

## ‘Garden to Table’ Opportunities lost at the Ballarat Botanical Gardens



Figure 1 Prize winning Wright and Armstrong Design 1857, showing grid of orchard, vineyard and vegetable gardens City of Ballarat Collection

*In the International Agenda for Botanic Gardens in Conservation the definition of a botanic garden is as follows: "Botanic gardens are institutions holding documented collections of living plants for the purposes of scientific research, conservation, display and education."*

*The only legal definition of a botanic garden in Commonwealth legislation occurs in the National Parks and Wildlife Conservation Act 1975. This definition is carried forward into the replacement Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999 by bridging legislation. In Section 3 of that Act, "botanic garden" means a scientific and educational institution the purpose of which is the advancement and dissemination of knowledge and appreciation of plants by:*

- (a) Growing them in a horticultural setting; and*
- (b) Establishing herbarium collections; and*
- (c) Conducting research; and*
- (d) Providing displays and interpretative services.*

‘Garden to Table’ is concerned with that mission, and covers more than a century and a half from the aspirational planning and implementation to the present day, and covers the many lost opportunities at the Ballarat Botanical Gardens in the growing of food.

To set the scene, from the mid-nineteenth century, across the British Empire the opportunity was being embraced in cities both in Britain and its many colonies to establish botanic gardens. With the encouragement of the Royal Horticultural Society, botanic gardens were being unshackled from their bastions of privilege and academia at universities, and moving into the realm of municipalities. It was a source of great civic pride to be able to demonstrate both the taming of the environment and the respectability of the community; it was a place to ‘show off’ to visitors and to demonstrate horticultural and botanical prowess.

Botanic Gardens were established in Sydney in 1816 under botanist John Carne Bidwill. In Hobart Lieutenant-Governor Arthur’s own garden was developed from 1818 as a botanic garden. With the enthusiastic support of Superintendent, later Lieutenant-Governor Charles La Trobe, Australia’s third Botanic Gardens were established in Melbourne in 1846 under botanist Ferdinand von Mueller. Geelong followed suit in 1850 and employed the trained botanist Daniel Bunce, and after several thwarted attempts Adelaide began at its present site in 1855 with botanist George Francis at the helm.

All these Botanic Gardens were developed, usually under the directorship of a botanist, for scientific research into indigenous plants and as a testing ground for 'Economic Botany', not simply for the enjoyment of a beautiful garden. The pioneer agricultural and pastoral settlers provided weather statistics as well as specimens to the new herbariums and observatories and were able to source information and plant material from the nurseries at and near those establishments.

In the region around what is now Ballarat, relationships of various sorts did exist between the earliest settlers and the indigenous population. For example, Scottish immigrant Katherine Kirkland of Trawalla Station recorded in her diary the collecting of bush food and carrying her small baby in a possum skin sling. She also made efforts to learn the Wathaurong language<sup>i</sup>. Other settlers had a more difficult time, creating fortresses to protect themselves and showing a willingness to shoot at Aboriginal people<sup>ii</sup>. Aboriginal Protector, George Augustus Robinson, visited the district with a small party in February and March of 1840 and noted the complaints of the indigenous population: their stretches of *murrnong* or yam daisy were being trodden down by flocks of sheep and herds of cattle and couldn't be harvested, and fresh water was being fouled by stock.

Before European settlement, the Kirrit Balug members of the Wadawurrong (or Wathaurong) language group, of the Kulin people, stopped regularly at the south western end of Yuille Swamp, now known as Lake Wendouree, for ceremonial purposes. They were well fed by the natural larder of the reedy swamp: fish, fresh water mussels, duck and all manner of root vegetables were available to those who knew where to look. This time is symbolically remembered by the ten poles created by local artist Tom Clarke (Wotjobaluk) and now located at the Gregory Street entrance to the Wetlands, with the food sources of *Cumbungi*, *Murrnong*, *Possums*, *Snake*, *Swan* and *Quandong* depicted.

The sparse population of pioneering pastoral and agricultural settlers living near the village of Buninyong treasured and nurtured the seeds and plants they brought with them. Growing seasons and conditions were different from those left behind in Europe. Diaries of the period contain many details of rainfall and descriptions of weather as the settlers tried to make sense of the topsy-turvy seasons. In 1834, J. C. Loudon advised that '*The Gardening of Australia, like that of every other newly colonised country will depend jointly on the gardening knowledge of the settlers, and the capabilities of the climate.*'<sup>iiiiv</sup>

Andrew and Celia Scott, of *Mount Boninyong Station* Scotsburn, travelled to the colonies with plants from their *Larchwood* property in Scotland and vegetable seed purchased in London on 27 August 1837. On arrival Scott purchased fruit trees from Daniel Bunce's nursery in Melbourne for planting at *Mount Boninyong*.<sup>v</sup> Amongst other things, Bunce had joined exploration parties, written books on indigenous language, and applied for the Directorship of the Melbourne and Adelaide Botanic Gardens.

A spirit of agricultural co-operation and the pooling of resources enabled these earliest settlers to grind their grain. Indeed, in Buninyong, Thomas and Somerville Learmonth owned the mill used by the community to do just that. There is even correspondence from William Yuille begging Andrew Scott for spare tomato seedlings – the pigs had got into his!<sup>vi</sup>

Early directories show a significant percentage of these early settlers on smallholdings describing themselves as gardeners, market gardeners, orchardists or nurserymen. They were capable of feeding their small community of a few hundred but after gold was discovered in 1851, the provisioning of a sudden influx of many thousands was another matter entirely.

There was a rapid establishment of frontier tent cities on or near these pastoral runs and soon vast wealth was arriving in Melbourne. Flush with goldfields revenue, the Colonial Government of Victoria encouraged the development of municipal reserves and botanical gardens offering

grants of up to £100 for fencing, and the scene was set for the establishment of botanic gardens in regional centres.

The ability to supply oneself with fresh food and clean water was not a luxury nor was it merely recreational, but rather a stark necessity in this remote mining community. Though it was possible to transport barrels of brined oysters from Phillip Island through the Port Phillip Heads to Geelong and then by dray to the gold fields, and the nearby graziers could and did bring mutton and beef on the hoof to the diggings, the need to feed a tent city on more than meat was immediate and essential.



Figure 2 Chinese market garden  
J.C. Armytage Art Ballarat of Ballarat

The new goldmining community, busy in their search for riches, did not think of indigenous sources of food or to look to the swamp for food. Nurserymen set up along the watercourses and beside the swamp. The Chinese population began planting market gardens along several silty creek edges. Soon there was a thriving horticultural industry, with nurserymen such as Thomas Lang advertising vegetable seed in the Chinese newspapers on the gold fields<sup>vii</sup>, as well as generally to the



Figure 3 Lang Nursery advertisement in English and Chinese Advertiser  
November 28 1857

English-speaking population. There were trained gardeners amongst the shiploads of eager prospectors hoping to ‘strike it rich’. In at least one case a gardener, travelled under the occupation ‘farmer’ when the Colonial Government attempted to slow down immigration to the goldfields.<sup>viii</sup> This is how George Longley described himself when he boarded the *Marco Polo* with his new wife Helen.

The newly created and forward thinking Borough of Ballaarat West was made up of idealists who had set up camp on William Yuille’s Ballaarat run. Entrepreneurial and energetic, they intended to stay and saw it as their duty to create ‘The Best of all Possible Worlds’ here. They intended every citizen to be provided with the best of all amenities, in accordance with the expectations of the time. In only five years this diverse community had begun to create a modern, progressive municipality out of the mud and dust of a tent city. Indeed, at the inaugural meeting of the Council of the Borough of Ballaarat West in 1856, after the decision was taken to become a borough, the next and second motion passed was to establish a Botanical Gardens and Public Reserve. Along with a public garden, schools, roads, hospitals, libraries, sporting clubs, and the provision of fresh water were introduced very early compared with other places.



Figure 4 Photograph of Yuille swamp, now Lake Wendouree  
Ballaarat Historical Society Catalogue Number: 681.79

Borough Surveyor Samuel Baird was given the task of selecting a suitable site for a botanical gardens and public reserve and after reserving then rejecting several sites including one on the southern boundary of

the municipality, the site of the Police Paddock at the western edge of the swamp, near where William Yuille camped briefly before settling further south near Bala Street in Sebastopol, was selected. (Yuille is recognised at the now Lake Wendouree with the naming of a small man-made island at the western edge.)

The site, comprising approximately 100 acres, was listed in the Victorian Government Gazette of December 1857. A competition prize of £10 offered by the Council for a Garden design was won by a pair of local entrants, a nursery man named Wright and the draftsman, Armstrong. The immediate need to educate the community to feed itself was clearly addressed. A neat grid of demonstration orchards, orangeries and vineyards to the north of the decorative walkways was included on the winning design, as well as other inspirational items such as a folly and croquet lawn.<sup>ix</sup>

Council called for a 'Group of Horticultural Gentlemen' to form a Committee of Management to superintend the laying out of the Gardens. The gentlemen who offered their services included botanists and a man who had been a head gardener to Windsor Castle, as well as several professional nurserymen.<sup>x</sup> This committee advertised the position of gardener in November 1858. From ten applicants George Longley, a trained gardener, was appointed. He was paid £3 per week to lay out the Gardens and in 1859 the Ballarat Botanical Gardens were opened to the public. These same 'Horticultural Gentlemen' were among the founders of the rural based Ballarat Agricultural Society (Est. 1856) and the urban based Ballarat Horticultural Society (Est. 11th October 1859). There was an opinion that an Agricultural Society should speak for all agricultural and horticultural matters, however the rural and urban interests were seen to differ enough to warrant a separate entity, the Agricultural Society being interested mainly in economic rather than ornamental horticulture.<sup>xi</sup>

The twenty-seven founding members of the Ballarat Horticultural Society comprised the leading gardeners and nurserymen of the district, and included Longley and most of the other applicants for his job, as well as pioneers who were getting involved in the activities of Ballarat. Longley was a respected founding member and committee man, but never held office. He did however exhibit regularly at shows in both Ballarat and Melbourne, and encouraged his staff to do so also. The Ballarat Horticultural Society became the instrument to pressure local government to implement ideas across the municipality. Their committee successfully lobbied for street trees; elm, oak and Tasmanian Blue Gum and set up horticultural competitions, shows and lectures and their members supplied these Gardens with plant material. In 1861, the BHS set up experimental plots, but not at the Gardens. *Two Victorian societies of the kind of which the Ballarat Horticultural Society is one, have, for the purposes of aiding, facilitating, or initiating private enterprise in the introduction of new plants, procured from the Government the grant of reserves for*

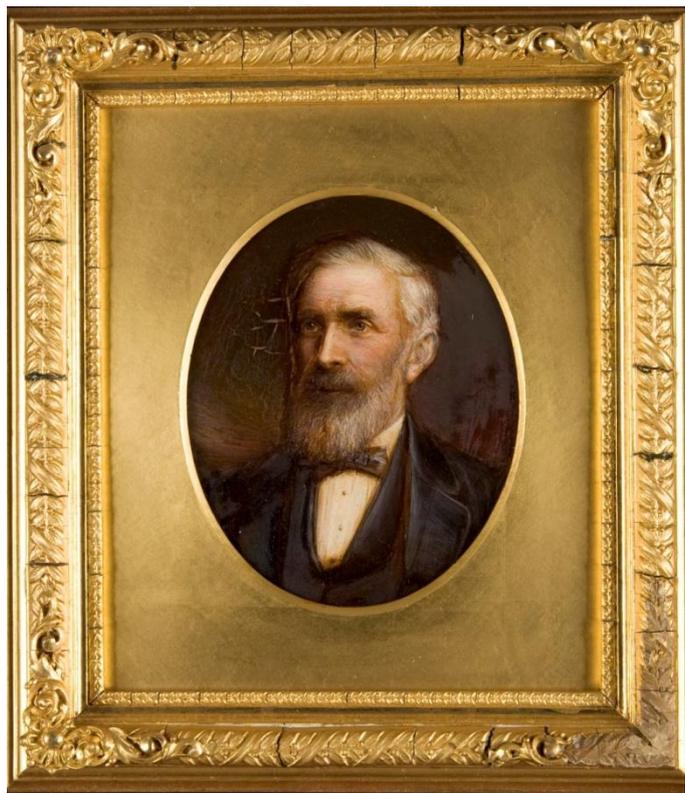


Figure 5 George Longley, Curator Public Gardens Lake Wendouree, 1880s.  
Thomas PRICE Oil on board  
Gift of James Oddie, 1887, Art Gallery of Ballarat

experimental gardens in which it is proposed systematically to test all new horticultural discoveries as to their actual and relative value...<sup>xiii</sup>. As well as decorative plants, rhubarb was trialled.



Figure 6 Ballarat Horticultural Show Winner Mr Louis Jones displays his fruit and vegetables at Gordon Bros Fruit and Vegetable Store 1924 Source: Postcard M. Taffe

With the establishment of an agricultural and a horticultural society, the demonstration beds of orchards, orangeries and vineyards were not proceeded with at the Gardens. The need to provide a practical demonstration of agricultural techniques waned and in 1862 the area set aside for demonstration beds was suggested as the site of a maze.<sup>xiii</sup> Not everyone agreed with this decision. In a letter written to the Ballarat Star surprise was expressed at the absence of fruit trees because they

were considered too great a temptation to visitors. The writer thought they afforded shelter from the sun to visitors and that in the fruit season the same plan might be adopted as in the other colonies, viz.: that visitors pay on entrance 6d or 1s, and be allowed to help themselves, but to carry none away.<sup>xiv</sup>

Enterprising settlers in the district were beginning to produce fruit and vegetables on an industrial scale to supply Ballarat and even sending produce to Melbourne by rail - once it was established by the Victorian Railways under Engineer-in-Chief George Darbyshire. Nurserymen such as Thomas Lang were able to supply the community with vast stocks of vines, fruit trees and vegetable seeds as well as decorative trees, shrubs, flowers and etc. A butcher, George Morgan, established the largest herb farm in the southern hemisphere near the township of Napoleons, and sent dried herbs across Australasia.

As the Ballarat Botanical Gardens matured, and the need to provide for ones meal was met by the numerous market gardeners, the more decorative forms of horticulture were concentrated on. However, the staff exhibited in the Horticultural shows along with the staff of other



Figure7 Garden staff circa 1890s Longley in bowler hat centre, FBBC Collection

institutions such as the Orphan Asylum, and Longley displayed the first pineapple grown in Ballarat in 1883. The gardeners who would come to live in the cottages on the site would maintain personal plots to feed their families, and did keep their own milk cows.

Under Longley, still superintended by the *Horticultural Gentlemen* and still designated 'Gardener' (not until 1885 was he accorded the title Curator), an education system for apprentices was developed, and gradually more staff

was employed. By 1890, the next three curators were employed as gardeners at the BBG. The staff included at that time: John Williams, the future Curator of Victoria Park, a future Victorian Government Landscape Designer, Hugh Linaker and several future curators of regional and urban municipal parks and gardens. Relationships were well established between Ballarat and the Melbourne and Geelong Botanic Gardens, with donations of plant material backwards and forwards and Ballarat's fish being bartered for plant material. Ferdinand Von Mueller was a regular visitor, offering advice on numerous subjects.

In 1870, both the Ballarat Fish Acclimatisation Society and the School of Mines, Ballarat (SMB) were founded. The Ballarat Fish Acclimatisation Society, the oldest in Victoria, began with the aim of introducing trout, perch and other English fish to the district waters, for sport and for the table. In 1873, a permanent breeding pond was constructed and in 1885 a windmill was erected at the edge of the lake to provide running water to the earthen ponds. Thousands of trout yearlings were placed annually in the lake with Curator Longley responsible for the management of the lake, the gardens and the Fish Acclimatisation Society grounds. These Gardens are considered to be of scientific significance for the close link with the acclimatisation movement demonstrated by the continuous activities since 1873; however the Fish Hatchery is today maintained and operated by a volunteer organization.

Students who wished to study in the fields of medicine and pharmacology at university studied botany at SMB. As part of their course, Curator Longley and senior staff provided outdoor lectures at the Physic Gardens at SMB as well as here.

*'Through the Courtesy of the Mayor, Mr J. Noble Wilson, the Botanical Gardens were placed at the service of the instructor in Botany for class purposes, together with the assistance of Mr. George Longley the Curator, who had already rendered the School considerable service. When the weather permitted we (Botany students) frequently visited the Botanical Gardens where Mr George Longley, Curator, and Mr Williams, (foreman) offered every facility.'*<sup>xv</sup>

The establishment of the Ballarat Mental Hospital (1877) and its associated farm led to an arrangement for agistment of the Hospital 'milch cows' on the north and south reserves. This produced a welcome additional income for many years: in 1915, £2.10.0 was received.

World War I left its mark in the most unexpected places. In Europe a shot rang out and war was declared. Shipping was taken over by the war effort and the importation of seeds and export of plants ground to a halt, bringing food production almost to a standstill. In Ballarat, and across Australasia, relationships with seed merchants established for over half a century were rent asunder. The last order of seed from F.C Heinemann FRHS of Erfurt, Germany, to the BBG was sent on 3 July 1914. It arrived on August 11, just 3 days after war was declared. Poignantly the accompanying letter acknowledged the death of Curator Thomas Rooney.<sup>xvi</sup> N.B Heinemann recommenced the export of seed to the Council between the Wars, continuing again after WWII and only ceasing when the Iron Curtain curtailed trade in 1951.<sup>xvii</sup>

Many of the Botanical Gardens staff enlisted. The propagation houses emptied, and a skeleton staff maintained the permanent collections of orchids, begonias etc. as well as the lawns and beds as best they could with the help of temporary staff sent by the Government 'Manpower' agency. In a memo to the Town Clerk, new Curator Thomas Toop complained *'The problem is these men aren't Gardeners.'*

To encourage home food production, Mayor F. Brawn instituted a Mayor's Cottage Garden Competition. Proceeds were to aid the local orphanage. Gardens were judged over three years by Ballarat Botanical Gardens Curator Thomas Toop, Head Gardener at the Ballarat Orphanage, Arthur Kenny and Ballarat Base Hospital Head Gardener, John Ross.<sup>xviii</sup> In the depths of autumn, the judges assessed the standard of presentation in front decorative, and rear productive gardens of plot owner and tenant alike. This competition culminated in the awarding of a

Mayoral trophy for the “Champion Cottage and Garden, City of Ballarat, 1915 –1918”. The trophy was awarded to Hymettus Cottage, with its wonderful front and rear garden. Now occupied by descendant Michael Taffe, it is described as follows

*‘The front flower garden of “Hymettus Cottage” features Nineteenth Century varieties of standard roses with flower beds edged in miniature English Box (Buxus sempervirens). It also features a large bolly bush which was planted when the garden was first established, and today blocks the front door from view of the street. The rear garden is much more utilitarian and is set in a grid pattern with a variety of heritage vegetables and more Nineteenth Century varieties of standard roses. As in 1901, chickens are still kept at the rear of the property, adjunct to an old orchard, and pet rabbits lope freely about the white gravel paths.’*



**Figure 8** Details to Plan of Ballarat Botanical Gardens Watercolour W Greville, 1939 showing vegetable garden Collection Ballarat City Council

During the Depression, the Gardens maintained demonstration vegetable beds near the Fernery. It is possible that these were created by Longley as part of his ‘education of the young gardener’ but records of this period are patchy at best. The Ballarat Gold Museum holds some of the very earliest records of the day to day management but other records are believed to have been scrapped. These vegetable beds enabled the community to emulate ‘best practice’ and are said to have provided produce for the soup kitchens set up to aid the poverty-stricken population, some of whom were reportedly bathing in the City’s fountains.

The Depression ended only for WWII to have an impact. Once again Curator Toop had to manage the Gardens on a minimal, and this time geriatric, staff. In 1943 Toop retired, aged 78. He admitted *‘My active working days have come to a close’*. He was replaced by Acting Curator William Lindsay aged 70.



**Figure 9** Government advertising poster 1942

With food shortages imminent, in January 1942 the Prime Minister, John Curtin, launched the “Dig for Victory” campaign. This publicity campaign urged householders to contribute to the war effort by growing vegetables. The press loved and promoted the idea, as did industry and local community groups. Many Municipal Councils became involved with these Gardens, under Lindsay, contributing 32 bushels of onion seeds for the campaign.

This seems to have been the last time these Gardens actively contributed to the idea ‘Garden to Table’, although the Educating Group do have five demonstration wicking beds used as part of a program for teachers. There was an opportunity in the 1980s to become actively engaged in the idea of ‘Garden to Table’ when the BHS developed a community garden on the Lakeside Hospital grounds, but the Gardens were resolutely disinterested.



**Figure 109** Oxford Botanic Garden Community vegetable gardens photo ©Charlotte Weycham

However, elsewhere it is a different story. In Britain for example, the Oxford Botanic Gardens hosts a thriving community garden and many of the grand houses run by the National Trust, such as Kingston Lacey, in Dorset, encourage allotment gardens. At the Geelong Botanic Gardens an area has been rededicated to Economic Horticulture in their central Gardens, with a succession of themed displays and the Geelong Permaculture Group keeps up an exhibition plot for public enjoyment, and. The

public are occasionally encouraged to harvest the crops and the teahouse café has used the harvest to make soup and etc. The Melbourne Botanic Gardens, recently rebadged as the Botanic Gardens of Victoria, has its Children's Garden and Restaurant vegetable garden. Sydney Botanic Gardens maintains its connection with its beginnings as a food source for the settlers with a substantial vegetable garden. Adelaide Botanic Gardens host the 'Diggers Club' and is re-establishing its trial plots for vines and other crops. Hobart has, since 1996, hosted *The Patch*, a working display garden which regularly appears on the television program Gardening Australia

Today, while other botanic gardens continue to nurture the belief in the worth of providing food from garden to plate, these Gardens seem content to be a pleasant 'zoo for trees'. The community gardens which operate in Ballarat have as yet no formal relationship with the Ballarat Botanical Gardens.

Apart from the contribution of onion seed during a war effort, there is no evidence the Ballarat Botanical Gardens has contributed on a national level. On a colony or state level there is a limited impact - a few fish for some plants! Locally, however, there is some evidence of an early effort to contribute. Though the initial prize winning design of the Gardens was never activated, the two greatest contributions to the theme 'Garden to Table' demonstrated at the Ballarat Horticultural Shows where the exhibits gave a standard of quality to aspire to for our community, and in the educating of our young gardeners. The general members of the early Horticultural Society would surely have valued the contribution of Longley, and his successors. Longley did establish a six year apprenticeship system which for the lucky few selected to become staff was followed by two years of 'improving'. This system of apprenticeship continued at least until Tom Beaumont's time and included the preparation and planting of vegetable gardens. For nearly 160 years these gardens have provided a public space for Ballarat's citizens and for some of that time, as gardeners were trained, vegetables were grown. There were several moments when the BBG rose to the challenge of food production but often exterior pressures were the catalyst. Opportunities for community engagement were missed even the 1980s when the BHS established a community garden at the neighbouring Lakeside hospital. The 'Gardenesque' pleasures of a Melbourne Botanic Gardens, as reimagined under Guilfoyle, became Ballarat's ideal, and Ballarat citizens promenaded amongst the young exotic trees. The man-made lake at the swamp became a place for pleasure and leisure rather than a productive food gathering site as it was for the indigenous population and rather sadly, despite having the oldest Fish Acclimatisation Society in Victoria as a close neighbour, the many restaurants around the lake do not make use of the trout in the lake

I would like to imagine a present day conversation with Curator Longley. What he would think of the Gardens? The trees and shrubs he planted are approaching senescence or long gone. The vegetable garden identified by the apprentice Greville is no longer in evidence, and the layout Longley and his staff established in the central Gardens only basically recognisable. I am sure, however, that he would be continuing his thorough and rigorous approach to the apprenticeship system, and I would want to congratulate him and thank him for his part in the creation of our wonderful gardens.

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History Group Convenor, FBBG August 2016

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