

# Cultural Landscapes Past and Present

*Over the weekend of April 9-10, a group of AGHS members explored part of Tasmania's East Coast. Janet Whelan reports on the tour and changes to the landscape.*

As gardeners, I think we develop a sound sense of past and present: the way our garden looked when we planted our first shrubs, its lushness and overcrowding years later; changes brought about by discovering 'new' plants that had to be incorporated into the garden; or perhaps just memories of seasons past when growing conditions were easier than we experience now with the threat and devastation of floods, drought and fire. Changes to land use that I observed on the East Coast some years ago alerted me to the fact that landscapes and land use are not constant.

During the 1970s, we visited a block on the outskirts of Swansea. We camped, admired the changing colours in uninterrupted views of the Freycinet Peninsula, walked, with the farmer's permission, through sheep paddocks to reach the beach. We watched for birds in the majestic eucalypt that stood guardian at the front gate, and admired the craftsmanship in the drystone wall that ran along our block and beyond. We learned that it was best to swim in the morning as strong, cold, sea breezes were a common feature of afternoons in Swansea. Quite suddenly, it seemed, all this changed (except, of course, the afternoon winds). The property and surrounding farmland were sold, the eucalypt was removed, the drystone wall dismantled, views were visible only between walls of large houses that subsumed almost all the land: restful, productive rural land adopted a feel of encroaching suburbia.

## **Tasmanian Bushland Garden**

The AGHS visit to the East Coast provided other insights into the way land has been shaped and reshaped since early colonial times. Our first stop, the Tasmanian Bushland Garden at Buckland, is a constructed garden. Developed largely by volunteers as a Regional Botanic Garden, it reflects a growing interest in, and appreciation of, our indigenous plants and communities. Opened in April 2010 after a decade of landscaping, fencing and planting, the development was driven by the Australian Plants Society and other advocates of native gardens.



**Tasmanian Bushland Garden, Buckland Tasmania. Photo Tasmanian Bushland Garden**

Now, it is possible to wander on walking trails, admire a nature themed sculpture, a spider or an eagle perhaps, and enjoy the diversity of established plantings. A gentle climb to a hilltop reveals a northerly vista of bushland and clearings. We know that the latter are probably pastures for grazing sheep, or vineyards, and we must ignore the winding bitumen highway. Is it possible then to imagine the land as the original inhabitants managed and respected it with clearings to lure wildlife for hunting?

### **Spring Bay Mill**

Two locations north of the garden at Buckland have formed strong links with indigenous people to understand and adopt, where appropriate, ancient cultural approaches to land use. At Triabunna, Spring Bay Mill was once the site of the largest wood chip mill in the world. After years of controversy, the mill was closed and the site is now in private hands. Since 2018, it has been undergoing a process of remarkable transformation and repurposing. Marcus Ragus, head horticulturist, told us of connections forged with descendants of the Great Oyster Bay people. They are consulted about land management, cultural burnings, preservation of native vegetation and 'planting with purpose'.

The approach to gardening at Spring Bay Mill is one of sustainability. The industrial site included huge quantities of bitumen and concrete, much of which has been removed to make way for landscaping and plantings. This is an area of low rainfall and strong winds. Plants must be able to flourish without water after a 'settling in' period. This means selecting plants that are native to the area and the coast north to Sydney.

Native grasses and small creeping herbaceous plants have been selected for their soil binding qualities, resistance to the strong winds and capacity to smother weeds. Likewise, gravel mounds have been positioned and planted with trailing plants to deflect the winds. Trees native to the area but threatened, including *Eucalyptus globulus* and *E. viminalis*, are especially treasured. A *Banksia serrata* showing its old age in a gnarled trunk stands proudly at the entry to a venue, the Banksia Room, with pathways built to showcase and protect it.



Marcus Ragus designed the landscape at Spring Bay Mill and acted as guide for AGHS members.  
Photo Antonia Dunne



**Wind-resistant plantings of native grasses at Spring Bay Mill are part of the recent sustainable plantings.**  
**Photo John Whelan**

### **Kelvedon**

Further north, 'Kelvedon', has been the home of the Cotton family for six generations. In 1828, Francis Cotton, his wife, Anna Maria, and five children, arrived in Hobart Town. They decided not to travel on to New South Wales, instead taking up land near Waterloo Point (now Swansea). Here, their friend, Dr George Story, was surgeon at the military station. He was also a botanist involved in developing what became the Royal Tasmanian Botanical Gardens.

It is thought that he played some part in laying out gardens at 'Kelvedon', including planting medicinal herbs. Today, while there is evidence of early garden design, the eye is drawn to the homestead. Started simply with four rooms, using blue gum logs for 'foundations' and framing and Oyster Bay pine for floorboards, it is easy to see how this house evolved with rooms and verandahs added to meet the needs of a large family.





**Gravestones at Kelvedon. Photo Antonia Dunne**

At the rear of the house, the shearing shed stands solidly in its original form, timber construction, bedecked with spider webs on every beam. Bales of wool testify to the continuing history of raising sheep on this property. Adjacent paddocks, now lush vineyards planted from 1998, are an example of how diversity has become a core practice in farming.



**Kelvedon is now part of a vineyard. Photo Kelvedon Estate website**

‘Kelvedon’ offers another insight into the way many landowners are now taking their responsibility seriously for stewardship of the land they or their families acquired. In 2021 the Cotton family placed more than 1200ha of their land under conservation covenant with management by the Tasmanian Land Conservancy (TLC). Known as the Kelvedon Hills, this land is the home of extensive

eucalypt forests, including the threatened *E. globulus*, and supports 40 rare and threatened bird and animal species. Like Spring Bay Mill, TLC works closely with Indigenous people to identify species and to practise land management that will conserve the environment into the future.

### **Glen Gala and Gala**

Around Cranbrook, north of Swansea, hillsides of vineyards and wineries demonstrate again how land use on the East Coast has changed and evolved since colonial times. Like 'Kelvedon', the neighbouring properties, 'Glen Gala' and 'Gala', date back to the 1820s. After Adam Amos Senior had explored land north of Swansea with fellow settler, George Meredith, the Amos families moved north to land adjoining the Swan River. Here at 'Glen Gala' they established three homes (the first two were destroyed by fires).

With the help of many labourers, an extensive garden was established. Gums and pine trees were planted to form windbreaks, along with a hawthorn hedge, orchards, vegetable gardens, roses, bulbs and annuals. Wheat was grown with sufficient yields to send to the goldfields of Victoria. Cider was made on the property and stored in a substantial cellar accessed via a ramp to a low set door, still visible today. In the past 50 years, vineyards have taken over from grazing sheep for wool and fat lambs as the major farming activity. Very little of the original garden remains although pleasant gardens and lawns surround the old home.



**The Mill at Gala erected in 1842. Photo Antonia Dunne**

Next door, at 'Gala', a homestead was built in the 1840s by James Amos (the eldest son of Adam Amos Senior). Like 'Kelvedon', there is evidence of incremental changes as the homestead evolved: variations in rooflines and use of different building materials. Among a range of outbuildings, the surviving red brick mill erected in 1842, including its original timber waterwheel, is of special interest. Damaged in floods in 1929 some of the building has been demolished however the remains are a stately reminder of the importance of grain growing in this area in the 19th century.

A drystone wall at the back of 'Gala' homestead is thought to be a more recent addition to the property but there are substantial trees and creepers that may well date from early days. These include a sprawling oak, a horse chestnut, poplars, magnolia, camellias and wisteria, reminders of how early settlers tried to bring familiarity to their new homes through selection of Northern Hemisphere plants.

The final historic property in our visit was a sad sight, some would say depressing. It was 'Cambria', built in the 1830s by the notable early settler George Meredith. A simple, single storey homestead at its front, it rose to three floors at its rear and housed around 30 rooms. Built by former convict, William Bull, this aspect is perhaps as formidable as its owner was known to be.

Once, cottage gardens, fruit trees and other trees surrounded this property, tended by George Meredith's wife, Mary, and enjoyed in walks by the artist, Louisa Anne Meredith. Today, there is little evidence of the more 'gentle' plants that have disappeared through drought and lack of care. Pine trees, pepper trees, pittosporums, grasses in gutters and weeds of all varieties are the survivors and the invaders.

'Cambria' is the subject of a controversial planning application for large-scale development. Whatever the result, gardeners and historians alike would hope that restoration of the house and garden would be part of the outcome. Culturally and historically, both are too significant to lose.

While the East Coast visit concentrated on historical properties and included informative talks by historian Malcolm Ward and a visit to the East Coast Heritage Museum, one garden showcased the work of just 20 years. On the edge of Swansea township, Penny and Nick Green have a garden which has evolved as they have understood the conditions of the site. Winds are managed by retaining established eucalypts and blackwoods and the low, unreliable rainfall has been considered in choosing plants. Some areas of the garden are clearly defined with flourishing roses, camellias and other exotics in room-like spaces. Other areas planted with natives are places to ramble and admire the views across to Freycinet Peninsula. Once owners of the local hardware store and garden centre, Penny and Nick muse over the fact that many of their plants were ones that struggled in their store. Relocated to their own garden, they have flourished under their care.

This weekend on the East Coast was pleasurable intense. With a strong historical focus, we saw homes and gardens as they were and have become, all subject to cultural and physical changes. Were we to visit again in a few years, I expect we would see more evidence of change. Some we might admire and enjoy; other aspects might arouse feelings of sadness and regret.

In 2017, in the first edition foreword of *Houses & Estates of Old Glamorgan*, Chris Tassell wrote: "The beautiful landscape of Tasmania's east coast has been spared much of the pressures of development...". In the second edition, in 2021, he added: "This is anything but the case now. Threats to buildings - or the cultural landscapes in which they sit inextricably linked, now regularly make the headlines of the state's news media...".

We must wait to see what unfolds. We must also be vigilant, hoping that developments will enhance and preserve, not destroy or diminish, a beautiful landscape and its history, ancient and recent.