

Ballarat's statuary

Some of the finest Victorian statuary to be found in Australia is located in the Botanic Gardens.

The collection of statuary, which yearly draws the admiration of thousands of visitors, has its origins in two Scots immigrants who came to the Ballarat goldfields in search of their fortunes.

The men, Thomas Stoddart and James Russell Thomson, both drifted independently to the Ballarat goldfields in search of their fortunes — and found them, although both later in life lost heavily on their investments.

Besides being Scots, they both had in common the fact that they had formerly been soldiers.

Stoddart, who had worked at his trade of joiner in the British Army, came to Ballarat in 1854 and worked as a miner until 1861, by which time he had amassed some capital.

He turned from mining to speculation, and then to share-broking. It was said of him that "Thomas Stoddart floated as many mining companies as any other man."

By 1882 he was a wealthy man and he decided to visit his homeland, and to make the then fashionable Grand Tour of Europe.

While he was visiting a sculptor's studio in Italy he saw some work being executed for the City of Genoa, and in the impulsive fashion of the gold men of the time bought on the spot 12 statues which are now to be found in the Botanic Gardens.

These statues of Carrara marble include Spring, Summer, Autumn and Winter, and a number of classic figures, all done by leading Italian sculptors of the day.

Two years after his return to Ballarat, Stoddart began to lose heavily on his investments in the Westport Coal Company, the City Bank and the Queensland copper venture.

But he continued to support the city he loved through the donations of statues, and

contributions to churches and sport until he died at the age of 77.

The other Scotsman, James Russell Thomson, was responsible for the purchase of the famous collection in the statuary pavilion.

Thomson served in the Gordon Highlanders for eight years, and then worked as a clerk in the Glasgow Post Office until 1852.

He arrived in Australia in Christmas of that year, and at once headed for the Ovens diggings where he found some gold.

In the following February he came to Ballarat and worked in the Republic Mine — on the site of which the Base Hospital now stands — in conditions so wet he contracted an illness which later cost him his hearing.

He had often worked shifts of 24 hours to keep back the drift in the mine, and took an active part on the side of the miners before and after the events at Eureka.

Thomson sustained big financial losses in later life, but, after making substantial bequests to relatives, left the residue of his estate to buy the collection in the statuary pavilion.

This consists of "The Flight from Pompeii" by Benzone, with the associated figures of Ruth, Naomi, Rebecca, Susannah and Modesty.

A man of much different background, but one who also made a great contribution to the statues in the gardens, was Richard Armstrong Crouch.

Born at Ballarat in 1868, he attended the Mt Pleasant State School, studied law at Melbourne University, and served as a colonel in the Middle East during the First World War.

He became a Federal politician, historian, collector and patron of the arts.

As a direct result of a gift by him to the city in 1940, the unique avenue of statues of Australian Prime Ministers in the Botanic Gardens was set up.