

Post Card Memories or more?

BY KEN DUXBURY

If you enter the Royal Botanic Gardens Melbourne through 'A' Gate, on Alexandra Avenue at the bottom of Anderson Street, and then turn right at the grotto sheltering a giant clamshell drinking fountain, you skirt around a narrow lawn area overlooking the ornamental lake and pass into a shady tunnel of deep green comprising such species as Moreton Bay Fig, *Pittosporum undulatum*, *Pinus radiata*, *Acanthus mollis* and rampant, smothering ivy.

Suddenly, you emerge into a small clearing with views across the lake. Here there is a large 'roundabout' where the path splits in two – one path heading over the bridge to Long Island, the other skirting the lake. In the middle of the roundabout is an incongruous pavilion built in 1972.

Although known as the Clematis Shelter, the structure is covered by several specimens of *Wisteria sinensis*. Alongside is an exceptionally large, old elm tree. Look up into the tree to see evidence of a once gaping wound, now two-thirds calloused over. This scar marks the location of the large branch which, in 1969, fell and destroyed one of the Botanic Gardens' most attractive and picturesque features – the Bougainvillea Rest House. Once a cool and sheltered retreat for hot and tired visitors, it is now only a distant memory to middle-aged and elderly Melburnians, and a tantalizing vision to collectors like myself of old post cards and guidebooks.

The rest houses

William Guilfoyle replaced Ferdinand von Mueller as Director of the Melbourne Botanic Garden in 1873 and spent the next 35 years totally re-organising their character and appearance. He created a series of outdoor rooms, separated by masses of dense vegetation and linked by an artfully designed

path system. This created carefully controlled visual experiences through a continually unfolding sequence of hidden and then dramatically revealed views, with a succession of points of interest along the way.

There were two very important elements in Guilfoyle's design. First, was the series of over one dozen structures – pavilions, summer houses, rotundas and 'temples' – each with its own distinctive character, but all having a familial resemblance to create a diversified but unified whole. These structures were generally located at junctions along the path system and took advantage of an attractive view. They were also practical buildings providing much needed shelter from Melbourne's hot summer sun and unpredictable rain. One – the Rose Pavilion – was used for band recitals in summer.

They added a picturesque charm to the landscape of the gardens, highlighting points of visual interest along the trail of the paths and serving a role not dissimilar to the grottos, classical temples, follies, hermitages and pagodas along the circuit walks of the classic 'English Landscape School' gardens such as Stourhead.

Most of the structures appear to have been designed by Guilfoyle himself although the specific plans no longer exist for those in the RBG Melbourne, but his plan for an arch at Mooleric still survives¹. Most of the structures also still remain, albeit with extensive remodeling and/or restoration, and one, the William Tell Rest House was totally rebuilt in 1994 after the newly restored building was torched by vandals.

The arches

The second notable element of Guilfoyle's design was a series of large iron archways used



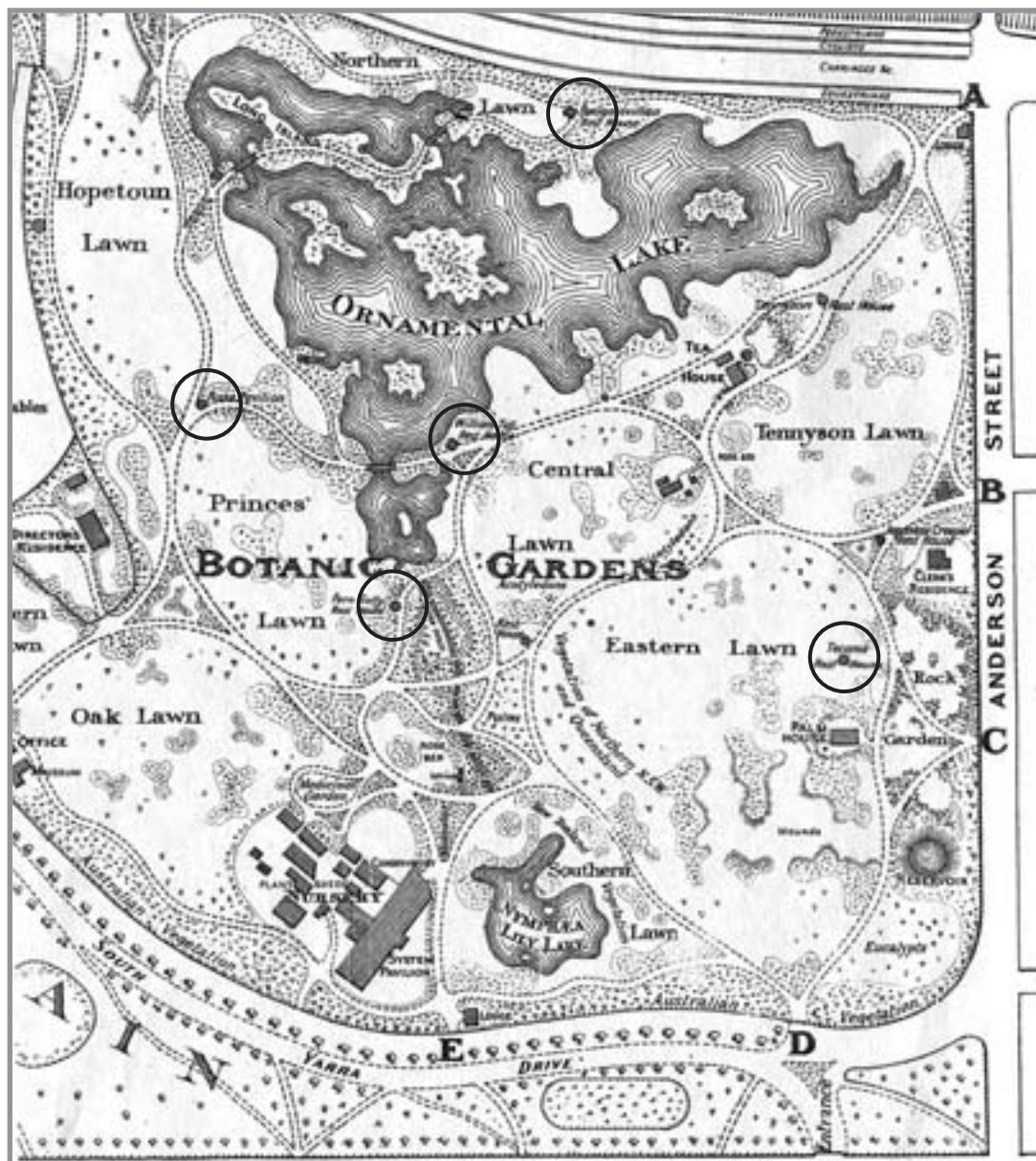
The post card view of the archway and William Guilfoyle's Bougainvillea Rest House that inspired this article.

Post card c. 1913 from the collection of Ken Duxbury.



Above:
Bougainvillea Rest House,
framed by creeper-clad arch.

Right:
1911 Plan of the Botanical
Gardens shortly after the
Bougainvillea Rest House
was built.



to highlight entry to the rest houses and to mark points of transition. They served to create ‘doorways’ between one outdoor room and the next. When seen from a distance they created a sense of anticipation and expectation in the minds of visitors walking along the paths. Further the archways also served to frame the initial view and support climbing plants that created foreground interest in a picturesque scene.

The importance which Guilfoyle attached to these archways is emphasized by the frequency with which they are referred to in his *Descriptive Guide* (c.1908) to the Gardens. In his description of the route traversing the Northern Lawn towards the Lake Brink Walk he writes that:

Continuing our journey, we pass under one of the many large arches which have been placed in various parts of the Gardens for training climbing and creeping plants upon and at the same time effecting breaks in path lines.ⁱⁱ

By ‘breaks in path lines’ Guilfoyle presumably means breaks in visual continuity at points of transition; but he may also have meant that the arches tended to cause pedestrians to slow down and perhaps pause briefly to admire the views – especially when the creepers and climbing plants were in flower.

According to Pescottiⁱⁱⁱ the iron archway appears to have been introduced into the Gardens during the Mueller era (1857-1873) and it is a tribute to Guilfoyle’s special genius

that he was able to incorporate them so effectively into his comprehensive plan to transform the Melbourne Gardens into one of the world's greatest nineteenth century botanic gardens.

Unfortunately many of the archways have since been removed, possibly because their significance as key elements in Guilfoyle's plan to create a carefully controlled visual experience was not always fully understood – although it is clear that Pescott (Director from 1957 until 1970) did so when he wrote that the archways were used for training climbing plants upon and also for marking the entrance of a different section of the Gardens.^{iv}

Happily however, about ten of the archways still remain. They seem to have developed a sort of impervious crust of rusty corrosion which forms a protective layer preventing further deterioration so that, despite well over a century of exposure, they are still generally in very sound condition with an attractively mellowed and patinated appearance.

The Bougainvillea Rest House

In 1896 the Yarra River was straightened to alleviate flooding, and the former river bend area was added to the Gardens and gradually landscaped over the next decade. In 1906 a new pavilion, known as the Bougainvillea Rest House was constructed where the circuit path and the new Long Island path separated from the 'A' Gate entrance path.

There was an obvious need for a pavilion in the new northern section of the Gardens as the nearest existing shelters were the Separation Tree Rest House, the Rose Pavilion and the Temple of the Winds – all located 300-400m away from the site.

The junction of the two pathways was the obvious and best location for the new pavilion, especially as there were pleasant views across the lake. The narrow approaches from both directions, caused by the way the path was hemmed in on both sides – by the ornamental lake on the south and by Alexandra Avenue and the Yarra on the north – could be turned into an advantage by using dense planting to create a sense of anticipation and expectation and then



a dramatic sense of arrival, revelation and open space when the rest house and its landscaped setting were reached.

The rest house was almost certainly designed by William Guilfoyle, although none of the original plans appear to have survived. It was easily the largest of the Gardens' Rest Houses and with its vaguely gothic (or 'Carpenter's Gothic') character it had many stylistic similarities to the William Tell Rest House on the opposite sides of the lake. It had four entries, each connecting directly to the path by means of a sort of projecting gable. Like the William Tell Rest House the shelter was built of timber with a roof of wooden shingles.

An iron archway was erected at the point of arrival from the Anderson Street Bridge entrance ('A' Gate). The arch could be seen at the end of the narrow, densely planted pathway and the drama of the scene was enhanced by the visual contrast between the curvilinear iron archway and the 'spiky' character of the wooden rest house. The contrast was also heightened by the use of carefully chosen plants – plants with dramatic and colorful flowers and foliage – so as to create a secluded oasis or secret garden.

Guilfoyle's account of the area in the 1909 Guidebook underscores this. Approaching from 'A' Gate he writes:

... A dense mass of vegetation, consisting of *Coprosma Baueriana*, *Corynocarpus laevigatus*, *Pinus insignis*, *Arundo Donax*, *Cordyline australis* near the water's edge, and ornamental trees, shrubs and flowering

C. 1913 post card of the Bougainvillea Rest House unframed by the archway.

Post card from the collection of Ken Duxbury.



Top:
Fern Gully Rest House,
Botanic Gardens 2005.

Above:
William Tell Rest House,
Botanic Gardens 2005.

plants near the front, skirt the pathway on our left. . . . We now pass under a large archway and come to the largest Rest House in the Gardens, known as the Bougainvillea Rest House. It was first opened to the public on 13th July, 1906. Taking the path between the Rest House and the main lake, we notice among the plants grouped on the left side, a few good specimens with coloured foliage, notably *Prunus cerasifera* var. *atropurpurea*, the ‘Persian Purple-leaved Plum’; *Euonymus japonicus variegatus*, the ‘Variegated Japanese Spindle Tree’; *Eleagnus argentea* ‘Silver-leaved Oleander’ North America; *Pittosporum eugenoides variegatum* ‘Variegated New Zealand Hedge Laurel’.

It is likely that at least two of these plants would probably no longer create the same type of visual response on the part of viewers today as they did in 1908. The Persian Purple-leaved Plum has been all too widely used for street planting and the variegated Pittosporum has become a ubiquitous plant for screening flats and villa units from adjoining residential properties. However in 1909 both these plants must have appeared eye-catching, fresh and new.

Which bougainvillea?

Despite his detailed description of plantings in the vicinity, Guilfoyle makes no mention of the bougainvillea that gave the Rest House its name. Perhaps this was because the guidebook was written only two years after the building was constructed so that the climber would not have reached an impressive size.

I have not been able to discover what species of bougainvillea was planted, however I think that it was most likely to have been one of the following:

- *Bougainvillea magnifica* var. *traillii* – a very vigorous, rampant species from the Seychelles Islands with brilliant purple flowers. This species was certainly growing elsewhere in the Gardens in 1908 in a garden bed near the William Tell Rest House.^v
- *Bougainvillea spectabilis* var. *brasiliensis* – a species with masses of purple flowers over several months of the year. This species was

planted at the entrance to the Gardens’ Plant Classification Pavilion.^{vi}

- *Bougainvillea glabra* which was planted in a bed with a group of magnolias close to the fern gully.^{vii} This species originally had purple flowers but various cultivars have flowers of scarlet, orange or white.

Early postcards

Sadly Guilfoyle’s 1909 *Descriptive Guide* does not contain a photograph of the Bougainvillea Rest House. Fortunately however it is the subject on several early postcards. One early postcard in my own collection, entitled Melbourne Botanical Gardens shows the Bougainvillea Rest House framed by the iron archway, with a group of very formally and sun-protectively dressed men, women and children – long skirts, hats and an umbrella. It is easy to imagine the group seeking refuge in the Bougainvillea Rest House and filling it to capacity. This card does not have a dated message or post mark, but it probably dates from shortly after the Rest House was constructed as the archway is not yet covered by a climbing plant.

A second postcard in my collection, titled ‘Shelter House, Botanic Gardens, Melbourne’ has a message dated 15.6.13. It shows that the plant that gave the rest house its name has grown very vigorously indeed and is now clambering over the shingle roof. The card shows the bougainvillea as having red or orange flowers but as the card is ‘colourised’ rather than in natural colour, this should not be given too much credence. (I have seen postcards with agapanthus shown as bright red flowers!)

A misnomer

A new *Descriptive Guide to the Botanic Gardens* was prepared in 1951 by A.W. Jessup (Director 1941-1957). It does not contain a picture of the Bougainvillea Rest House but Jessup writes:

Continuing under another iron archway over which *Bignonia capreolata* (‘Crossvine’) is growing, we come to the Bougainvillea Resthouse. This is a misnomer, since the



Central Lawn (south side); showing Rustic Summer House, Date Palm (*Phoenix dactylifera*) and Palm Lily (*Cordyline australis*). To the right Government House in the distance.

Bougainvillea was found unsuitable, and removed for the benefit of the building.

Bignonia capreolata is a particularly vigorous evergreen climbing plant. With bell-shaped flowers which are reddish brown on the outside, and red and yellow on the inside, it is native to the north eastern region of the United States of America.

Published photographs

In 1949 the Victorian Railways Commissioners (possibly on behalf of the Victorian Government Tourist Bureau) published an illustrated booklet on *Melbourne's Parks and Gardens* providing 'a little gallery of pictures revealing the created loveliness of the city's open public spaces'. It includes a double-page spread showing the Bougainvillea Rest House viewed through the iron archway and also a picture of a bridge connecting Long Island to the Gardens 'mainland'.

The view of the Rest House is taken from a similar vantage point to that of the c.1909 postcard. The archway is now very densely covered by a vigorous climber (*Bignonia capreolata*) and the adjoining shrubberies are now much higher and denser thus greatly enhancing a sense of anticipation and surprise and creating a pleasing contrast between the shade of the pathway and the sunlight of

clearing around the pavilion. The photograph's caption emphasized these points.

About 1961, a new *Guide Book to the Royal Botanic Gardens* was prepared by R.T.M. Pescott (Director 1957-1970). It did not make any written reference to the Bougainvillea Rest House but the frontispiece showing a full-page illustration of the Rest House with a large, and spectacularly flowering, specimen of *Magnolia soulangeana* in the foreground, suggests the rest house was regarded as one of the most attractive and characteristic features of the Gardens' landscape. It appears from the photograph that by that date the iron archway covered with *Bignonia capreolata* had been removed.

Destruction and replacement

A large branch from the old elm tree fell on the rest house in 1969 and caused severe damage – repair was possibly beyond the capacity and skills of the two staff carpenters and beyond the resources of the Gardens in that period.. The Bougainvillea Rest House was demolished and a new replacement shelter was planned.

The Clematis Shelter was constructed in 1972 to replace the demolished Bougainvillea Rest House. It is a very simple, functional and blandly designed structure that does not have a unique and individual identity. Nor does it



Top:
Clematis Rest House,
Botanic Gardens 2005.

Above:
Rose Pavilion Rest House,
Botanic Gardens 2005.

make a positive contribution to the landscape of the Gardens. For me it creates a sense of anti-climax and disappointment and is of very little interest.

Concern and growing loss

Concern over the growing loss of historic garden structures emerged in the 1980s and was articulated in the seminal publication *Historic Gardens of Victoria*. The book describes the many threats to Victoria's historic gardens, noting how:

'Certain garden features have been lost through nothing other than old age. Nineteenth century garden buildings were generally of fragile construction and quickly became dilapidated without continual maintenance. Of the thousands of lattice summer houses once found in Victorian gardens there can be only a bare handful left.'^{viii}

On p. 210, the book includes a pair of photos, taken from the same standpoint showing 'the old bougainvillea rest house and its replacement at the Royal Botanic Gardens Melbourne'. The new rest house is clearly much too small, undistinguished and insignificant for its site.

In recent years several of the rest houses and similar structures at the RBG have been restored to something approaching their original condition – the Rose Pavilion (c.1891) was effectively restored in 1994 as was the William Tell Rest House (c.1901). Indeed *The Royal Botanic Gardens, Melbourne Master Plan* (1997) recognizes that the Clematis Shelter is 'plain and lacking the finesse and ornamental interest of the other pavilions' and recommends that it be replaced with a structure which is more picturesque in character. To date there has been no replacement.

A centennial challenge

In general the re-instatement of heritage structures can only be justified on comparatively rare occasions, however I feel strongly the Bougainvillea Rest House is one such case for several compelling reasons.

- It is part of Guilfoyle's unified and harmonious design for the Melbourne Botanic Gardens as a whole.
- It is significant as part of a suite of structures throughout the Gardens - each unique in its own right but all almost certainly designed by Guilfoyle with a sort of familial resemblance.
- It has a special relationship with the William Tell Rest House on the opposite side of the Ornamental Lake – what can be described as a 'stylistic echo'.
- It is a very attractive, functional and welcoming building that clearly demonstrates Guilfoyle's exceptional skill as a designer of garden structures and their setting.
- As the largest and most imposing Rest House in the RBG it can be considered the culmination of Guilfoyle's career as a designer of garden structures.

Next year, 2006, will be the centenary of the original Bougainvillea Rest House's installation, so what about re-instating it?

Ken Duxbury has a keen interest in urban and environmental planning and is a consultant on historic gardens. He has built up a significant collection of early postcards depicting Victorian public gardens.

Endnotes

ⁱ See Suzanne Hunt and Anne Colman 'Turkeith and Mooleric, Birregurra', p.11 in *Australian Garden History* Vol. 15, No. 2, September/October 2003.

ⁱⁱ W R Guilfoyle *Handbook or descriptive Guide to the Botanic Gardens*, Melbourne, J Kemp, Government Printer, Melbourne, 1908, p. 28.

ⁱⁱⁱ R T M Pescott, *W R Guilfoyle 1840-1912: the Master of Landscaping*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1982, p. 73.

^{iv} Ibid.

^v W R Guilfoyle *Handbook or descriptive Guide to the Botanic Gardens*, Melbourne, J Kemp, Government Printers, Melbourne, 1908, p.33.

^{vi} Ibid.

^{vii} Idem p.61.

^{viii} Peter Watts (ed. Margaret Barrett) *Historic Gardens of Victoria: A Reconnaissance*, Oxford University Press, 1983, p.211.