



Above: Grottoes and shelter house beside the site of the former swimming pool.
Below: "Yaralla" now the Dome Eadith Walker Convalescent Hospital.

Yaralla Estate Concord

A Bicentennial Landscape Restoration Programme

By PAUL KNOX

The approach of the Australian Bicentenary in 1988, and its encouragement of an awareness of national identity, presents a pertinent opportunity to focus public attention on significant items of our cultural heritage. To date historic gardens have been a neglected element of the National Estate.



Approximately 12km west of Sydney's Central business district, the Yaralla Estate at Concord occupies an entire peninsula on the Parramatta River, an arm of Sydney Harbour.

The Estate comprises a Victorian Italianate mansion designed by Edmund Blacket, with later additions by Sir John Sulman; the former home of Australia's first postmaster, Isaac Nichols; a squash court built for a visit of the Prince of Wales, workers' residences, a stables and coach house complex, a dairy and the remains of some early 19th century farm house buildings. These architectural elements are located in nearly 45 hectares of important gardens, fringed by some original eucalyptus woodland, and extensive mangrove stands along the harbour frontage.

Originally a grant in 1797 of 50 acres to Isaac Nichols, the property was enlarged by him to over 600 acres and developed into a flourishing orchard, dairy and market garden enterprise, before being reduced in size to almost its original boundary in the mid 19th century economic recession.

Gentleman's Estate

Ownership of the land transferred to Thomas Walker, a Sydney merchant, pastoralist, shipowner and philanthropist, who gradually acquired the surrounding properties expanding Yaralla to 306 acres. With stone quarried from the site, Thomas built in the late 1860s the towered Italianate villa befitting his wealth and station in the community, surrounding it with the features of an English-style gentleman's estate.

Upon his death in 1886 his 21 year old daughter Eadith, also a philanthropist, assumed its responsibility. The garden became the scene of lavish charity functions and splendid parties for children, the home a centre for high



Sandstone birdbath atop three layers of sandstone steps.

society with many important visitors to Sydney, including the Prince of Wales in 1921. With the outbreak of war she became a benefactor of the forces, and in 1917 established a camp for AIF tubercular soldiers in the grounds, maintaining its staff of 3 years. For her patriotic work and widespread charity she was made a Dame of the British Empire in 1928.

The garden, believed to have been laid out by Thomas Walker, was certainly modified by Eadith. The long outer drive through grassed paddocks is bordered by an avenue of Brush Box trees and then continues through iron gates past the shrubberies and formal, plumbago-hedged rose garden to the house.

Elaborate Grotto

The front garden gives onto lawns and a path reaching down to a sunken

knot garden and clumps of giant bamboo from which a broad grassed walk, bordered on its higher side by elaborate Edwardian concrete grotto work, leads round the shoreline to a grottoed shelter house planted with native and exotic orchids, succulents, palms and cycads, some of which still survive.

Above the grotto is an upper lawn, formerly a Wisteria-hedged tennis court, overlooked by an Italianate balustraded terrace. Many fine specimen trees planted in the late 19th and early 20th centuries remain, and include Araucarias, Mediterranean pines, Kauris and Raphis palms.

The Estate was bequeathed by Eadith to be of benefit to the public as a convalescent hospital in a relaxed and gracious landscaped setting, and has been administered since 1944 by Royal Prince Alfred Hospital.

Register of the National Estate

While many of Yaralla's features have disappeared or become depleted in condition, sufficient remains for it to be a heritage item of national significance. It is listed by the National Trust of Australia (NSW), listed on the Register of the National Estate, and protected by a permanent conservation order made under the NSW Heritage Act of 1977.

Recently a Bicentennial Authority grant of \$80,000 was made available to Concord Council and Royal Prince Alfred Hospital enabling restoration works for important parts of the property.

Following consultation with Concord Council and the Hospital Authorities it is intended, at this stage, to install a discreet irrigation system within the grotto in addition to the latter's restoration by careful hand-weeding, mulching and replanting of original species.

The broken garden-bed edging of the driveway turning circle is to be replaced with a more historically appropriate detail, as is some of the garden furniture. The rivulet and fountain in the sunken garden are to be restored to working order, and a number of picturesque outbuildings and landscape features restored.

Ideally, this will be but a first step in a comprehensive restoration programme at Yaralla, which is undoubtedly the finest surviving example of a Victorian/Edwardian suburban estate in NSW.

Paul Knox, principal of Paul Knox and Howard Tanner, Landscape Consultants, is responsible for landscape conservation work at Yaralla.



The stables and coach house, designed by Sir John Sulman.