



# Bishops Court and its garden

**120 Clarendon Street, East Melbourne**

Welcome to 'Bishops Court', the home of the Anglican Archbishop of Melbourne.

Bishops Court, one of the oldest properties in East Melbourne, has been the official residence of the Anglican Bishop, later Archbishop, of Melbourne since 1853. It is the last intact urban estate within the City of Melbourne.

Bishop Perry, the first Bishop of Melbourne, selected the site in 1848. A prime site in East Melbourne, its main views at the time were south across Jolimont and Richmond Paddock, (later Yarra Park), to the Yarra River Flats and the Domain beyond. The Fitzroy Gardens to the west of the site were not developed until the 1860s. The house, designed by the architects, Newson and Blackburn, was finally ready for occupation in January 1853 and was Bishop Perry's home until 1874. The red brick northern wing, designed by the architects, Inskip and (Walter) Butler, was completed in 1903.

In 1854, architect Charles Swyer (without remuneration) laid out the grounds. His job was made easy with the siting of the residence by Newson and Blackburn in its north eastern corner position, east of an ancient River Red Gum (*Eucalyptus camaldulensis*). This eucalypt often referred to as the Corroboree Tree, survived on the site until the 1990s. The siting gave the garden the wonderful space we appreciate today and it is difficult to imagine what it would be like now had the house been centred on the block. Walter Butler was a talented landscape architect and it is believed that during the 1903 extensions to the house that he had some influence on the garden. Indeed, it was at this time that he delivered a seminal paper on landscape design to the Royal Victorian Institute of Architects which included *'If a garden is as much a work of man's art as his house is, it is - owing to their oneness, and inseparableness - as much the architect's business to design the garden as to design the house.'*

Each resident Bishop or Archbishop and their families have enjoyed the garden and many have made their own contribution to the garden. Bishop James Moorhouse chose the garden to bury his faithful dog in 1884 and the headstone can still be seen with the touching inscription *'In memory of Dear Old Tim, a friend true and tried'*. Bishop Lowther Clark and his wife, who took up occupancy in 1904, are reported to have held many garden parties, as did his successor, Archbishop Harrington Lees. The tradition continued and there are numerous reports available of garden parties until the late 1960s when garden parties were considered an indulgence and that the money could be better used to help those in need.

Archbishop Woods and his wife were both keen gardeners and lived with their family at Bishops Court for 20 years (1957 - 1977). They planted the *Escallonia* hedge to screen the southern garden from the driveway and provide privacy. Mrs Woods planted several native trees on the eastern boundary of the southern garden and the family named this planting *'the Deanery Screenery'* referring to the neighbouring property then owned by the church and the residence of the Dean of Melbourne. Archbishop Woods' love of figs resulted in several of these trees being planted in the orchard, which survive to this day. The last Archbishop, Peter Watson pursued (unsuccessfully) possum control methods and his wife, Margo was tireless in watering according to restrictions of the day.

From the 1960s, garden maintenance focused on a tidy appearance and little, if any, real gardening was done. In 1998 the church lodged an application to Heritage Victoria to subdivide the land at Bishops Court; they wished to excise the south eastern corner of the site. The Victorian Branch of the Australian Garden History Society (AGHS) was one of the objectors. When the subsequent appeal was made in 1999 the AGHS again objected and appeared along with others at the hearings conducted to resolve the issue. At all times when objecting to the subdivision the AGHS offered assistance for the maintenance of the garden. It is history now, that Heritage Victoria disallowed the subdivision.

In July 2001 the AGHS commenced a program of working bees on the 3<sup>rd</sup> Wednesday of each month. Following the many years of neglect, plants were lost and many layers of rubbish and ivy and other weeds built up in each of the shrubberies. Rubbish had been allowed to accumulate and paths were lost under rubbish and weeds. The working bees cleared away much and managed the rubbish by separating chippable material for mulch, bagging green rubbish for council collection and composting suitable material.

Bishopscourt (house and garden) is included on the Victorian Heritage Register and 18 trees are included on the citation. *Ilex f. kingiana*, a fine plant when healthy, suffered from years of neglect and damage by possums. In 2003 it was cut to the ground and replaced by an *Arbutus glandulosa* recommended and given to us by Stephen Ryan. Sadly, the *Arbutus* has been a victim of the drought and we have replaced it with a *Zelkova serrata* (Japanese Elm). Interestingly the cut down *Ilex* has regrown. The root zone of the Port Jackson Fig, *Ficus rubiginosa* was for many years covered by heaps of firewood logs and suffered from extreme stress due to soil compaction. The wood heap was relocated to a less prominent position enabling the tree to receive some well-needed attention; it has responded well and will continue to be a significant tree in the garden, and in fact has been added to the National Trust's Significant Tree Register. In 2002 one of the volunteers investigated further and rediscovered a path, complete with spoon drain, under the *Ficus* and this has now been reinstated as an important part of the garden's path network.

Heritage Victoria funding enabled the driveway and some of the garden paths to be resurfaced, the pergola, which had been lost, to be reconstructed and for replacement established trees, four *Ulmus x hollandica* (Dutch Elm), a *Agathis robusta*, a *Robinia pseudoacacia* and a *Magnolia grandiflora*. An RACV Foundation grant provided seeding money for the AGHS to engage professionals to carry out specific tasks. Money generated by the Open Garden Scheme openings in 2002 and 2003 and by specific Bishopscourt fund raising projects has enabled that work to continue. Clive Blazey of Diggers Seeds provided a wide range of heritage vegetable seeds and the vegetable garden has been reinstated on the land proposed for subdivision.

Alan Soderlund of Total Plant Solutions in 2002 and 2003 donated dozens of established trees and shrubs which propelled the restoration project ahead by years. These were all selected as suitable for this garden and all were available in the nursery trade in Melbourne at the end of the 1800s, the time the garden was established. A list of these recent plantings is available. The *Eucalyptus camaldulensis* west of the front door of the house and considered to be remnant vegetation had to be felled in the 1990s. Total Plant Solutions were able to provide a replacement tree which was planted in August 2002.

The southern garden has received a lot of attention. Two more original paths have been resurfaced and the garden shed moved from under the *Ficus rubiginosa*. The shed was relocated by two East Melbourne residents and has proved that nothing is impossible with this garden if we set our minds to it.

In October 2005 we farewelled Archbishop Peter and Margo Watson. Their support of our work here enabled us to achieve much and so the volunteers wish to acknowledge Archbishop Peter and Margo for trusting our judgement in the restoration of the garden and for the privilege to work in this very special place. To mark their retirement we planted an English Elm (*Ulmus procera*) in the main lawn. This replaced an earlier elm in that spot and since working here Heritage Victoria have encouraged us to plant a replacement.

The future of Bishopscourt, following the Watsons' departure was in doubt and we were told in early 2006 that the Diocese was calling for 'Expressions of interest for sale or lease'. In December 2006 Archbishop Philip and Joy Freier moved into the Chaplain's residence. During 2007 we were delighted to be told that the Freiers were to move into the main house and to make it their home. This supports our strong view that the property should remain as the residence of the Archbishop of Melbourne. The support we have received from Melburnians and what we have achieved over the past 10 years has proved this to us.

As with all gardens, Bishopscourt presents many challenges for us to manage: water restrictions, elm suckers, possums who even defy the experts by eating the rhubarb, including its leaves and weeds in particular, acanthus, ivy, wandering jew and oxalis.

In 2011 a large underground brick lined tank, originally the water supply for the house, was located and cleaned. Plans are now underway to incorporate the tank into a water capture and watering plan for the garden. The driveway and side paths are in desperate need of resurfacing and many metres of in-fill brick gutters are required. These along with ongoing tree care from professional arborists are major expenses for the garden. Donations are always gratefully accepted.

The volunteers are continuing to restore and maintain the garden. The comments we receive during visits confirm to us that all our efforts to restore this important Melbourne garden are very worthwhile. We are proud of what we have achieved in the ten years we have worked here and we look forward to achieving more in the future. Working bees are held on the third Wednesday of each month and anyone is welcome. These days are most enjoyable and a wonderful camaraderie has developed within the group.

We wish to publicly thank the very many people who have helped the Bishopscourt garden in a whole range of ways.