



# A Beloved Cottage & Garden

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Gardens are embedded with histories and narratives that span lives, time and our sense of place. Cherished childhood memories of moments spent in the garden with parents and grandparents, where bonds are nurtured and green thumbs are grown, are then passed between generations. The earthiest of shared experiences, Mother Nature has a way of forging connections between people.

The National Trust is custodian to many special gardens across Victoria, from vast natural environments to beautifully landscaped estates and smaller domestic gardens. Over decades these gardens have been tended by countless hands, in many cases by people who generously volunteer their time to ensure these treasured green spaces are appreciated and enjoyed for many years to come.

All of our gardens are unique and have their own stories to tell, but like all historic narratives, the details are often scattered in pieces that must first be put back together.

We acknowledge the Bunurong people as the Traditional Owners of the land on which La Trobe's Cottage is located. We pay our respects to their Elders past and present, and recognise their continuing connection to lands, waters and communities.

The history of Jolimont, the former Melbourne estate and garden of Victoria's first Lieutenant-Governor Charles Joseph La Trobe (1801 - 1875), is one such story. La Trobe's cottage garden, now located in the Kings Domain, is a living breathing tribute to the garden that was at the heart of the La Trobe family from 1839 to 1854.

## The early years

Charles Joseph La Trobe was an unusual sort of gentleman for his time. Rather than striving to advance his station in the military or government, he was an adventurer who spent his early twenties travelling the Alps, North America and Mexico.

In 1824 La Trobe travelled to Neuchâtel, a French-speaking region in Switzerland. During this time, he became an accomplished alpinist and further developed his personal interest in botany and geology by studying and sketching nature. La Trobe collected specimens and kept detailed journals and drawings of his natural discoveries, which formed the basis of two books about the Alpine region.

La Trobe published his first book in 1829, *The Alpenstock; or Sketches of Swiss Scenery and Manners*. This was followed by a second book in 1832, *The Pedestrian: A Summer's Ramble in the Tyrol*.

In 1832 La Trobe, accompanied by the young Count Albert de Pourtalès, journeyed to America and embarked on an intrepid adventure across Native American lands alongside fellow adventurer and American author Washington Irving, best known for his enduring novel *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow*.

In his 1835 publication *A Tour on the Prairies*, Washington characterised La Trobe as a 'man of a thousand occupations; a botanist, a geologist, a hunter of beetles and butterflies, a musical amateur, a sketcher of no mean pretensions, in short a complete virtuoso'.

La Trobe next set off on a four-month exploration of Mexico. His personal journals from these two trips laid the foundations for his next two books, *The Rambler in North America* (1835) and *The Rambler in Mexico* (1836).

In 1835, La Trobe returned to Switzerland and married de Pourtalès' cousin, Sophie de Montmolin. The couple honeymooned on a family estate, Jolimont near Lake Neuchâtel. By April 1837 they had welcomed their first child, Agnes.

## The next adventure

In 1837, La Trobe took a job studying the progress of early education efforts for recently emancipated slaves in the British West Indies. His work was well received and after two years of reporting to the Colonial Office, La Trobe was appointed Superintendent of the Port Phillip district of New South Wales (current-day Victoria). In early 1839 he embarked on the four-month journey to Australia with his wife and young daughter.

The La Trobe family set themselves up on the outskirts of the settlement of Melbourne in a prefabricated home brought from England: a two-room dwelling made by Manning of London. This was assembled upon arrival when a locally-built dining room was erected, the first of many additional rooms needed for a growing family.

The following year La Trobe was able to purchase the land at auction, a twelve-and-a-half-acre estate which they named 'Jolimont' after the Swiss estate where Charles and Sophie had spent their honeymoon. The estate was located on what we now know as Wellington Parade near the Melbourne Cricket Ground.

La Trobe established an extensive garden at Jolimont, with a large variety of English ornamental plants and Australian native plants.

*'The garden was important to Charles Joseph La Trobe and his wife Sophie. It was a place where they relaxed from the pressures of government and entertained their friends. They were keen to re-create a garden with plants similar to the ones they remembered at home. At first the garden was very ornamental with star and moon crescent shaped beds full of hollyhocks and flowering annual plants. But due to lack of man power (the*



*gardeners having left for the goldfields) and also lack of water, their garden changed to a romantic and slightly wild garden, where Charles planted species that were drought tolerant.'*

- Friends of La Trobe's Cottage website

State Library Victoria has a collection of detailed drawings, personal letters and diary entries that reveal what life was like at Jolimont, particularly in the garden. When Agnes was only 8 years old, she was returned to Switzerland for a formal education and her father sent her many letters with detailed descriptions of the garden, describing the progress of flowers and trees they had planted together.

*'Jolimont has not had any alterations made to it since I wrote to you last and told you about our new room and verandah. This spring the garden was most beautiful - full of flowers & the verandah so full of fine geraniums & cactus of various kinds in full flower that everybody said it was worth coming to see. But since the hot weather set in all has disappeared. I think the only important addition I have made to my garden is the pretty rockery - for the sake of various rock plants which I got from Sydney & cacti. His has succeeded very well & is ornamental. I can hardly describe to you where it is exactly - but it is not far from your first little garden, do you remember when you were a very little girl you planted it with the pea - there were a few shady trees & bushes & I have put a seat under them.'*

- Letter from Charles Joseph La Trobe to Agnes, January 1848



Over the course of 15 years in Australia, a chronological timeline of La Trobe's movements depicts a man who spent much of his life exploring Victoria; ascending peaks in every direction, traversing waterways and discovering coastlines. When La Trobe was at home, Jolimont was a much-loved sanctuary and source of happiness.

## Farewell to Jolimont

In July 1851, the colony of Victoria was formed, and La Trobe became the first Lieutenant-Governor. Along with the wealth and prosperity of the Victorian Gold Rush came many challenges for the head of the new colony. The population grew rapidly due to the influx of immigrants arriving in search of gold, leading to housing shortages and rising crime.

At the end of 1852, La Trobe submitted his resignation but had to wait for a replacement before he could return home. In 1853, Sophie La Trobe returned to Switzerland with their children to seek expert medical attention, but sadly passed away the following year after many years of ill health.

Upon his return to Europe, La Trobe needed money to provide for his family and retirement. He could not afford to retain Jolimont, which was sub-divided and sold off in pieces between 1857 to 1871 to provide an income.

In 1899 Bedggood & Co, a large shoe manufacturing company, acquired the property and expanded rapidly around the cottage buildings. In the 1930s the Bedggood family commissioned prominent landscape designer Edna Walling to design a new garden that would allow the company to open the cottage for tours, although this was short lived.

Sadly, by the late 1950s most of the cottage had been demolished and the National Trust became involved, working with the Bedggood Company to save all that remained - the dining room. The National Trust acquired the building in the early 1960s and it was relocated adjacent to the Royal Botanic Gardens Herbarium. Here, the original prefabricated cottage was reconstructed and some of the original fittings located and restored under the direction of heritage architects Phyllis and John Murphy.

The cottage was relocated again in 1998 to make way for The Ian Potter Foundation Children's Garden. The cottage and garden now reside in the Domain parklands near Government House and the Shrine, in a precinct that was granted a permanent place on the National Heritage List in 2018.

## La Trobe's legacy & beyond

Charles La Trobe was not able to write a memoir later in life due to the deterioration of his eyesight, but he ensured that many of his personal letters and documents were held in the archives at the Melbourne Public Library (now the State Library of Victoria).

From this extensive collection we're able to form a rounded impression of Charles Joseph La Trobe who, despite varied opinions of his experience and success as Lieutenant-Governor at the time, undoubtedly laid the foundations of our modern-day city.

La Trobe was instrumental in the creation of our earliest institutions such as Melbourne University and the Public Library, secured the city's water supply, and ensured that there would be plenty of green space allocated for parks and gardens.

Today La Trobe's Cottage and garden are tended by a dedicated group of National Trust volunteers who are passionate about sharing the story and history of Jolimont and the La Trobe family.

The Friends of La Trobe's Cottage was formed in 2009 to support the National Trust in maintaining and developing the site. They utilised sketches, paintings, diary notations, private letters, plant lists, and a set of twenty-two drawings of Jolimont produced by La Trobe's cousin, accomplished artist Edward La Trobe Bateman, as the basis for the re-creation.

Interestingly, Bateman shared his elder cousin's love of the natural world and became a successful landscape architect and designer in the years that followed La Trobe's return to Europe. Bateman designed the garden of the University of Melbourne, Williamstown Botanic Gardens, Carlton Gardens and Fitzroy Gardens.

The Friends of La Trobe's Cottage aimed to re-create a romantic wild garden using plants that were available to La Trobe in the 1840s and 1850s, and those that could be identified in the sketches of his garden. The Friends reinstalled the same diamond and crescent shaped beds as featured in the original Jolimont estate; rebuilt the garden bench La Trobe wrote about in a letter to his daughter Agnes; planted two varieties of early 18th-century heritage apples, the Pomme de Neige and the Ribston Pippin, in front of the kitchen; and established a Latrobei bed, planted out with the species named after La Trobe. The Friends also planted several heritage roses in the garden. From the George Alexander Gilbert pastel drawing of the cottage in 1843-44, it appears that La Trobe loved roses.

In 2014, the garden was awarded a Victorian Community History Award for 'Historical Interpretation' recognising the historical re-creation of the garden and restoring an authentic essence of the original Jolimont Garden for visitors to enjoy.

## Acknowledgments

Thank you to the C J La Trobe Society, Helen Armstrong & Helen Botham.

*Gardens of the National Trust of Australia (Victoria)*  
Anne Vale (2018)

*La Trobe's Jolimont: a walk around my garden*  
Helen Botham (2006)

Visit the C J La Trobe Society for more reading and resources



La Trobe's Cottage and garden is open October to April on Sundays 1pm to 4pm. Visit the National Trust website for more information: [nationaltrust.org.au](http://nationaltrust.org.au)