COLLECTIONS IN CONVERSATION

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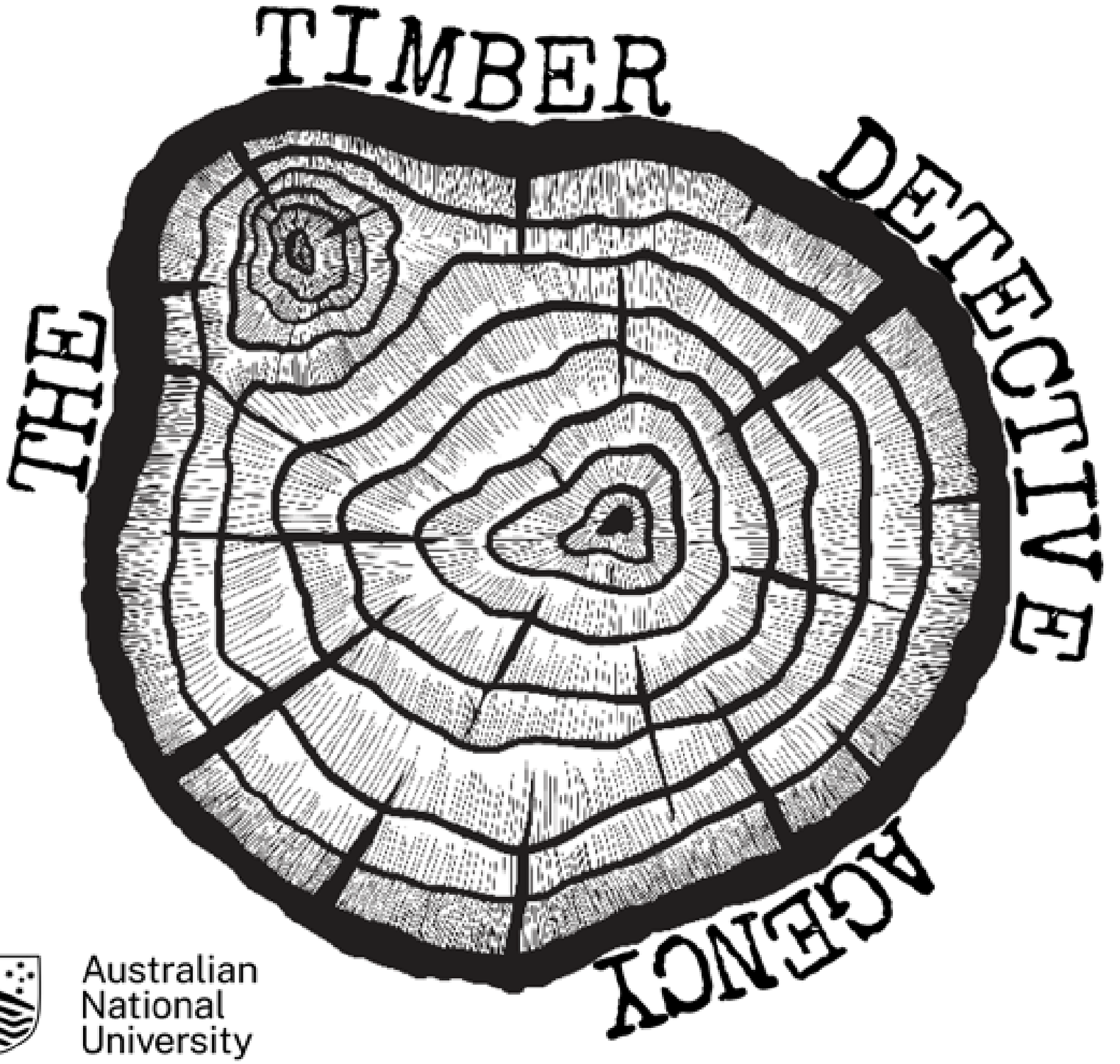



Australian National University

Have you ever imagined the driftwood you collected from the beach came from an old sailing ship or a Vietnamese refugee boat? Are you curious to know why a university has an old cattery full of mid-century furniture? Want to hear music written by First Nations artists and composers for a piano built in 1770, the same year Captain Cook navigated the east coast of Australia?

University Collections are strange things. By-products of research and teaching, they include everything from art and musical instruments to cultural specimens and archival records. They tell a story about how research developed in Australia and what was valued as credible knowledge in different eras. They show the problems that researchers have tried to solve and the communities we have worked with to address the nation's most pressing questions. But at the same time, the 'stuff' of our research pursuits is often forgotten or hidden away in cupboards, basements, behind locked doors, and even in disused catteries.

Join the **Timber Detective Agency** on a journey of discovery through some of the Australian National University's hidden collections as we learn how old things like an eighteenth-century piano or weird things like a library where everything on the shelves is a block of wood can be reanimated through new research, new technology and new art to inform, delight and intrigue.

This podcast introduces three extraordinary stories into timber-based historical collections that will change the way you think about objects, universities, and the world you live in.

Selection of timber gun butts, ANU Xylarium Collection
(Fenner School of Environment and Society, ANU College of Science)

## Episode 1:
## The wood library and the case of the missing elephant

In this episode we visit the **ANU Xylarium**. We start with a tour by real life timber detective (TM), Professor Phil Evans, around a building on the outskirts of campus that is home to researchers studying wood, forests and the environment. We peek into its rooms lined with native timbers from across the Commonwealth, see the building's informal mascot – a wooden elephant from Thailand, and ask why there are gun butts hanging on the walls.

The design of this building and the collections it holds tells a unique story about the cultural heritage of Canberra, student life, and international diplomacy. We also chat about how the collections support the critical identification work undertaken by timber detectives to protect against international trafficking of plants and animals.

Experts featured in this episode: **Dr Matthew Brookhouse** and **Professor Peter Kanowski**, from the Australian National University, and **Professor Phil Evans**, University of British Columbia.

**'I always found it very relaxing working here, despite the pressures of academia' – Phil Evans**

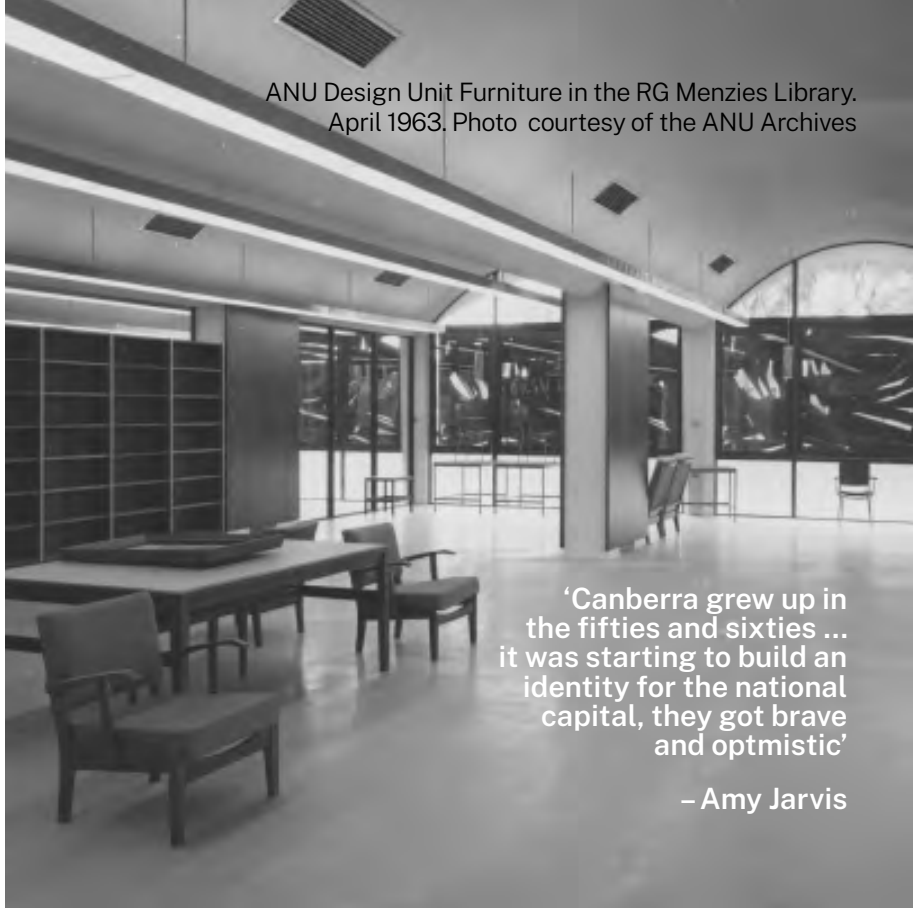
A selection of wood blocks from the ANU Xylarium Collection (Claire Sheridan 2022)

## Episode 2:
## Chaos, possums and layers of dust:
## Saving the university's mid-century furniture

The national university that opened in 1946 in the shade of Black Mountain's scrubby gum trees was meant to be future-focused, nation-shaping, and modern. Alongside the new professors, libraries and labs the university also hired designers to create a new modern aesthetic. Led by the famous designer Fred Ward and later Derek Wrigley, the university design team followed the Bauhaus 'total design' ethos, working on everything from interior fittings and furnishings, light switches, cutlery, candlesticks, mirrors, garbage bins, laundry baskets and the timber furniture for University House and eventually the whole campus. But as times and fashions changed, much of the furniture was lost, removed, or replaced.

In this episode, we hear from the collections staff turned timber detectives who tracked down the lost collection of mid-century furniture to sites including an underground tunnel and a cattery, and the work they do behind-the-scenes to conserve, repair, and document it so it will continue to be part of the university's story into the future.

Experts featured in this episode: **Amy Jarvis**, ACT Government and Canberra Modern, and **Claudia Reppin** and **Dr Matthew Brookhouse** from the ANU.



ANU Design Unit Furniture in the RG Menzies Library. April 1963. Photo courtesy of the ANU Archives

**'Canberra grew up in the fifties and sixties ... it was starting to build an identity for the national capital, they got brave and optmistic'**

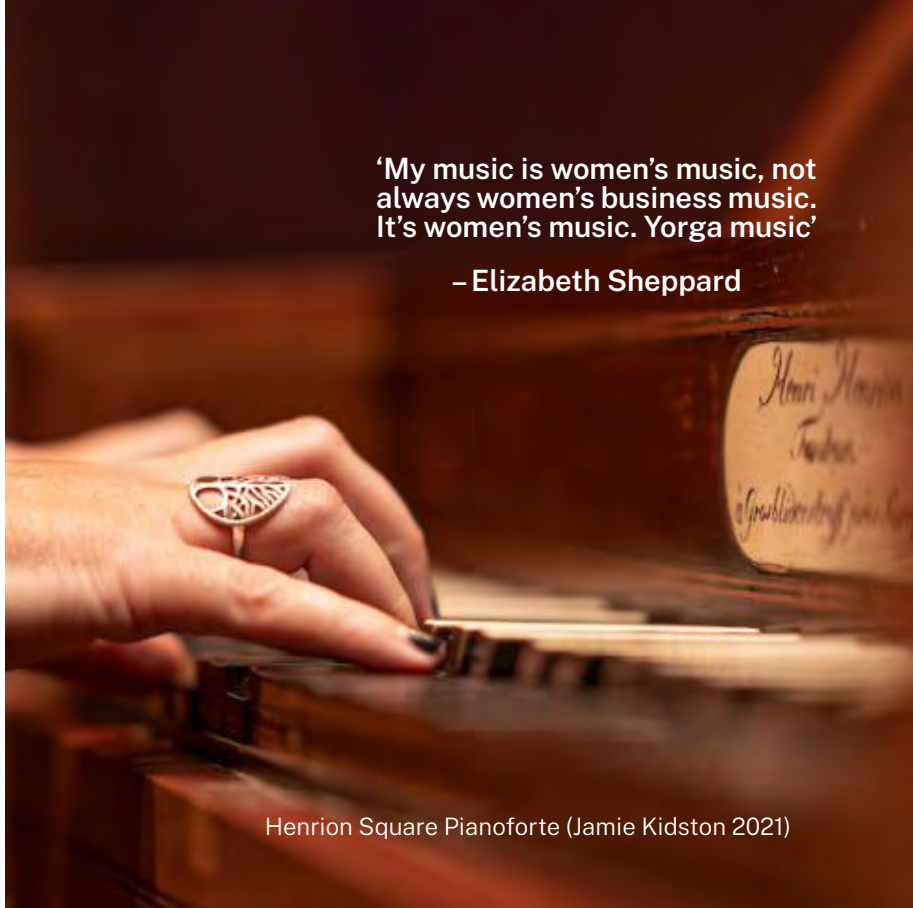
**– Amy Jarvis**

## Episode 3: ‘A sea of wood’: Breathing new music into an historic piano

This episode uncovers the ANU Historic Keyboard Collection and interweaves two stories. The first reveals the curious nature of the collection, which includes one piano hidden in a sewing table that makes the sound of bells, it is one of only two known examples worldwide. Knowing how to care for these timber instruments can take a lot of detective work, especially when they are centuries old and suffering from damage caused by insects, water, and by the wood reverting to its natural shape over centuries.

This is a fragile but also living collection, brought to life through performance, by staff and students in the School of Music. In the second half we hear from Indigenous composers from the Ngarra-Burria program who wrote new music for a piano made in 1770, the same year Captain Cook navigated the east coast of Australia. They tell us of the discord and beauty that can be found in a historical instrument when it is reanimated through creativity and performance.

Experts featured in this episode:
**Dr Scott Davie**, **Nardi Simpson** (Yuwaalaraay), **Elizabeth Sheppard** (Noongar Yamatji), and **Tim Gray** (Gumbaynggirr/Wiradjuri/Bidjigal), all ANU.




Henrion Square Pianoforte (Jamie Kidston 2021)

## About the Collections in Conversation podcast series

Everyone knows that universities are full of people and ideas. But did you know they are also full of objects and collections? University collections provide a unique window into how and why the stories Australians value about our country and its past continue to shape the present and future. They evidence and offer insights into the shared human pursuit of knowledge, as well as its discoveries, omissions, disagreements, biases, fractures, and connections.

## Credits

The ANU Collections in Conversation podcast series is produced by Katrina Grant, Kylie Message, and Claire Sheridan with production and technical support by Renee Dixson. Logo designed by Claire Sheridan. The 'Timber Detective Agency' music was composed by Nicholas Dullow. The podcast was supported by the ANU Humanities Research Centre, ANU Centre for Digital Humanities Research and ANU Collections, Research Initiatives and Infrastructure.

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# Collections in Conversation

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