

Family memories of Carisbrook, the McDougall twins and my great-uncle Wesley Eaton.

On the 18th of June this year, friends invited me and my mum to a Devonshire tea at Carisbrook. During our visit, members of the Lane Cove Historical Society were most excited to meet with and talk to my mother, Leah Benfield. My parents had their wedding breakfast in Carisbrook in 1959, hosted by their uncles Jim McDougall and Wesley Eaton. My father, the late Alan Benfield, was the nephew of Wes Eaton. Wes Eaton was the life partner of James Kitchener McDougall. Uncle Wes and Uncle Jim, as they were fondly known to us, worked together to restore and refresh Carisbrook in the late 1950s and early 60s. Uncle Wes, my great uncle and also my godfather, was a businessman in Crows Nest running the family's shoe repair shop in the arcade that runs between the Pacific highway and Willoughby Rd. His partner, Uncle Jim, was a Milliner of renown in the city and, along with his twin brother Matthew Jellicoe McDougall, they built, worked and lived in a world of creativity, artistry and good times.

My intention in putting together this primary source was to interview my 83 year old mother and create a historical document of stories about those times at Carisbrook. What you will hear, however, is a loving chat between a mother and daughter reminiscing about happy memories and sad memories and paying tribute to a group of men who led extraordinary lives, both privately and publicly, but who ultimately were beloved uncles and respected figureheads in our family.



Standing: Alan Benfield (my father), Wes Eaton, Jim Symington's son, Jim McDougall
In front: Jim Symington (family friend)

Our interview, recorded in the final weekends of August 2022, begins with a discussion of mum's wedding day and the meal that took place there on the 2nd of November in 1959. Uncle Jim loved hosting get-togethers and meals. He was a very talented and creative cook and Uncle Wes was well known as the organiser of events for the Eaton/Benfield family. It was Uncle Wes who decided on what day my parents would be married, because it was the 'bootmakers picnic' on that Monday and therefore the family shoe repair business in the arcade in Crows Nest would be closed, and they could all head off to Chatswood to the registry office for the wedding and later on to Carisbrook for dinner.



The only photo of Leah Benfield on her wedding day in 1959.



Leah enjoying Devonshire tea at Carisbrook this year.

Our conversation turns to memories of the millinery salon and the artistic skill that the twins brought to their business in King St. as well as mum's first impressions of Carisbrook and the gigantic task that lay ahead in landscaping and renovating the property.

Family celebrations such as Christmas and New Year's Eve are described and there are numerous hints at the Scottish heritage of the brothers including highland dancing, Hogmanay and the not so occasional glass of Johnnie Walker. Uncle Jim's culinary skills are highlighted, including his original creation for my christening that we fondly refer to as "Chicken McDougall" – still a family favourite. (See recipe below)

Connections to the ballet, musical theatre and the celebrity world of the 1950's are outlined along with the suspicion that my Uncles had adopted my mother as their very own Eliza Doolittle – taking her to the ballet to hang out with all their celebrity friends!



Jim McDougall at a family wedding in 1960



Leah with a McDougall creation kept at Carisbrook. "It looked just like the hats they used to make for Mrs Mac!"



Our strongest memories of Jim McDougall and his brother Matthew are of two very talented, creative and artistic men who could put their hand to anything and turn something mundane and ordinary into something very special and unique. They turned macaroni into artwork, an old shirt into a fancy dress triumph and one dollar notes into a 'Money tree'.

The Macaroni Tree



The vase of glass grapes made by the McDougalls and part of their decor at Carisbrook



The tree branch made from cream bottle tops - a gift for Leah from Jim McDougall

The story of the poltergeist in the pantry at Carisbrook requires further explanation ... and has always haunted me!

Then the time came for them to leave Carisbrook due to plans for Burns Bay Rd. to be widened. Thank goodness the Lane Cove Council ultimately saved the property – by which time Uncles Jim, Wes and Matty, along with Mrs Mac, had all moved to Hunters Hill.

Our reminiscences conclude with the sad and spookily identical passing of identical twin brothers.



The twin brothers at Carisbrook.
Jim face on to the camera.
Thank you to the Lane Cove Historical Society members for showing us this photo on our recent visit.

I never really knew my Uncle Wes – I was only 3 years old when he passed away, but whenever I was in Uncle Jim's presence in my teenage years, I sensed that he was a very special man who lived a life of elegance and design, living life to the fullest and on his own terms.



My christening in 1966. My godfather and great uncle Wes Eaton proudly holding me. My godmothers are my Aunty Ruth (mum's eldest sister, wearing a McDougall hat) and my cousin Robyn.

Nowadays, Carisbrook is presented in the style of the Brooks family in the 1880's but from the late 1950s until early 60's it was the home of my great uncles, who brought their own style to the decor inside the house while maintaining and upgrading the garden, building a garage and sandstone wall, restoring tiles and window shutters and generally caring for a property which they treasured. When they moved from Carisbrook they continued to live together in a beautiful sandstone semi on Woolwich Rd. in Hunters Hill which my parents inherited through the generosity of Uncle Jim who had promised Uncle Wes that the property would come to us. We sold the property in the 1980's.

I have to pinch myself sometimes when I drive past Carisbrook. That property, which was a significant part of my family's history, could have been where I lived had circumstances been different.

I hope this recorded conversation and these reminiscences make a contribution to a deeper understanding of the last private owners and occupants of Carisbrook. A certain amount is already known about James McDougall and his twin brother Matthew, however it's my intention to shed light on Jim's partner, my godfather and great uncle, Wesley Eaton. In those days, their partnership was barely acknowledged or spoken about, although it was completely accepted by their loving family and friends. I also dedicate this work to my late father, Alan Benfield. Dad lost his own father post WW1, when he was only a child, and "Unk" as dad called him, or Uncle Wes to the rest of us, became a father figure to my dad, guiding and mentoring him to become the beautiful, gentleman that he was.

Ruth Benfield. August 2022.



Leah and Ruth Benfield visit Carisbrook - 18 June, 2022

The recipe for "Chicken McDougall"

A dish created by Jim McDougall to cater for guests at my christening on Palm Sunday in 1966.

Ingredients

1 roast / BBQ chicken
1/2 a bunch of shallots chopped
1 onion
2 bacon rashers diced
1 small can of mushrooms in butter sauce
1 small can of corn kernels
1 tablespoon soy sauce
1 cup of water
1 tablespoon cornflour

Break up or shred the cooked chicken into bitesize pieces. Place chicken in an ovenproof dish with the mushrooms and strained corn kernels. Keep the 'juice' from the kernels for the gravy. In a saucepan, fry the bacon and then lightly fry the shallots. Once fried, spread the bacon and shallot mixture over the chicken, corn and mushrooms.

Gravy

Fry 1 chopped onion in a little oil. Add the soy sauce, one cup of water and thicken with a cornflour paste. Add the 'juice' from the can of corn kernels. Bring gravy to the boil and stir until thickened but still liquid enough to be a generous sauce. Pour the gravy over the chicken mixture and gently mix through. Bake in the oven - 180c for 30 minutes. Add and gently stir through a little water if its not juicy enough.

Serve with boiled white rice.

Yum.