

VILLA ALBA: 44 Walmer Street, Kew

The Garden: A Report from Dr. James Broadbent, 2005

Villa Alba's garden is a reconstruction, but in its design it is as accurate to its late nineteenth century form as the available evidence and Xavier College's requirements, allowed.¹ This is so, despite the 1890s garden having been progressively destroyed, built on and reformed as a hospital garden during the third quarter of last century, as a glance at a twentieth century aerial photograph makes clear.²

In turn this hospital garden, which declined rapidly following the retirement of Emilio Cairo in 1989,³ lost its logic and 'reason for being' in 2001: with the demolition of the hospital buildings, the garden beds which had flanked them lacked foci. Transplanting proved a failure, with only one palm surviving relocation. The attendant removal of large areas of contaminated soil and the use of the land as a site office and access for Xavier's building program next door, further decreased the possibility of archaeological evidence remaining. Yet, with its combination of preserved architectural and some archaeological features, and a largely accurate re-created form, Villa Alba's new garden is a major interpretational component of the property which allows the visitor to comprehend its original design and functions and provides an essential historical context for the house as a major suburban villa.

Features of Heritage Significance

1 Architectural Features

- The remains of the conservatory
- The fish pond with remnant urns
- The area retaining wall
- The eastern area steps, piers, remnant urns and retaining wall
- Iron bar and hare and rabbit proof fences

2 Archaeological Features

- Foundations of the privy and evidence of adjacent paths and paving
- Foundations of the western gatehouse
- Foundation holes of the summer house
- Evidence of paths to the west and south of eastern lawn

¹ J. Broadbent, Villa Alba, Kew. Garden Plan and Plant List, November 2002 and Villa Alba, Kew. Garden Plan for land shared with Xavier College, December, 2002.

² Aerial Survey, 13/11/1953, reproduced as fig 2.2 in M. Atkinson, Villa Alba Landscape Reconstruction, Archaeological Test Excavations. A report to the Villa Alba Museum Inc and Heritage Victoria, 18 April 2002, p 10 Report 1.

³ Notes of interview with late E. Cairo, 9/5/2001 by J. Serle, Villa Alba Records.

- Evidence of path on west of northern lawn
- Evidence of tiles edging beds to south-east shrubbery, and largely intact tile, not in situ south of house. Further evidence appears probably to have been largely destroyed during reconstruction
- Bases of east and west Nolan Street gate post bases

Garden Reconstruction

The reconstruction of the garden is based on features and evidence, of varying degrees of detail: of existing features; archaeological features; documentary evidence; photographic evidence and oral evidence. The analysis of this evidence was supplemented by reference to contemporary practice of garden design, detail and planting.

Historically the garden consists of five areas and it should be noted that the numbering which identifies those areas in this report, does not coincide with that in other reports where, for good reasons, different divisions were more logical, e.g. who will control the area; who pays for works, archaeological requirements etc. To identify areas in the archaeological reports by number the reader should consult the plan in each report to locate the area under discussion. For example, M. Atkinson, Report 1, 18 April 2002, fig 3.1, p 12. The five historic areas are:

1. the front (south) flower garden
2. the south east shrubbery
3. the east lawn
4. the north back garden and fernery
5. the west privy, fish pond and conservatory area

1 The Flower Garden

No physical evidence remained other than the fragments of the boundary woven wire fence and outer iron bar fence, and one wooden garden tile revealed during archaeology (not in situ).

In this area the layout is taken totally from the surveyor's field book as redrawn by surveyors, Adshead & McQuie Pty. Ltd. in 2001.⁴ No attempt was made to correct the geometry, assuming the field book dimensions to be accurate. The raising of the central bed is based on the oral evidence of Mr. Robert Fripp, a grandson of the second owner, who visited the property in March 2004 to see Broadbent, together with reference to contemporary nineteenth century practice.

⁴ Adshead & McQuie, Plan of Compilation of Field Records dated 1894 and 1911, August 2001. Villa Alba Records. For source material for Compilation, see VPRS 8600/P1, Unit 54, Field Book 946, 1894, pp 53, 75-77, 87 and VPRS 8600/P1, Unit 97, Item 1645, p 8, 1911. Villa Alba Records.

2 The South East Shrubbery

The layout is based on archaeological evidence and on photographic evidence,⁵ informed and supplemented by reference to contemporary 19th century practice. Archaeological evidence provided the exact site of the summer house and confirmed the outlines of the beds towards the south east corner and adjacent (south) to the summer house.⁶

The 1890s photograph provided the design of the summer house, the nature of the planting and the use of edging tiles to the beds.⁷ The survival of the wire fence and house features enabled some planar tabulation from the photograph (see drawings made by Broadbent in the Villa Alba Records), determining large shrubs/trees and the extent of the early cypress hedge.⁸

The Fripp photographs of c.1945, reproduced as figs 40, 41 in P. Sanderson's Conservation Analysis of 1989, confirmed the survival of the edging tiles, and therefore the original layout of beds, into the 1940s and gave the outlines of beds to the south of the summer house site.

Overlaying of the aerial photographs of 1931, 1945 and 1953,⁹ gave a composite image of the layout of the shrubbery with approximate disposition and size of beds. Growth of plants, shadows and the scale of the photographs limited the accuracy of this plan but affirmed the character of the layout. This layout was then refined by use of the 1890s photograph and the Fripp photographs, and then by applying contemporary 19th century design usage. Lastly, owing to the timing and development of the exercise, the projected design was verified, at least in part, by the chance survival and identification, archaeologically, of two sections of residual evidence of the wooden tiles edging the beds. This required slight realignment in places of the layout on site (by up to approximately one foot).

Modifications were made in the design of the central bed in this area, incorporating a grassed area and eliminating some tile edging from the final plan, to accommodate the needs of Xavier's kindergarten.¹⁰

⁵ Photograph, Austral Art Bromide Co., Imperial Institute Series, c. 1890, reproduced as fig 8, in P. Sanderson, *Villa Alba Conservation Analysis*, 1989.

⁶ M. Atkinson, Report 1, pp 6, 14-16, 21-22, pls 3-6, 8, 9. (NB pl 9 is mislabelled as Area 4 in Report 1) and M. Atkinson, *Villa Alba Landscape Reconstruction. Archaeological Test Excavations Phase 2*, October 2002, pp 6, 14, 22, figs 4.3, 5.1; pls 2, 3,4, Report 2. See also VPRS, 8600/PI, Unit 54, Field Book 946, 1894, p 77 and Item 1645, 1911, p 8.

⁷ Tiles are visible through the southern gateway in the south east, fig 34 in Sanderson.

⁸ J. Broadbent, Drawings, 2001. Villa Alba Records.

⁹ Aerial photograph, 1931, neg 2743, Connell Wagner; aerial photograph, 1945, appears as fig 39 (Dept. Cons. Forests & Lands) in P. Sanderson, *Villa Alba Conservation Analysis*, 1989, but attributed in Sanderson's list of sources to Dept of Property & Services; aerial photograph, 5/11/1953, fig 2.2, Atkinson, Report 1.

¹⁰ See J. Broadbent, *Plan for Land Shared with Xavier College*, cited in note 1, for modifications to a solid shrubbery bed in south east.

3 The East Lawn

In this area, which is partly edged on the west by a retaining wall, James Broadbent decided, after inspecting and measuring the distance of the wall from Villa Alba, to amend the Adshead & McQuie compilation plan to accurately reflect the position of the southern end of the retaining wall. The original surveyor apparently and mistakenly, measured the location of the wall from the outer instead of the inner edge at its southern end.

The survival of stone steps leading from the area east of the house to the lawn, suggested an adjacent path, which was confirmed archaeologically, to run parallel to the house southwards, joining a surviving concrete covered path running east/west in this area.¹¹

The cypress hedge (see 1890s photograph) appeared to border this path. Archaeology revealed the gravel beneath the concrete to be consistent with other early paths. This is the only section of path to have survived the hospital reconstruction of the site.

The south/north return of the hedge visible in the 1890s photograph did not meet Xavier's requirements for supervision of children and was eliminated from the design. The lawn, which sits on land reconstituted after the removal of contaminated soil, is based on contemporary nineteenth century practice in garden design which also happened to meet Xavier's requirements.

4 The Back or North Garden and Fernery

The layout follows the surveyor's field book and was partly confirmed archaeologically north-west of the north-west corner of the retaining wall and at the gatehouse.¹² Archaeological investigation was limited owing to the substantial prior removal of contaminated soil from the eastern section of this area during Xavier's control of the site. Evidence as to the composition and level of the gravel path surface derives from archaeology just north of privy area.¹³ The flat-laid and sawtooth brick edgings derive from the Fripp photographs,¹⁴ no archaeological evidence of post holes of the pergola was found, although a number of visitors, including Robert Fripp and Diana Allen clearly remember it. A surviving wisteria close to the site of the pergola may descend from the plant which covered it. The site of the pergola appears to have been deeply excavated to accommodate major hospital services in the 1950s. The footings of the western gatehouse were uncovered and then back-filled during decontamination/remediation works (which were supervised by archaeologist, S. George, in April 2002), at the same time as the Nolan Street

¹¹ Atkinson, Report 1, pp 13-14, pls 1, 2; Report 2, Oct. 2002, pp 12, 13, 18, 22, p 11.

¹² VPRS, 8600/P1, pp 53, 75. Atkinson, Report 1, pp 12, 17-18, pl 7.

¹³ Atkinson, Report 1, p 17, pl 7.

¹⁴ Sanderson, Villa Alba Conservation Analysis, figs 18, 35.

gate post bases were located, thus confirming evidence as to the location of the gates.¹⁵

5 Privy, Fish Pond and Conservatory Area

Archaeology is incomplete in this area. Limited work has been carried out on the privy site, with the following results:

- Brick foundations consistent with being the remains of a two-seater privy block, known to have been located in this area,¹⁶ were found.
- Nine postholes consistent with a documented octagonally-shaped structure were located, as well as vestiges of what was possibly a gravel path.
- A gravel surface consistent with having been part of a path was located adjacent to the east face the conservatory at a depth of 8 cm below current ground surface.
- An east/west trench dug south of the fish pond and north of the conservatory revealed alternating red and yellow tiles, consistent with those surviving east of the mansion, and consistent with a notation in the 1894 field book (p. 76). Archaeological work is still required on the conservatory remains. With the exception of a privet hedge and minor planting against the Walmer Street fence, no works, such as remediation of levels, relaying of tiles and paths, or planting, have been undertaken in this area. The cesspit site has still to be dug out.¹⁷

6 Planting as at 19/7/2001 and later

The courtyard and perimeter gardens of the hospital wards were well gardened with an interesting variety of trees, shrubs and herbaceous plants, many traditional species and cultivars as well as modern, during Emilio Cairo's term as gardener between 1964 and 1986. Between 1986 and 2001 the garden lost much of its horticultural richness. Many plants were lost during the demolition of the hospital which impinged on bordering beds: and the removal of contaminated soil, and drought took their toll. Nonetheless herbaceous survivors appropriate to a nineteenth century garden were saved with the help of the contractor: *Acanthus mollis*, *Aucuba japonica*, *Agapanthus praecox*, *Bamboo* sp., *Camellias*, *Chlorophyton comosum*, *Dracaena* sp., *Dietes*, *Impatiens* sp., *Plectranthus* sp. and species *Rhododendrons* are a major component in the present landscape.

¹⁵ S. George. An Archaeological Monitoring Program of the Northern Garden Area of Villa Alba, Victoria, May 2002, pp 7-9, 19, pls 1-17; VPRS, 8600/P1, FB 946, pp 53, 57.

¹⁶ Photograph, PRO, series 10516/P, Unit 7, reproduced in Atkinson, Report 2, fig 5.4; Aerial survey, 13/11/1953, in Atkinson, Report 2, fig 2.1.

¹⁷ For this area see Atkinson, Report 2, pp 4, 6, 9, 12, 15-17, 20, 21, 23-25.

The only tree that may possibly have survived from the Greenlaw's time is the fruiting fig against the area wall near the privy site. The ginkgo at the south east corner of the house does not date to the early phase of the house although it does appear to predate the hospital garden. It is of some horticultural interest.

As many trees as possible have been retained in the garden reconstruction – for their amenity or aesthetic value, not for any heritage significance.

7 The Replanting of the Garden

Little evidence as to the original planting of the garden has been found.

The surveyors' field books provide no information, and the 1890s photograph shows only the character of the planting of the shrubbery, apart from the substantial cypress hedge, which framed the eastern lawn on the south and east.¹⁸

In the absence of specific evidence it was decided to 'furnish' the reconstructed layout only with plants that could be verified as being available in the late nineteenth century in Melbourne – particularly by reference to the compendium of Melbourne nursery catalogues, M. Brookes and R. Barley, *Plants listed in Nursery Catalogues in Victoria, 1855-1889* and to the appendices to A. Ryan's (1997) *Report on Toorak Gardens 1850-1896*, Melbourne University.

Apart from the significances of the individual features listed, the heritage significance of the late twentieth century garden at Villa Alba, was negligible, and when the hospital wards and offices went, it was neither comprehensible nor sustainable. Now, with its original form once more apparent, it can convey its past intelligibly to a new generation and century.

8 Works Awaiting Completion: Stage 2 of Garden Plan

Stocking the garden is still incomplete and some elements of the Plan will need refinement when funds are available to complete Stage 2.

Major unfinished elements include:

- The restoration of the fernery
- The restoration of the pergola (plan prepared)
- The restoration of the summer house (plan prepared)

¹⁸ Not to be confused with the later cypress hedge seen in the south east of the garden in a Fripp photograph, fig 41, in Sanderson, *Villa Alba Conservation Analysis*, 1989.

- The restoration/conservation of the fish pond, including 6 urns, for which research is underway
- The restoration/conservation of the conservatory, and its restocking
- Further archaeology on the privy and possible reinstatement of the trellised, nineteenth century privy building
- Work on the land to the west of the house, including the lowering of land levels to their nineteenth century position to protect the house and reveal early paving
- The restoration and reinstatement of garden urns and seats
- The fabrication of garden bed edging tiles for beds to the south/east and south of the building and their installation.