

The Fernery

In the Colony of Victoria fern gullies were quite close to population centres. The great Victorian Exhibition of 1854 showed a small display of tree ferns from the still inaccessible and only partially known Dandenong Ranges, forty kilometres to the east of Melbourne. However, the fern gullies remained largely unexplored until Eugene Von Guerard immortalized the tree fern with his painting "Fern Tree Gully". Ferns became an emblem of Australia, with furniture and Decorative Arts items such as Mounted Emu eggs festooned with fern motifs. In Melbourne, the fernery at 'Ripponlea' was the epitome of Fern Mania with its enormous battened house. In Creswick a massive batten fernery was built beside Creswick Lake, and Landscape Designer Robert Sangster developed a naturalistic fernery beside the reservoir at the Wombat Hill Botanic Gardens in Daylesford.

In Ballarat, the Curator of the Ballarat Botanical Gardens George Longley, was caught in the mania. A planned Palm house to be fully imported from Britain as a colonial Crystal Palace had been mooted, and when this project was abandoned due to budget constraints, a lattice shelter house thirty metres in length was constructed with an ornamental front matching the one on the Curator's cottage. This Gothic confection, to George Longley's own devising, would serve the dual purpose of providing a northern wind break for the infant plantings and provide a sheltered position for the more delicate plants.

In 1879 the Council engaged Borough Architect H.R. Caselli, an ex-Councillor, to produce sketches for a large scale fernery, and the central portion was pegged out in May, 1880. An estimate for the construction was put at £105.15.0 Extensions were added annually until 1883 when a major extension to the west ^{was} added. This included an ornate entrance and two main and four smaller sections, all with fretwork barge boards.

Baron Von Mueller, in his role of Examiner in Botany for the Melbourne University, ^{came to} visited Ballarat regularly between 1880 and 1888. After visiting the Gardens, Von Mueller lost no time in sending a note to the Town Clerk encouraging the City to consider mirrors for the Fernery, enclosing one guinea towards the project to demonstrate 'this new scientific principle' and suggesting that the glaziers of the town would as likely as not 'stump up' with a pound each. His suggestion was rebuffed and his money returned.

James Veitch, of Veitch's Nursery visited in 1892, and opined that Ballarat 'Possessed Gardens of unusual interest, but though called Botanic, they can in reality scarcely claim to be such.' However he went on to state 'The collection of Tree Ferns (*Cythea medullaris*, *C. Princeps*, *C. Cunninghamii*, *C. Dealbata*, *Dicksonia australis*, *D. Squarrosa*, *D. Antarctica* etc) is large and in good condition, occupying the main portion of a house four hundred and fifty feet long and sixty feet wide; the paths, nearly all at right angles, as the streets in Australian towns, are twelve feet wide, covered with a fine iron-stone gravel, weedless and perfectly smooth The species more ordinarily met with of *Cyrtomium*, *Pteris*, *Davallia*, *Lomaria*, *Asplenium*, *Platyerium*, etc, occupy the open borders between the Tree Fern stems, and adorn a neat rockery and waterfall at one end'

The battened building was being constantly extended and renovated. In 1889 a rockery and pond were added to the south side. In 1907 the original central section and the 1888 eastern section were replaced with a new central section and smaller east wing. In 1927/28 the western end was demolished and replaced. In 1927/28 a new pergola was constructed.

Internally there was seating for hot days, a pair of fish tanks, camellias, Japanese maples, fuchsias, rhododendrons, azaleas as well as ferns and a tree fern grotto. At some time the original paths were replaced with a serpentine walk and the ironstone converted to bitumen.

By the end of World War II, the great Ferneries of the 19th Century had by and large fallen into disrepair as lack of manpower made their maintenance all but impossible. In the case of the Ballarat Botanical Gardens, local architect Valentine Lohse was engaged to design a more modest construction of less than a third of the size in a rustic style, replacing the original grandeur, though retaining the 1907 entrance as well as the stanchion plinths. In 1962 the eastern entrance was demolished and a new entrance bay built. The entrance stanchions were kept as picturesque vine supports. At the beginning of the 21st century, this building was under review and a 21st century replacement mooted.

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