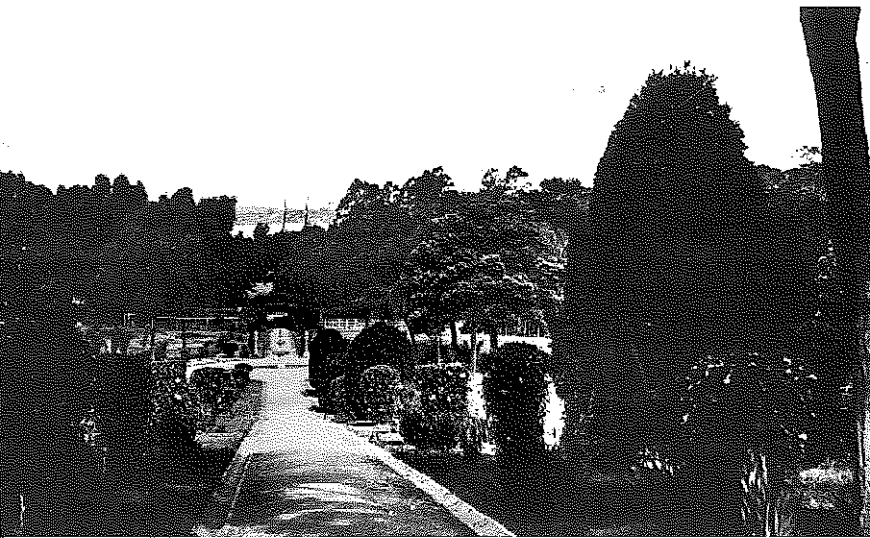


PORT ARTHUR GOVERNMENT GARDENS RESTORATION

BY JERRY DE GRYSE



Port Arthur has come to be a complex, layered cultural landscape, where the topography, plants and built elements combine to provide a physical chronicle of an eventful and dramatic history. This article focuses on the pilot study undertaken to ensure appropriate restoration of the Government Cottage Gardens.

THE CULTURAL LANDSCAPE

Amongst its many heritage values, the historic Port Arthur site is an important cultural landscape that includes sites of Aboriginal occupation of the area prior to European settlement, and the multiple layers of inhabitation since the establishment of the convict settlement in 1830. The site is also a striking setting of natural landforms, water bodies and large areas of seemingly natural vegetation. This complex, eventful and dramatic cultural landscape creates a strong sense of place with important meanings for both residents and visitors.

In the past, the significant assemblage of buildings on the site has been the focus of conservation activities. It has long been recognised, however, that conservation of the cultural landscape is critical if the significance of the site is to be made visible and meaningful to the visitors and local residents who frequent the site.

The current landscape setting of the Port Arthur settlement reflects the 20th century management of the site by the Scenery Preservation Board. The image is one of ruins, mown lawns and clusters of trees flanked by bushland. More recent landscape management efforts have restored and reconstructed portions

of the site's historic landscape, but not yet to the stage where they have altered the overall landscape legacy of the Scenery Preservation Board.

HISTORY

At the time of European settlement at Port Arthur in 1830, the hills and ridges, which formed a natural amphitheatre, were cloaked in a rainforest inhabited by the Pydairrerne band of the Oyster Bay tribe of Aboriginal people.

Initially settled for the extraction of timber and as a secondary penal station, the development at the site was at first confined to the southern and western sides of the Cove. The main penal and administrative infrastructure was concentrated on the southern shore, while intensive agriculture was carried on to its immediate north. Little other building development took place on the north shore until the 1840s.

The earliest reference to the leisure gardens of Port Arthur is from 1837. The leisure gardens at Port Arthur reflect the interest by officials at the time in the design and plantings of formal gardens. The main central pathway of the Government Cottage Gardens and a four-tiered, carved sandstone fountain were constructed in c1846-47. This was nearly eight years

before the Government Cottage (1853) was built for occasional use by official visitors and the Governor.

The Government Cottage Gardens were flanked by the officers' horticultural gardens south of the oak avenue leading to the church, through which officials and their families strolled to Sunday service.

The Government Cottage Gardens reached their ornamental peak in the late 1860s-70s, at which time they were described as having: '... the rarest shrubs and flowers of our sweet land... a very neat summerhouse ...', a 'sweet little stream... with very many trees of dear old England ...', and 'lovely green lawns and gay flower beds - even a fountain in the centre - all beautifully kept'.

However, the gardens had begun to decline by the time the settlement was closed in 1877. The Government Cottage was burnt down in the bushfire of 1895, and the ruins of the cottage were purchased and declared a reserve by the State Government in 1939. A few trees and shrubs and part of the ornamental fountain remained intact until the 1970s-80s.

A major Government Gardens restoration project proceeded in two stages over 1991-1992 and has included the reconstruction of the

*Above: Looking south along the main path from Government Cottage to Mason Cove, c1870s.
(Source: PAHSMA Resource Centre 66-1619 at the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery Q376.)*

main path to and around the fountain, the restoration of the fountain, the planting of the garden beds adjacent to the path, and the reconstruction of a rustic pergola.

A SIGNIFICANT SITE

As a component of the cultural landscape of the site, the Government Cottage Gardens has exceptional significance for its capacity to add to the understanding of the site as a complex layering of historic activities.

Historically, the Government Cottage Gardens has exceptional significance in its own right in that elements from its early periods remain, are evident in the site or are known from the archaeological and documentary records. These elements display deliberate design and arrangement, reflecting the order and hierarchy of the military and convict occupation of the site, and of the history of Tasmania. Plants used in establishing the gardens also have importance for their links to notable sources. The Government Cottage Gardens also has high archaeological research potential.

A PILOT STUDY

The Port Arthur Historic Site Management Authority (the Authority) is the agency responsible for the management of the site. The Authority's vision is to make Port Arthur the nation's best presented historic site.

The concern by the Authority for the interpretation of the cultural landscape has given rise to a Pilot Study to determine the appropriateness of restoring landscaped



Above: Government Cottage (circa late 1850s – early 1860s. (Source: PAHSMA Resource Centre 3025.)

Below: Looking north along the main path to Government Cottage, c1870s. (Source: PAHSMA Resource Centre 66-1601 at the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery Q1683.)

spaces and features at Port Arthur, using the Government Cottage Gardens as a case study area.

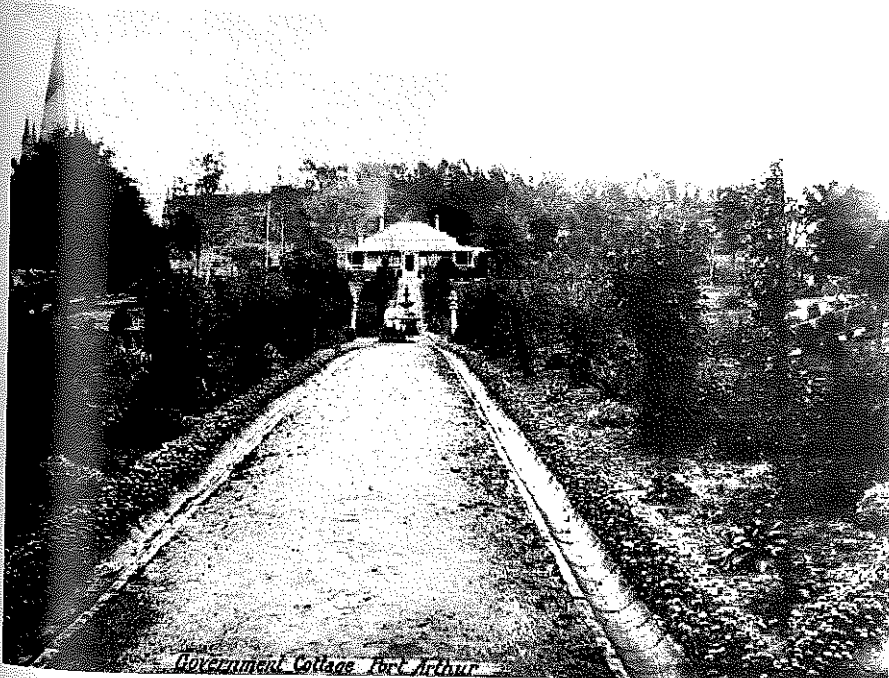
The argument for restoring the landscape of Port Arthur is supported by:

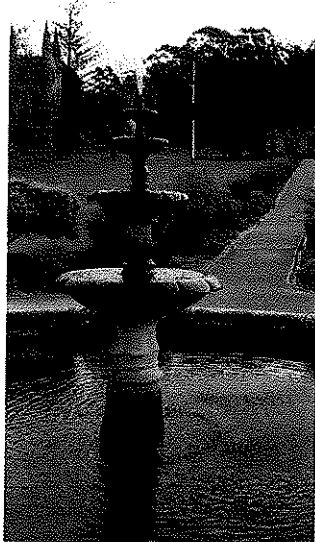
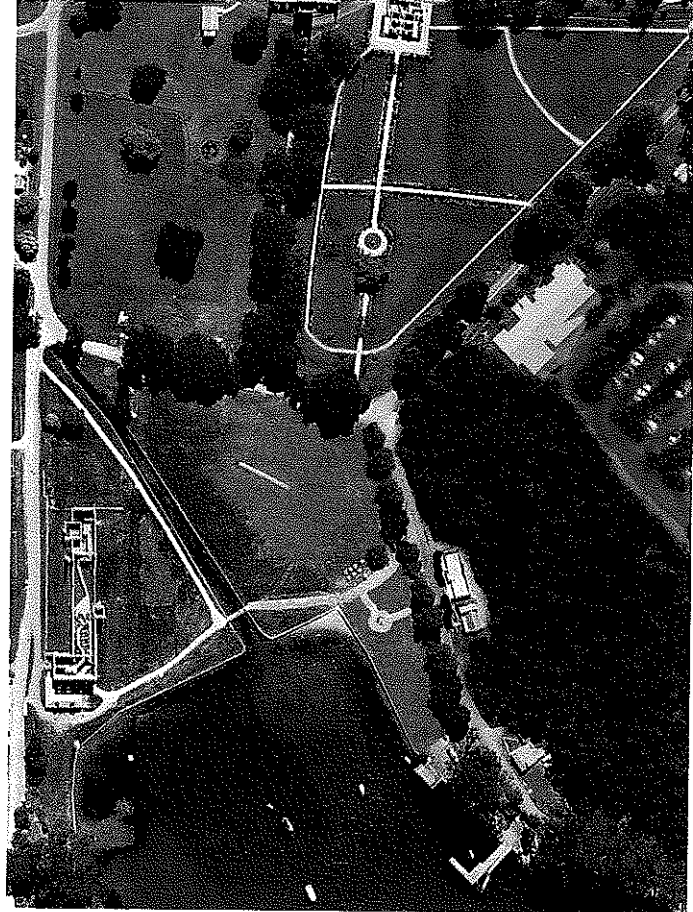
- the forthcoming Conservation Plan for the site, which supports restoration and reconstruction of the landscape of the site as a means of revealing the complexity of the use of the site;
- the Burra Charter, which states that conservation of a place should take into account all aspects of its cultural significance;
- the Port Arthur Historic Site Business Strategy, which aims to conserve the heritage values of the site and to create a unique and interactive visitor experience which is financially viable; and
- the Interpretation Strategy for the site which recognises the specific goal of revealing the complex, multi-layered cultural landscape.

The Pilot Study has:

- identified and assessed the heritage values of the cultural landscape of the site;
- identified opportunities and constraints that apply to the recreation of past land-use patterns;
- developed policies for the reconstruction of historic gardens and landscapes at the site that are compatible with retaining and enhancing its cultural significance;
- provided an integrated planning approach for the Government Gardens with other areas of the site; and
- developed priorities and costings for immediate works and further investigations and planning.

All of the recommendations made by the Pilot Study are in accordance with





Far left: Aerial plan of the study area showing proposed changes, including the path network from Lander's plan of 1858. (Source DPIWE Land and Information. Graphic changes by Peter Whyte).

Left: The four-tiered, carved sandstone fountain, which was constructed in c1846-47. (Photograph by Jerry de Gryse).
Below: View of the gardens site.



the Australian chapter of the International Council on Monuments and Sites Burra Charter – the Burra Charter being the standard code of practice for heritage conservation practice in Australia.

KEY CONCEPTS

A plan prepared in 1858 shows an extensive network of paths and the location of the summerhouse at the northern apex of the study area where Church Street meets Jetty Road. Evidence points to most of this plan having been implemented prior to closure of the settlement in 1877.

The proposal is to restore/reconstruct the Government Cottage Gardens to the extent of the 1858 plan, as far as it can be determined that it was developed.

In developing the garden plantings, care will be given to species selection which accurately reflects plants known from the site at the time of the garden. Care will also be given to the 'lushness' of the overall effect – photographs of the Government Cottage Gardens suggest that it was a sparer and more clipped landscape than presently presented.

Consideration will also be given to reconstruction of the summerhouse on the basis of its potential to further illustrate the significance of the site, that is, its image of 'English' surroundings in the Australian bush, and notions of a civilised society

within the convict context.

Other elements that may be restored or reconstructed include:

- fencing and gates, which appear in historic photographs, between Government Cottage and the Church;
- the bridge over the 'creek' mentioned in some historic accounts;
- the exposure of the convict well along the embankment below Church Street;
- garden furniture, including the urns near the front porch of the Cottage; and
- all or part of the roof of Government Cottage.

The major themes to be interpreted in the Government Cottage Gardens include the daily life at Port Arthur, and the cultural and social significance of the landscape. Sub-themes will include landscape design, the official visitors and guests, the gardeners (who they were and where they came from), heritage garden plants, and the culture and lifestyle of the site.

Interesting ideas for presenting interpretative information include:

- interpretation of the heritage processes which underpin restoration and reconstruction activities;
- interpretation of the summerhouse (if reconstructed) by appropriate background period music and audio on-site media

to convey the pleasure and leisure aspects of the gardens;

- interpretation of the period plantings along the central and side paths as representative of garden plants shown in historic photographs and illustrations, and why they may have been used; and
- placement of artistically conceived figurines within the Government Gardens, such as children playing at the fountain or a convict gardener tending the garden, to convey the people activity of the garden space. These should not be prominent elements in the landscape but be casually discovered by visitors as they move within the Gardens.

CREDITS

The Pilot Study was prepared by consultants to the Port Arthur Heritage Site Management Authority: Jerry de Gryse and John Hepper of Inspiring Place Pty Ltd (environmental and tourism planners and landscape architects), and Francine Gilfedder (history, horticulture and heritage landscape architecture), with assistance from Gina Donnelly, Workhorse Graphic Design Studios, and Peter Whyte, photographic graphic designer. This article was prepared in collaboration with these consultants.

