



AGHS members enjoy lunch on a log at Hans Heysen's family garden, The Cedars, near Hahndorf on the final day of the 2006 Adelaide conference. Photo: Anne Kaleski

Designs on history

Highlights and lessons learned at the AGHS 2006 annual national conference
– Botanic Riches: keeping garden history in design - by Christina Vos.

Over three days in October 2006 (20th–22nd), AGHS members and conference participants heard from 11 speakers and visited 13 gardens as part of the Australian Garden History Society's 27th Annual National Conference in Adelaide, at the National Wine Centre.

As the conference title suggests, the focus of last year's AGHS Annual Conference was Adelaide's botanic riches, from which, either directly or as a point of departure, the conference's sub-theme 'keeping garden history in design' was discussed. As a heritage practitioner working on, among other things, the assessment and conservation management of historic cultural landscapes, parks and gardens etc, it was this sub-theme of the conference that initially sparked my curiosity.

It was a fascinating and inspiring three days; with a diverse range of papers presented and well-matched garden visits.

Of the papers presented over the first two days, those by Richard Heathcote on Carrick Hill, Stephen Forbes on the influence of botany from a local to world context, Stuart Read on lessons to be learned from Mediterranean gardens and their management, and Professor Lance McCarthy on a

new garden, the Flinders Investigator Garden, were of most interest and relevance to me.

Colleen Morris writes in her introduction to the conference, 'maintaining the most significant aspects of a historic garden or landscape and integrating new design in a meaningful and respectful way is among one of the greatest challenges for landscape designers today'. As a heritage practitioner, the challenge is identifying the most significant aspects of a historic garden or landscape to determine the limits of acceptable change, ensuring new design or new elements can be integrated while maintaining the most important aspects of the place.

In this regard, the presentations by Richard Heathcote, Director of Carrick Hill, and Stephen Forbes, Director of the Adelaide Botanic Gardens, on the stories, conservation and management of their respective pieces of Adelaide's botanic riches, were fascinating and relevant.

Richard Heathcote spoke about the legacy of Ursula Hayward at Carrick Hill, a large and ambitiously landscaped garden, created from 1937. Structural elements remained, but otherwise the garden was lost. Richard's research revealed Ursula to be an amateur gardener, influenced by

popular house and garden journals (a *Country Life* reader), and the English Arts and Crafts environment in which she grew up, with a joy of flowers evidenced by her collections of books and art. With this understanding, various parts of the garden such as the picking garden – filled with light-coloured herbaceous perennials and annuals dramatically set against dark foliage of a clipped yew hedge – were interpretively reconstructed, referencing the spirit of its maker, her influences and contemporary fashions.

One thread of Stephen Forbes' paper discussed botany in an economic and political context during the Age of Empire, when the great nations of Europe built their wealth on the natural resources, including plants, of the colonies. A Museum of Economic Botany was constructed in the Adelaide Botanic Gardens (1881) and used for displays of industry, including plants, 'that would benefit the new colony', such as grain, fodder and other crops for South Australia.

To then visit the picking garden at Carrick Hill and the Temple of Flora exhibition in the recently restored Museum of Economic Botany, with a greater understanding of the historic, aesthetic, social, economic and political contexts in which they were created, and observe the outcomes of the respective approaches to their management and interpretation was invaluable.

In the context of Australia's drought and increasingly arid environment, 'Our Mediterranean Heritage...' by Stuart Read posed pertinent questions about what can be learned from Spanish garden traditions and their current approaches to managing change in a similar environment, with pressures from growing visitor numbers and with increasing limitations on resources such as water and budgets. One such valuable lesson was plant selection and the suggestion to consider using plants better adapted to aridity and variable environments, such as those with Mediterranean origins.

While not necessarily suitable for all historic gardens or all sites, plants of Mediterranean origin should be considered when selecting appropriate species for historic parks and gardens for a more sustainable conservation approach. A core 'Spanish lesson' then is the importance of 'place-based' design to best ensure sustainability.

Professor Lance McCarthy's paper was also fascinating, illustrating how a new garden, through design and plant selection, can itself be an interpretive device and symbolise the past. The species selection for McCarthy's Flinders Investigator Garden was inspired by and representative of the work of botanist Robert Brown and botanical illustrator Ferdinand Bauer, during Flinders' voyage which produced

detailed maps of the South Australian coastline.

The final day of the conference was devoted entirely to garden visits, taking us via the Waite Arboretum, in Urrbrae, and then into the Adelaide Hills. While all interesting places, for me The Cedars and the Waite Arboretum were quite exceptional.

The Cedars was the house, studio and garden of landscape painter Sir Hans Heysen (from 1912 to 1968). Established in the 1870s, and enhanced by the Heysen family from around 1912, the garden is set within a rugged pastoral landscape characterised by the eucalypts so familiar from Heysen's iconic Australian landscapes. The Cedars was also the home, studio and garden of Nora Heysen – celebrated artist and daughter of Sir Hans. A wander through the rambling cottage garden, or viewing it through Nora's studio windows, was enhanced by the memory of Nora's still lifes (favourites of mine), and the sounds of laughter and squeals of delight from a more recent member of the Heysen family at the discovery of a cicada.

Against the peace of its picturesque surrounds, The Cedars is a lively and dynamic place brought to life by the fact that it remains in the Heysen family, various

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generations of whom were present during our visit – making this place, for me, a delightful house museum.

The comprehensiveness of the collection at the Waite Arboretum (2200 species including 360 species of eucalypts), grown under natural rainfall and all labelled, was spectacular and impressive. The 80 minutes allowed for the visit could not do the extensive collection justice. As a student of horticulture at Burnley, (and indeed for anyone with an interest in Australian and exotic trees), the Waite Arboretum is an incredible resource. It has been added to my list of fascinating places to revisit.

At Stirling in the Adelaide Hills, we witnessed some grand gardens with impressive plant collections in several properties with origins as 'hill station' retreats, including a significant mature pinetum at Forest Lodge from the 1880s with an unusual Japanese umbrella pine (*Sciadopitys verticillata*). The pinetum was a feature of many large nineteenth century Australian gardens, stemming from the Gardenesque style advocated by JC Loudon.



ABOVE: The mature pinetum at Forest Lodge fascinated tree lovers.

LEFT: Urabrae House, the Waite Arboretum: a favourite destination for many of those attending the conference's final day.

Photos: Benoit Trudeau



The picking garden at Carrick Hill. Photo: Benoit Trudeau

Other highlights of the conference included Trevor Nottle's introductory reference frame for garden history in Adelaide and SA branch member Marilyn Kuchel's fascinating look at Robert Swinbourne's research on lost South Australian gardens and their lessons. Marilyn's work, along with that of so many others in the SA branch, was instrumental in making the conference such a great success.

Keynote speaker Marylyn Abbott discussed her experiences in reconciling historic places with newer garden designs, both in NSW and the United Kingdom. Marylyn argued that while design often arises from the need to unify existing elements in the garden, plants, colour and a wider palette of influences can also play a significant role in creating a cohesive picture.

There were many opportunities between sessions, over coffee breaks and picnic lunches, on bus trips and ambling through public and private gardens, to talk informally with other people interested in or working with garden heritage; garden makers and designers, landscape architects, historians, researchers, heritage practitioners; about their

research interests, their gardens, current projects, and the odd conservation conundrum – such as pressures to add mortar to crazy paving for health and safety reasons.

Pausing to reflect on the collective expertise, knowledge and experience in Australia's garden history and heritage present at the conference, it would be wonderful if the 2007 AGHS annual conference seized the opportunity to bring that collective knowledge together in a constructive and more formal setting. A facilitated discussion may be possible for example, where those interested could consider and learn from a representative sample of recent successes, challenges and failures in the conservation of Australia's historic gardens and cultural landscapes.

Overall, it was a wonderful conference. I returned to Melbourne having learnt a great deal, having met fascinating people, inspired, and confident that you can keep garden history in design.

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