Parliament of Western Australia

History of Parliament House Gardens

From 1911 -

Overview and Photographs
As at October 2005

The development of the 1958 and 1964 period produced the built form and landscape setting that is now most visible from the city and city approaches.

The grounds of Parliament House are regarded as a prestigious and symbolic venue for the conduct of important ceremonies and civic functions, as well as for public rallies and the presentation of petitions.

The initial development of the grounds reflects the emergent interest in the early decades of this century in the beautification of the city and the image of Perth as a garden city.

Development of Grounds

The employment of a permanent gardener on the Parliament House staff from the earliest period, meant the grounds were not only maintained but continued to be developed, albeit slowly. Written records covering the development of the grounds during the inter-war period do not appear to exist, however the photographic record provides some evidence and shows the growth of the early tree plantings, fencing and hedge plantings. The development of the streetscapes on Harvest Terrace and Malcolm Street are more fully recorded in written and photographic records.

The Woods & Forests Department supplied another 1800 trees over the period 1911 to 1914, in addition to the 150 trees which had previously been supplied. The planting of this number of trees is surprising and while it suggests that significant effort was being expended on the development of the grounds, it may have been necessary to replace a considerable number which did not survive. The earliest aerial photograph available taken in January 1942, reveals the concentration of well-developed trees growing on the north and east sides of Parliament House, and it seems reasonable to assume these were some of the trees planted in the years just prior to World War One. After 1914, the Woods & Forests Department no longer listed in its annual reports the places receiving trees from the Hamel nursery. It is therefore possible more trees were received from the nursery and that tree planting continued after this date.

Hedge Plantings

Hedges were planted along the fence line bordering Harvest Terrace, Hay Street and Malcolm Street. The photographic evidence suggests the plantings were probably cypress, a popular hedge plant in the early decades of this century. The curved hedge alongside the ramp at the north-west corner of the building had an impressive architectural form and was kept in immaculate condition. It appears in photographs dating from 1929-1959 and can probably still be remembered by older people who were familiar with the place. These hedges appear to have been planted c1920; those bordering Hay Street and the lower north-east corner of Harvest Terrace were removed in 1926 when roadworks were undertaken and new limestone walling was built.

On the south side of the building there was a low clipped hedge extending a short distance along the Harvest Terrace boundary. Beyond this a line of cypresses, which grew to be large trees, extended to the corner of Malcolm Street and continued down the hill to the old Barracks building. These trees may have been planted as a dense wind break to protect the southern part of the grounds from the strong west and south-west prevailing winds. The cypress pines along Malcolm Street were removed in 1933-34 when the road was widened; those along Harvest Terrace remained and their roots created a hazard along the footpath until they were removed some twenty years later.
Harvest Terrace Street Trees

A row of flame trees was planted in front of Parliament House and the line was continued along the Harvest Terrace verge to the Malcolm Street corner. A row of seven Canary Island date palms was planted along the verge at the Hay Street end of the street. There is no ready explanation why the flame trees were not planted the full length of the street or why palms were preferred for just the lower section. A photograph from the late 1920s shows the newly planted trees and the maturing character of the streetscape. It is not clear who planted the trees and palms in Harvest Terrace, the Perth City Council was responsible for the trees in the streets, however there is no reference to these plantings in the City of Perth annual reports for the period, and it is possible the House Committee took the initiative to improve the appearance of the street.

Road Widening on Hay Street and Malcolm Street

Hay Street was widened in the mid-1920s, in the vicinity of the Parliament House site, to overcome traffic congestion caused by horse drawn vehicles interfering with the increasing motor traffic. A strip 27(ft) wide was excised from the parliamentary reserve and the picket fence and hedge along the boundary was removed.

The widened section of Hay Street in front of Parliament House site which still exists appears as something of an anomaly; it is a relic of that transitional period in Perth when horse power was rapidly being overtaken by the combustion engine.

Malcolm Street was widened as part of a civic improvement scheme which began in 1927 with the proposal for widening Kings Park Road and construction of the circus at the entrance to Kings Park. At that time the whole area in front of Kings Park was described as "rather unkempt" and "forlorn looking". The works were to commemorate the visit of the Duke and Duchess of York in May of that year, but were not completed until after their visit. The Perth City Council’s aim was to create a fitting entrance to the city by developing a wide thoroughfare incorporating St George’s Terrace, Malcolm Street and Kings Park Road. This was already the preferred route for buses and taxis travelling from Fremantle and after the widening of Kings Park Road to 126(ft), Malcolm Street still only 66(ft) wide remained as a bottleneck at the top of St George’s Terrace which was 99(ft) wide.

The widening of Malcolm Street in 1933-34 was accomplished by the excision of a 33(ft) strip from the parliamentary reserve. The fence and cypress pines along the Malcolm Street boundary were removed and the ground graded back into the site to form the steep bank which exists today. The Council planted twenty NSW box trees along the verge, and a line of Moreton Bay figs along the top of the bank inside the Parliament House grounds. Due to lack of reticulation the trees and the grass planted on the bank died and more were planted in the following season. The street trees and the trees planted inside the grounds can be seen as small specimens in the 1942 aerial photograph. A line of poplars was planted at the foot of the hill to screen the unsightly buildings behind the old Barracks, from the view of motorists travelling down Malcolm Street.
Extent of Development c1954

Surveys of the parliamentary reserve were prepared in 1953 and 1954 showing details of the planting, path system and contours. These drawings provide a good record of the state of development in the early 1950s and give added substance to the information available from photographs and oral evidence.

Two permanent gardeners were now employed, one man spending most of his time mowing the lawns. The grounds were remembered as a pleasant environment, considerably larger than at present, with extensive areas of lawn, trees, and beds of flowers and roses, mainly concentrated on the north and east sides of the building. The foundation stone laid in 1902, still remained as a free standing element in the gardens "waiting for the rest of the building to be finished around it", and is marked on the survey plan as a monument, no doubt to past aspirations!

The southern section of the grounds was more austere and less interesting. The cypress pines along the Harvest Terrace boundary were in decline and a fine Norfolk Island pine which stood alongside the pedestrian entry to the grounds had disappeared. The trees planted along the Malcolm Street bank which would have enhanced the area failed to survive; leaving the barren looking grounds open to view. A work area at the rear of the building was screened by a tea-tree hedge.

The clarity of the layout in the 1907 plan is no longer evident in the survey drawing of the early 1950s. The flower beds along the Hay Street boundary remain, but are organised in a regimented line, and the terraces which were formed on the slope in the initial works, appear to have been reshaped to a more or less even gradient. The steep bank with the hedge at the top divides the site and provides a clear demarcation between the parliamentary grounds and the Public Works offices and other departmental buildings on the old Barracks site. The system of paths linking the two areas is indicative of the interactions between the two, but shows little concern for formal niceties and the rose gardens which added colour and gave pleasure were aptly described as being in "no particular order".

Development of the Grounds

The extensions to the building and the completion of the eastern facade were accompanied by significant changes to the grounds in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

The building additions on the east elevation and construction of the roads and a carpark considerably reduced the area of informal garden development. A number of mature trees were removed from the eastern portion of the grounds, as well as the hedges and flower beds and the whole of the southern section was completely redeveloped.

Plans prepared in 1950 for extensions to the building, still retained the original concept of incorporating the old Barracks site in the grounds; however the adoption of the Stephenson-Hepburn recommendations for the freeway extension north of the Narrows Bridge finally put this to rest. An area of approximately 3 acres (1.2ha) was excised from the parliamentary reserve for the construction of the Mitchell Freeway, reducing it by a quarter. At the same time it was proposed to close the southern section of Harvest Terrace and incorporate the area in the parliamentary reserve. Although a sizeable portion of the reserve had been relinquished, it was land which had never effectively been a part of the parliamentary grounds. Its loss had a major impact on the relationship with the city, and ensured that the Harvest Terrace frontage would continue to be important as
the main access to the site.

**Plantings**

Planting plans for the new carpark and sunken garden on the south side of the building were prepared in 1959 by the Public Works Department landscape architect John Oldham. The scheme included informal massing of trees, an avenue of eucalypts on both sides of the driveway and a continuous border of mixed hibiscus shrubs along the Harvest Terrace boundary-replacing the tall hedge of old cypress-pines. The plant list included familiar species such as Norfolk Island pine, jacaranda, Lombardy poplar, prunus, and lemon-scented gum; these trees were in harmony with those already growing elsewhere in the grounds and provided continuity within the site and with the surrounding external environs. In addition a large number of Western Australian native plants were incorporated in the design and this was an innovative feature in the late 1950s. The list included the spectacular flowering eucalypts, *E. erythrocorys* and *E. macrocarpa*, kangaroo paws, boronia, wattles, melaleuca, verticordia, calothamnus and lechenaultia; all species which are now widely grown but which at that time were largely unknown as horticultural plants. The uncommon pink flowering marri (*E. calophyla rosea*) was specified for the avenue planting alongside the drive. Oldham's aim in these plantings was to promote the appreciation of the local flora, draw attention to its uniqueness and the need for conservation.

Additional planting designs were developed in the department during the 1960s for the other areas affected by the new works, including massed plantings of trees and shrubs along the driveway on the north and the continuation of the hibiscus hedge on Harvest Terrace along the Malcolm Street bank.

Although the changes to the grounds were considerable, the Harvest Terrace streetscape retained its essential character with the street trees planted in the inter-war years remaining in place along the verge. The eclectic character of the original plantings was also maintained in the newly planted areas, although the variety of temperate and semi-tropical plants increased considerably and there was a new emphasis on the use of the local flora.

**Construction of Mitchell Freeway and Water Features**

Construction of the Mitchell Freeway delayed the completion of work on the grounds until the early 1970s. This final stage included the construction of the water features on two levels, a parking area in front of the entrance to *Parliament* House and a viewing area overlooking the city. The Premier turned on the fountains and unveiled a plaque commemorating the completion of the work in July 1971 on the occasion of the official opening of Parliament.

The design for the water gardens, incorporating pools, fountains and a water cascade with a pedestrian walkway behind it was a development of an earlier design prepared in 1963 as part of the completion of the east front to *Parliament House*. Concrete parterre gardens planted with colourful, textured low-growing plants complemented the water features on the upper level and terraced gardens formed a backdrop to the fountains and pools at the lower level.

Major planting of the area extending along the freeway boundary accompanied the completion of the water gardens. Massed plantings of large growing trees were planted at the Hay Street end to restore the planting which had been lost in the course of the construction works. Similar plantings were made in the south-east corner and along the Malcolm Street bank where the hibiscus hedge, planted only a few years earlier, was replaced with trees.

The informal massing and scale of the tree plantings complemented the symmetry and formality of the
building design and reflected the character of the historic plantings in the northern part of the grounds.

**Works Completed between 1994 and 1998**

**Landscaping**

Some of the marked improvements have occurred in the public domain and in the grounds. The landscape maintained its eclectic nature up to this period. The improvements in this period relate to better traffic management, security concerns, displaying endemic and Western Australian flora, rationalising the grounds to open up important views and establishing plantings that adhere to 'waterwise' principles.

Clearing of existing vegetation and soil, application of new soil and planting of native shrubs has been undertaken to the eastern freeway reserve section of the grounds. A mixture of native and exotic species were in place prior to this period, with a predominance of native trees, exotic species and grasses. These obscured views to Parliament House and lacked a theme. The new plantings were designed to be low, to link with the Freeway Interchange and Kings Park and showcase Western Australian flora. A small variety of tree plantings were made, including *Banksia hookeriana*, *Eucalyptus Lane Poole*, and *Hakea orthyncha*. Understorey planting included *Arcacia ashbyii*, *Banksia peteolaris*, *Beuatiforia squarrose*, *Boronia alata*, *Chameluacium forrestii*, *Eucalytus macrocarpa*, *Grevillea bipinnatifida*, *Grevillea fililoba*, *Zanthorrhoea spp.* and *Anigozanthus spp.*

During the winter recess of 2004 the landscaping in front of the western facade of the building, the 1904 section on Harvest Tee, was modified. The work involved the removal of the intrusive pencil pines planted in front of the building and a general thinning of the planting along the front of the building. The car parking and access drive in front of the facade was removed in response to security concerns, and replaced with grass and flowerbeds. The levels were adjusted back to their historic profiles. A path system was installed that produces a memory of the driveway that was removed. The central section of the front of the building was left uncluttered and grass extended from the pavement to the building. The verge was re-turfed and the front elevation of the House framed by three additional palms. The Harvest Terrace footpath was repaved and the new paths extended to the two western entries. Flower beds were added to the flanks of the entrances. Other beds were filled with *Anigosnthus* 'Gold', then a mass planting of *Syzgium* 'Bush Christmas' and then a backdrop of *Dianella revoluta variegata*.

Parliamentary Services Department in conjunction with the Perth City Council (P.C.C.) undertook works to improve the Harvest Terrace Streetscape with the installation of upgrade works in conjunction with PCC. The median was planted out with Tuart Trees (*Eucalyptus gomphocephala*), with ground covers of *Diane/la caerulea*.

**Plantings**

The earliest plantings occurred along the Harvest Terrace frontage and in the area facing Hay Street. A small number of mature trees still standing in the grounds may be remnants of the large number of specimens thought to have been planted prior to World War One, however the precise age of these trees has not been determined due to the limitations of the archival record.

The early plantings were undertaken at the same time as the development of the grounds of other major public institutions. These included Kings Park, Government Gardens (now Stirling Gardens), Claremont Training College (later Edith Cowan University and now part of the University of Western Australia), Zoological Gardens (South Perth), Old Men's Home (Sunset Hospital, Dalkieth), and the Hospital for the Insane (formerly
Swanbourne Hospital).

The species planted in the grounds were widely planted in the metropolitan area in the early 20th century, and were readily available, mainly through the government nursery at Hamel in the south-west. The plants available from Hamel were predominantly introduced species, including pines, palms and other temperate climate plants from the northern hemisphere and some Australasian species including wattles, ficus, eucalypts and araucarias from various regions.

Western Australian plants were introduced as an important theme in the planting schemes first developed in 1959 and continued to feature in the plantings thereafter. The inclusion of the local flora in the planting palette at this time coincided with a growing heritage and conservation consciousness in the local community, and the development of specialist suppliers of native plants within the nursery industry. The use of Western Australian flora has become a much more concerted effort in the early twenty first century.

A comparison of the aerial photographs taken in the early 1940s, 1950s and 1960s reveal the extent of the earlier plantings, the decline which had occurred by the mid-1950s and the reconstruction and replanting of almost the entire site which began in the late 1950s and was completed in the early 1970s. The plantings undertaken in this most recent stage of development were representative of the landscape design work being carried out by the Public Works Department at that time, although the plantings may have been more elaborate than for other government properties, in recognition of the prestige of the site.
Photographs

Aerial Photograph, 1942. Note the collection of buildings within the Pensioner Barracks ground built to accommodate a variety of government departments and the clusters of plantings to the east and north of Parliament House, together with street tree plantings. The observatory telescope can also be seen on the axis of Fraser Avenue.
Photograph of the North-West Corner of the Site, 1938. Note the plantings of palms and the hedging around the northern entrance steps, together with the temporary building on the north face of Parliament House. (Batty Library 8168/85084)
West Elevation, 1959. By this period, the tree plantings had matured and car parking had become a feature of the setting. Note the well kept cypress hedge curving away from the northern entrance. (Battye Library 816BffB3216)
Northern Section of Grounds along Hay Street, 1959. Note the simple retaining wall and fence and planting beds. (Battye Library 816B/TB3218)
Malcolm Street Before Widening, c.1934. The building on the right is the Pensioner Barracks. (Lord Mayor's report, City of Perth, 1933-34, opposite p. 92)

Malcolm Street After Widening, c.1934. (Lord Mayor's report, City of Perth, 1933-34, opposite p. 92)
Southern Section of grounds along Malcom Street, 1934. The Pensioner Barracks on the left.

(Batyre Library 816B/B2826)
Postcard View of the Fountains. This photograph shows the parterre gardens (Battye Library 51378)