

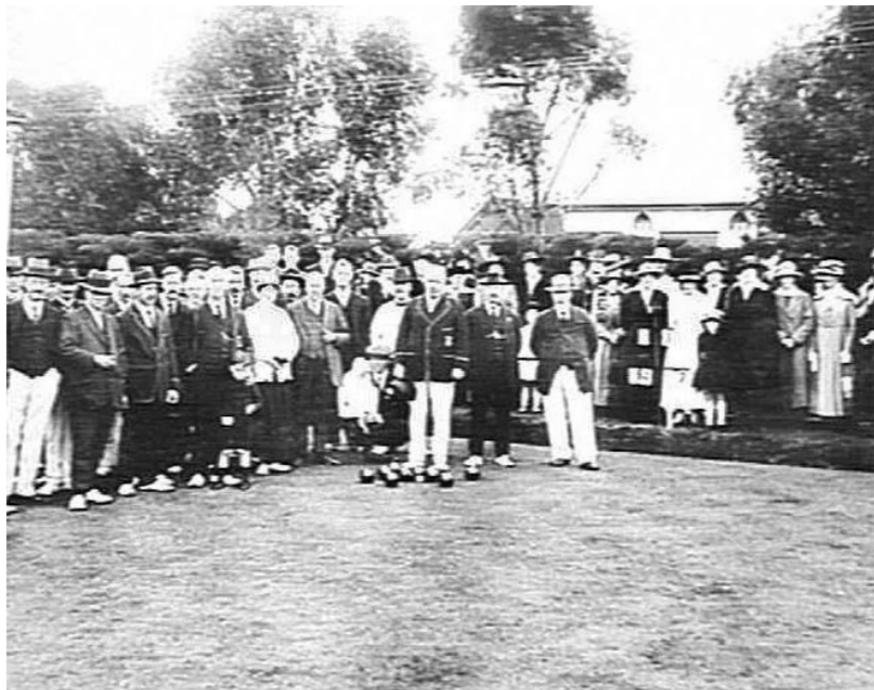
SunRRA monographs

The H.V. McKay Gardens

An industrial garden 100 years on

by

Bill Bampton



*The opening of the Sunshine Bowling Green in 1918, situated in the McKay Gardens, with H.V. McKay standing centre. Note the row of *Eucalyptus cladocalyx*.*

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At first sight the H.V. McKay Memorial Gardens in Sunshine look incongruous in the industrial landscape of Melbourne's west. These Edwardian Gardens with carved bluestone gateposts, substantial oaks and a Gothic church spire contrast with cream brick flats, a vast car park and a shopping mall. Rather than an anomaly, these gardens actually evolved as an integral part of the industry of the west. With the Fletcher Jones Gardens in Warrnambool, they are an early and rare Australian example of an industrial garden and as such were listed on the Register of the National Estate in 1993.¹

Established in 1909 by the inventor and industrialist H.V. McKay as a garden for the workers at his Sunshine Harvester Works, the gardens are now celebrating their centenary.² McKay placed the gardens along side his factory as central to his vision of 'a garden suburb' to house a contented and respectable workforce whose life would revolve around work, church, sport, and horticulture. These gardens are a remnant of this ordered controlled world dominated by McKay and his factory. The dramatic discord between the current environmental, social, economic and technological context of the gardens and that of the past raise issues for the preservation of their significance, issues that are shared with many other historic public gardens.

When in 1904, seeking easier access to export markets, McKay moved his Sunshine Harvester Works from Ballarat to Braybrook Junction his vision was to create a "Birmingham of Australia".³ As seen by the new arrivals, the grasslands site was a dramatic contrast to this vision. H. V.

McKay's daughter Hilda graphically portrays the sense of homesickness such a landscape evoked:

The day we moved down from Ballarat was hot and windy and the trip was tiring. We left a beautiful home with all modern comforts to settle in this desolate, unnamed place.

The first day, as I sat on the back steps of our new home and looked for miles around at nothing but wind-swept plains, I broke down and cried. My father came out and sat with me – he kissed me and said gently, “Don’t cry, Hilda, one day you will be proud of this place.”⁴



An aerial view of the McKay Gardens in 1925.

Sunshine Gardens, as they were originally known, would play a key part in the establishment of this sense of pride. Like a contemporary land booster, McKay promoted his new estate through an evocative name, Sunshine and landscaping. As a promotional article in *The Australian Builder* explained, “Tree-planting was realised to be the first

essential, and the streets were accordingly planted with thick-foliaged sugar gums.”⁵

The central and integral role McKay's privately-funded garden played is clear, “If a cluster of outer suburbs could be ringed around Melbourne, all planned and developed with the prescience and system that has been exercised in Sunshine, there would be no grounds for fearing the growth of new slums that now haunt many once-promising districts. Sunshine today illustrates how pleasant and secure life can be made when a powerful industrial concern undertakes the housing of its employes [sic]. Ranks of neat cottages, set in trim lawns and flower plots, line streets closely planted with well-grown and shady gum trees, and all the main thoroughfares converge on one of the prettiest public parks and playing grounds to be seen anywhere”.⁶

The gardens were laid out by head gardener S. G. Thomson following plans drawn by a Mr Horsfall of Ballarat.⁷ In form it was a typical gardenesque municipal garden with early inclusions such as tennis courts and pavilion, a bandstand, a bowling green, a substantial house for the head gardener, a conservatory and associated works area, all set on a tight 8 acres. More unusually, reflecting its private origin and the fervent Presbyterian faith of McKay, it included a church and hall.⁸

It is an important feature of these gardens that these inclusions were early, integrated elements of the design and not subsequent intrusions. The garden acted as a central community hub, where church services were held during the

influenza epidemic of 1918, where most sporting tournaments were held and where bands like the Sunshine District Band, the Harvester Works Pipe Band and Australian Ladies World Scottish Pipe Band would play in the rotunda.⁹

While originally designed by the engineer Horsfall, the gardeners themselves forged the character and ultimate form of the garden. This represented a craft process where designer and maker were one, the garden being formed by a series of maintenance decisions over time.



Sunshine Gardens curator Harold Gray (right) and Charlie Clarke, at work preparing for their autumn display, March 1946.

These small gardens during the McKay era were maintained by a staff of four. The head gardeners were Mr Thompson

(1909-1927), James Willan (1930-1939), Harold Gray (1939-1950), F. Young (1950-53) and under council, E. (Ernie) Jordan (1954-1981), then Tony Menhennitt, as parks superintendent. The qualities of these men can be seen in C. G. Carlton's praise of James Willan in the *Sunshine Advocate*, "He is no mere hewer of wood or drawer of water. He is a man who is master of his work, a true craftsman, with all the joy there is in successful achievement. Under his able control, the Sunshine Gardens will lack nothing in originality and expression."¹⁰



Harold Gray in front of his house, Sunshine Gardens. The clock tower of the factory can be seen behind, 1933.

Likewise Harold Gray, who had previously worked at Footscray Park was skilled in floriculture, renowned for displays of chrysanthemums and dahlias. He won numerous prizes for chrysanthemums at the Royal Horticultural Society flower shows.¹¹ The skills, labour and passion of these men were essential to producing the elaborate floral displays that were the highlights of the gardens - tiered rows of chrysanthemums, an elaborate floral arch, and conservatory exhibits.



The band rotunda was regularly used for popular Sunday afternoon concerts and was often used by the Sunshine Municipal Band.

As George Seddon commented with reference to the Fletcher Jones garden, this style of gardening satisfies the “most important aesthetic criteria for most Australians: neatness and clear evidence of hard labour. If you don't put your back into things then they can't be very valuable.”¹²

Mr. Thompson began the hard labour of establishing the gardens on windy plains receiving a mere 550 mm of annual



rainfall. Water sourced from the factory dam and windbreaks were an essential starting point, as was the use of a suite of hardy plants.¹³

At the opening of the tennis pavilion in August 1909, the gardens were described as “a plantation of wattle and sugar gums...the golden bloom of the wattle lending the necessary brightness to the scene.”¹⁴ Early photos highlight the use of *Phoenix canariensis*, *Cordyline australis*, and various cypress.

Built features from this era include the gravel “salamander” paths with fieldstone edging, and a pair of large cast iron recumbent lions at the northern entrance.¹⁵ Under head



gardeners Willan and Grey the focus on floral display and exotics increased, no doubt helped by the modified micro-climate. The gardens were fancifully described as a “fairyland”.¹⁶

In 1953 Massey Ferguson handed the control of the gardens to the Sunshine City Council and the Sunshine Gardens became the H.V. McKay Memorial Gardens. Under the council the bedding plantings continued. However, the nineteen-sixties saw annexation of some of the garden for an extension to the bowling club, and the erection of a Presbyterian manse. The seventies brought a gradual “rationalisation” of garden beds, paths and maintenance techniques, with an increase of open turf areas, the planting of native rather than bedding plants and the demolition of the gardener's cottage.

In the eighties, rose gardens were established in the northern end. The nineties saw the awakening of an awareness of the gardens heritage value with listings by the National Trust and the National Estate and the commissioning of a heritage survey.

Momentum in implementing the recommendations of this survey was lost with the demise of the Sunshine City Council and its part incorporation with the new vast Brimbank Council. Vandals burnt the conservatory and it was demolished. Under Brimbank the gardens lost their central role, becoming almost a peripheral park. It was not until 2007 that a new era for the garden began with a serious attempt to renovate the gardens with some reference to their heritage elements.

Rather than any intrinsic design or planting factor, the significance of these gardens comes from its context as “an integral part of an industrial complex of national importance

in the history of Australian manufacturing” and links with the surrounding “garden suburb”.¹⁷

The wholesale demolition of the factory in the early nineties permanently transformed this context. While they are now one of the few vestiges of the old Harvester Works their significance was tied to the structure of the old factory, its massive bulk framing the entire northern boundary of the gardens, without this physical association they read simply as any other municipal park.¹⁸

Likewise, the surrounding suburb has lost much of the quality of a “garden suburb”. The Federation era houses and large gardens sold by McKay became attractive prey to developers. The uniform street plantings undertaken by McKay have likewise disappeared. Increasingly, the value of the gardens lies in their contrast with, not connections to the surrounding landscape. Yet to survive into the future the gardens needs to reconnect with their contemporary context.

Unlike built heritage, gardens are reliant on the management techniques and skills that constantly maintain them. Current horticultural management techniques are in stark contrast to the past. The H.V. McKay Memorial Gardens no longer have on site gardeners but are maintained through fortnightly visits by a gardening team based at Keilor. These gardeners perform limited tasks of sanitation, mowing and weed control. Tasks of the past like disbudding of chrysanthemums would certainly not fit their time allowance or skill set. Increasingly, the gardener is removed from all design decisions, now made by landscape architects and based on

short term capital works projects, rather than long term maintenance.

Such rationalisation is a global trend, its effect on heritage gardens with their specialised requirements are often detrimental. They can be mitigated by providing specialised training, creating specific maintenance plans and encouraging a sense of ownership.¹⁹

The role of friends groups, such as the Friends of McKay Gardens formed in 2007, can also assist with labour



Sunshine Gardens 1925

intensive tasks. How to incorporate volunteer labour into the hands on maintenance of the gardens is an on going learning experience for both friends and council staff.

Issues of public safety and property damage compound the challenges of the gardens. I don't think that many private gardens have to contend with newly restored garden beds being routinely set alight. Although it is easy to be nostalgic about the past, as early as 1910 the *Footscray Advertiser* reported, "Residents at Sunshine are highly indignant at the action, presumably of boys, in rooting up a number of the trees recently planted in the new reserve."²⁰

The gardens still function as a main thoroughfare and public safety is an on going concern. To this end council set about clearing lines of sight to improve public safety. This new concept of a safe environment being visually open contrasts with Hilda McKay's fear of the open "wind-swept plains." Original hedging of cypress, *pittosporum* and mixed hawthorn and pomegranate have largely disappeared.²¹ With the loss of the strong boundary the major roads and railway all impinge on the experience of the garden, as does the wind noted by Hilda.

The ultimate challenge for the gardens is environmental. In the recent drought, water restrictions saw the cessation of all irrigation, until exemptions, as a 'garden of significance' were granted, in 2008. This gap of several years caused severe water stress to the mature tree canopy and resulted in the loss of about 19 trees. This indicates the damage done with

even a small break in the continuity of watering regimes, especially to mature specimens.

These challenges, of loss of context, reduced maintenance levels, water restrictions and concerns of public safety have all influenced the renovation of the gardens begun in 2007. Landscape architect, Roslyn Savio, has used drought hardy species; *Gaura* cv, *Euphorbia characias* subsp. *wulfenii*, *Pelargonium* sp, *Iris unguicularis* and *Rhaphiolepis umbellata* to reference rather than recreate the plantings of the past.

To maintain visibility new plantings are low but the future reinstatement of a hedge of sorts is planned for the northern and western borders. While this pragmatic approach is understandable, it is hoped that eventually a small place might be set aside for the replication of a bedding display of the past in honour of Harold Gray and company. Looking to the past to reconnect the gardens with the community, The Friends together with the Sunshine and District Historical Society hope to celebrate the centenary with a return performance by the Sunshine District Band.

End Notes

1. Jill Burness, John Hawker and Charles Nilsen, *H.V. McKay Memorial Gardens: Conservation, Analysis and Management Guidelines* Prepared for the City of Sunshine and the Sunshine and District Historical Society, Sunshine 1994 p4.

2. The historical significance of the McKay gardens is outlined in SunRRA's *Sunshine Matters* podcast for May 2008 (accessed 9 Nov

2009). <http://www.sunshine.asn.au/audio/0805SunshineMatters.mp3>

3. 'An Industrial Garden City' *The Australian Home Builder* April 1925 p41.
4. In Dorothy McNeill and the McKay family, *The McKays of Drummartin & Sunshine: Their Personal Story* Melbourne, 1984 p34.
5. *The Australian Builder* op cit.
6. *Ibid.*
7. C.G. Carlton, 'Gardens a Fairyland' in *Sunshine Advocate* 11, May 1934 p1. Presumably this was F. A. Horsfall who was the assistant city engineer at Ballarat *The Argus* 21 July 1903 p7 and Juliana Horsfall pers. comm.
8. The current brick church being completed in 1928 designed by Raymond Robinson, the company architect. Burness p36.
9. Prue McGoldrick, *When The Whistle Blew: A Social History of the Town of Sunshine 1920-1950* Morwell 1989 p104.
10. *Sunshine Advocate* May 11 1934 p1.
11. Burness pp12-13.
12. In HLCD Pty. Ltd. *Conservation and Management Plan, Fletcher Jones Garden*. Prepared for Warrnambool City Council Carlton 2005 p28.
13. Originally the gardens were watered from a dam within the factory complex, fed from the Stony Creek. In 1960, with the sale and development of this land, the entire water supply had to be transferred to mains water under the control of the Melbourne and Metropolitan Board of Works. Burness p14.
14. Olwen Ford, *Harvester Town: The Making of Sunshine 1890-1925* Sunshine and District Historical Society Altona 2001 p112.

15. These Lions were removed sometime in the 1940s. The rumour is they were lent to Lord Casey of Berwick. Any information of their current whereabouts would be greatly appreciated! Burness p36.



The "Straight Six", 2009.

16. *Sunshine Advocate* op cit.

17. Richard Aitken in Burness p3.

18. The importance of the preservation of surrounding structures has implications for the Fletcher Jones garden in Warrnambool.

19. Stephen Thorpe, 'Harnessing Resources for Everyday Heritage Management' in *Managing Culturally Significant Landscapes* Heritage Victoria 2002. Accessed 9 August 2009.

http://www.heritage.vic.gov.au/admin/file/content2/c7/harness_1217213097654.pdf

20. However policing methods have changed. There are no longer “black trackers” to “set to work” following footsteps that “led ... to the residence of boys who admitted pulling up a tree guard” *Footscray Advertiser* in Ford, p112.

21. The initial National Trust statement of significance highlighted that the the regional significance as an “oasis” was “enhanced by strong boundary plantings.” Aitken in Burness p3.