

Australian Garden

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HISTORY



*Marion Halligan reflects
Australian flora in the UK
a NZ gardening partnership*



Sandra Pullman

Charles Joseph La Trobe's garden PART 1

Part of the front garden of La Trobe's Cottage, 2015. The Friends of La Trobe's Garden received an award in 2014 for their historically sensitive restoration of the cottage's garden.

photo Sandra Pullman

A dedicated group of volunteers has been working hard to improve the garden at La Trobe's Cottage in Melbourne, and make it resemble the romantic wild garden Charles La Trobe created before he returned to England in 1854.

In October 2014, after five years of work, the Friends of La Trobe's Cottage were very excited to win the Historical Interpretation category of the Victorian Community History Awards 2014 for the garden at La Trobe's Cottage. The Friends were able to use the prize money to complete the final step of reinvigorating the garden, by employing a professional to produce a digitised landscape plan for our website, showing what plants were in the garden and where they were located. This will be an important historical document in the future.

La Trobe in Melbourne

The original colonial garden (pre-gold rush) at La Trobe's Cottage in Jolimont was created by Charles Joseph La Trobe during the period 1839–54. La Trobe had accepted the position of

Superintendent for the newly established Port Phillip District of New South Wales (NSW). He was told there would be no accommodation for his family, so he purchased three prefabricated houses from the London company Manning's, who built portable cottages for the colonies (Lewis 1994 p 6). When he arrived he was also told that he would have to buy his own land, which he did at £20 per acre. He bought 12 and a half acres on the northwest corner of the 'Government Paddock' (Botham 2006 p 7). Today the area is known as the suburb of Jolimont and is just behind the Melbourne Cricket Ground. The estate was named Jolimont after the place where La Trobe and his Swiss wife Sophie de Montmollin spent their honeymoon at Cerlier in Switzerland (Botham p 5). It was a private dwelling for his wife and family, and was not an official residence (unlike Government House in the Domain Gardens today). The garden was his retreat from pressures of his official duties.

The cottage's changing location Melbourne in 1839 was not the metropolis that it is today. La Trobe's prefabricated house was one of the very few permanent wooden homes.

He wanted to establish a home and to create a pleasure garden for his delicate aristocratic wife Sophie and their growing family (Botham p 5). Originally the site was gently sloping grassy woodland. The cottage was positioned in the northwest corner looking down to the floodplains of the Yarra Yarra River. It was parklike with majestic gum trees, local acacias and grasses, making it look like an 18th century English gentlemen's park (Pullman 2016). Over the 15 years La Trobe was there, his letters to his oldest daughter Agnes (who was sent home to Switzerland to become a lady because she was becoming a tomboy) reveal the improvements and additions he made to the garden (Botham p 24).

Today, in 2017, there are almost no colonial gardens in existence in Melbourne, and the cottage is now located in the Kings Domain Garden after being moved to the edge of the Royal Botanic Gardens Melbourne in Birdwood Avenue in 1964. In 1998 the Royal Botanic Gardens wanted to build a children's gardens on the site so it was moved again, across the road. In 2009, a group of people interested in Charles Joseph La Trobe formed the Friends of La Trobe's Cottage, which is under the auspices of the CJ La Trobe Society, to support the National Trust of Victoria in maintaining the cottage and garden. The garden is about the size of a quarter-acre block. The Friends decided that as they did not have 12 and a half acres to recreate the original garden, the next best thing was to create a symbolic one, using only plants that were available to La Trobe. This means there are no modern hybrids or cultivars in the garden.

The sleuthing begins

Before La Trobe returned to England in 1854, he asked his cousin Edward La Trobe Bateman, who arrived in Melbourne in 1852, to sketch the cottage and garden. Edward's sketches of about 1853 (now held by the State Library of Victoria) have been a wonderful source of information on how the house and garden evolved over the years La Trobe was in Melbourne. In 2006, the La Trobe Society and Australian Garden History Society jointly published Helen Botham's *La Trobe's Jolimont – a walk round my garden*, a wonderful collection of these watercolours. They are an invaluable resource in identifying what plants and structures were in the garden.

Botham's book includes snippets of letters to friends and family talking about the garden, and some of La Trobe's own sketches. There is one important letter in 1844 from his friend Ronald



Portrait in oils by Sir Francis Grant (1803–78) of Charles Joseph La Trobe (1801–75).

State Library of Victoria H30870



Victorian Community History Awards winner's certificate for 2014 awarded to the Friends of La Trobe's Cottage.



many of labourers had left to go to the gold rush, leaving a vacuum in horticulture labour and knowledge.

The Friends used the brilliant Colonial Plants Database (<http://sydneylivingmuseums.com.au/research-collections/library>) on the Caroline Simpson Library of NSW website to check whether the plants were available to La Trobe. This database lists plants known before 1870. It is based on garden records, manuscripts

and nursery catalogues of early colonists such as Sir William Macarthur of Camden 1843 to 1857, TW Shepherd of Darling Nursery in 1851, Michael Guilfoyle nursery and seedsman at Exotic Nursery in 1851, Alexander Macleay's notebook of plants arriving at Elizabeth Bay from 1836 to 1843, and the Colonial Botanist Charles Fraser's (or Frazer, (?), 1788–1831) list of plants including herbs and vegetables grown in the Botanic Gardens, Sydney in January 1828. We did not use *Plants listed in nursery catalogues in Victoria 1855–1889*, published by the Garden Plant Conservation Association of Australia, because its coverage does not start until a year after La Trobe had returned to England.

The gardenesque

In the *gardenesque* style of gardening, trees, shrubs and other plants are positioned and managed in such a way that the character of each plant can be displayed to its full potential, and enough room is left between plants so that they do not touch each other. The term was coined by John Claudius Loudon and published in 1832 in his *Gardener's Magazine* (Morris 2002). It grew out of arguments between designers of the time that the *picturesque* (which had been shaped by human intervention) could not be distinguished from the wild natural gardens which apparently had not been manipulated by humans.

Gardenesque was the perfect style for plant-obsessed Victorian collectors, as they were able to show off all the new and exotic plants to their friends and family. It promoted beauty of detail, and variety, and created mystery, sometimes to the detriment of coherence. Features such as island beds and artificial mounds were used to create small scenes within the larger garden. Plants were managed, not allowed to go wild and become untamed, and if they grew into each other, were pruned back to show their form.

Campbell Gunn, an amateur botanist who lived in Tasmania. It is a list of plants Gunn was sending to La Trobe, and shows that La Trobe was still favouring European plants (Botham p 13). A painting by George Alexander Gilbert shows a very pretty ornamental garden in the gardenesque style, which was popular in Europe at the time (Botham p 12).

But as Edward La Trobe Bateman's sketches show, this evolved into a wild overgrown rambling garden. The change of style may have been due to a combination of factors including lack of water. Remember there was no reticulated water and there were no hoses. La Trobe had to purchase water in barrels from the Yarra Yarra for the household needs. As this was expensive, watering the garden was not a priority. Other contributing factors could have been the lack of knowledge of hot dry summers, and the fact that by 1853

A rose in bloom in La Trobe's Cottage garden today.

A water butt in the grounds of La Trobe's cottage reminds visitors that watering the garden was once a far from straightforward process.

photos Sandra Pullman

The second and final part of this article by Sandra Pullman will appear in our next issue, vol 28 no 4.

References

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The work of **Sandra Pullman** (graduate of Burnley 2005) with the Friends of La Trobe's Cottage won the historical interpretation category of the Victorian Community History Awards in 2014 for the La Trobe Cottage garden. Sandra is interested in early students at the Burnley School of Horticulture, and is doing a Master of Architecture (Research) at Deakin University on Burnley graduate Ina Higgins (1900).