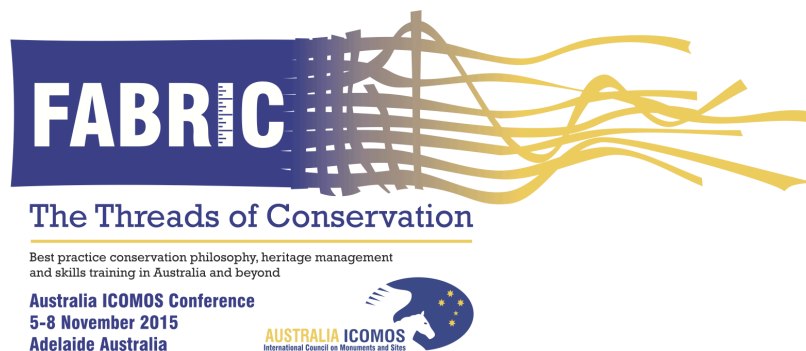


Snapshot: H V McKay Gardens

**Does a significant ‘designed’ landscape in Melbourne’s inner west  
have a future?**

**Melinda Mockridge**

Proceedings of:



**Does a significant ‘designed’ landscape in Melbourne’s inner west have a future?**



Robert Gray, Mary Bogle and David Gray, 1935,

Coll. Friends of H V McKay Memorial Gardens (FOMG)

The H V McKay Memorial Gardens (formerly Sunshine Gardens) are of State significance. Originally six acres they were established in 1909 by industrialist Hugh Victor McKay for the workers at his agricultural implements factory, Sunshine Harvester Works. They were an integral part of this nationally significant industrial complex, linked by a footbridge to the factory, and a key element of his vision of creating a planned ‘garden suburb’ for his workers. The Gardens are of increased significance since the demolition of most of the factory in 1992. They are designed in a Gardenesque style and described in the statement of significance as an ‘oasis’ in the heart of a densely developed industrial and residential area.



Aerial view, Harvester Works and Sunshine Garden, c.1926.

Source: State Library of Victoria

Included in their heyday were tennis courts, a bowling green, band stand, bowers with seating, flower displays, conservatory and Head Gardener's house.



l. Sunshine Bowling Green, date unknown, Source: Museum Victoria

r. Band rotunda, April 1935 Source: Museum Victoria



l. Woman sitting in H.V. McKay Memorial Gardens, April 1935, Source: Museum Victoria

r. Betty Deeble and friend, H V McKay Memorial Gardens, 1942 Source: Museum Victoria

Garden and community were entwined - HV McKay lived in Sunshine, was founder of the Church and funded the education of local families also setting up the local school. Head Gardener Harold Gray was choir master of the Church. Plants grown in the Gardens were given to locals. ANZAC day commemorations were held there. During the 1918 flu epidemic church services were held there.



l. Harold Gray with his prize winning Chrysanthemums, 1933 Source: Museum Victoria

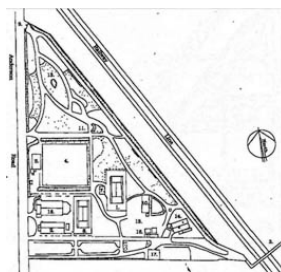
r. H V McKay Memorial Gardens, Sunshine, Victoria, April 1935 Source: Museum Victoria

But H V McKay is also notorious for having crushed a strike which ultimately led to the High Court ‘Harvester Judgement’ which established the principle of the basic wage in Australia.

## The issues:

### A. Fabric of Gardens

**There has been a gradual deterioration in horticultural and cultural fabric** since the Gardens were handed to Council in 1953, including alteration of the pathway system and removal of ‘heritage’ infrastructure and boundary plantings. A manse for the Presbyterian Church and maintenance shed were added.



‘Gardens 1927 – 1952’ Fig. 3 of *H V McKay Memorial Gardens Conservation and Management Guidelines*, prepared for City of Sunshine and Sunshine and District Historical Society, 1994

This **deterioration** has continued over the last twenty years. The ageing Bowling Club was removed in c. 2000. The Conservatory was vandalised and removed.



‘The Sunshine Harvester Works’ from 1939-1945 *HV McKay Massey Harris*

*Pty Ltd Australia*, n.d., Collection S. Christodolou

The decision was made by Council in the 1970s that it should be treated as a park, resulting in a policy of removal of any remaining recreational or horticultural infrastructure, and any high maintenance elements of the garden fabric. Later straight concrete paths were put in and low maintenance shrubs replaced flower beds.



Aerial photograph, date unknown (pre 2009),

Collection Friends of H V McKay Memorial Gardens

Then came the drought! No application was made for an exemption to watering restrictions until 2008. By that time key elements of the original Garden, particularly oaks were at serious risk and consequently 19 trees were lost.



Photographs Collection Friends of H V McKay Gardens

Then in 2011 came Regional Rail Link! It was proposed to remove the bridge, thus removing the remaining historical and visual link with the factory and main area of Sunshine, and excise a significant portion of the Gardens. Suffice to say Council and the Friends lobbied successfully for modifications to the original plans, though the listed bridge was removed.



l. Old footbridge 2011 Photograph, Collection C. McDonald

r. New footbridge 2014 Photograph, Regional Rail Link

<http://www.regionalraillink.vic.gov.au/construction/stations/sunshine/hv-mckay-footbridge>

And now a 200 unit residential development is proposed, directly alongside the Gardens!

## B. Fabric of Community

The **amalgamation** of Councils in the 1990s, and acknowledged Council corruption exacerbated the lack of commitment to the Gardens and corroded community participation.

Importantly there was division within the community about its value – perhaps ‘**the concealed social narrative**’. Labor councillors were antipathetic to preserving McKay’s legacy. Community was divided between those who appreciated McKay’s legacy and those who saw anything to do with McKay as symbolic of worker oppression.



Sunshine Presbyterian Church, 2014

Collection Friends of H V McKay Gardens

Add to this changing **demographics**. The community has changed around the Gardens. The post war influx of migrant workers and further waves of new arrivals have largely broken the original family/historical connections with Sunshine and the factory.

In the 1970s and 80s the Gardens weren’t a nice place to be, with vandalism and drug use. As a former Council employee described it, by the 1990s Sunshine was a demoralised community. There was deterioration in the fabric of the community, like



the Gardens themselves. When I went there in the 1990s the local kids I taught used to call it 'scumshine'.

### **Increasing engagement – Physical fabric**

At first blush, this seems the easiest to address:

During the implementation of RRL its listing as of State significance did enable some acknowledgement of the intangible heritage - particularly the replacement of the bridge (which wasn't initially planned). That has allowed the link between the Harvester estate, the Gardens and former factory area, now shopping plaza, to be maintained. A section of the Gardens was excised, but less than proposed.

Some of the bones – the large trees – are importantly still there. A revised CMP could plan for the future in a way which acknowledges the horticultural heritage of the past, in a climate challenged future.

Council has in recent years employed a landscape architect to advise, though there is still little appreciation of it as a Garden by those who actually do the work in the Gardens.

Council has also declared a commitment to its maintenance and preservation and is considering a proposal for increased community involvement in future planning.

The need for a proper watering system has been a nagging issue for a long time. In late 2015 one was finally been put in, interestingly, with compensation from RRL. There has been significant but not permanent damage to the physical fabric.



Keeping Council engaged and increasing its understanding, as custodian, of how the Gardens should be treated is **the** ongoing issue. It's a learning curve.

### **Engagement: social fabric**

The Friends Group, which was started in 2007, has been unrelenting in its advocacy and gardening support! It is a small but active pocket of community engagement.



Friends of H V McKay Gardens at Brimbank Festival, 2013

Its existence and membership reflect changes in the area though a number of members are long term local residents. Overall, the Friends group has a good working relationship with Council.

It is one element – the weft of redeveloping social fabric. The warp is Council. Since 2009 the local Council has been run by appointed administrators with integrity which, post elections, it is to be hoped continues.

It is clear that as pressure from urban infrastructure and development increases so will the need for places to rest and recreate. Interestingly as the value of green spaces is increasingly acknowledged 'old' Sunshine stands as an anomaly in the west of Melbourne with 13½% tree cover, compared to that of the Local Government Area of 6%.

Changing demographics present problems but also opportunities, particularly as the inner western suburbs change and new residents demand better services and amenities. Restoring the physical fabric of the Gardens so that community activities can again be held there could increase relevance and understanding and new residential developments may, in fact, be a boon.



l. H V McKay Massey Harris Children's Party, 1948 Source: Museum Victoria



r. Friends Heritage Picnic, 2015

Whether it is possible to maintain the gardens as a 'designed' garden is uncertain.

Whether it is possible to alter entrenched attitudes both within, and about, the suburb of Sunshine is also uncertain.

It has become clear to me in the last six years that the issues are not only about physical fabric or at least they are also about a different but related fabric. The Gardens will survive if they are relevant to the community as they were before. The Gardens will survive if the community thrives because their state reflects the state of the community. The question is – is this possible?