

Australian Garden

vol. 35, no. 4, April 2024

HISTORY





John Viska

Hesperia

The AGHS conference looks west

The last time AGHS members visited Western Australia for a national conference was 10 years ago. They travelled right down south to Albany. This time the branch invites interstate members to come west for the 44th annual national conference (18 to 20 October 2024) in the coastal city of Bunbury, about two hours' drive south of Perth. (Non-members can zoom into the lectures from around the world.) Visits during the conference will include places of early settlement when the colony saw its future in the hands of Hesperus, the god of the west wind.

Colonisation of the western sector of New Holland was considered a venture that offered trading opportunities with the large British populations in India, and after 1814, the British Cape colony on the southern tip of Africa. The initial settlement on the Swan River in 1829 was championed by Captain James Stirling, who had convinced the British Government to support the establishment of a colony by free settlers. The name he contemplated for the new colony was Hesperia from Hesperus, the Greek name for the god of the west wind. This was not adopted, with the name the Swan River Colony being used until it became officially Western Australia in 1832.

View of Koombana Bay on Port Leschenault, Australind, Western Australia, drawn and lithographed by TC Dibdin, from an original sketch made on the spot by Miss Louisa Clifton, image National Library of Australia

Botanical imports and exports

The newly formed colony relied heavily on imports from the Cape of Good Hope, the last stopping off point before the port town of Fremantle. As a consequence, many economic and ornamental plants grown in the early days of the colony were of South African origin, procured when passengers disembarked before their final leg to Western Australia.

Among those obtained were the Cape gooseberry (*Physalis peruviana* syn. *P. capensis*), the eponymous Constantia grape from that district of the Cape, the true varietal name unknown. Doublegee (*Rumex hypogaeus* syn. *Emex australis*), cultivated in early kitchen gardens as a spinach substitute, the Cape tulip (*Homeria collina*) and the African boxthorn (*Lycium ferocissimum*), used for hedging, have all become weeds.

Ornamentals such as Cape lilac or white cedar (*Melia azedarach*), watsonia, chasmanthe, freesia, belladonna and arum lilies were well adapted to the climate and thrived. The reed-like foliage of Guildford grass (*Romula rosea*), another weed, was woven to create Guildford grass baskets.

Despite the initial hopes of prosperity, the fledgling colony floundered. Consequently it looked to the Cape and India as markets to bring in much needed money. Exports included sandalwood (*Santalum spicatum*) and native gums, particularly jarrah (*Eucalyptus marginata*). Also contemplated were the establishment of a mulberry plantation for a silk industry and the cultivation of the damask rose for the production of attar or otto of rose. Seed exchanges also took place. Jarrah was supplied to an Indian botanical garden and, once the Woods and Forests Department was established in the 1890s, the colony imported Himalayan cedar (*Cedrus deodar*) seed to trial for plantation use.

Cape gooseberries
(*Physalis peruviana*),
mr.donb, Flickr,
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Settling the southwest

In the first years of establishment there were a few isolated settlements in the southwest corner of the state: Albany, Augusta, Busselton, Vasse and Bunbury. Bunbury (Goomburrup), established in 1836 at the south of the Leschenault Estuary, was an ideal location as a port with the early settlers dependant on trading with North American whalers. The local population providing fresh meat and vegetables in exchange for oil, tobacco and spirits.

The first Government Resident at Augusta was John Molloy, whose wife Georgiana is remembered as one of the first botanical collectors in the colony. The settlement at Augusta did not succeed. The settlers moved north: the Molloy's relocated to Busselton; another family, the Laymans, went to Wonnerup where they built Wonnerup House, now a National Trust property.

When the colonial administration made land available in 1838, Charles Prinsep, Judge Advocate General of Bengal, residing in Calcutta, sent Thomas Little to acquire land. Little purchased 741.4 ha (1,832 acres) in the vicinity of the estuary and named the property Belvidere in honour of Prinsep's Calcutta mansion. The intent was to run horses for the British Army in India and breed cattle. Little was employed to develop and manage the property and brought with him an Indian workforce consisting of coolies. One, Hookam Chan, went on to make a career crafting furniture from the indigenous eucalypt, colloquially known as Swan River mahogany. Buffalo Road and a population of naturalised figs are the sole reminder of the early enterprise in the area. In the 1850s, Little bought his own land and established Dardanup Park, planting one of the earliest vineyards in the area and going on to produce prize-winning wines.

Such was the confidence for developing the region, a new settlement named Australind (a combination of Australia and India) was proposed. The Western Australian Land Company was established and purchased land in the area and surveyed a town site. It was hoped the horse trade would be the beginning of an important trade relationship between Australind and India. Marshall Waller Clifton was appointed Chief Commissioner. The plan was to divide a huge land grant of over 40,000 ha into small farming lots of 40 ha and establish an English-style village.

From 1842 the first settlers arrived but by 1843 the settlement had been abandoned: the soils were poor, there was no water in summer and too

much rain in winter. Alverstoke, Leschenault Homestead and Upton House, three Clifton properties from the venture, are still extant. Many of the families attracted by the scheme stayed in the area. Thus began the consolidation of the port town of Bunbury and the beginning of agricultural, horticultural and viticultural enterprises in the region.

With a lack of masonry materials, the first buildings were of the traditional wattle and daub, still evident at Leschenault Homestead. As there was a reliable supply of timber, a water mill in Picton, built by William Forrest, the father of WA's first Premier, doubled as a sawmill and supplied boards that covered many early constructions. St Mark's Church in Picton built by the Reverend Walliston and his sons is a surviving example.

At first, Bunbury grew slowly, with the port expansion limited by the shallow waters of the estuary and extremely hard underlying basalt rock. From the 1850s the rate of development accelerated due to convicts being brought in to work on draining swamps, building the timber jetty, roads and bridges as well as being hired out to farmers.

From the initial reliance on trading opportunities with India and the Cape, the state's gold discoveries of the 1890s eventually brought economic prosperity from within. The influx of settlers to the state created a demand to be fed and serviced and the location of Bunbury with its diversity of rural industries and business benefitted. Today it is the second largest city in WA.

Come Bunburying!

Over three days, the conference's morning program will consist of talks by local speakers on aspects of the region's cultural landscape, including history, botany, art, viticulture, horticulture, geomorphology, environmental and community projects. The lectures will be held at the Bunbury Regional Entertainment Centre (BREC).

Each afternoon will feature garden visits covering Alverstoke, St Mark's Church, Leschenault Homestead, Wonnerup House, the picturesque town of Dardanup and Caves House, opened in 1903 to cater to booming caves tourism. On the last day, attendees will have the opportunity of looking west out over the Indian Ocean when they visit the coastal succulent garden created recently by Bill and Di Mitchell at Smiths Beach.

- An optional day on Monday 21 October takes visitors inland into picturesque scenery that is quite different from the coastal topography
- Pre-conference tour Tuesday 15 to 17 October
- Post-conference tour Tuesday 22 to 24 October

Both tours include two nights' accommodation in Margaret River.

Top Thomas Little's copy of Loudon's 1824 *Encyclopaedia of Gardening*, which is now in John Viska's possession. He acquired the 2nd edition at a Royal Historical Society of Western Australia annual book sale, photo John Viska

Bottom Mitchell Garden, Smiths Beach, photo John Viska



John Viska is WA branch Chair and Conference Convenor, will be one of the speakers at the conference with a presentation on the plant connection between the Cape and Western Australia.

