

## Trees and Commemoration – Honour Avenues in WA

John Stephens

As Australian and other British Empire troops retreated from the Gallipoli peninsula in 1915, Padre Dexter wandered amongst the graves, which dotted the Gallipoli terrain and scattered wattle seeds. In his words this was so that “a little bit of Australia would be left behind”. It is often overlooked that during and after the First World War an enormous amount of plant material (including trees) went between the battlefields of Gallipoli, the Middle East, Europe and Australia. Plants and seeds went both ways across the world.

Trees, plants and flowers have always had an important part in the way that we commemorate the living and the dead.

During the First World War Soldiers regularly received parcels and letters with sprigs of wattle and other flora as reminders of home. Wattle was favourite and it became a de facto national flower. Many of the seeds from foreign battlefields and cemeteries that were sent to Australia were germinated and planted in Municipal Gardens all over the country. Also seeds were sent to battlefield sites from Australian municipal gardens. For example, in 1925 the Subiaco Municipality sent seeds of acacias, eucalypts and grevilleas from their nursery in Rankin Gardens to Gallipoli for planting in Australian cemeteries.

Perhaps the most famous seedlings to be trafficked to Australia were pinecones from Gallipoli. While there are two famous stories about how the so called Gallipoli Pine came to Australia, it appears that many soldiers sent pine seeds or cones to relatives in Australia. Newspapers sometimes gave readers advice on how to germinate pine seeds sent from relatives at Gallipoli.

None of these were actually from the lone pine tree at Gallipoli and it appears that the majority of Gallipoli Pines in Australia are Aleppo pines and not native to the Anzac area at Gallipoli. Even the pine tree growing at Lone Pine Cemetery at ANZAC at Gallipoli is a Stone Pine (*Pinus pinea*) and not the original native species, which is *Pinus brutia* or the Turkish Red Pine.

Despite their unreliable provenance, Gallipoli Pines have become a major tree for commemorative sites in Australia and New Zealand and have become a major and revered part of our commemorative heritage.

In this context it can be established that trees can have special commemorative meaning. Perhaps the most visible manifestation of this is the honour avenue. While monuments dominate as commemorative symbols, trees also have a significant claim on the heritage of Australian war commemoration. A drive through the Honour Avenues scattered throughout Australia reinforces the perception that trees are powerful commemorative objects. In an honour avenue each tree stands for the life of a serviceman or woman that has died for their country. Unlike the hard stone of a monument, trees are living and symbolically grow in the stead of the dead soldier.

The planting of trees by relatives of the dead is a form of funeral. Unlike a stone memorial, trees may die and return to the earth. With all commemorative vegetation there is an emphasis on the fragility of life and the constant regeneration of nature that calls to mind the Christian concept of resurrection. Flowers and foliage are popularly used as tribute to the dead. Just look at a memorial on Anzac Day and the mass of flowers that surrounds it.

Western Australia does not appear to have built as many war related honour avenues as Victoria for example, where they apparently originated. The actual number of avenues, groves and other related collections of commemorative trees that have been planted in Western Australia are unknown as some avenues have disappeared because trees have died or the name or significance of the avenue has been lost. Sometimes only the name 'memorial avenue' remains to indicate that commemorative trees might have once lined the street.

For example the memorial avenue at Wyalkatchem appears to have disappeared with only a plaque hidden on the side of a building to claim its former existence. This is the only evidence available to indicate that the Wyalkatchem Koorda Road was an honour avenue planted with trees to commemorate dead soldiery.

The ongoing war memorials project at Curtin University has counted about 23 avenues or groves planted in Western Australia since the First World War. Other groups such as Tree Net have identified 27. The Curtin project was primarily concerned with monumental memorials so it did not go too deeply into herbaceous forms of commemoration. Probably many more still remain to be discovered. These also do not reflect other forms of civilian honour avenues such as the Fraser Avenue trees planted in 1937 which is related to the 1929 centenary celebrations in Western Australia.

Unlike a stone memorial, green memorials such as Honour Avenues and commemorative trees require water and gardening skill if they are to be kept alive. Not all municipalities have the resources of Kings Park to maintain Honour Avenues. Since water scarce is in Western Australia, growing trees en-masse can be daunting and in many avenues trees have died, often obliterating the avenue. The species of tree grown was also important and sometimes there were arguments on the national symbolism of native species over foreign exotics.

Several avenues in Western Australia were planted in pine echoing the Gallipoli Pine – one of these this was the 1920 Bicton Honour Avenue. These trees were removed in the 1980s for road widening and currently eucalypts replace them. Another is the Honour Avenue at Balingup which consists of oaks planted in 1932 in the presence of military luminary Field Marshall William Birdwood.

In celebration of our 'Britishness' good English oak was used in the planting of the May Drive Honour Avenue in Kings Park in 1919. Of course these were not suited to the climate and soon died. Others planted in their place also died before the present native species were finally planted – at least satisfying the dictates of climate as well as nationalism.

In Albany the (now decommissioned) honour avenue on Middleton Road was originally planted with 112 Red Flowering Gums, which subsequently died, and these were replaced with plane trees. Most of these have also died and only about 19 remain – one original red Flowering Gum remains.

The 1921 Middleton Road Honour Avenue was superseded in 1956 by the Apex Avenue of honour planted on the approach to the Desert Mounted Corps memorial on Mount Clarence. The best trees for the location were researched and the 250 NSW Swamp Mahogany trees were planted in two rows either side of the drive. These appear to be thriving, proving that good research can pay off.

Honour groves are related to honour avenues and serve a similar purpose to individually honour the fallen. Perhaps the most evocative of these is the Grove of Unforgotten at

Araluen near Armadale. Built in 1933 this was memorial to the 89 dead of the Young Australia League (YAL) and consists of 89 pencil pines planted in the shape of an ancient lyre, symbolising the YALs love of music. The type of pine used was an Italian Cypress which, (according the YAL) was supposed to be the same family as the Gallipoli pine.

A well-hidden honour avenue is the Chidlows Memorial Avenue planted after the Second World War in 1949. Another post World War Two Avenue was planted in 1958 in the suburb of Carlisle in association with a rose garden. Both these appear to be intact but not widely recognised as avenues honouring the dead in war.

We do not yet appear to be finished with Honour Avenues as a form of commemoration and a number have been constructed recently including the HMAS Sydney Memorial Drive in Carnarvon planted in 2001. This consists of 645 palm trees each representing an Australia sailor who died in a mutually destructive battle with the HSK Kormoran off the coast of Western Australia in 1941.

I think that there are deep reasons for using trees for commemoration that springs from our primordial and symbiotic relationship with trees and vegetation in general. There is a reciprocal relationship between trees and humans that is very ancient and the idea of the pastoral and all its symbolic power has a strong grasp on our collective psyche. Honour Avenues successfully tap into these relationships.

However tree memorials are much more fragile than traditional monumental memorials and they require a much greater effort to build and maintain. They can disappear very quickly and locating them can be a frustrating experience. However they are as much a part of honouring the sacrifice of war dead as monumental memorials and deserve as much consideration.

**Paper presented at the 2013 Australian Garden History Society & UWA Tree Forum.**