



INTERVIEW

with

Colleen Morris,
Heritage Consultant and
Chair of the
Australian Garden History Society

Colleen Morris is very enthusiastic about gardens and their history. She is curious about all designs and the people behind them. Her book, [‘Lost Gardens of Sydney’ is reviewed in the books section.](#) I met her on her recent visit to the UK to seek out some of the British gardens she has been reading about.

Q: Let's start with your work as a Heritage Consultant: what does this entail?

A: My primary interest is garden history. The practical application of that work is through my Heritage Consultancy. This involves providing advice to institutions and private clients about Heritage gardens and cultural landscapes. This commonly includes undertaking conservation studies and management plans. For these, I examine the history of the place, its physical condition, assess its overall significance and identify what elements of the garden are the most significant. Then I write policies for the garden's future management and make recommendations about conservation actions. I also provide advice in situations where new development is being proposed in or adjacent to a Heritage listed property.

Q: Is there a specific project you are working on at the moment?

A: I am writing detailed conservation actions for a property, Broughton Hall in an inner suburb of Sydney, which was initially a large private 19th century estate and then converted to a psychiatric hospital in the early 20th century. The superintendent of the hospital remodelled the garden for psychiatric use with oriental touches to the structures. Care of the gardens was scaled back from the 1980s onwards and many of the water features fell into disrepair and garden details were lost. It was recently decommissioned as a hospital and now has a number of health-related organisations as tenants. I am working with the major tenant and the challenge will be to determine what is achievable within a limited budget. We are feeling very positive.

Q: In the terms of European Historic Gardens, the Australian ones are quite young

– were there gardens before the British arrived? When were the first gardens created?

A: The Aboriginal people cared for the land and 'gardened' or 'farmed' it in a way the Europeans could not recognise when they arrived to colonise Australia in 1788. There were deliberate plantings in various parts of Australia but they were not easy to distinguish. Fire-stick farming involved burning the vegetation to encourage new green growth, which attracted kangaroo thereby providing good hunting. Fire also triggered the germination of seeds - some native plants actually require fire to trigger germination.

Australia was the first continent to be colonised where there was no tradition of agriculture and gardening to be built on, at least that the colonisers recognised, no native gardeners to be employed and no gardens in which to plant the imported plants and seeds. The first garden in a European sense was planted in 1788 around Governor Arthur Phillip's house facing Sydney Cove. Early depictions of Phillip's Government House show a low stone wall and picket gate separating the forecourt from the garden beyond, whose ordered rows of cultivation signified a garden for the governor's table rather than one to impress with a show of flowers. Grapes planted to the side of the central path leading to Sydney Cove provided the garden with a feature that was both ornamental and productive.

Plants loaded onto the First Fleet at the Cape of Good Hope and Rio de Janeiro grew with some success. From Rio came plants of coffee, banana, oranges, lemon, Eugenia or pomme rose (*Syzigium jambos*), prickly pear, tamarind, jalap and ipecacuanha, and seeds of coffee, cotton, cocoa, orange, lemon and guava. At the Cape, Phillip had loaded plants of fig, bamboo, Spanish reed, sugar cane, vines of various sorts, quince, apple, pear, strawberry, oak, myrtle, and grain seeds to feed the new colony. These, except for the corn that was sown at the head of Farm Cove, which is now the site of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Sydney, were planted in the three gardens quickly established to the east of Government House. Sir Joseph Banks sent seeds and plants: of a long list of fruit trees he sent in 1789. We know that mulberry, almond and pomegranate matured.

Q: How did the Australian Garden History Society begin – and how long have you been involved with it?

A: In 1975 the newly formed Australian Heritage Commission, had a challenging role – to identify Australia's natural and cultural Heritage places. The initiative to fund specialised surveys in each state of Australia brought together a key group of consultants who undertook an Australian Heritage Commission Historic Gardens Survey in 1978-1979.

Together with Howard Tanner's 1979 exhibition, *The Art of Gardening in Colonial Australia* and its accompanying catalogue, the survey provided the impetus and the climate whereby the Australian Garden History Society could be formed. The catalogue included an 'Afterword', *The Future of Historic Garden Conservation in Australia*, by Peter Watts, Co-ordinator, Historic Garden Study, National Trust of Australia (Victoria), (and from 1980-2008 the Director of the Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales), that signalled the intention to establish the Australian Garden History Society. The AGHS was established in 1980.

Initially the Society grew from the concern for historic gardens from a Heritage perspective, not from the perspective of the academic study of history: the concern

was for garden history that is tangible or real. However, we have also pursued an educative role and from that perspective we were particularly delighted to be the co-publisher of *The Oxford Companion to Australian Gardens* in 2002.

My active involvement with the Society began in 1994 when I joined the committee of the Sydney and Northern NSW Branch and I later served as its Chair. I have served two terms of 6 years each on the National Management Committee (NMC), the second of those as the National Chair.

Q: So, what work is the Society undertaking at the moment – what are its plans?

A: The AGHS publishes a quarterly journal, scholarly papers, runs an annual conference and tours. Over the years the NMC has contributed to a number of exhibitions and books. In 2010 we are sponsoring a book *The Garden of Ideas* by Richard Aitken, and we are hoping to sponsor a travelling exhibition on the same theme. On a practical level we are planning to provide financial assistance to branches undertaking conservation work in significant gardens. The state and regional branches are the instigators of practical projects and the range of projects has been from the documentation of gardens through to restoration of urns, hands-on garden working bees and the engagement of tree surgeons and a specialist to reconstruct a dry stone wall.

Q: You've recently visited gardens in England and Scotland – can you tell me about the ones that excited you?

A: I was delighted to attend the Ashridge Garden History Summer School, which in 2009 examined Edwardian gardens, established in a period of particular relevance for Australian gardens. Of the gardens I visited during that course Iford Manor Harold Peto's own garden, which I first visited in 2004, excited me all over again. I love the series of terraces, the influence of Italy and of Japan that is explored in a number of elements throughout the garden and the way it melds so well with its river setting. Rodmorton, inspired by the Arts and Crafts movement, has a mellow pleasure and quirkiness that I love. It fits perfectly with the house and outbuildings it surrounds, and has a sense of the layers of history, sensitively melded, that continuous ownership by the one family brings.

En route to Scotland the high Victorian eclecticism of Biddulph Grange delighted me. I was impressed by the deft handling of the variety of design elements and the part that surprise plays in the garden - it is like a grown-ups' playground.

The walled gardens and immensely tall trees, especially the conifers of Scotland bowled me over. In parts the scale of the landscape is more akin to what I am used to in Australia. Mertoun, which is situated near the Tweed River in the Scottish Borders has a large productive walled garden and circular dovecote dating from the 16th century and the later house and garden is beautifully sited above the river. Following the Ashridge experience, Sir Reginald Blomfield's 1909 reworking of the garden around Mellerstain had particular resonance. The reconstruction of the mid-18th century Hercules garden at Blair Castle in Perthshire initially puzzled but intrigued me and then impressed me following my discovery of a small interpretative display in the garden itself. That left me concluding that Christopher Dingwall of the GHS in Scotland had undertaken a splendid piece of research.

The conservation of Ascog Fernery, a delight of a structure half sunken in the ground, on the Isle of Bute is a testament to one couple's passion. The avenue

leading to Drummond Castle is magical and the contrasting colourful foliage and flowers in Drummond's formal garden almost psychedelic; the old gardens at Cawdor Castle still match Sir Herbert Maxwell's impression from 1911 in *Scottish Gardens* : 'the eye is gratified by beauty of form and colour, and the mind is stimulated by historic association; and such is the case at Cawdor Castle'. On the north west coast the dramatic contrast between protected gardens and their broader context of exposed headlines and sea is quite remarkable and no more so than at Gruinard, a few miles beyond Inverewe.

Of course I could not help but be impressed by Scotland's distinct and important contribution to late twentieth century garden design - Little Sparta and the Garden of Cosmic Speculation at Portrack. They are quite different to each other but both are breathtakingly clever.

Q: Do you have a new book project?

A: *Lost Gardens Diary* 2010 has just been released. A number of images in the diary supplement those in the book *Lost Gardens of Sydney*.

I have started research for a new book but it is in its early stages and far too soon to write about!

For more information see:

www.gardenhistorysociety.org.au

PICTURES BY CHRIS BEDALL OF TWO OF THE GARDENS COLLEEN VISITED ON THE COURSE AT ASHRIDGE ON 'EDWARDIAN GARDENS':

Rodmarton: Arts and Crafts
Cirencester, Gloucestershire, England

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