

Gaining a deeper understanding of the gardens at the Port Arthur Historic Site

On a beautiful autumn day in late April 2024, a group of AGHS (Tasmanian Branch) members and friends visited the Port Arthur Historic Site. It was an interesting event curated to showcase parts of the site that many of us may not have been aware of previously. Sue Small reports.

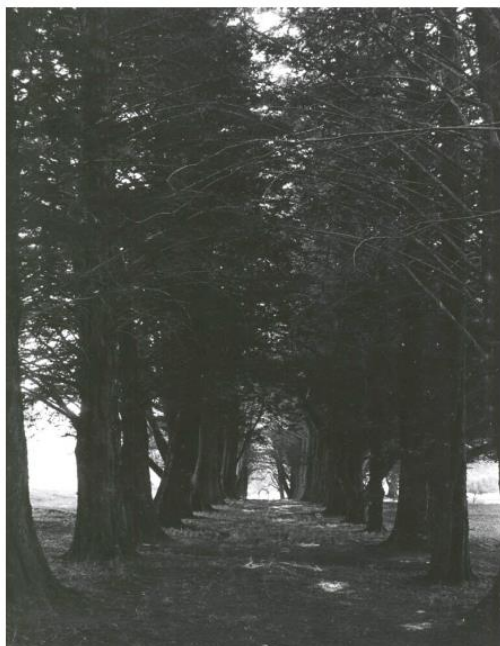


Members enjoy the axial view past the original fountain through the Government Gardens towards Masons Cove at Port Arthur. Photo Sue Small.

During the first part of the day, the group was led by a Port Arthur Historic Site guide with a walk along the replanted Soldiers' Memorial Avenue. A double line of macrocarpas (*Cupressus macrocarpa*) was planted in September 1918 in memory of 17 soldiers from the Carnarvon and Oakwood districts, who served in WW1 and died overseas. They were planted adjacent to the northern side of the separate prison. Over the following years up to 44 trees were planted forming an avenue.

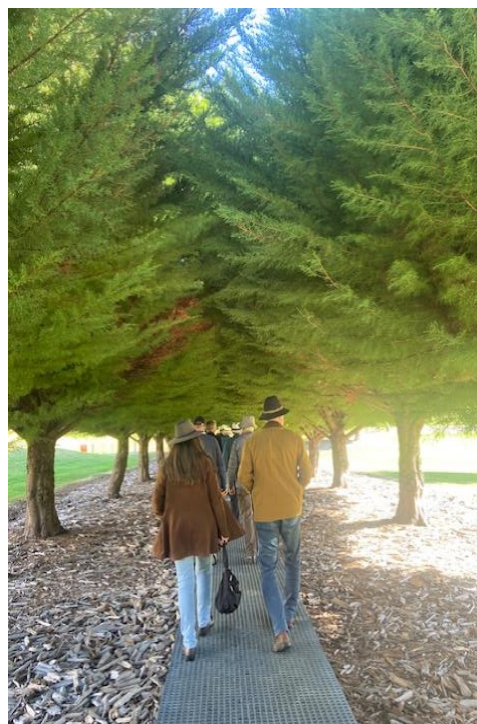
By 2013 several of the trees had been removed due to poor health and it was determined that all the trees would be removed over three periods and replanted over the following five years to 2018 to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the end of WW1. The same tree species was planted.

Discussions ensued among the group on whether replacing with the same tree species, at the same spacing was the best solution for replacement given climate change, the deterioration in the first 20 years of the 21st century. The following images show the Memorial Avenue at 54 years old and how the closely plant replacements have grown over the past six to nine years.



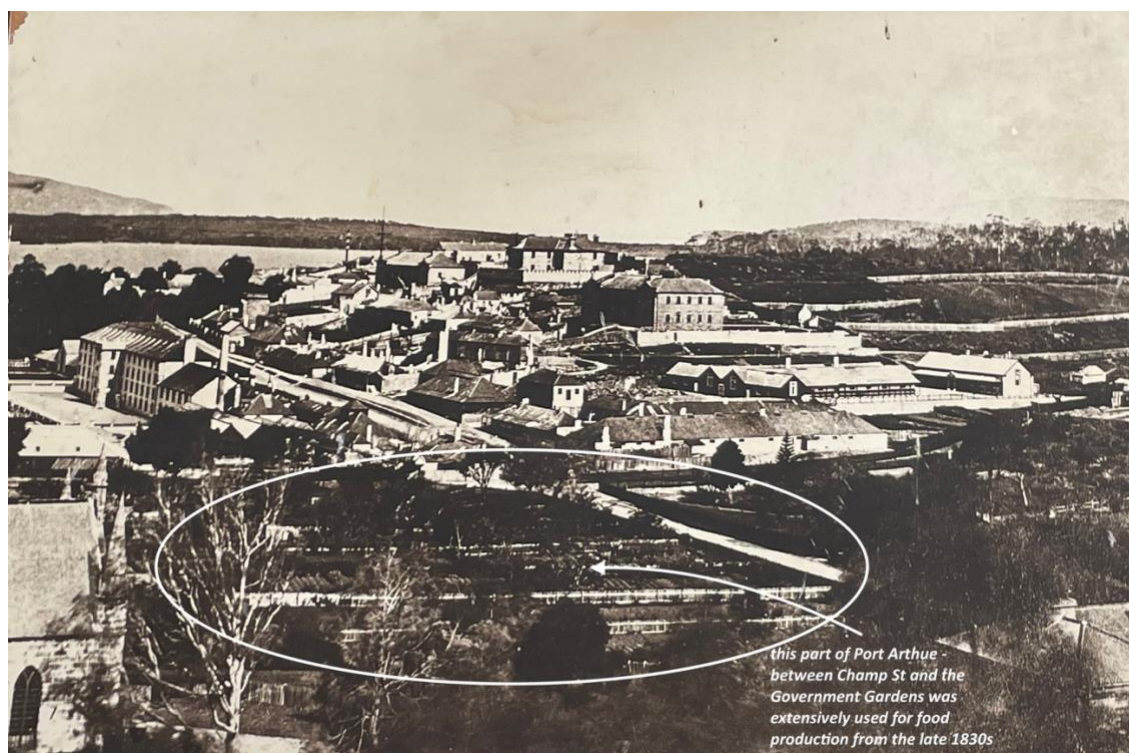
PAHSMA collection:

Frank Bolt 1972



Top left: The Memorial Avenue in 1972. Right: View within the replacement hedgerow.

Wandering towards the grounds of the ruined church we passed a wide, open grassy area providing very little indication of the intensively managed food gardens of the 1830s to 1860s for the whole of the Port Arthur settlement. An image in the guard house adjacent the Penitentiary indicates the density of the site.





Oak avenue.



Blue gums.

Our guide mentioned that most of the buildings were built from four sandstone quarries surrounding Port Arthur. We viewed the Church ruins, then walked down the Oak Drive, which is a mix of several ages of oak (*Quercus* spp.) to the Penitentiary. Below the Commandant's House at least one of the blue gums is thought to have been retained since the establishment of the penal settlement. Several of the existing trees are likely to be descendants of these trees.

Guest speaker

After lunch, we heard from guest speaker Richard Weston, who worked at the Port Arthur site from 2010 to 2015 as head gardener and undertook research and development of two sites –the government gardens and Trentham. He was part of the reconstruction team that determined how the gardens may have looked in the 1850s and 1860s by using archival research, archaeology and pollen analysis. The research established fence lines, paths, drainage systems (shown below), and plant species.

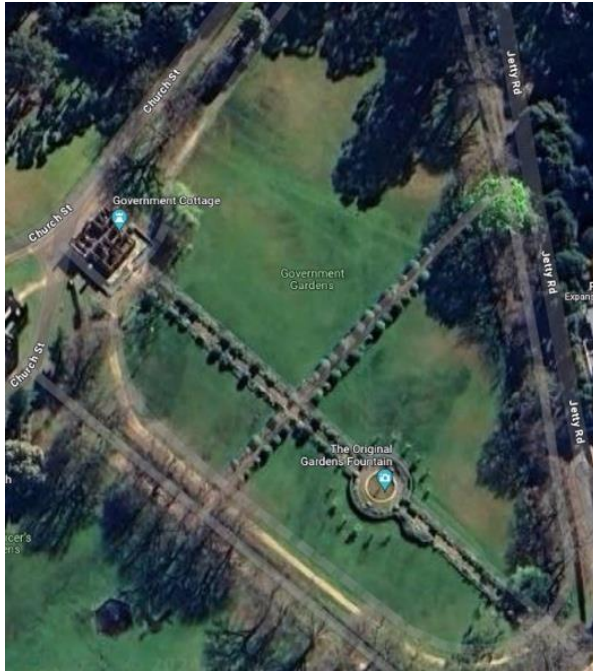
Trentham was a cottage built in 1894 after the convict period. It was lived in by several members of the Trentham family until the 1920. In the front and side gardens of the small cottage are growing typical trees, shrubs, annuals, perennials and groundcovers likely to have been available and planted in the early 20th century, including an orchard of many heritage apple varieties from the late 19th to early 20th century and a wonderful vegetable garden.



The heritage apple orchard and wonderful vegetable garden at Trentham.

Members explored Trentham and the Government Gardens. As noted in the management plan: “In the first few years of the settlement efforts were made to improve the private gardens, which were designed for the pleasure of the military staff, and their wives and families. George Arthur had criticised the state of the gardens in 1832, but by the 1840s they had improved substantially and earned frequent praise from visitors. The Government Gardens were renowned for their flowers and vegetables.”

PAHSMA Landscape Management Plan. Context, Urban Initiatives 2002.



Detail of the planting of the axial paths indicating tough exotic and native plants that could survive the wildlife, hot summers and lack of irrigation at Port Arthur. Nursery catalogues from the 1850s and 1860s were used to determine likely exotic plants of the time including *Viburnum* sp., *Kniphofia* sp., various succulents, *Robinia* sp., and local native blackwoods, and ferns. Pruning and topiarising was popular in this period. The grass would have been scythed by hand. These gardens were in ruin by 1887. Photo Sue Small.

Shown above is an aerial view of the Government Gardens indicating the re-established axial paths leading from Government Cottage to Tarleton Street and Mason Cove. Also shown is the Oak Walk and the wonderful original fountain. Source Google Maps.



This photo shows a detail of the reconstruction of half round brick drains and a stone pit, along the axial paths, based on extant remnants found around the historic site. Photo Sue Small.