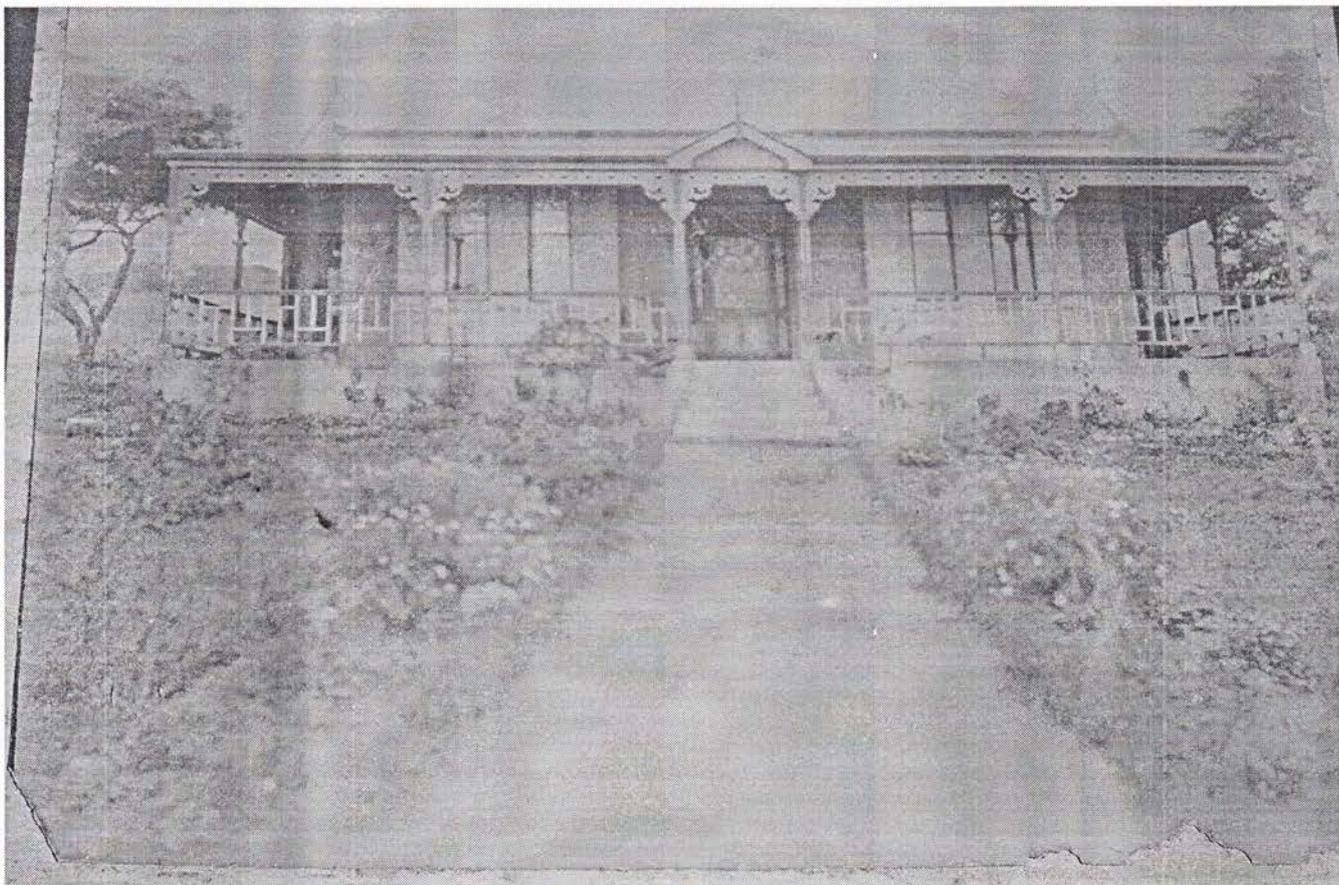


"Sylvan Woods"

- The ongoing story of a Natal home over 100 years

This story is written for my grandchildren



Diana Noyce

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Sylvan Woods was the home and heart of my maternal family – the Agars – for more than 100 years. In our robust young province of Natal 100 years of continuous living by one family in one home is remarkable. Sylvan Woods was never a “grand house” like others situated on the Berea and in Durban but was essentially a farm house and a family home.

Because of this I felt a heavy responsibility when in 2002 my mother Sylvia Simpson (née Agar) died and left the house to me. Much as I loved the house in which I grew up I knew that it was not right for me so reluctantly I decided to put the house on the market. It helped to know that in the 1970s Sylvan Woods had been “listed” as a significant old Natal Home. Whoever bought it would not be able to alter the house in any way or demolish it but would be allowed with special permission to make additions and alterations to the interior. The buyer would have to be someone with a genuine love for an old house and a commitment to restoring it.

I felt a deep longing to put pen to paper and record some of the fascinating events that took place at Sylvan Woods over the years. As I sorted through the treasures, photographs and papers in the house I learnt to know and understand better the people who had lived there.

In the lofty hallway there was an old “Wellington Chest” full of memories collected over the years. It took me weeks to sort through all the items in this chest alone which ranged from a box of assorted buttons from dresses long gone to family photographs dating back 150 years. Some of these I was able to identify but others I had no way of knowing who they were. If only people would write names and dates on the backs of photographs.



There were 6 generations of my family who were involved with Sylvan Woods. The first was my great grandfather, Charles Artemus Agar who bought the land in 1870 and built himself a house a stones throw from Sylvan Woods. Then my grand parents Charles and Jessie Agar and their four children, their youngest daughter Sylvia and her husband Ronald Simpson who made Sylvan Woods their home after their marriage in 1934. They bought the house from the estate when my grandmother Jessie died in 1964 and my sister Cynthia and I who lived in the house until we left to get married. Our children and grandchildren who all loved visiting the old home. The sensed the serenity and peace that was there.

My mother Sylvia had the longest association as she was born in the front bedroom on 22nd May 1909 and never moved from there until eight months before her death in 2002 at the age

of 93. She was indeed “Sylvia of Sylvan Woods” and the old home gave her a sense of comfort and deep serenity over the years she lived there – both with Ronald and in the years she lived there alone after he died in 1993.

Charles and Jessie Agar

The central figures in the early history of Sylvan Woods and the building of the homestead were Charles and Jessie Agar my maternal grandparents.

Charles Agar was a true Natal pioneer. He was born in 1854 in the upper story of the first double storey house in Durban in Gardiner Street facing on to the Market Square. His mother was Emily Margaret, 1st wife of my great grandfather Charles Artemus Agar both of whom had come to Natal from England on the “British Tar” under the auspices of Iron’s Christian Emigration and Colonialisation Society in 1850.

Young Charles grew up in Durban on the Market Square where his father had opened a Tavern – Agars Tavern is mentioned in George Russell’s “Old Durban”.

He was educated at Rugby School in Pinetown. I have never managed to find out much about this school except that it could have been on the site of the old Rugby Hotel, Old Main Road, Pinetown. I know little of his academic achievements but he certainly learned to write a beautiful letter in the days when people took pride in calligraphy.

In 1870 Charles Artemus bought an extensive property on the North bank of the Umgeni River with the intention of farming. The exact size of the property is not known but my

mother's brother Victor Agar wrote in his memoirs (1971):

"In my boyhood Sylvan Woods was only part of a much larger estate acquired by my grandfather.... the estate was situated on the Umgeni River less than a mile as the crow flies from the village of that name..."

Young Charles then aged 20 helped his father on the farm where he grew cotton, coffee, arrowroot and chillies, capsicums, cucumbers, and spices for his father's curry powder and pickling business. He was a fluent Zulu linguist and was in charge of the Zulu workforce. He had such a mastery of the Zulu language that he was often called in as an interpreter in the law courts.

It was hard work with long hours but Charles learned to love the countryside and knew all the birds by their Zulu names and could imitate their calls. It was during this time that he joined in his father's regular hunting parties and learned how to handle guns and became an expert shot. Thirty years later when he inherited the land from his father and built Sylvan Woods Charles loved nothing more than to take his gun and his dogs and go out into the bush. Unlike his father he shot only for the pot.

Much of his life was shaped in those early years helping his father but eventually the young man and his sisters rebelled against their father's authoritarian rule. They all left home to make new lives for themselves. Charles took a job in shipping working at the Point and his two sisters headed for the Free State where they both married farmers in Ficksburg.

Jessie Agar (née Dawson)

My grandmother Jessie Agar was a strong resolute woman born in Adelaide, South Australia in 1868. I remember her well for she was very much a part of my young life growing up at Sylvan Woods. For sheer courage and tenacity she had few equals coupled with down to earth common sense that she always described as the "rarest sense of all".

She came from a pioneer Australian family with 6 sisters and 3 brothers. There was a strong family bond between the sisters that lasted all their lives in spite of their being scattered over three continents. Their father William Dawson was born in Waterford, Ireland and came to Australia with his parents in 1847. As a young man he surveyed large tracts of land in and around Adelaide and South Australia.

Jessie was the second of the 6 sisters and in 1890 she met the man who was to be the love of her life and who would ultimately cause her to leave Australia to come to South Africa. He was a 28-year-old marine engineer Alfred Willdey from Hastings, England. Alfred and Jessie were married in 1890 in Melbourne where they made their home (I found a photograph of the couple on the veranda of this house).

Not long after they had settled in Melbourne economic depression hit Australia and Alfred could not find work on any ships. He decided to move to South Africa where work was available. When he was settled he sent for Jessie to join him. All went well and Jessie left Australia in 1894 in a sailing cum steamship to undertake the long journey to South Africa on her own. She landed at the first port of call, Knysna. There she established contact with Alfred and spent some time in the friendly settlement of Knysna. Among the "treasures" I

found a programme for a musical concert given in the Wesleyan Church, Knysna June 1894. Mrs Willdey who had a rich contralto voice sang two solo items. Another reminder of their Knysna stay was a beautiful yellowwood cabinet made for her by Alfred. When I sorted out Sylvan Woods gave this lovely cabinet to my son, Digby.

Sometime in 1895 Jessie and Alfred moved to Durban into a home in Tyzack Street. By this time Alfred was on the Mozambique run calling at Lourenco Marques and Beira. In 1899 he fell ill with malaria and he died there leaving Jessie a young widow with a small daughter Iris Elvera (1895).

There was no shortage of suitors for this attractive young widow and in June 1900 Jessie was married to Charles Agar. Charles Agar was then 46 years of age – he went on to be the father of four children and lived to the ripe old age of 91.

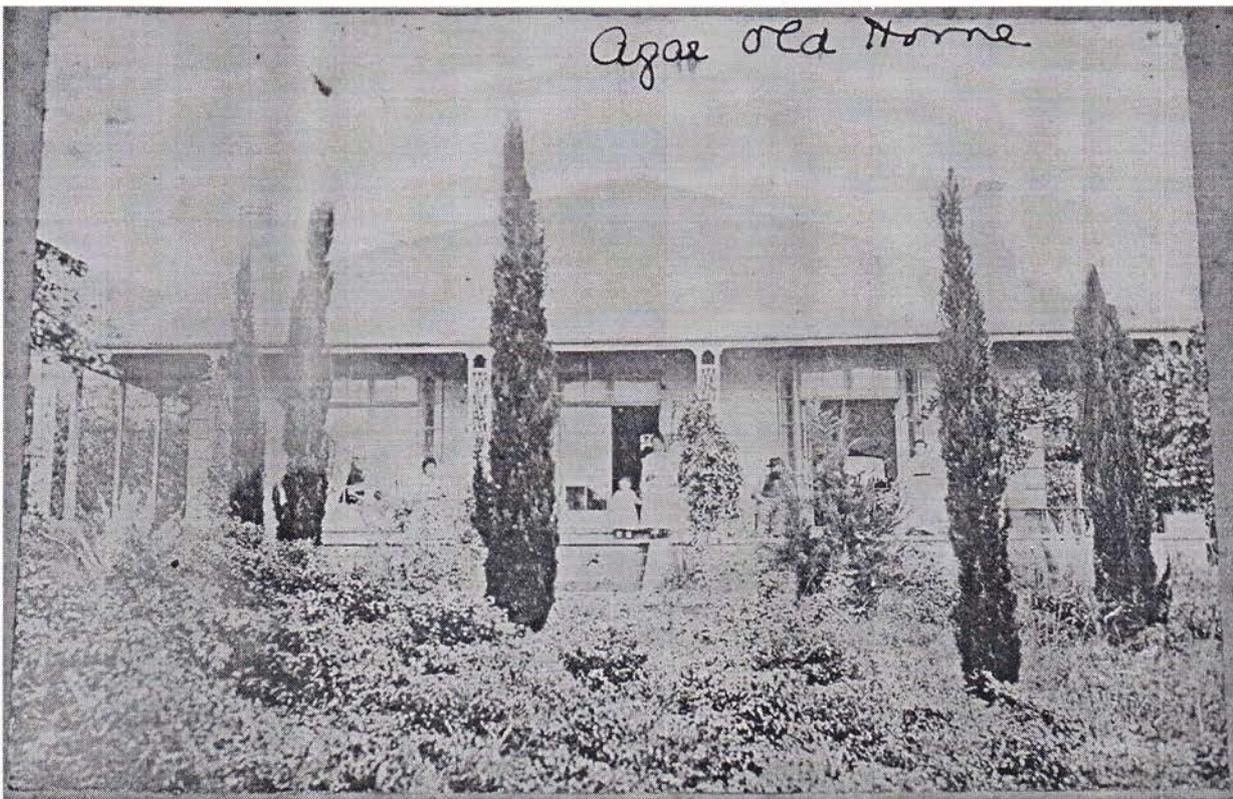
The couple set up home in Gillespie Street where they lived for the first five years of their marriage. It was here that their first son Hemsley Charles was born (he died at a year old of the dysentery which was sweeping Durban during the Anglo-Boer War.) They had two more children at Gillespie Street Dulcie (1902) and Victor Charles (1904).

The couple decided that the time had come to build their new home on part of the Agar estate, which by now had been inherited, by Charles and his sisters.

Charles and Jessie chose the site of the homestead with great care. They selected a South-West facing hill with panoramic views of the sea, harbour entrance and the port of Durban

which was approximately 5 miles away.

Their choice of architectural style was traditional Natal colonial with a wide passage through the centre facing the prevailing cooling South West breezes. The beautiful stained glass front door opened onto a balustraded covered veranda, which wrapped halfway around the house. There were 5 bedrooms in the original plan, a drawing room, dining room and back kitchen. A lovely fireplace with dark salmon pink marble mantelpiece and surround was imported for the drawing room where cosy fires kept the family warm in winter. All the cooking was done on a coal and wood-fired Dover stove. Like many Natal country homes of the period there was no inside bathroom or toilet. These were situated outside.



The first task was to clear the dense coastal bush that covered the 4-acre site so that the

building contractor could move in. A road had to be created through the bush so that building material could be delivered to the site. All the materials were taken across the Umgeni River by ox wagon at a place called Brown's Drift close to the river mouth.

The North bank of the Umgeni was home to a small community of pioneer families – the Butterys, the Goodwins and the Clarksons among others so that although they were isolated they were not alone.

Jessie was in her element – a practical woman by nature she enjoyed being on site while her new house was being built. Every weekend during construction Charles and Jessie spent on the site staying in a one-roomed wood structure. This structure eventually became a garage for their first car – a 1926 Austin. (Victor's memoirs).

I discovered the date they finally moved into Sylvan Woods quite by chance. Going through papers in the chest I found a sheaf of Insurance certificates from the South British Fire and Marine Insurance Co of New Zealand who had insured their Gillespie Street residence in 1901 and 1902. The first mention of the new Umgeni home was 4th September 1905.

Sylvan Woods must have looked very attractive when it was completed in 1905. Set amidst lush coastal bush land teeming with wild-life and birds the house with its dark red painted corrugated iron roof and dark green painted doors and sash windows must have looked beautiful.

Jessie laid out the garden on conventional Victorian lines. A path led from the front steps

down to a bird bath in the centre of the garden flanked by wide flower beds mostly annuals. It was a daily routine to keep this birdbath filled with fresh water. Sweeping green lawns surrounded the house and merged into the bush land. Here and there were lovely old shady indigenous trees – mostly flat crowns, acacias and *Trichilia D regeana* “Mhuhla”. Jessie aptly called her home Sylvan Woods. There was a large vegetable garden and even when I was a child all green vegetables came from the garden. Lots of sweet potatoes, fresh green mealies, cabbage, lettuce, peppers tomatoes (no black spot then) – it was like growing up on a farm. In my mothers childhood there were chickens, ducks, and for the milk, cows and goats. Mum remembered clearly as a child a “cold cupboard” in the pantry, the sides of which were hung with muslin, which had to be kept wet.

Because of the distance from the nearest shop everything had to be produced at home – jams, marmalade, pickles and preserves – Jessie and her daughter Sylvia kept the pantry shelves filled. I remember the wonderful clear jellies made from indigenous fruit picked from the bush – amatungulu (*Carissa Macrocarpa*) a claret coloured jelly, amatongwane (*Bequaertiodendron natalense*) a lovely tart jelly good for venison. Other fruits made into jelly were china guava, Brazilian cherry and sorrel.

Water was always a problem at Sylvan Woods and remained so until the 1930s when Corporation Water was laid on. Before then rainwater was collected from the roof and stored in corrugated iron tanks. In times of drought – a regular occurrence – water supplies to the house often ran short and as a last resort water had to be fetched by bucket from a nearby spring. It was a little brackish but fine for washing. This spring never ran dry in our memory (After 1970 when the Department of Community Development “reinvented” the topography of

the area this spring was covered over with tons of earth. I often wonder what happened to this spring.) It was my father Ronald Simpson who organised water for Sylvan Woods after their marriage in 1934. About the same time he laid on electricity and telephone and they were able to put away the gas lamps, which were so dangerous and inadequate. What a blessing it was for them all.

It was about this time – 1937 – that my family decided to add on a new bedroom and bathroom for much needed living accommodation. Unfortunately they chose to take in part of the front veranda for the addition – this spoiled the symmetry of the house. This was a great shame.

From 1905 until they acquired their first car in 1926 the family had to walk to the tram terminus at Umgeni in all weathers crossing the Umgeni River. Every Sunday they walked to the nearest church, St James in Venice Road. They all lived long and healthy lives – Charles and Jessie and my mother all living into their nineties. I'm sure this exercise was beneficial to them.

There were practically no roads in the area and those that existed were often impassable in wet weather. In 1926 Jessie bought the Austin. Because Victor and Dulcie had already left home the only family member able to drive the car was Sylvia. The "bull nose" Austin had gate change gears and was extremely heavy and difficult to drive – add to this the appalling state of the roads and I begin to have a new admiration for my mother's skill behind the wheel. She drove from the age of 17 until nearly 90 when I persuaded her to give it up. Nearly 72 years without a serious accident!

Special days were always celebrated by the flying of the Union Jack on the tall flagpole in the front garden. This flagpole was still there when I was at school and I recall the last time a flag was flown was for the visit of the Royal family in 1947. Our family like so many English-speaking South Africans were immensely proud of their country but never forgot their ties with their country of origin.

Sylvan Woods was surrounded on all sides by luxuriant coastal bush, which abounded with game. Bushbuck (Nkonka) grey duiker and the timid Ipiti were plentiful in the early days and even when I grew up bushbuck and Ipiti were occasionally seen. Bush pigs were plentiful in fact as late as the 1960s the milkman refused to deliver milk to the homestead as an aggressive bush pig lay in wait for him early every morning and chased him down the road! There were bush babies (we often heard them crying) mongoose, porcupine and birds of every variety. There were many snakes but unless the bush was being cleared they were rarely seen.

In spite of its isolation we were well served. The postman delivered the mail daily – in fact before the 2nd World War there were two deliveries of post a day. During the War when men were on active service a strong post woman took over the job carrying her heavy leather bag over her shoulder. We always felt very sorry for her especially in the summer heat and when ever she called she was given a cool drink.

The doctor always visited you at home when you were sick and bread and milk were delivered daily. Once a week Payne Bros delivered the grocery order and I recall one Friday

after very heavy rains the road gave way and the huge lorry toppled over on its side. This gave us children something to talk about for weeks!

After the 2nd World War because of the size of the property – still about 15 acres in extent in 1950 the civic authorities were eager to submit plans for future development. In the 1940s and 1950s Mr Mallinson then City Estates manager submitted plans for a large business centre for the area taking in all of Sylvan Woods. Jessie (by this time in her 80s and still very aware of everything going on around her) was appalled because the plan showed a 60 ft road cutting across the garden through existing outhouses and passing 11 feet from the N.E. corner of the house. Fortunately nothing came of this plan and so Sylvan Woods was saved.

In the 1960s however the Department of Community Development approached the family and other people living in the area with a plan to expropriate the entire area. This time they were serious about it. The family were shocked by the arrogant manner in which the Department approached people living in the area. After nearly 100 years of ownership the authorities plan was to expropriate our land and push us all out. Finally after much bitter argument the Department agreed that Jessie by now in her 90s could keep Sylvan Woods and an acre of land but the rest of the property had to be sold to the Department at a fraction of its real value. A number of Indian house owners were expropriated and had to leave their homes – it was a really sad time for all concerned. Once again Sylvan Woods was saved.

In 1964 Jessie died peacefully at home aged 96. Sylvia was the new owner of the property and she and Ronald decided to make the old house their permanent home. They went ahead with improvements to the property – doubling the size of the drawing room by taking in the

main front bedroom and turning the old back kitchen into a new guest bathroom and laundry. A swimming pool was added and back patio provided a shady sitting out area.

The Department did nothing with the area for nearly 10 years and in the 1970 s moved in with huge earth moving equipment and excavators to change the topography of the area. Valleys were filled in and hills created. Existing roads were demolished – dozens of acres of natural coastal bush were destroyed – it was devastating and all so unnecessary – no conservationists came forward to protest and so it went on. Sylvan Woods was left on a pinnacle surrounded by new roads and sites for houses. In this way, the suburb of Umgeni Park was created. Today it is a really beautiful area and most of the people living there have no idea of what was there before and how much indigenous beauty and other people's property was sacrificed for their homes.

The new chatelaine of Sylvan Woods was Sylvia, youngest child of Charles and Jessie.

Sylvia was a beautiful small slender child with a very remarkable voice, rich and resonant with a wide range of pitch from high to very deep. She was educated at Model Infants, Gordon Road School and later Coates Academy all in Durban. But her first love was Speech and Drama. She excelled in this field passing all her exams with flying colours. She was a "natural" and performed on the stage of the Durban City Hall on many occasions. She was a contemporary of Elizabeth Sneddon and Anne Freed both of who were her friends. In her early 20's Sylvia opened her own studio in West Street and Margaret Simpson (now Mrs Lester Hall) was one of the pupils who admired are attractive young teacher. She invited Sylvia to meet her parents at their home at 123 Bellevue Road, Durban where she met

Margaret's eldest brother Ronald. This meeting led to their romance and a wonderful marriage that lasted for 60 years.

Ronald was a young officer in the RNVR and their wedding at St James Church on 7th April 1934 was a naval one with a traditional Guard of Honour. Sylvia wore a wedding gown of shimmering gold lame which was remembered in Durban for many years afterwards.

Ronald and Sylvia set up home at Sylvan Woods with Sylvia's ageing parents. Sylvia supported Ronald as he qualified as a professional electrical engineer. In 1937 Diana was born and Cynthia in 1940.

When war came in 1939 Ronald was called up for service with the Royal Navy and spent much of the war overseas. Sylvia was a tower of strength as she kept the home together, looking after her elderly parents and her two small daughters. After 6 years of war, peace finally came in 1945 and Ronald was demobilized. He continued his career in the Durban Electricity Department, eventually taking over as City Electrical Engineer for the whole of Durban.

Sylvia and Ronald loved Sylvan Woods and enjoyed entertaining their friends there. The old house lent itself to entertaining and many a happy occasion was celebrated there. Sylvia was a gracious hostess and a superb cook. Her "curry suppers" were legendary and hospitality was a way of life at the old home.

Ronald died at Sylvan Woods in 1993 but Sylvia decided to stay on in her home where she

felt so happy and secure. She was fortunate to have the support of Betwel Zulu who worked for her for nearly 25 years.

Sylvia continued to live at Sylvan Woods until February 2002 when she had a severe fall. She held her last dinner part a most gracious affair in the old style a month before in January at the age of 92! She died in the Kloof Rest Home in October aged 93. This ended an era.

The new owner of Sylvan Woods:

A house like Sylvan Woods has a life of its own and from the moment Greg Hammond saw the place he knew he wanted to be the new owner. He appreciates old Natal houses and a few years ago he restored a similar old Durban house as an office – so he was prepared for the challenge. And a daunting challenge it is proving to be! He realised that to restore the house to its former glory he would have to demolish the unsightly 1937 addition and restore the front veranda as it was before. He has to re-roof the house and replace rotting sash windows, doors, and some floors. All this is being done under the eagle eye of the group of architects who oversee the restoration of listed homes. They have given him permission to build a 2 bed roomed addition which will be joined to the main house by a glass screened walkway. Although this will have similar proportions to the main house he is not allowed to use the same veranda decorations – he cannot “mimic” Sylvan Woods – the addition must not look part of the original. Inside Greg has made changes. The drawing room with its beautiful fireplace stays as it was as does the lofty hallway and stained glass front door. He has decided to reposition the kitchen at the back where it was in my grandmother’s day. Inside all the finishes are as they were before including the tongue-in groove wooden ceilings. He has

cleared most of the unnecessary and exotic trees and shrubs from the garden which will be landscaped. Two very old *encephalartos Natalensis* – (cycads) which were planted 90 years ago by Jessie have been carefully preserved. When it is complete Sylvan Woods will be once again a beautiful family home – Greg and his wife have two children and it makes me happy to know that the old home will be ringing with the laughter and joy of children once again.

Diana Noyce