

Anne Vale reports on a conference which had the important theme of ‘Gardens in Time of Peace and Conflict’.

Conference Report

The annual Australian Garden History Society (AGHS) conferences are always a stimulating fusion of on-topic lectures and garden visits that showcase the host region’s garden-making history. The 2018 conference was held in the Southern Highlands of New South Wales which has a permanent population of approximately 50,000. At just 110km south-west of Sydney, the Highlands sit geographically between 500m and 900m above sea level on the Great Dividing Range. The region’s cool temperate climate, fine wines and beautiful gardens attract local and international visitors alike.

The area boasts an eclectic mix of contemporary homes and historic cottages as well as many magnificent ‘estates’ set amongst beautifully landscaped grounds. Typical are Retford Park and Red Cow Farm. Evergreen hedging and conifers are the preferred property boundary-markers, augmented by Australian trees and a wealth of evergreen and deciduous European trees. Beautifully presented gardens, large and small, are evidence of a very enthusiastic gardening community. The larger, more prestigious properties are kept in pristine condition by a local cohort of horticulturists, arborists and landscape contractors.

The lectures and garden visits focussed on the broader landscape and the townships of Mittagong, Bowral, Moss Vale, Bundanoon and Robertson, as well as the historic town of Berrima. First came an introduction by Craig Burton, architect/landscape architect, to the physical and historical evolution of the landscape. He suggested that the historical evolution of the area, from the last 40,000 years to the present, could be seen in six historical layers: the indigenous cultivation of the landscape over millennia; the adaptation of the indigenous park-like setting for colonial occupation; the establishment of a network of roads, railway, paths and village centres evolving to towns throughout the rural region; the introduction of exotic flora, particularly the impact of *Pinus radiata* tree plantations and the introduction of cool climate coniferous species as well as deciduous and flowering plants; subdivision of larger rural estates and the introduction of row plantings of coniferous species; the threat of invasion of new land uses on a larger scale than previously existed, such as mining and gas fracking, ironworks, shale, oil, coal, cement works and stone quarrying.

He also looked at the establishment of some of the earliest gardens, including Oldbury Farm, dating back to 1822, which we had the privilege of visiting over the weekend, and the Parsonage at Berrima, made in the 1850s.



Above: Retford Park, gifted to the National Trust of Australia in 2016.

Below: Pergolas invite exploration at Red Cow Farm.





Above: Rest area on Remembrance Driveway dedicated to Kevin Wheatley VC, killed in Vietnam, Below: Corn Poppy specimen collected in 1849, conserved in the National Herbarium of Victoria and reproduced in *Weeds, Plants and People*.

The Conflict aspect of the conference theme of ‘Gardens in times of Peace and Conflict’ was explored through many of the lectures. We were inspired to learn of the Remembrance Driveway that runs from Sydney to Canberra. Ian Scott AM and Greg Jackson described how the Driveway was established in 1952 to honour those who served in the Australian Defence Forces during World War II. It is marked in Macquarie Place, at the Sydney end, with two plane trees planted in 1954 by Her Majesty the Queen and His Royal Highness the Duke of Edinburgh, while at the Canberra end the Remembrance Park behind the Australian War Memorial features three red spotted gums, planted by the Governor-General in 2002.

The Remembrance Driveway has continued to evolve as roads have changed with some re-routing, while rest areas dedicated to Australian Victoria Cross recipients from World War II, and later wars, have been enhanced with new plantings and infrastructure.

Through a lecture by Frances Simons, we also learnt how garden-making ingenuity was exemplified by the creation of some very large, productive and ornamental gardens in a Berrima camp for prisoners of war. At the outbreak of the First World War, Germans, Austrians and Hungarians living in Australia were declared enemy aliens and thousands of men were imprisoned from 1914 to 1919 in internment camps throughout Australia. The Berrima camp was established in the area they called New Pomerania. Using found materials and a great deal of ingenuity, gardens and huts were built along the Wingecarribee River. Essential for the mental and physical health of the prisoners, the sharing of plants and produce with the local population fostered good relationships and a peaceful existence throughout the years of conflict.

A lecture on ‘The war on weeds’ by Dr John Dwyer, QC, gave us a rather different perspective of the ‘Peace and Conflict’ theme. His research into our often conflicting and emotional response to weeds, or what we perceive to be weeds, was derived from his well received 2016 publication *Weeds, Plants and People*. John encouraged us to “be slow to judge plants by their origin, and to accept that native species are weeds when seen as too successful; and should not allow ourselves to be conscripted to attacks on plants that cause little harm.”

‘A Parcel from France: The Poppy Seed Project’ was a fascinating talk by Linda Emery about the origins of the red poppy grown in many Australian gardens today and much respected as a symbol of individual sacrifice. Linda described how a parcel of poppy seeds was sent to Joseph Henry Maiden, director of the Botanic Gardens in Sydney, in January 1920. The seed had been gathered in the Somme Valley by school-children from the village of Villers-Bretonneux and came with a request that the seed be distributed to the relatives of the Australian and New Zealand soldiers who had fallen on the battlefields. Linda explained that, as Joseph Maiden was a meticulous man, with a methodical mind and working habits, he had kept registers of seeds and plants coming in and out of the Botanic Gardens. The names were recorded of all those people who applied for and received poppy seed to plant in their gardens in memory of their loved ones. The Poppy Seed project has involved tracing the recipients of the seed and the soldiers in whose memory they were planted.

Further talks covered War memorials, Avenues of Honour, and Gardens of Remembrance, resulting in a much-improved understanding of the region before embarking on our tour of local gardens.



These garden visits are enjoyed over two and a half days if one includes the optional extra day after the conference officially closes. (Delegates can also attend a pre- or post- conference tour.)

Every endeavour is always made to showcase a variety of gardens including botanic gardens, small town gardens, prestigious estates and broader more extensive landscapes.

The Southern Highlands now has its own botanic garden established in just the last decade. The gardens have been designed by Kate Cullity from the award winning Australian landscape

architects Taylor Cullity and Lethlean with the theme of four seasons in a cool climate. The concept is a series of 'journeys' through the landscape and seasons of the Southern Highlands.

One of the benefits of belonging to the AGHS is that garden visits are often to private gardens not generally open to the public. Those we were privileged to visit included Greenbrier Park in Mittagong, a country garden set within 115 acres, created in the English style and incorporating Australian shrubs and trees. Oldbury Farm (1822) at Sutton Forrest, one of the most important historic properties in the district, features an English 18th-century style farmhouse surrounded by sweeping lawns. These are encircled by layered hawthorn hedges and original elms and oaks. A very pretty cottage garden and a productive vegetable garden nestle close to the house. An extensive arboretum has been established with a contemporary gathering circle, created with local stone from the property, at its pinnacle.

Somerley House (1875) in Sutton Forrest has a more charming and relaxed style. Home to the Governor of New South Wales from 1882, Somerley has hosted many Australian notables over the years including Dame Nellie Melba, Prime Minister Billy Hughes and Sir Percy Spender. In addition to the house, surviving historic structures include the original stables, summer house and cottage. We were there in time to see the season end of some very special camellias and various forms of wisteria in full bloom.

Carisbrooke in Bowral was a tapestry of colour, form and contrast and thoroughly enjoyed by all the plant and tree enthusiasts. This intensely planted town garden, on two acres, delighted at every step with surprises hidden from view by hedging, winding paths, and screens of espaliered fruit trees.

Gardens with public access included Red Cow Farm, Southdown and Retford Park, the last a magnificent property of historic significance. James Fairfax AC developed the grounds and maintained the mansion for fifty years before gifting the 80-acre estate to the National Trust of Australia in 2016.

Photographs on pages 7 & 9 © Anne Vale.



Above: Modern fire pit and gathering circle at Oldbury Farm.



Left: The lattice summerhouse at Somerley House.



Right: Spring colour at Carisbrooke.