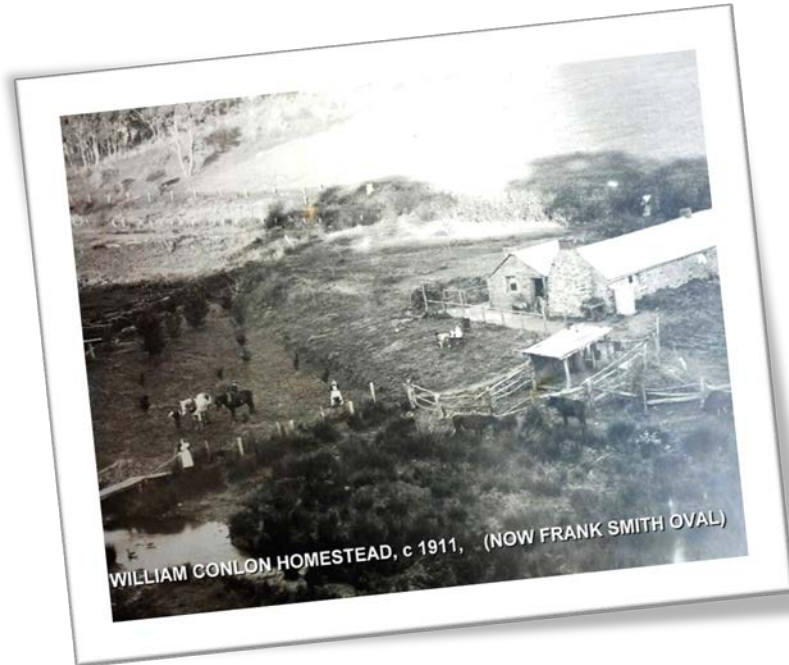




**NATIONAL TRUST**  
**SOUTH AUSTRALIA**  
COROMANDEL VALLEY & DISTRICTS BRANCH



# HELEN FAIRLEY AND MICHAEL CONLON RECALL

Mrs Helen Fairley and Mr Michael Conlon  
talk about their family history and life  
in Blackwood and Coromandel Valley

Prepared by National Trust SA Coromandel Valley and District Branch  
2024

## A Brief Introduction

Helen Fairley (nee Conlon) and her brother Michael spent their early years with their family living in a cottage in Coromandel Valley. Their parents were William and Mary Ellen (nee McNamara).



They built a little stone cottage down the creek in a location which is approximately in the middle of the Frank Smith oval. They had 9 children and in addition adopted 2 others. In later years they built a new house on Turners Ave and on the property ran cattle chickens, pigs and other animals to provide for their needs. This sets the scene for many tales.

In 1979 Helen and Michael were interviewed by Dianne Burchell and Lisa Watson about their growing up and recollections of life over the years.

Their stories have been assembled in 2024 for this document.



# **HELEN FAIRLEY AND MICHAEL CONLON RECALL**

Transcribed by Maxine Conlon

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This is Dianne Burchell and Lisa Watson talking to Mrs Helen Fairley and her brother Mr Michael Conlon.

Mrs Fairley would like to talk about the family history and you can get started. - Mrs Fairley.

## **Helen Fairley**

### **Memories of Michael and Anne MacNamara (0:00:35)**

My grandparents Michael and Anne MacNamara both came from Ireland in 1856, in their early childhood and settled in the Marion. I haven't any history of how or when they met, but I believe they settled in Chambers Run, up at Cherry Gardens.

Grandfather use to chop and cart wood to Glenelg in a dray drawn by bullocks, which meant walking beside the team when the load was on. He probably could ride on the dray on the way home. They later bought a property of several acres at the bottom end of Coromandel Valley. The house was built on the hill above the ford by Horners Bridge. They had a large family of seven boys and seven girls with no loss of life until their son Richard was killed in action in the Middle East, I think in 1918. They had four boys in the war overseas.

Earlier they worked on the land vegetable garden, orchard and cows and later Granny use to make butter and sell at Blackwood. I haven't got that here. We use to go around with a horse and trap and there was certain customers that we used and we got 1 and 3 (one shilling and threepence) a pound of butter, and you had to keep a check on it, and that was my duty.

They worked on the land of garden orchard and cows. Before that time, five of the boys went to Western Australia to work on the Gold Mines. Evidently there was a gold rush, that was much earlier. Some of them came back to South Australia but some stayed over there.

The house was of two rooms that was extended to a fairly sizable house over the years. I went to live with Granny when the last two girls remaining home got married – that was Florence became Mrs Scherer and Ethel became Mrs Wescombe. They were the youngest members of the family..

Mrs Scherer, this is ancient history, died about five years ago, she was 87 and she was the youngest and last member of that family.

### **Michael James Conlon remembers. (0:03:05)**

Now I'm Michael James Conlon, commonly known as Mick, I'm Mrs Fairley's brother. I was born at the top end of Coromandel Valley in the house down near the Sturt Creek. My earliest recollections down there was of a garden and the creek and good fun.

My father was a carter on the roads he use to cart metal and one of my jobs when I got older was to help him with the horses, and in the garden. Later on I joined the

Post Office, that was after I had done several months working in the garden next door, but prior to that I use to have to help around the place, at the home. When I was about 15, my mother asked me if I would stop home and do the garden, then she let me learn the violin, so this I did, and later I use to play for them to have dances in our house, and all that type of thing.

I had three younger brothers and we use to have lots of fun, rabbiting and all this type of thing. Looking for birds nests, and looking for fish in the creek, and generally got into trouble, after I'd done it.

One day I was looking at some of my favourite bird's nests and I peeked into a briar bush and there was a big brown snake up in the bush, getting the young birds out. I left that very hurriedly.

### **Post Office (0:04:57)**

After I joined the Post Office I worked as a messenger at Goodwood, I had to walk a mile to the Blackwood station, catch the train to Goodwood, and then walk half a mile to the Goodwood Post Office. I'd leave home at 8 minutes past 8 in the morning and get home at about 6.30 at night if I was lucky.

Then later, I went to work at the GPO (General Post Office) in the mail room, and the same thing happened there, I had to walk all that distance. After I turned about 19 I got a bit tired of the Mail Branch and I put in for a job at Port Augusta. I went up there when I was 19 and worked there, and we use to work late shifts and early shifts, right around the town at 5 o'clock in the morning and clear the pillars and at 10 o'clock at night and clear the pillars. That's the letter pillars I mean, not the other pillars, and that was where I met my wife up there and consequently I still go up there quite a bit. We had to do all our study on our own. I left school at the 'qualifying certificate' stage and we had to do all our studies by correspondence up to about Intermediate stage to pass the post office clericals. We also had to learn telegraphy, and all that type of thing, which was quite a big job. It took me quite a few years to get through this, but finally I did and I progressed through the Post Office all those years and I had 51 years in the Post Office, retired Post Master at Hindmarsh in 1972.

### **Transport - Bullocks to Motor Cars (0:06:45)**

My earliest recollection of transport was in the bullock days. When they use to use the bullocks to carry/drag timber out of the paddocks out into the roads where they would be picked up and carted away by horse and cart. The transport generally was buggy or trap which would be drawn by one or two horses or a spring dray in which you sat up with the seat across the dray, which sometimes fell down and left you at the bottom of the dray.

And the trains, I can't remember the trains starting at Blackwood, but I use to catch the train to work in town at 8 minutes past 8. Everybody walked to the train. There were no motor cars up and down to town, and Blackwood Station would be like

Rundle Street when the train arrived. The motor cars came later. The first motor car I can remember was a T model Ford owned by Mr Magarey.

Motor cycles, the young fellows all use to ride motorcycles, Harley Davidson, Sinton and Red Indians. They rode them up hills and down dales when they weren't riding horses.

Push bikes, they were strong and heavy and not very favoured around the hills, and nevertheless, the young boys use to travel to Victor Harbor and all over the place on their pushbikes.

### **Road Maintenance (0:08:15)**

The road maintenance in those days were done, there was no bitumen, they were done by, poured by hand, they were grubbed out by pick and shovel, the big metal was carted out onto the road and it was crushed down by heavy roller. My father was a contractor for carting the stones out. They were blasted out of the quarries in the hills, broken down into handable size, loaded onto the drays, taken out onto the roads, and tipped out there out of the tip dray, for the men to come and crack them down into about inch metal to put on the road. The chappies who did this use to come along and they would have a bag and a small napping hammer, and they'd sit down and crack around at these.

This inch metal was carted onto the road, rolled out flat watered down and then what they called a blinding was a screening of finer gravel placed over it and rolled in. And they made very good roads with these.

It was carted out by tip dray and generally three horses, and it was very hard work for all concerned.

### **Doctor – medicines (0:09:35)**

My first recollection of a doctor was a Dr Gould. He use to drive a horse and buggy from Mitcham, park it up the top of the hill at our place, and then walk down over the slippery hill if it was wet. Why I remember him so well was that I had a small operation when I was a child and he was one who came to see me and put me in the Adelaide Hospital. If you wanted the doctor, you had to either get Dr Gould or the ladies of the district would. Mrs Smith and my mother in particular would prescribe and were generally very successful with their recipes.

### **Orchards (0:10:10)**

Now orchards in the districts. The largest orchards were owned by Magarey's, Turners, Ashby's and Lowindser. During my younger days I spent many hours working in Turners and sometimes in Magareys orchards. They had to grow their vegetables here and cart them to Adelaide by horse and trolley. Later they progressed to motor transport, but never-the-less it was all hard work, but there was some very lovely orchards.

### **Boys Chores (0:10:47)**

And the chores the boys had to do was help and look after the animals, horses, cows, fowls, pigs, sometimes goats or sheep, and small pets. Carry and cut the firewood, help in the garden, wash face and hands and especially behind your ears.

As a boy there was plenty adventure for the small boys, such as rabbiting, fishing, birdnesting, horse-riding. However we always had to be very careful we didn't walk on a snake and just when you think that everything was all right, suddenly a snake would slither by and we would get a terrific fright.

We also swam in the Sturt Creek and got very muddy under our chins. The dangers we had to be careful about were mainly snakes. There was always snakes around, and in summertime you had to be very careful where you walked.

Water, well the creek was there and small boys, you could get drowned. I once fell in the creek at the small age of two or three and if it had not been for my brother, would have been the end of me, however he rushed in and pulled me out as I was going down the third time, and I'm still here.

But nevertheless, there were no motor cars on the road in those days, you didn't have to worry about those. We were climbing trees and minor things that boys do.

### **Helen Fairley remembers.**

#### **Childhood Memories (0:12:24)**

After marriage Mum and Dad went to live in a really big house in a property which is now Frank Smith's prospective oval. We were close to the Sturt Creek. When the small 200 gallon tank ran out of rainwater, they had to carry water from the creek about 200 yards away. This happened for years until we got an underground tank, later. There were nine children in the family, five girls and four boys. Mum and Dad worked very hard in the garden to help augment the living and the wages were not high. When Dad arrived home from work at night he'd have a cup of tea and go out into the garden, ploughing or planting, potatoes, beans, tomatoes, there were also fruit trees. We all helped. We never played sport you know, there was never time. Cows to milk.

We went to school, to Coromandel Valley School quite close to where we lived. At night we had to hurry home and Mum nearly always had a cake, a hot cake, made in a meat dish, we use to call it the meat dish, and there was no butter used in those cakes, it was dripping. The cream was made into butter and the butter was sold, other than when we used it for table, but for cooking, making of pastry and making of cakes, we used dripping, and it had to be dripping that didn't have any onion cooked in the. (I hesitated then because I couldn't remember how to say that the dripping couldn't be tainted with onion if it was used after cooking meat with onion) The dripping must be free from any strong seasoning.

After having something to eat when we got home from school, always something to eat, my job was to go out and do things in the garden. Turn the water on, there was a dam quite a distance up the creek, past our property, up in Mr Turner's property, and the water came from down around a bank gradually lowering, it was I suppose in places 12 foot above the creek level and then when it got down further the creek, to take it across the other flat, it was taken over in 3 inch galvanised pipes erected on cross sticks, to another gutter on the opposite side of the creek, which gradually went down to the main flat where we changed the water from one row to the next.

The water was taken along a main furrow at the top and there must have been a gentle slope, enough for the water to run slowly to the end of the row, which was about 150 feet, I suppose, and if the water was running too quickly we dropped clods of soil or little stones in to, to spread it.

I was an outside worker, I helped Dad with the horses, in the garden, I always hated cooking. My eldest sister helped Mum with the cooking, and mothered us, three years older than me. If we had any worries and Mum was in the garden, we always ran to Rene. Later she was Mrs Harry Winn.

### **Laundry (0:17:40)**

The home was warmed with open wood fires, the same used for airing clothes. The laundry, my earliest recollection, that was about 1905 or 1906. Three tubs on a bench, one for soapy water, the water, the water being heated in the copper, the first wash was much rubbing and scrubbing on a wash board, you would see both the wooden board and a later invention, a glass one, in a wooden frame at the Bakehouse Museum. The water was wrung out by hand, and then put into a copper of boiling water, oh dear that's wrong. The clothes were wrung out by hand, then put into a copper of boiling water, the copper having 10 to 12 gallons holding capacity, again was heated by wood fire. While boiling the clothes were pushed down at intervals with a wooden stick, most likely made from a shortened broom handle. The clothes were then lifted to the draining board which run the water back into the copper ready for the next batch of clothes. After draining, each batch was lifted with the stick into a tub with clean water, then wrung out from there into another tub of clean lightly blue water. I remember if one was too heavy handed with the blue, someone would ask 'did you borrow the blue bag.' The blue, Reckitt's Blue, by the way was bought from the shop in about a cubic inch of compressed powder, and we used a small blue bag, best made of flannel with a drawstring at the top. Of course it was only the white clothes that went into the boiling copper, the coloureds went through the same process as the whites with plenty of scrubbing, but no boiling. After drying on the line attached to two posts, we ironed with a box iron, again you can see several different types at the Bakehouse. These were heated by filling with hot coals or cinders, and if it cooled down, the coals were made to glow again by using the bellows, or by swinging the iron, but always being careful, to tighten the catch. Later we used flat irons or Mrs Clots irons.



### **Cooking. (0:20:09)**

The first oven I can remember was not very large with a fire on top on which a trivet stood to hold the saucepans and when baking there was a place under the oven to put the fire. Prior to that we had a very large three legged pot, cast iron for roasting dinners. This was called a camp oven. It was also used for cakes and scones. This stood in the coals in the fireplace with more coals over the lid. One required experience to get the right temperature.

### **Dances (0:20:46)**

Later our parents built a home on the top of the hill and that was when I was about eleven. But through the war years we had a dance in our dining room, rolled up the linoleum and we had a dance every Saturday night whilst my brother was in camp at Mitcham.

Quite a number of young people around the district use to attend. Mum provided supper, but it was not elaborate, we use to have bread and butter sandwiches and homemade cake and tea. Never any alcohol in our home.

In our home we taught several of the young folk in the valley to dance. We were allowed to go to dances, we always had to ask Mum if we could go, even after I was engaged, Mum always said yes, but if you thought you were going without asking, you just couldn't go.

My recollection of the first dances that I attended we older ones were allowed to go with Mum and Dad, it was about once a year, I think it was called a Labour Social. Our neighbour use to come and stay with the younger children and we were allowed to go to the dance, and all people use to dance with us, but that was a real family affair. Then later we had dances either in Blackwood or the Valley to raise funds for various Churches, but we always arranged that there would not be two dances on the one night. We had the Valley Dance and the Blackwood Dance on separate nights. That was arranged beforehand.

Later too we had some dances in Mr Smith's cow barn. He use to milk the cows early in the day instead of 4 o'clock in the afternoon, and then he use to hose all the brick floors clean, and we use to decorate it. There were four balls a year, we use to have the ball there, and they use to come up from town on buses. The dancing was up where the hay was kept, it was a board floor, it was shiny from the hay on it. We use to decorate that. We'd take weeks to decorate the hay barn for the dancing, and that was a really elaborate supper, everybody would bring supper and we use have some.

Going back over the years we lost our Dad at a fairly early age, in his fifties. He died of cancer caused by an accident in the quarries. He was ill for six months. We had wonderful neighbours. Mrs Smith, Mrs Jacob Smith, Mrs Boy use to come and help, a lot of people came to help. I often wonder how Mum coped because there was very little coming in, only what us older ones earned, but we still had the garden and

the fowls, the cows and the pigs that helped with food for the family. Mum also at that time had two times from the Social Services which is now called Social Service and she was paid for looking after them, and those two boys are still like our brothers, were always treated as brothers they were never adopted, but they are still like our brothers. Mum never made any difference with the boys.

Dad suffered a lot through that time and then when he died my eldest brother Ted was at the war and five of the younger ones were still at school and the rest of us were working in homes, the housework in the homes, that's where we worked, but it was after I'd left Grannies. Mum always managed to cope, and our house was an open house for all our friends. Nothing elaborate, but it was always an open house for a lot of fun and there was always something to eat, even though it was simple.

I remember one night, coming home from a dance, and there was no milk for supper. It was a bright moonlight night, and so we went over the hill and brought up a cow and milked it, to get milk for supper. Of course that was a lot of fun, bringing the cow up, you can imagine.

### **War Years (0:26:34)**

Through the war years there were many ways of raising funds to help the various, Red Cross and the Comforts Fund. One especially was the Australia Day procession. People decorated their trollies, by then there were a lot more trollies around the place, carts, bicycles, and we were asked to dance on a trolley, the highland fling, and a mixture of Irish and Scots, I think, we four girls, the four younger ones. At that time I was living with my Granny down the hill. I remember that Granny was very hostile that Mum allowed us to dance up on this trolley, showing our legs, most unladylike.

In my early teens, not too early teens, we were allowed to go to the dances, but if I was home we walked to the Institute in the Valley, which is about a mile and a half, and danced all night and then walked home again, not feeling any the worse for it. We use to dance at the Church parish hall, the Church of England Parish Hall in Blackwood, but we always had to ask Mum if we could go. We didn't just say we are going somewhere, we had to ask. We were more disciplined.

### **Picnics at the Beach (0:28:40)**

We use to go to the beach twice a year, the Rechabite picnic was in March and we use to go on Mr Penno's trolley, he had a trolley with two horses, and we sat on boards across the trolley, they were the seats, and coming home we walked up Shepherds Hill, that was fun walking up Shepherds Hill, but it lightened the load for the horses, and on New Year's Day we went to Brighton, that was the gathering place for a lot of the country people, Clarendon and all your relations. You could drive onto the beach. We had a spring cart in those days. The cart was tipped with the shafts in the air, and there was some covering, rugs or something like that, to form a shade and the horse was tied to the back of the cart. Then Dad would build a table with the sand, with a seat all round it in the shade and that's how we sat and

had our meal, as we always use to provide it from home, but we were allowed to have an ice-cream and a cool drink, that was the highlight of that picnic, but otherwise we didn't have cool drinks and ice-creams, and they didn't have ice-cream in Blackwood. You couldn't buy ice-cream in Blackwood, as they didn't have refrigeration and you must have it very cold to keep ice-cream.

I remember on time when I was not very old, I was only about five or six and for some reason, Mum couldn't go to this picnic, that was the lodge picnic, and the people, Mrs Watchman from the valley was to look after we children, and when it came time to go in for a bathe, there was no bathers for me, so they undressed me and sent me in with no clothes on, and I was horrified. I remember I was just old enough to feel very embarrassed, and I would leave the post, I stood by the big post where the jetty went out to the baths. I wouldn't go into the water, I was just standing by that post until finally somebody got me into the water, I can't remember who, but I remember I was horrified of having to go in with no clothes on, so I'd be no good at Maslins Beach now, would I.

### **Helen Fairley – Working Life (0:31:15)**

After the first world war, I married Teddie Scroop. After they came home, several of the returned men learned trades and he was a builder. Gradually the depression came on and there was no more building. He worked at Islington in the brick kilns, that was very hot work. Gradually there was no building work, so we went to the peninsula and he worked on a farm and we lived on the farm, for some years. We had one son. Finally that job petered out and we went to Sandy Creek onto a farm, the Martins' Farm, and it was there, when they were harvesting canary seed, it was something new and they didn't have the right implements and they were using a clover cutter, and the canary seed had long stalks and got caught up and instead of him stopping the machine, he got up on it and tried to push the stuff through with his foot, and his leg was torn off. And he only lived about a day and a half after that. There was lots of blood and he had to go into the Gawler Hospital. And I remember they were looking for people with the same blood group, and that was before people had a blood test and you knew what their right blood grouping was. A lot from the cricket team came up to get their blood tested to give him blood, but it was too late. In the meantime I did housework, and Eric my son lived at home with Mum and my sister Mary and my brother Bill. Then later I started cleaning the Blackwood School, and in that time I was learning hairdressing. I use to go down and catch the train at 9 o'clock in the morning and get home about 3 in the afternoon from learning hairdressing and in the meantime.

Before I married the second time, I did housekeeping for a time and I wanted to learn hairdressing so I got a job at the Blackwood School as cleaner. It was rather hard work in those days. The school was not very big, there was only one outer room and the main building, but my sister Rene, once again came to the rescue, she use to have the infant room cleaned by the time I got home from my hairdressing lessons, at about half past three in the afternoon, and I always went to a friend in the morning,

and when I got home, to prepare to go to school in town, and my afternoon tea was ready for me when I got home. They lived near the station. There was only once that she was not home when all the times I went down to the hairdressing school, and she got a neighbour to get my cup of tea ready.

At holiday times, there were three holiday times through the year, we had to scrub all the paintwork through the school, which I don't think they do these days, but the whole family use to come and help. Neighbours, friends anybody, everybody came to help me. Gradually I was able to give that up and I was able to start a business in Blackwood. It was a hairdressing business which was in Mr Edges shop.

During the war years we had a depot for wool for people who use to do knitting, we had the wool there and if they wanted more wool to knit socks or whatever they were knitting they would come to us. We use to sell flowers. Mrs Gamble from Wardlaw Vale (Hawthorndene) use to walk up at least a mile especially Friday mornings with a clothes basket full of flowers and she would have a wet cover over it and we use to sell the flowers. We use to sell all sorts of things in our shop, towards the Red Cross and the Comforts Fund.

Also through the second world war years, my Mum use to have boys up for the weekend, boys who didn't have homes near Adelaide; perhaps boys from the country or boys from interstate, and they would come home with my brother, or the other boys to stay for the weekend, just as they didn't have a home to go to.

### **Blackwood Connections - Life with Joe Fairley (0:37:21)**

About seven years after I lost my first husband I married Joe Fairley, from Blackwood who then kept a shoe shop and repair shop at that time. In the meantime I had my business next door. That's how we became interested.

Over the years he was on so many committees, he seemed to have a finger in every pie. For many years he played hockey. He played interstate hockey. This sounds like bragging you know. He's been eight times the champion at the Blackwood Bowling Club, and nobody has got that far yet. Jenny, his sister has got to seven times, champion of the ladies club, but Joe is still ahead. I don't know long before I catch up because he hasn't been champion for a few years. He got into the finals last year, but we are hoping he will do something this year.

He has been on several committees. He was on the committee of Blackwood Boys' Club, that was the old club at the old building, he played hockey for many years, he played interstate, he's a foundation member for the Blackwood Bowling Club. He's still a member and playing bowls today. He's with the Coromandel, the local paper, which is now gone. He was one of the earliest committee for that. He is also a member of the committee for the Coromandel, the local paper which is now gone.

We both sang in the Blackwood Choral Society for several years, in the days when Lou Dawe our conductor first, Jack Bargwanna was our pianist, then later when Lou

Dawes was too busy to come to Blackwood, Jack Bargwanna was the conductor and Peter Hadrick was pianist for many years.

He's been interested in many public affairs in the district. He started off in a little tin shop where now the South Australian Savings Bank is, just there in that corner, but in hot days, just after he came out from England, cause it was depression time, they couldn't get work anywhere, and he learnt his trade of shoe repairing in England, and he got this little shop and one of the companies in Adelaide loaned him the tools he needed, on time payment, I suppose they call it, for the machine and tools he needed to start his business, and this little tin shed use to get so hot he said he had to go out and stand in the sun to get cool.

Later on he took a shop where the sound music is now, and from there he went next door and he stated selling shoes and gradually that business grew. They bought the land where the Fairley shoe store is now and that has gradually grown to present and he has now sold his business, he has retired, but he said that he fitted shoes on four generations. He has children who now bring their children and there were grandparents who bring their children. He knows them, and he says, 'how is so and so' or 'I know so and so,' all these different children he remembers them. And you would speak of somebody in the district and he would say 'Oh he wore a 6 or they wore a 7 and a half'.

Blackwood has changed a lot over the years. Where the post office now stands is where the blacksmiths shop, where we use to take the horses to be shod. From the age of about eight I use to lead the draught horses from home up to the blacksmith's shop. Mr Paddick was the blacksmith. He was a terrific gentleman. And Mr Munro's shop was up about where that Church. The post office in those days was kept by Mr Fennel, at the side of the house opposite the police station. There was shop owned by Mr Dunstone on the southern side of the railway line, later he had a shop on the northern side of the railway line, which is now near the bridge over the railway line, and Mr Munros shop further up the road past Penno's plant shop.

### **Coromandel Connections (0:43:32)**

There was another grocers shop down near the Ford in the Valley, at the bottom of Winns Road. That was also the bakers shop, that was kept in my childhood by Mr Winn, Mr Walter Winn, and on the opposite side of the road there was the butcher's shop kept by his brother, I can't remember his brother's name.

Down near the Institute, earlier there was a shop kept by a Mrs Dorman, down by the tennis courts in Coromandel Valley and later they shifted up to the shop which is near the Institute. These were the only shops in the district I think.

There was the Methodist Hall, which is now Cliff Street, that was Shepherds Hill Road, there's the club hall which is down near where the big new building is, and the Church of England Hall is the one that was burnt down later I think, that is next to where the Church of England Church is, and there is a small hall there at present. Now it is quite suburban, no more country Blackwood, is not country anymore, shops

everywhere, too many shops, but I might add, that you can drive safely through Blackwood at any busy time, they are all careful drivers. When there is dozens and dozens of cars and nowhere to park, I've never once thought that the drivers were careless.

Thank you Mrs Fairley, this tape was made on the 10<sup>th</sup> December 1979.

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