

ROSS GARDENS IN SPRING

Australian Garden History Society Tasmania Branch

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From the earliest days of white settlement in Van Diemen's Land, Ross has been a stopping point for travellers. Once, this was for overnight stays on the arduous trip by horse or coach between Launceston and Hobart. Now, taking a deviation from the busy Midlands Highway, Ross is a place to explore. We can learn about convict history, enjoy a walk in the elm lined main street, sample treats from the local bakery or picnic by the Macquarie River. Here, we marvel at the workmanship of the design and carvings on the Ross Bridge, completed in 1836, the third oldest bridge in Australia.

One of the benefits of membership of Australian Garden History Society (AGHS) is the opportunity to explore some of these places more closely. What lies behind that hedge we've driven past so often, or that avenue of stately trees, or an old dry stone wall? We can go beyond the usual tourist sites and see how history, initiative, dedication and passion have shaped the landscape in the last two hundred years. And so, our visit to Ross in the Spring was enlightening and enjoyable, thanks to the generosity of local home and garden owners and the hard work of AGHS organisers, Ian and Leslie. The mild Spring weather, always the unknown variable, was a bonus.

Woodbury House, on the Midland Highway just 6km south of Tunbridge is a fine example of a property that has been lovingly tended, seriously neglected, eroded by resumption for highway development, then brought to new life by its current owners, Allen and Linda Cooper. First settled in 1823 on a 2000 acre land grant, a home was completed for the Harrison family in 1825. In 200 years since, the property has had only five owners including well known Midlands farmers, Headlams and Salmons. Reports indicate that in its early days, and during the stewardship of the Lawrence family in mid 20th century, gardens at Woodbury were quite beautiful. When the current owners acquired the property in 2004, it had been vacant and neglected for 30 years. Trees and shrubs had died or been souvenired or eaten by wandering stock. The house was derelict, in a state of complete disrepair.

For 15 years, restoration of house and garden was undertaken on a fly in – fly out basis from the owners' home in QLD until they finally moved in in 2019. The result is truly impressive, displaying their horticultural and artistic skills and appreciation of the property's heritage value. Many of the 400 trees they have planted, oaks for example, come from seeds they collected from trees that survived decades of neglect. Allen is proud that their efforts have defied the view of respected garden guru, Peter Cundall, that nothing will grow in the trying conditions around Woodbury. He laments the fact

that ‘probably the worst degradation of the gardens was the intrusion of the (Midlands) Highway that resumed the land at the front of the house to the Tin Dish Creek, containing both the orchard and vegetable gardens’. While tree plantings largely hide the passing traffic, although not its noise, the loss of gardens is compensated for by espaliered fruit trees and productive raised vegetable beds in a sheltered and sunny courtyard at the rear of the house. To the north, a grove of surviving elms presents a restful place to wander or sit to contemplate the history of this property and the achievements of its current owners.



Scotch Thistle Inn sits in the heart of the Ross Village. Some of us might recall its life as a restaurant in the 1980’s, a convenient place for residents from Northern and Southern Tasmania to meet for a meal or for meetings. We may not have appreciated then the extent of the rear garden or its early life as an Inn, or even earlier, the location of a tannery. Research indicates that the Inn was built around 1830, licensed to sell liquor in 1832, and as a Coaching Inn in 1840. Known originally as Angel Inn, it was the site of a convict riot on Christmas Day, 1834. Stables, a worker’s cottage and old stone wall are thought to date from its early use as an important stopping point on the journey between Hobart and Launceston. In the 1920’s it was used as a cottage hospital and at other times has been a store, a school, and a restaurant.

The Inn has been the home of Debra Cadogan-Cowper for the past seventeen years. Much of the garden restoration she attributes to her late husband, Geoff. Garden highlights include old trees, a gigantic, nearly 200 year old Napoleon Pear, an elm and a walnut, for example. Sadly, one elm growing dangerously close to the old stables needed to be removed. When AGHS visited, the white facade of the Inn was beautifully highlighted by a mauve wisteria in full bloom. Most of the garden, sheltered by old stone walls, sits behind the Inn, quiet, sunny and private, away from the bustle of tourists. Trees and beds of perennials break up the lawns, inviting visitors to wander, to find what lies in the next bed or in a far corner. Created from a sheep paddock, and despite challenges from possums, the garden is lush with plantings that offer year round colour and interest. At the time of our visit, dogwoods, camellias, iris and hellebores were especially eye catching.



It might not be unreasonable to assume that most visitors passing through villages such as Ross do not stray far from the main street or well defined tracks. Yet, ‘back’ streets often contain hidden gems, justifying the time and effort spent in exploring them. Margaret Kennedy’s garden, across the railway line at **29 Waterloo Street**, is one such gem. Photos show that this colourful garden, with a history of just 35 years, sprang from a bare block denuded of trees. Margaret attributes much of the garden layout and development to previous owners; however, it is clear that its healthy, lush state is due to her efforts and those of her husband, the garden’s ‘hedger and edger’. Margaret came to Tasmania from QLD. She acknowledges the steep learning curve she faced in moving from gardening in the Tropics to managing cold, frosty winters and warm dry summers in Ross. In the front garden, silver birches and oaks provide height and shade. Ixias bloom in clouds of colour. Rocks are placed helpfully in walls and garden edges. Some are thought to have been collected from a local quarry, others from the ruins of old historic buildings in Ross. In the rear garden, a bright contemporary garden room, dedicated to Margaret’s aunt, offers a warm and comfortable spot to read or just relax with a cuppa.



The last of the four gardens on our visit to Ross, **Lochiel**, dates back to the earliest days of European settlement. Built by William Kermode in 1824 as a Georgian Style house, although known as Mona Vale Cottage, the property was held by this family for more than a century. It was sold in 1927 to Eustace Noel Cameron, grandfather of the current owner, and our host, Valerie Le Maître. Her father ran the merino wool and cropping property until he handed management to Valerie in 1995. Although she lived away from the home for nearly 30 years, she had returned with her husband in 1988.

Valerie tells us that she ‘had the good fortune to be tutored by my father to respect the land and I really enjoyed all the challenges – it’s never dull’. She emphasises that Lochiel is her family’s home, a source of contentment, where they and their friends can gather. Her special spot, she says, is the lake in front of the house where she can be free of distractions apart from the birds.

Lochiel’s gardens cover about 2 hectares. The walk to the house is dominated by mature trees and a remarkable row of Cupressus macrocarpa, planted in 1870 and known fondly as the topiary ‘bottle trees’. Tall, stately, and finely trimmed to shape each year, they help to form a screen between the garden and the railway line that was placed directly next to their boundary. Other beautiful ‘screening’ trees include a linden (Tilia) tree planted in 1928 and a huge Cedrus deodara, dating from 1870.

Developments in the garden, dating from Valerie’s return to the property in 1988, include the removal of 12 old and dangerous pine trees to allow more light into the garden; planting an embankment with rhododendrons and azaleas; and converting an old tennis court into a sunken rose garden. Valerie tells us that paeonies do well in their cold winters, attested by some full and beautiful blooms when we visited. Behind the house, an extensive area has been fully enclosed to enable fruit and vegetables to thrive, protected from birds and wild life. Further afield, beyond the area of our visit, Valerie has fenced off areas to encourage regeneration and protection of various forest plants and endangered native wildflowers. It was encouraging to hear how a love of ‘traditional’ European style gardens can also encompass the protection of native plants, so many of which have been lost in the conversion of lands to grazing and cropping.



Our visit to Ross Gardens in the Spring gave us not just a feast for the eyes. The content of our lunch time talk from Dr Jennie Jackson was surprising and unexpected. A retired medical practitioner, Jennie is the great great granddaughter of a convict quarryman – stonemason who arrived in Van Diemen's Land in the same ship as the convict stone carver, Daniel Herbert. Jennie's interest in the bridge began coincidentally when she was majoring in sculpture in a course at the Tasmania School of Arts and crossing the bridge when she was working in Oatlands and Campbell Town.

Jennie's talk was entitled ***The Bisected Orchid***. Her cover slide depicted a photograph of a carving on the bridge, commonly described as a lyre. Not so, says Jennie. This is an orchid and a good example of the metaphoric nature of the carvings on the Ross Bridge. The content of the carvings, Jennie argues, is subversive, lewd, even licentious. They are satiric, ironic, and symbolic, documenting in stone, the truth that could not be told in words. The orchid, for example, sends messages about 'unnatural crimes' between convicts of both genders that were the 'bane' of administrators and Quakers who visited the settlement.

Carvings of animals, plants, wild creatures were all used to depict individuals, especially those disliked, attitudes, activities, or yearnings of convicts. A lion's head, for example, represented the hated Governor Arthur. A branch of a gum tree, where a bough is broken, tells of separation or a life cut short. Oak leaves symbolise home, in this case, England, while the pineapple was a symbol of wealth and prodigality. A representation of King George 3rd is flanked by sheaves of corn. These do not tell of the prosperity of Van Diemen's Land. They represent the Corn Laws which privileged wealthy property owners and traders and led to convictions for stealing for food, then transportation to penal settlements such as Van Diemen's Land.



Jennie's message from her interpretation of the bridge carvings is that they are a unique presentation of the story of a harsh and alien life in a convict settlement far from home. Convicts were largely illiterate and, in any case, would not have the materials to write, or the safety to comment and criticise as they could in carved stonework. Jennie's talk was fascinating to hear, worthy of closer examination via this site:

www.rossbridge.com.au/extracts

In conclusion, the AGHS Tasmania Branch visit to 'Ross Gardens in Spring' was a day well spent. Perhaps just one consideration is missing from the historical content of our day: comment on how the landscape we love and admire might have been valued, interpreted, managed and used by indigenous people before white settlement. I suspect we all have much to learn in that regard; hopefully, that will come.

Compiled by Janet Whelan. With thanks to Kathleen Oakes; notes supplied by Allen Cooper and Valerie Maître; Jennie Jackson's paper accessed on 6 November at www.rossbridge.com.au/extracts

Photographs from members and visitor Annabel Hanke