

Mount Gambier Cave Gardens and Environs State Heritage Area

Mount Gambier Cave Gardens and Environs was declared a State Heritage Area on 2 August 2001.

HISTORY

The Garden today is largely as designed, constructed and planted in 1925. It reflects the strategy established and maintained by William Denham Robinson and conserved under his son Robert's curatorship. The Cave Gardens represents a creative approach to 1920s-30s landscape design, for a formal civic garden needing to respect an unusual geological feature. Changes over time have been due to plant and tree age, and to the progressive modernisation of gardening and irrigation practices.

The attraction of this site to early settlers was its reliable fresh water supply. In 1845-46 the first survey of the area secured three acres surrounding the sinkhole as a Government Reserve, and during 1847 the first commercial buildings (a hotel and a store) were constructed opposite. It was 1870 before the Government Reserve was vested in Council, but community interest to create a civic garden or park, in this central location of the growing town, began in the 1860s.

In 1883 Captain Robert Gardiner donated funds for the erection of the present fountain. Described as the first marble fountain constructed in Victoria, it was seen as a symbol of Mount Gambier's prosperity.

During the 1890s Council gardeners planted ornamental trees, installed gas lamps and seating and constructed a gravel path.

In 1906 the first community-based plantings were inspired by Paul Krummel and resulted in the quick creation of a formal garden and rosary. Krummel then supervised the establishment of an eclectic-styled garden around the sinkhole during 1906-1910.

In 1925 Council looked towards the town's Jubilee Celebrations and initiated a competition to re-design the Garden. William Denham Robinson submitted the successful plan and a philosophy statement, and was commissioned to implement his design. In recognition of his work, Robinson was appointed Honorary Curator of Gardens. He continued his design and planting strategy to include the Cave area and also extended his responsibilities to other Council parks and reserves.

With William Robinson's death in 1945, his son Robert became City Gardener and continued the Garden plan established by his father. He replaced and replanted numerous trees because of age and soil compaction, conserved the rosary as restructured by his father, and added several new trees and shrubs according to the plant fashions of the time. He retired in 1964.

Since Robert Robinson's resignation, few changes have occurred to the structure and planting strategy in the garden. The new Civic Centre was opened in 1981, enabling Watson Terrace to be partly closed, with an extension of the reserve's eastern lawn. Community donations of plaques, roses and flowering shrubs continue, with many positioned in the Garden.

FEATURES

The state heritage area also contains a number of prominent buildings that are predominantly of two-storey construction, in a grand architectural style and located on or immediately adjacent to the street alignment. Five of these historic commercial or civic buildings are state heritage-listed:

- Mount Gambier post office – formerly Telegraph office (1865)
- Riddoch Art Gallery -- formerly the Institute (1868) and King's Theatre (1907)
- Mount Gambier Town Hall (1882)
- Jen's Hotel (1884)
- Rubenkönig building – formerly Jen's Hotel Annexe (1902).



VISITING

This relatively small state heritage area is the centrepiece of the City of Mount Gambier, and is located within the town's busy commercial and civic area. The Cave and the surrounding Reserve are a 'must-see' for tourists and other visitors, but are also important recreational spaces for local workers or shoppers. An interpretive display at the entrance to the Cave Gardens provides information about the history and geology of this site.



Further Information

For further information please contact the State Heritage Unit

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