

Ballarat Botanical Ferneries

History

The fernery at the Ballarat Botanical Gardens has a complicated history of additions and alterations and now retains nothing of the earliest constructions, though some of the planting may have survived the ensuing century and a half.

The fernery complex started with the erection in 1876 of an ornamental shelter house of timber construction over the Camellia beds in order to include the exciting new fern plantings.

Further extensions were made to the fernery over the next decades:

- In 1879/80 the building was extended to the east to form a Shelter House. The eastern end's extension was constructed in a relatively ornate multi-gabled form set back only slightly from the Claxton memorial.
- 1883/84 extensions to the western end of the central camellia building produced another ornate entrance consisting of two main gables and four smaller gables which featured fretted bargeboards matching those of the Curator's cottage. These extensions were finally finished in 1887 and extended to the Gillies Street roadway.
- Further extensions were completed by 1888.
- In 1889 the installation of a rockery and pond put the finishing touches to the now very large complex.
- The fernery complex was 460 feet in length and 63 feet in width. It was a vast complex as was noted in many journals and publications of the time. (*J. Smith [ed.] Cyclopaedia of Victoria, Vol. 11, Cyclopaedia Co., Melbourne, 1904, p.248*)

In his article for the Australian Garden History magazine "Fabulous Ferneries", Ken Duxbury described "*a broad gravel walk [which] led up the middle of the grounds, with lateral paths all daintily kept. Dark shadowy labyrinths conducted us into grottoes overhung with tree ferns, where young lovers could whisper undisturbed, and those who were not lovers could read novels.*" He commented on Froude's 19th century visit to the fernery on a summer afternoon when the temperature was 103 F in the shade. After visiting a gold mine and its foundries in the morning the fernery must indeed have been a welcome

relief. He emphasised the way in which gold contributed to the prosperity and almost overblown grandeur of Ballarat. Froude wrote, "I have already expressed my admiration of Australian gardens, but this (one) at Ballarat excelled them all. It was as if the town council had decided to show what gold and science could do with such a soil and climate". (*Australian Garden History, Vol. 13 No 3 November/December 2001 & Vol. 13 No 4 January/February 2002.*)

The internal features of the original ferneries included:

- Comfortable seating for hot days.
- The erection of an aquarium. It was an iron tank covered- in with brickwork.
- Camellias and ferns.
- Japanese Maples.
- Fuchsias, Rhododendrons and Azaleas.
- A grotto, over- hung with tree ferns.

Many demolitions and refurbishments took place early in the twentieth century, particularly in the 1920s when the central section collapsed.

In 1906, plans were drawn up for the proposed construction of a new steel framed 'central feature' to replace the earliest Camellia House feature. This proposal opted for the addition of a new steel truss-framed wing onto the building. (*City Engineer's office, Ballaarat. Drawing Fernery Botanical Gardens Steel Framework, 3 sheets 1906.*) This work was not carried out, perhaps by the constraints of funding.

The following year, 1907, another major proposal was drawn up for the extension of the Fernery building. (*City Engineer's office, Ballaarat. Drawing Timber Fernery at Botanical Gardens, 3 sheets, 1907.*) This time, the proposed building was to be a timber-framed construction and the work was carried out according to plan and using day labour. In the course of construction, the existing (original Camellia house) central feature was demolished as was the 1880 eastern extension. A new central feature was constructed and a smaller eastern wing replaced the earlier structure. This new eastern wing was considerably smaller than the 1880 structure being set back about 25 feet from the original eastern boundary of the earlier building. (*The virtues of the new structure were noted in the 1906 Mayor's report*)

The next main development of the Fernery took place in 1925/6. (*City Engineer's office, Ballarat. Drawing, Timber Fernery at Botanical Gardens. 1 sheet 1925.*) In the course of this phase, the western Fernery extension, which dated from the 1883/4 works, was demolished and replaced with a new western wing of a timber-framed construction. This wing was designed as a replica of the 1906/7 addition. (*Refer Mayor's report, 1927*) Two years later a pergola was added near the western end of this wing. Presumably, this replaced the glass-house referred to in the 1899 Mayor's report. (*City Engineers Office, Ballarat. Drawing Pergola West of fernery, Botanical Gardens, 1 sheet 1927*) also (*Refer to Mayors report, 1927*)

In 1955, the large fernery, which had been a feature of the gardens over a long period, finally reached the end of its life. New works included the demolition of the central feature which had been built in 1907 as well as the main section of the eastern wing of the building, which also dates from the 1907 constructions. The entrance bay of this eastern wing was retained as was the 1927 western wing. New central and eastern wings were constructed. The design was by local architect, Valentine J Lohse. (*City Engineers Office, Ballarat. Drawing Ballarat Botanical Gardens: Proposed Rebuilding of Fernery, 2 sheets, 1955.* Seven years later, in 1962, the 1907 eastern entrance feature, retained in the 1955 works, was finally demolished and replaced with the existing entrance bay. (*City Engineers Office, Ballarat. Drawing' Extensions to Fernery Botanical Gardens General Plan, 1962.*) The drawing showing this work refers to the western wing of the building as the "Open Fernery". This replacement fernery is a steel framed structure with steel pipe supports and steel lattice truss beams overlaid with open timberwork. It uses the original entry points and is located on the original central feature. It has rough timber poles and beams mounted on a low rubble wall, much like the famed Hawkesbury sandstone constructions of Sorensen in New South Wales. The 1955 column locations have possibly re-used the column pedestals of the earlier building although this is yet to be confirmed. The path and bed layout may predate the 1955 works though it is nothing like the strictly formal grid commented on by James Veitch in his Traveller's Notes of 1891-93.

From as early as the 1870s, as the structure grew in an east-west direction, it provided an important division in the garden between the cultivated area of the central gardens and the service areas to the north. It seems the placement of the structure was intentional, even though it

was built in stages and today that division still exists. The historical significance of the existing structure therefore lies, not in the structure itself, but in its location as the focus at the northern end of the formal garden.

Architecturally the building is without particular distinction but continues the work of Valentine Lohse, who was also responsible for the Cuthbert conservatory and the brick Curator's cottage which was removed in 1995. Overall the structure is sympathetic to the character of the garden but lacks the elaborate gardenesque qualities which were so apparent in the earlier forms.

As with the conservatory, the tradition of a fernery/camellia house in this location is important as an attraction in the garden. It is now one of a few structures which has survived and regardless of age is of historical interest.