

OUR BOTANICAL GARDENS

Ballarat's first assessment was in 1856 and it showed that there were 267 tenements within the municipality and 297 vacant lots, the whole being valued at just over forty thousand pounds.

The council struck a rate of six pence in the pound which the Government disallowed, and a shilling rate was then struck. Among the applications to the Government by the first council were requests for a site for a mechanic's institute, for a market place, for the removal of the Government Camp buildings which stood where Sturt and Lydiard Street intersect, for the formation of Sturt Street, and for public gardens.

— The Botanical Gardens date back to 1858. The Government granted the old Ballarat Police horse paddock, 100 acres of scrubland on the edge of the swamp to the Municipal Council for public gardens. The council engaged George Longley, a miner to clear the land and create the gardens and he originally resided in a tent on the site. R.M. Serjeant who was elected for Ballarat West to the first Legislative Assembly under the New Constitution Act in 1859 applied unsuccessfully for five hundred pounds for the Ballarat Botanical Gardens. In 1859 the gardens were described as being 'too far to travel on shank's pony', and the size was recorded as being about seven and a half acres which were enclosed in a post and rail fence, but the rest was a wilderness. The council offered ten pounds for the best garden design and also formed a committee of management. The Government did however grant two hundred pounds in 1860 but at three pounds a week wages for George Longley, little was left. Casual labour was used to assist Longley and men received one shilling for felling a tree and digging out its roots, and soil was brought in for seven and a half pence per drayload. Longley had to rely on gifts of bulbs, plants, seeds and shrubs from local residents.

In October 1894 the Courier ran a report on a petition signed by Ballarat's leading citizens including James Oddie, highlighting the serice of Longley who had served for thirty six years and had taken a total of less than three months holiday during that time. His salary had been reduced, and as his health was failing his position was in jeopardy. He was finally succeeded in 1898 by Thomas Rooney and John Lingham.

By the mid 1870's the origins of the Ballarat Zoological Gardens may be seen when a pair of deer and several native animals and birds were donated to the City. The zoo was situated at the north west corner of the gardens.

Cassell's Picturesque Australasia 1888, informs us that 'foliage of every shade and hue meets the eye. Great care has been exercised in laying out these gardens, and though the

oldest oak has barely reached its majority, trees grow more quickly in Victoria than in their native England, and oaks and elms, poplars and ash trees, begin to make a good show. Every variety of deciduous tree is found, and numbers of the fir tribe of all descriptions and from every part of the world. Here and there, too, remain, by way of contrast, an old gum tree, or a she-oak, the latter in its ragged greyness looking strangely out of place among the brighter hued trees from other lands.'

We are given a further insight with the publication 'Ballarat and District in 1901' which tells us that the gardens 'were originally laid out by the late Mr. George Longley. There is a magnificent fernery, containing an aquarium and aviary; there are orchid houses and forcing houses, winding walks and ribbon borders. The southern portion is is mainly devoted to landscape gardening; the charm of shady nooks, and the wealth of bloom in nearly all seasons of the year make the place both attractive and profitable to visit.

Beyond the pale of the gardens all sorts of provision is made for picnickers, who swarm to the place each holiday time. Yet there is plenty of room for all. There are swings and roundabouts, a maze and shelter pavilion, and hot water is provided by the City Council. The entrance to these gardens is very jealousy guarded by obsolete cannon pointing menacingly at the approaching visitor and to prevent attacks by water upon the caterer's pavillion

On the Queen's Birthday 1884 Thomas Stoddart, a wealthy bachelor mining speculator gave to the city a dozen marble statues for the gardens which he purchased at Carrara, Italy. To celebrate there was a procession of boats across the lake, a large concourse of spectators, and the prescence of the Ballarat Rangers with their band. Withers tells us that the statues represent Spring, Summer, Autumn, Winter, Hercules, Mercury, Leda, Bacchante, the Farnese, and another Flora, Hebe, and Pomona.

The Statuary Pavillion was designed by T.E.Molloy and erected in 1887. It is an octagonal building with a convex curved roof which is crowned by an octagonal lantern light with its own small domed roof. The building consists of large windowed walls glazed in an English Regency design and contains amongst others the 'Flight from Pompeii' which was purchased in 1887 with part of a bequest from James Russell Thompson. Withers describes Thompson who died on the 26th May 1886 as a 'very true gentleman, well informed, studious, generous and modest.' The pavillion was officially opened in 1888 by local politician, Duncan Gillies who was Premier of Victoria. Money from the bequest was also responsible for the Wallace statue as well as the figures of Rebekah, Ruth, Susan and Modesty.

W.H. Piper was the architect of Lake Lodge which was erected in 1890. A competition had been held to design a new refereshment pavillion, however the cast iron supported verandah was a later addition. A glasshouse was also built in 1890, which included azaleas, orchids, amaryllis, and

calceolarias. In 1893 the marble lions were presented by David Ham, M.L.C. and the gates were presented by Edward Morey.

The maze was opened to the public in 1881 but after being constantly vandalised was removed in 1957.

Perhaps the most interesting description comes from the publication, 'Ballarat and Vicinity' 1894 which gives us a good insight into the Botanical Gardens, in their quaint phraseology of the time. It almost has to be translated to be understood - 'Though the casual visitor to Ballarat may at first be impressed with the idea that its residents make undue boast of their several points of beauty and interest, and especially of the Botanical Gardens - themselves a never failing topic for discussion and praise - that feeling is soon dispelled when he has had the pleasure of personally beholding their beauties. To one who hies his way thence with a resigned apprehension of being bored by an inspection of a two or three acre tract of woodland, interspersed with a few beds of pansies or geraniums, it is a most pleasurable surprise to find himself ushered through the portals of the reserve into gardens some 100 acres in extent, which, comparatively with their size, are, from a horticultural and botanical standpoint, as perfect as any in Australia. Upwards of one third of the entire reserve is devoted to floriculture and landscape gardening, which in artisitic conception and execution is equal to anything in the colonies. The balance is devoted to the purposes of a well-kept and handsome park.

A reserve of 83 acres was set aside in 1858 on the Western shore of the Lake, and has been somewhat added to since that date. The high state of perfection to which the park and gardens have been brought speaks volumes for the liberty and cultured taste of the citizens of Ballarat.

Within the boundaries of the Gardens are to be found a wealth of botanical specimens, affording to the lover of that science a wide field for research, which in its magnitude must be seen to be appreciated.

Side by side may be seen the biblically historical cedar of Lebanon, from the sunny slopes of Palestine, and the beautiful Canadian pine, from its snowy home in Northern America.

From every tree and shrub sound the notes of feathered songsters, brought hither from their English homes; while high in the air the lark's glad song floats out in sweetest melody, carrying the listener back perchance to boyhood's days, when as a happy child midst fields of English clover, with face turned to the deep blue arch above, the same sweet notes had charmed his senses.

Beautiful promenades and walks abound everywhere, the Mile Acacia and Palm Walks being marked favourites.

The mammoth fernery, 460 x 63 feet, is in itself well worthy of a day's study. The statuary which abounds throughout the Gardens, comprises in the aggregate at once the largest and finest collection in the Southern Hemisphere, notable amongst them being the twelve statues in Carrara marble from the hands of the best Italian sculptors, and that magnificent and masterful creation of Benzoni's, 'The flight from Pompeii' This group alone is valued by the best Continental judges at four thousand pounds. All the statues are gifts to the City from public spirited-citizens and admirers of Ballarat, the greater number having been presented by Thomas Stoddart and J.R. Thompson, the latter in his will bequeathing several thousand pounds sterling for the purpose, from which bequest was purchased the group by Benzoni.'

The Botanical Gardens remain as one of the jewels in Ballarat's crown.

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