

# THE SOLDIERS' MEMORIAL GARDENS VICTOR HARBOR 'AN EMBLEM OF LOVE AND REVERENCE'

BY CHRISTINE GARNAUT

**The Soldiers' Memorial Gardens discussed here is an example of many memorial gardens that were constructed after the First World War. The preparation of a management plan raises issues relating to the gardens' maintenance, and in this case, redevelopment. This article illustrates the process undertaken to resolve those issues.**

One response to the enormous loss of life that occurred during World War I was the construction of memorials 'to the fallen'. Whether initiated by councils, private citizens or committees of individuals in metropolitan areas or country towns, these memorials were intended to perpetuate the memory and celebrate the patriotism of those who had died. Concomitantly, they were expected to offer solace to loved ones of the deceased. The memorials took various forms – statues, cairns, shrines, obelisks, buildings, parks and gardens – chosen according to the purse and preference of the community and/or benefactor. Over time they became an integral part of the social and cultural fabric of the town or suburb where they were established – silent, tangible reminders of people, places and events past.

This article examines a garden memorial, the Soldiers' Memorial Gardens, at Victor Harbor, a coastal town and popular tourist destination on the Fleurieu Peninsula south of Adelaide, South Australia. The discussion outlines the Gardens' origins, history and early development. It refers to characteristics that distinguish them as a landscape garden type – their formal layout, use of local plant species and fencing, edging, path and seating materials as well as their civic and cultural significance. During 1997, the Victor Harbor Council commissioned a Conservation Management Plan for the Soldiers' Memorial Gardens. The article reflects on the management plan's process and its outcomes.

## SETTING

The Soldiers' Gardens, as they are locally known, are located on a large expanse of public open space formally declared for recreational use under the Victor Harbor Foreshore Act (1917). The Gardens are a leisurely stroll from the centre of the town and are close to the railway station, the departure point for tourists journeying to nearby towns. The train was once the popular mode of public transport for day-trippers and holiday-makers from Adelaide, many of whom travelled to 'Victor' especially to visit the Soldiers' Gardens.



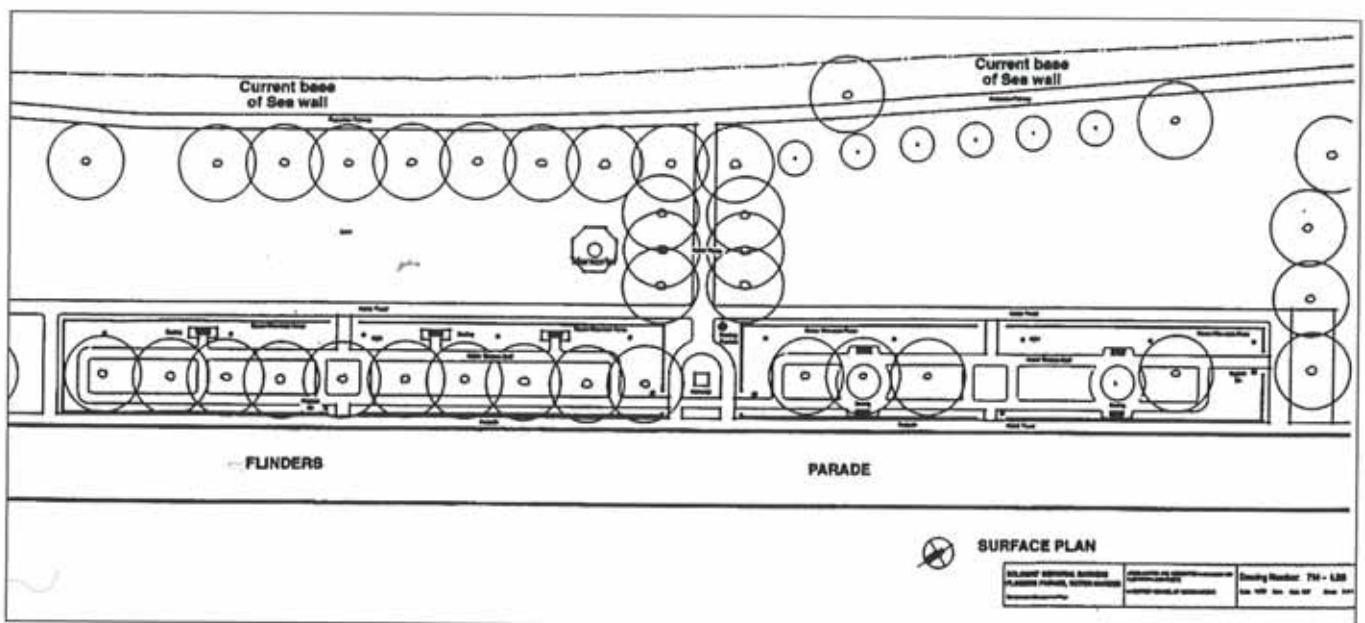
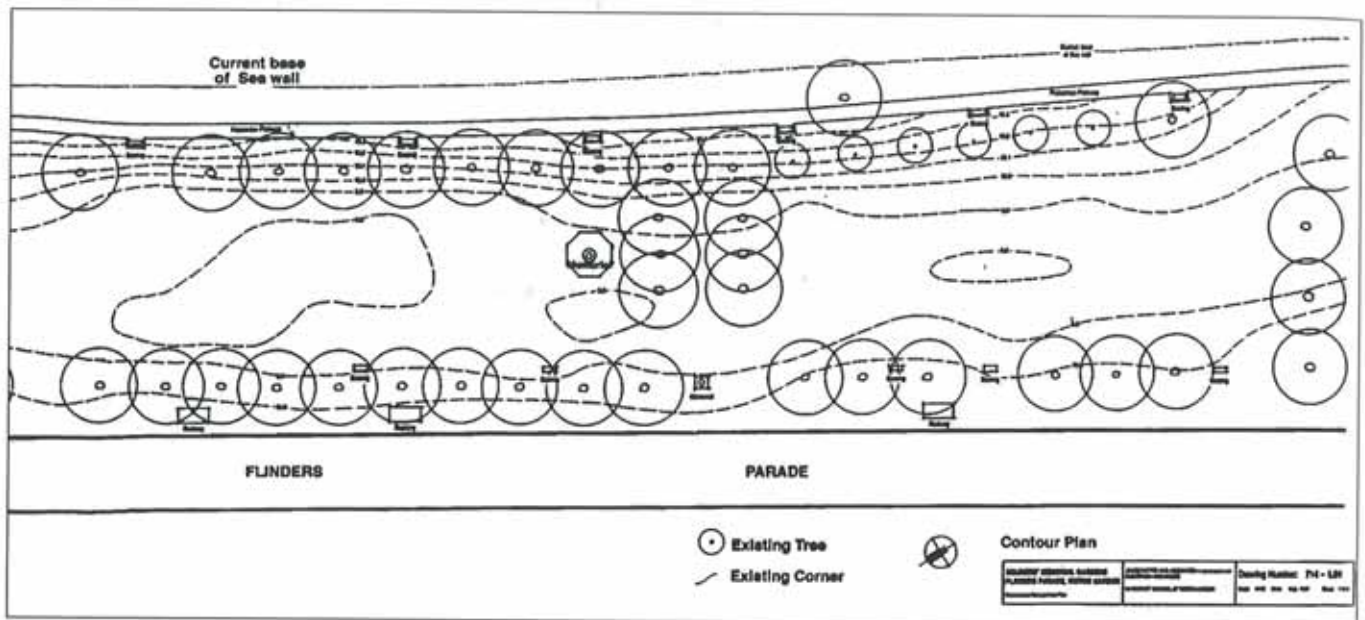
*Then and now.*

*Above: The Soldiers' Gardens as they were enjoyed by Victor Harbor residents and tourists. (Undated photograph courtesy Victor Harbor National Trust.)*

*Below: Contemporary view, looking south, of the Soldiers' Memorial Gardens Victor Harbor. Flinders Parade at right, Granite Island in the distance left. (1998, photograph by C. Garnaut)*



Tall Norfolk Island pine trees clearly demarcate the site. The pines are a distinctive visual landmark and one for which Victor Harbor is well known around the State. Near to the Gardens are tennis courts, a bowling green, children's playground and a grassed area used for informal ball games, picnics, festivals and Anzac and Remembrance Day ceremonies. South of the playground the foreshore gradually curves towards the south-west where there is a causeway to Granite Island, a kiosk and carparks. Flinders Parade, a main thoroughfare for



Top: Contour plan of the Soldiers' Memorial Gardens showing existing layout.<sup>13</sup>  
 Above: Surface plan of the Soldiers' Memorial Gardens showing proposed redevelopment.<sup>13</sup>  
 (Compare with Reade's original plan opposite on page 119).

pedestrians and vehicles, forms a boundary on the town side of the foreshore reserve. There is a sea wall and pathway on the ocean side, a short distance from the Gardens.

## BRIEF HISTORY

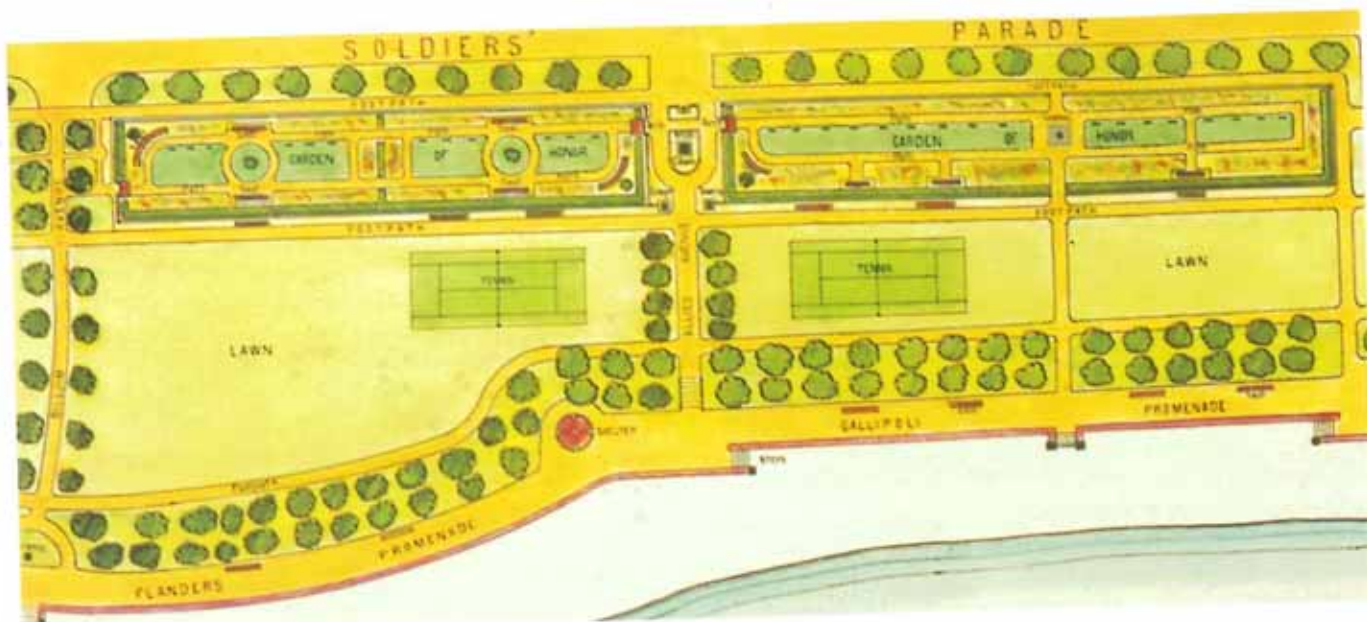
### Origins

The Soldiers' Memorial Gardens were established at Victor Harbor in April 1917<sup>1</sup>. The first of two gardens was laid out around Norfolk Island pine trees planted in memory of four local soldiers who died in World War I. The second was developed from February 1918 on the causeway side of the original site. Eventually the Gardens were incorporated in a plan to improve the whole of the foreshore area.

The Gardens were intended to enhance the memorial role of the Norfolk Island pines. According to the *Victor Harbor Times*, they became a colourful '... emblem of love and reverence.'<sup>2</sup> An article published in the *Times* in April 1918 summarised the popular view: 'Name after name of dear ones flashes upon the mind from among the

gorgeous riot of colouring made by the brilliant foliage and flowers. The ordered paths and bordered walks speak of loving and undying care and remembrance ... The beauty of a holy peace lies all about ...'<sup>3</sup> Later, in 1919, the local newspaper praised the Soldiers' Gardens as 'a model which many towns throughout the State might well emulate.'<sup>4</sup>

The first garden was designed by the Mayor of the Corporation of Victor Harbor, William Northey, in conjunction with local resident Mr Morris. In July 1917 Adelaide City Council's head gardener, Mr Pelzer, inspected the site and prepared a report in which he suggested a layout as well as suitable plants. Victor Harbor's George Kirby was appointed gardener and overseer of the project. The scheme was financed by private and company donations, social functions and collections paid into a specially designated fund. Local volunteers provided equipment and labour. Civic pride clearly informed and directed the townspeople's involvement in establishing and maintaining this special memorial site.



Reade's 1918 plan for the Soldiers' Memorial Gardens.

## EXTENSION AND INTERVENTION

In early 1918, when it was obvious that there was insufficient room to plant additional trees in the first garden, the Corporation decided upon an extension. A fencing scheme was devised for an adjacent site and the preliminary work of digging flower beds was begun. However, soon after, in March 1918, a report was received from the Government Town Planner, Charles Reade (1880-1933), regarding the Soldiers' Gardens.<sup>5</sup> Following the passage of the Victor Harbor Foreshore Act (1917) Reade was engaged by the Corporation to advise on a scheme for the whole foreshore area.

Reade had no formal training in landscape design. However, he had worked in the offices of the Garden Cities and Town Planning Association in London before coming to Australia in 1914<sup>6</sup> and consequently had first-hand knowledge of plans for public parks and recreation areas in new residential developments in Britain, Europe and America. At Victor Harbor he envisaged a grand scheme that included a sea wall and promenade; a memorial commemorating the 1802 meeting of explorers Nicholas Baudin and Matthew Flinders at nearby Encounter Bay; and a plaza, band rotunda, shelters, formal paths, gardens, and tree plantings. His plan for the foreshore was to be implemented in stages, as the need for additional facilities arose and as finances became available. That view was in keeping with his philosophy that planning should be anticipatory and coordinated rather than haphazard and piecemeal.<sup>7</sup>

As South Australia's Government Town Planner between 1916 and 1920, Reade played a significant role in promoting town planning and the garden city idea Australia-wide.<sup>8</sup> He assisted with the drafting of legislation, and in Adelaide he prepared plans for the model garden suburb of Colonel Light Gardens, as well as smaller subdivisions 'on garden city lines', extensions to existing rural towns, recreation reserves, parks and gardens and children's playgrounds.<sup>9</sup> These included formal gardens for promenading, resting and admiring horticultural displays, in the vein of the Soldiers' Gardens at Victor Harbor. During the 1920s until his untimely death in 1933, Reade went on to spread the message of garden cities and town planning in Malaysia, Northern Rhodesia and South Africa. Colonel Light Gardens stands today as the best national and international example of his work.

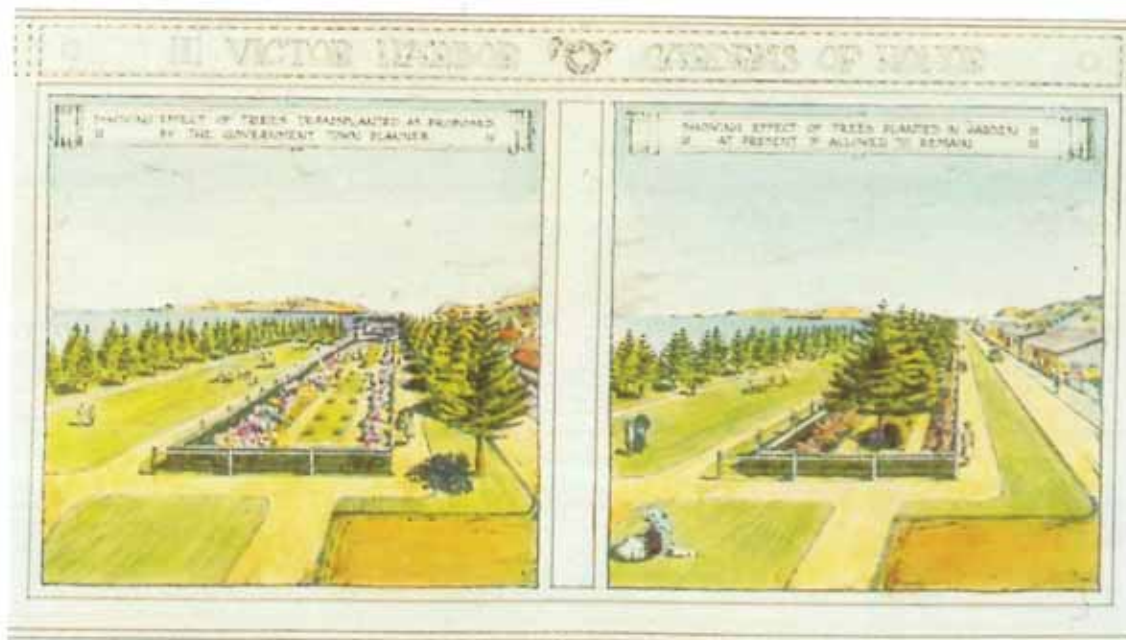
## READE'S PLAN

The Victor Harbor Corporation agreed to alter the layout of both the new and existing Soldiers' Gardens to conform to Reade's design. Consequently, the seaside boundary fence on the first garden was moved outside the already established *Coprosma* hedge to line up with the seaside boundary fence of the second garden. Surviving coloured lantern slides of Reade's plan show garden plots along each boundary, three central rectangular beds in the first garden and a combination of rectangular and circular beds in the second. Paths varied in line and length. Hedges occasionally intersected the flower beds. Places were marked for seats and for a sundial in the first garden. Arches were proposed at the entrance to each garden. These were built in the rustic style typical of the day. Eventually roses were grown over them and gates fitted, in an effort to deter stray animals. A footpath encircled the Gardens, enabling pedestrians to walk the perimeter and enjoy the view from the outside.

Reade suggested that, in time, a granite obelisk could be erected in the 'central plaza' between the gardens as a permanent memorial to the fallen. A stone monument, erected in 1932, fulfils that function, although it was placed closer to Flinders Parade than Reade specified. Later, after World War 2, an imposing memorial cross was erected in the lawns nearby. An essential component of Reade's scheme was an avenue of memorial pines ('Allies Avenue') extending seawards from the proposed plaza. They were planted and still stand.

Reade did not suggest any species of plants but newspaper reports referred to flowers in bloom: geraniums, dahlias, roses, violas, asters, daffodils, carnations, phlox, petunias and sweet peas (planted alongside the fences). The *Times* commented on the massed arrangement of plants, the riot and continuity of colour, variety of species, use of summer and winter flowering seedlings as well as bulbs. Newspaper reports stressed that the Soldiers' Gardens were always interesting, attractive and lovingly maintained by their curator. They were irrigated by their own 'inch water service', the gift of noted South Australian pastoralist Peter Waite.<sup>10</sup> He also supplied the Corporation with an irrigation plan and donated the pipes.

A controversial proposal in Reade's 1918 report was that the existing Norfolk Island memorial pines be



*Contrasting effects. On the right is an illustration showing pine trees transplanted, as proposed by Reade. The illustration on the left shows pine trees as originally planted in the gardens. (From an original lantern slide held by State Records SA GRG 73/19a D4. Slide reproduced by S. Noonan.)*

◀ moved to a grassed margin adjacent to Flinders Parade so as to prevent shading of the flower beds. Many townspeople challenged the suggestion on the grounds that it would be sacrilege to relocate the trees. Ultimately, that view prevailed and the pines remained where they were originally planted.

Once development was complete, the Soldiers' Memorial Gardens became a showpiece in the town and a favoured destination for locals and tourists alike. Visitors could stroll along the paths, admire the colourful and varied species of shrubs and plants, and rest on the lawns or on the strategically sited rustic bench seats. On Anzac Day, Victor Harbor residents gathered in the Gardens with family and friends of deceased soldiers for the annual commemorative service. That practice continues to the present day.

### CURRENT STATUS

In August 1984 the Soldiers' Memorial Gardens were nominated for inclusion on South Australia's State Heritage Register; they were subsequently listed. At that time their integrity was described as 'basically intact'<sup>11</sup> and they were regarded as an important example of a social response to the Great War. Furthermore, through their association with Charles Reade, they represented one aspect of the work of the State's early town planning movement.

However in the late 1980s, in a bid to reduce maintenance of the site, the existing fences, paths and remnant plantings including *Coprosma*, pelargoniums and *Hibiscus* were removed. Gravel was laid at the base of the Norfolk Island pines and low, concrete-edged rockeries were built between the pines and the footpath along Flinders Parade. About the same time the sea wall was reconstructed and the ground level raised. Unfortunately sub-standard landfill was used around the coastal line of Norfolk Island pines and those trees suffered significant damage.

As a result of changes to the site, the boundaries and the structure of the Soldiers' Memorial Gardens were lost and public recognition of their role as a World War I memorial diminished. The function of the space near and around the pine trees was altered; it became a thoroughfare rather than a place to linger.

### CONSULTANCY PROCESS

In mid 1997, the District Council of Victor Harbor and the State Heritage Branch of the Department for the Environment, Heritage and Aboriginal Affairs commissioned James Hayter and Associates Pty Ltd and Flightpath Architects to prepare a Conservation Management Plan for the Soldiers' Memorial Gardens. The objective was 'to ensure that this important community resource can be professionally managed to optimise its contribution to Victor Harbor'.<sup>12</sup> The decision to appoint consultants was in response to the demise of the Soldiers' Gardens, deterioration of the pines, and Council plans for a major tourist precinct development on the western side of Flinders Parade. Following the appointment, a consultancy process was devised in conjunction with Council and with a Steering Committee comprising two community representatives, Council's Parks and Gardens officer, Heritage Adviser and one elected member.

Historical records as well as local knowledge of the Gardens' history gleaned from Council staff, residents and community groups were to be used in devising a set of recommendations to redevelop, conserve and manage the site. The consultants employed an historical researcher to identify and retrieve primary archival materials, locate and extract information from secondary sources, conduct interviews and write a brief history of the Gardens.

### CONSERVATION MANAGEMENT PLAN

In preparing its recommendations for the Victor Harbor Soldiers' Memorial Gardens, the consultancy team was informed by contemporary and historical data including copies of the original plans, information about present day local needs, and a redrafted 'Statement of Significance' based on the South Australian Heritage Act (1993). Due to the completeness of written and visual historical records and the compatibility of the original design with 1990s requirements, the proposed redevelopment plan largely followed Reade's 1918 scheme.<sup>13</sup> However, changes over seven decades in the micro-climate as well as in maintenance, access, safety and security requirements, necessitated some adaptations.

The consultants' proposal adhered to the formal layout of the original design.

Its main features included:

- garden beds underneath the Norfolk Island pine trees planted with species selected for their sun and shade tolerance as well as for their form and flowering characteristics;
- use of ivy, bulbs and flowering ground covers to re-create the form of the lawns under the pines;
- definition of the Gardens with a fence of rigid panels of woven wire-mesh 800mm high, set between hardwood posts;
- a *Pittosporum* hedge, to be kept below fence height, to replace the original *Coprosma* planting;
- major paths paved with red clay pavers around the perimeter and through the Gardens, for access from Flinders Parade to the seaside promenade;
- minor paths of sandstone coloured pavers through and across the Gardens (the colour was chosen in deference to the original paving material, a limestone coloured gravel known as Goolwa marl);
- seats located where they were originally intended in Reade's design;
- drinking fountain, litter bins and lights, including spotlights for memorial trees, with the design of the furniture and lighting to complement the formal but simple character of the Gardens;
- signs to inform visitors about the history and significance of the Soldiers' Memorial Gardens.

In accord with their brief, the consultants provided a set of implementation strategies and priorities as well as cost estimates for paving, planting, irrigation and sub-soil drainage, street furniture and fencing. Again using Reade's original concept, they also included a proposal for the foreshore areas adjacent to the Soldiers' Gardens.

Following public consultation on the Draft Conservation Management Plan, it was accepted by the District Council of Victor Harbor. The Council then used the report to frame a submission to the State Government for matching funding to redevelop the Gardens through the Regional Open Spaces Enhancement Scheme (ROSES). ROSES allocated \$15000, less than half the amount requested. The Victor Harbor Council subsequently voted to match the grant but to undertake improvements in smaller stages than originally planned. The initial works will include removal of dying pines, paving between the pines in Allies Avenue, and installation of underground irrigation and drainage.

## SUMMARY

Historical records (reports, plans, lantern slides and photographs) played a major part in informing the consultants' report and shaping their recommendations for the redevelopment, conservation and management of the Soldiers' Memorial Gardens, Victor Harbor. The extensive use of historical documents demonstrates the significance of the records and the value of their retention. The Gardens have a long history as a World War I memorial and as a social and cultural centre for the town. Countless tourists and residents have visited them, enjoyed their tranquillity, colour and beauty, and respected their commemorative role. With the passage of time only the memorial Norfolk Island pines have survived. The contemporary proposal to re-create the form and structure of the Gardens is an exciting one that promises to reinstate the Victor Harbor Soldiers' Gardens as 'an emblem of love and reverence', and a showpiece of civic pride.

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## FOOTNOTES

- 1 'Soldiers Gardens', *Victor Harbor Times (Times)*, 20 April 1917.
- 2 Letter to the editor, *Times*, 17 May 1918.
- 3 'Remember Anzac Day', *Times*, 19 April 1918.
- 4 'Fallen Soldiers' Memorial', *Times*, 3 January 1919.
- 5 State Records South Australia GRG 1/2/1917/833
- 6 Garnaut, C., 1995, 'Of Passion, Publicity and Planning: Charles Reade and the Mitcham Garden Suburb', *Australian Planner*, Vol 32, No 3, pp.183-184
- 7 *ibid*, pp.185- 186
- 8 Garnaut, C., 'Towards metropolitan organisation: town planning and the garden city idea', in Freestone, R. and Hamnett, S., (eds), *The Australian Metropolis: a planning history*, (forthcoming 1999).
- 9 Tregenza, J., 1986, 'Charles Reade (1880-1933): town planning missionary', in Hutchings, A. and Bunker R., (eds), *With Conscious Purpose: a history of town planning in South Australia*, pp.45-60; Hutchings, A., 'Comprehensive Town Planning comes to South Australia' in Hutchings and Bunker, pp.61-84; Garnaut, 'Of Passion, Publicity and Planning' pp. 186- 187.
- 10 'Corporation', *Times*, 19 April 1918.
- 11 Mark Butcher Architects 'Consultant's Brief', n.p.
- 12 *Ibid*
- 13 James Hayter and Associates, 'Conservation Management Plan', pp.22-28.

