

Profile: Patsy Vizents

AGHS editorial advisory committee member Patsy Vizents works as the heritage officer on Rottnest Island, Western Australia. She finds new challenges and new areas of knowledge very exciting.

Did your working life begin the way you thought it would?

Growing up southwest of Perth in the towns of Bunbury and Busselton, I originally had my heart set on being a scientific illustrator, but there was no training available. Graphic design was the closest thing. During my diploma studies I managed to work with the University of Western Australia and the Western Australian Museum, illustrating teaching aids, publications and scientific papers for lecturers and curators in various departments. However, it was teaching that attracted me, and where I developed my love of history. I eventually taught for 12 years at Perth Technical College in art history, photography, design, and an obscure subject — lettering.

When did gardens come into it?

After teaching I moved to the Art Gallery of Western Australia and was involved with education and management of the voluntary guides, researching the collection and developing tours and talks on many of the travelling exhibitions that were shown in Perth during the early 1990s. Being a nomad by nature, I moved to Sydney and then Melbourne. At the Royal Botanic Gardens I became involved with the Australian Garden History Society.

During my time as a volunteer and exhibitions coordinator with the gardens, I was exposed to plants and garden design and the world of horticulture history, and by that time I had commenced studies in cultural heritage management. At one of the annual Interpretation Australia conferences I met Richard Heathcote, and eventually was enticed to work with him in Melbourne at Como historic house and garden and at Ripponlea, both of which he managed for the National Trust of Australia's Victorian arm.

My work for the National Trust meant full immersion in garden history. The pleasure of working in a 19th century house and garden should never be underestimated, especially when it comes to harvest time. My main activities at the National Trust were developing public programs



Photo: Maggie Bradbury

such as the Slow Food Festival and exhibitions, and managing the volunteer guides, but you get to do everything (and learn a great deal by doing so) with this organisation.

What happened when you went back west?

Returning to Western Australia, I worked in the southeast of Perth at the City of Gosnells as the heritage officer (I was the first heritage officer to be employed by Gosnells), establishing the oral history program and interpretation centre as well as managing the municipal inventory of heritage places. Gosnells was the citrus-growing centre of the Perth area in the 19th and 20th centuries, exporting produce overseas as well as interstate.

Are you doing heritage work now?

Yes — I am the heritage officer on Rottnest Island, about 19 kilometres from Fremantle. The limestone island retreat is a favourite holiday retreat for workers and families of Western Australia.

For more than eight years I have been responsible for the health of the island's cultural heritage. I work on maintenance programs of the heritage built and landscape environments, manage the oral history and photographic collections, and have developed a variety of interpretation products such as theatre, exhibitions and self-guided tours. Researching and gathering the information on buildings and activities on the island is one very important part of the Rottnest Island story. It is Western Australia's premier island tourism destination — the protection and conservation of those stories and sites, and how you interpret and tell the stories, excites me about what I'm doing.

I hope that my experience in historical research, my love of interpretation and storytelling, and my ever-growing interest in garden and landscape history can contribute to *Australian Garden History* for many years to come.