities of being an Australian.”*



