

**Victoria State Rose Garden Supporters  
Werribee Park Inc.**

*History & Origins of the  
Victoria State Rose Garden*

**By James I. Priestly**

This booklet is one of a series written, illustrated and published by  
Members of the Victoria State Rose Garden Supporters, Werribee Park Inc.

James L. Priestly (OAM) had the prime role in having the  
Victoria State Rose Garden established. This booklet is primarily composed using his  
notes and letters over the period of establishment of the Garden.  
Without his backing and hard work, the Garden would not exist.  
Mr. Priestly died in 2001.

# **History and Origins** **Of** **Victoria State Rose Garden**

**by Mr J.L. Priestly**

Edited by Wal Johnston

The Victoria State Rose Garden is one of the tourist gems of Victoria. Hidden behind a screen of trees from the carpark of the Mansion at Werribee Park, it occupies nearly all of the 4.75 hectares originally designated for the establishment of a National Rose Garden. It is on the visiting list of rosarians from around the world and in 2003 was awarded the Garden of Excellence by the World Federation of Rose Societies. This was the first time a non-European garden had received the prestigious award.

In plan, the design presents a stylised rose, with the traditional five-petalled Tudor Rose forming the largest display area at the northern end of the site. Pathways act as a rose “stem”, leading from the Tudor Rose petals, to a leaf” and a “rosebud”. The leaf is now called the Federation Leaf, planted to commemorate the Centenary of Federation of Australia. It contains beds of Australian roses bred over the period of Federation. The “rosebud” is planted with English Roses bred by David Austin.

## **Origins**

On the 3rd December 1976, the Premier, Mr Rupert Hamer, announced that Victoria was to be known as “The Garden State”. Shortly after, the Honorary Secretary of the National Rose Society of Australia, Mr Jim Priestly, suggested that

consideration be given to the establishment of a rose garden in the area in front of the old Treasury Buildings, where a new public square was proposed.

The reasons for the establishment of a public rose garden in Victoria were stated as:

- The creation of a new garden for the people in accordance with the Victorian Government's Garden State concept
- The tourist potential of a spectacular rose garden
- The existence of public rose gardens in major interstate and international cities
- The opportunity to establish a rose garden without rival in Australia
- Educational value to horticulturists and the public.

After eighteen months a reminder was sent to the Premier that "the Garden State lacked a public rose garden". This resulted in numerous meetings with the Research & Development Group of the Public Works Department. In May 1978 the basic concept of a project for a State Rose Garden was established.

Original Basic Concepts for a Rose Garden in Victoria:

- A garden for the display of all types of roses cultivated in Victoria
- A pleasant environment for public use and enjoyment
  - An informal and relaxed atmosphere, which invites exploration
  - Displays that ensure attractiveness and visual impact
  - Prominent displays of Australian produced hybrid roses
  - Fountain displays in conjunction with the State Fountains Trust Commission

In order to realise this concept the following planning elements were considered essential:

- All types of roses, including bush, standard and climbing roses to be displayed
- Roses to be grouped by individual varieties to produce an uncluttered effect and to enable cultivation appropriate to each variety
- Roses to be planted as densely as practicable to create mass displays
- Evergreen roses to be used where possible to alleviate the barren effect of deciduous roses during winter
- Consideration of the use of groundcover plants to eliminate exposure of bare soil and enhance the winter appearance of the garden

### **Site Selection**

A rose garden having been approved in principle, the next stage was to select a suitable site. Site selection criteria were:

- Land area and shape topography, orientation, available expansion possibilities and land ownership
- Access and security, transport, existing environment both visual and noise intrusion
- Climate, soil type and drainage, existing vegetation
- Visitor facilities such as conveniences, eating and information center.

A total of 22 sites were initially considered. A short list of three, namely Werribee Park; Barkly Gardens, East Richmond: and, St Vincent's Gardens, South Melbourne were recommended as the most suitable.

The suggested Werribee Park site was inspected by Mr Priestly

and Dr A.S.Thomas on Melbourne Cup Day 1978 and recommended as suitable. It was a clear field in a rural environment adjacent to landscape gardens. A northerly aspect, generally flat, State owned, with adequate expansion possibilities and immediately available, subject to approval. At the time of inspection a small herd of Murry Grey cattle were grazing on the area, which was secured on the southwestern side by an electrified, rabbit-proofed fence.

The Werribee Park site was selected as the most suitable because of its location. The site also had direct links to the first Rose Society in Australia in that Mr George Chirnside was one of the original patrons, a post which was offered and accepted in December 1899. It was therefore fitting that the first State Rose Garden be sited at the former estate of the Chirnside family at Werribee Park.

### **Preparing the Garden**

On the 11th March 1980, the Premier, Mr Rupert Hamer, approved in principle the establishment of a State Rose Garden at Werribee Park. At a subsequent meeting of interested parties in 1980, Dr David Churchil, Director of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Melbourne, presented a proposal to develop a National Rose Garden at Werribee Park. To encourage approval, a design had been prepared by Mr Priestly and ground plans were submitted with detailed costings for drainage, water reticulation, paving, turfing, seats, furniture and planting fixtures and plants.

The Interim Committee of Management approved the establishment of the Rose Garden on the recommended site. 4.75 hectares (12 acres) were set aside for the purpose.

The Tudor Rose design fitted the shape of the land available.

The proposed three display areas were to comprise a combination of beds, arches, festoons, pillars, weeping standards, three-quarter standards, gazebos, seats, rose hedges and a fountain. A viewing mound was introduced and the alter installation of a unique sundial was approved. The sun device was a modern noon mark called an analemma. At noon the sun's rays pass through an aperture and cast a sunlit spot on an engraved plate. In the course of a year, these spots of light would trace out the shape of an elongated figure eight. Along this path, notes on rose culture for that time of the year would be engraved.

The design, with minor modifications, was accepted and a Rose Garden Task Force under the Werribee Park Master Plan Task Force of the Public Works Department was established. Mr Priestly was invited to join the Task Force on a voluntary basis.

Soil core samples were taken at four different part of the Garden area to determine the depth of soil and ph levels. The soil depth exceeded twenty feet to the bedrock.

On 14th February 1981, the Premier formally announced the Victorian State Rose Garden was to be established. Behind the scenes the Premier's Department sought an assurance that the rose plants to stock Stage one (Tudor Rose) would be provided by donors. To avoid a delay in decision Mr Priestly gave the Premier his personal assurance that plants would be provided. Interstate Rose Societies undertook to assist and Mr Ted Treloar, a rose grower of Portland, Victoria offered to solve the problem. The plants were available in Portland. Mr Priestly, Mr Ted Phillips and their wives headed off to Portland to dig, trim, label and pack the roses before heading back to Werribee. The task of these volunteers was enormous.

In October 1981, 1100 roses were transported and in 1982 a further 1150 plants were transported. Meantime local and interstate breeders and growers donated plants and time. These included George Melville of WA, George Matthew of Qld, Dean Ross of SA, Mr & Mrs Roy Rumsey of NSW, Eric Welsh of NSW and Ron Bell of Vic. Ansett Airfreight carried consignments from interstate to Melbourne free of charge. All these plants were installed in temporary beds.

March 1982 saw progress with the release of the Rose Garden Task Force report covering the design analysis, the proposed land form and engineering aspects, accompanied by engineering drawings, planting and implementation programs and cost analysis and cash flow. Perimeter plantings were carried out and the bowl shape was excavated courtesy of the 22nd CIVINEX (Civil Engineering Exposition) during equipment demonstrations. Drainage systems, water reticulation, timber edges for pathways and electrical cabling for the central fountain area was installed.

The Chairman of the Werribee Park Committee of Management, Mr Ron Walker, performed a symbolic first rose planting ceremony.

### **A Setback**

A change of government in 1983.84 produced a lack of funds. As a result, the original target of an official opening of the Garden as part of the 150th Birthday Celebrations of Victoria was lost. Grant applications also were not successful at this time. Complete stagnation of the two years of development was avoided by the use of State Employment Initiative Programs and Commonwealth Community Schemes. Gravel paving, formation of rose beds and extension of water reticulation was carried out during these years.

1983/84 saw two further visits to Portland (Treloar's Rose Nursery) by the hard working volunteers to collect, pack and

transport more donated roses. Using labour provided by the job creation schemes and under the instruction and guidance of Ted Phillips and Ern Pietsch, these plants were transferred into the rose beds.

It was during this time that the State Government transferred the administration of the Rose Garden from the Premier's Department to the Melbourne & Metropolitan Board of Works (MMBW). The new administration inherited a partly completed dream that looked like a nightmare. Weed infestation, poor maintenance of surrounds and collapsing pathways existed due to lack of financial support. An early meeting between the MMBW Executive and the National Rose Society rose garden supporters did result in an agreement that Stage One, the Tudor Rose, would be completed as soon as possible.

### **Getting Things Going Again**

In late 1984 an on-site meeting was held to decide the best way of achieving completion of Stage One. Present were Messrs Tony Witham and Ron Cuthbert of MMBW, Dr Ferris, Messrs Ern Pietsch and Ted Phillips of the National Rose Society. It was decided to re-form the rose beds and seed the lawn area. The most practical and economic way of doing this was to lift all the rose plants to allow the use of mechanical equipment. The plants were thriving in spite of neglect.

They were "dried out" for four weeks in February 1985, then lifted and bedded in keeper beds along the existing fence between the Rose Garden and the Mansion grounds (where the Heritage Border now stands). The plant removal and bedding was supervised by Ron Cuthbert using job creation scheme labour.

The transformation brought about by the grassing, remaking of the beds and the restoration of the pathways was a joy to

behold, with a vast and beautiful green lawn contrasting with red soil beds and yellow gravel paths. MMBW Administration also supported the effort by the installation of festoon poles and chains, galvanised tripods and arches.

Then came the lifting and replanting of the roses. A small percentage of the plants were lost during the unconventional operation. This led to a revision of the plants to be used and where to use them. Specially budded three-quarter standards were prepared to line the five main walkways; ramblers and climbers were selected for the festoons and arches as were pillar roses for the tripods. One hundred weeping standards were specially budded.

### **The Grand Opening**

On the 9th November 1986, the official opening of Stage One of The Victoria State Rose Garden was performed.

The best organised public functions do have some unscheduled events. The official opening was no exception. A large marquee had been erected on lawns adjacent to the Rose Garden as a venue for invited guests to be served morning tea following the ceremony. Whilst the speeches were taking place a busload of tourists arrived in the carpark and proceeded to the marquee to enjoy the morning tea. They undoubtedly left with a warm appreciation of MMBW public relations.

The opening was blessed with sunshine and a fine display by the plants now in place.

An official opening does not guarantee that work will continue. After the opening, no maintenance was done for many weeks due to lack of funds and staff at Werribee Park. By Christmas 1986 the plants were carrying thousands of hips and deadheads with weeds and grass as high as the standards. So a small band of stalwarts got together and deadheaded, whilst putting pressure on the administration to mow the lawns

and carry out some weeding. Over three months, six members of the National Rose Society worked 220 volunteer hours.

### **A Rose By Any Other Name**

From November 1976 to 1982 the Rose Garden was officially known as “The Victorian State Rose Garden”. In 1982, under the Werribee Park Commission, it was officially known as “The National Rose Garden”. During 1985, the name was changed to its current title, “The Victoria State Rose Garden”.

### **Public Appeals (Failed)**

In June 1986 a public appeal was sought through the Victoria Conservation Trust for funds to provide and instal the central fountain and the noon mark device on the observation mound. This appeal was supported by Werribee Park Management and approved by the Conservation Trust, thus securing taxation concessions for donors. The appeal was deferred when Werribee Park Management found that taxation concessions were not available through MMBW. A second attempt to launch a public appeal was planned to concur with the spring blooming period of 1992. This attempt was frustrated when MMBW called for a report on the future of the Rose Garden. The report prepared by Roger Lord in February called for a diminishing scale of funds for the Rose Garden to reach zero by 1995. More on this later.

### **Seeking Support**

In February 1992, Mr Priestly used a rose promotion visit to Melton Garden Center to seek signature on a petition supporting the retention and completion of the Rose Garden. A sympathetic signatory suggested that her daughter may be able to assist the cause through the Werribee Banner, a local weekly paper. This resulted in an appeal for assistance with the pruning at the Rose Garden. It should be noted that up to this

stage the majority of the pruning had been borne by eight stalwarts of the National Rose Society. From 1985 to July 1992, nearly 2800 hours had been volunteered with more than 2000 of these being given by Messrs Priestly, Phillips and Haynes. To do the work they had travelled more than 1300 kilometers. They deserved a break.

At the same time (1992) the draft management plan came up with the suggestion that the southern area of land reserved for Stages Two and Three was to be fenced off and used as pasture for sheep. A petition against this move resulted in many hundreds of signatures supporting the completion, but it had to be shown that there were sufficient volunteers to carry out the work involved in both the current Garden and any extension. A media campaign by local newspapers supported a drive for volunteers willing to devote their time and effort for the benefit of the Rose Garden and be prepared to be trained in rose plant maintenance.

Over 50 eager and willing volunteers were enrolled.

### **The 1992 Rose Garden Management Plan**

As mentioned earlier the 1992 Management Report by Roger Lord recommended that funding be set on a reducing annual scale to reach zero in 1995. The Report disclosed some interesting costs:

- (a) Annual Summer Trim and Winter Pruning was valued by Werribee Park at \$69,000 (work which had been carried out voluntarily by National Rose Society members)
- (b) Monitoring pest/disease outbreaks at \$2000 per annum
- (c) Planting replacement plants/tying standards at \$2840 per annum
- (d) Deadheading November to May at \$47,405 per annum.

The local wave of economic rationalisation sweeping State Government finances left no doubt that the Rose Garden was about to be engulfed and terminated.

To insure against this, it was suggested to Werribee Park Administration the items (b), (c), and (d) could be taken over by the volunteers and paid for by paying \$40,000 per annum in seven equal monthly payments into a public appeal conducted by the Victorian Conservation Trust for specific developments to the Victoria State Rose Garden. \$40,000 would be a saving of 15% per annum by the Administration and would let the Garden be completed as originally planned. Administration rejected this scheme on the grounds that they could not split their contracts.

To avoid the very real danger of losing the Rose Garden, the services set out in the \$40,000 scheme was offered **free of charge** to Werribee Park Administration. Fortunately this offer was accepted.

### **The Victoria State Rose Garden Supporters**

The Victoria State Rose Garden Supporters (VSRGS) group was incorporated on 21st June 1993. Incorporation served several purposes. It allowed members of the VSRGS, regardless of age, to be covered by insurance provided by Parks Victoria. It permitted the group to negotiate working agreements with Werribee Park Administration. Also it created an entity which could carry on business, in this case the “Business of looking after the Victoria State Rose Garden”.

The Supporters work very closely with the staff of the Mansion at Werribee Park. The joint effort shows clearly in the standard of care and upkeep of the Garden and its surrounds.

The original volunteers were trained in all aspects of rose culture by some of the foremost rosarians in the country. In

particular, pruning techniques with each cultivar being treated in accordance with documented observations made by men with over 200 years of rose growing experience. They in turn now pass this training on to the next generation of volunteers. The aim is to produce healthy bushes and a maximum number of blooms each year. The plants are not pruned to produce exhibition roses, but many of them do so.

The volunteers come from all around Melbourne. They come from all walks of life. Many ethnic backgrounds are represented and there is no generation gap. With over 100 volunteers on the books, the VSRGS are one of the biggest volunteer groups around Melbourne. An average of 40 volunteers appear every Wednesday and spend anything from one hour to a full working day. As an example, in July and August 2004 a total of 1372 hours on 20 days were worked. This does not include all the administrative time, meetings and private time spent making tool repairs, keeping records, preparing grant applications, and so on.

### **Grants**

From 1994 onwards, the Supporters have actively sought grants for the improvement of the Garden. A City of Wyndham Community Partnership Grant enabled the Supporters to replace the old timber edging with brick edging on rose beds. Later an Access for All Abilities grant paved the ramp for the Tudor Rose Gazebo.

Parks Victoria has been particularly generous in assisting, with labour, support and specific Community Project Grants. New etched brick signs make identification of the roses easy for visitors. Drip watering systems have been installed to reduce water usage.

The Heritage Border and Rosebud are now special features of

the Garden. In particular, grants and donations have enabled the Supporters to fulfil the dream of completing Stage Two of the Garden: the Australian Federation leaf project, which has been sponsored by the Centenary of Federation Victoria and the Community Support Fund.

### **The Heritage Border**

In August 1997 it was decided to utilise the fenceline between the Mansion and the Rose Garden by creating a Heritage Border. With the help of Werribee Park staff and a grant from Parks Victoria, 44 varieties of climbing Species and Old Roses were planted to form a hedge on the fence. In 1998 a front row of bush Heritage Roses was planted consisting of 49 varieties. Many of these were species roses with historical ties to the modern rose. In 2000, with the realigning of the fence line to allow for Stage Two, a further 170 meters of Old Roses were planted.

### **The Federation Leaf**

In 2000, the Supporters were successful in obtaining a grant from the Centenary of Federation to develop and plant a stylised leaf. The Federation Leaf would contain 50 beds of roses bred by Australians over the years 1901 to 2001. The aim was to include roses from each State of Australia and represent as many Australian breeders as possible. In addition, eight climbing roses were planted to climb the watering poles. To retain the Australian feel the beds have not been edged with brick. The paths between the beds have been gravelled and the beds mulched with eucalyptus mulch.

The center of the Leaf is a grassed area. Within this area five Callistemon have been planted in the form of the Southern Cross and also to give some shade for visitors. The Leaf is connected to the Tudor Rose by a gravel path representing the stem of a rose. The gravel path also serves as a stem to the

Rosebud.

### **The Rosebud**

A donation from David Austin Roses in 2000 saw the Supporters in the nice position of planting out a perfumed garden of David Austin (English) Roses in the shape of a rosebud. Some 60 varieties, both climbing and bush, were planted and have developed quickly. The area has been paved to retain a more formal area.

### **Visitors**

The Victoria State Rose Garden was for many years a secret garden hidden from the sight of the general public by the protective treeline. This has changed and is continuing to change. There are now many local visitors who have discovered this treasure. The Garden has acquired a reputation as a place to visit in Germany, Japan and Malaysia. We frequently have visitors who only come to Victoria to see the Garden. You have to be keen to fly from Tokyo to Melbourne, catch a train to Werribee, walk the 5 kilometers to Werribee Park to look at the Garden for six hours, then reverse the whole procedure (one of our volunteers gave the lady a ride back to the train station). As admittance to the Garden is free, it is difficult to estimate how many people visit the Garden each year, but based on leaflet usage, it is in the vicinity of 250,000.

### **The Future**

The enthusiasm of the volunteers, the support of Parks Victoria Werribee Park staff, the generous donations from rose growers and other firms, the various grants we have obtained and the generous donations from the general public make the future of the Victoria State Rose Garden look very “rosy”.

\*\*\*\*\* IMAGE 01 \*\*\*\*\*

## NOTES

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