



THIS PAGE Entrance to Mt Yule. OPPOSITE PAGE Fruit of the strawberry tree. Arbutus line the driveway. The leaves of one of the four Algerian Oak at Mt Yule.



# The lost gardens of *Guilfoyle*

FAMOUS FOR HIS 36 YEAR TENURE AS CURATOR AND THEN DIRECTOR OF MELBOURNE'S ROYAL BOTANIC GARDENS BETWEEN 1873 - 1909, IT IS LESS WELL KNOWN THAT WILLIAM GUILFOYLE OWNED A PROPERTY IN HEALESVILLE FOR 10 YEARS AND IS BELIEVED TO HAVE LAID OUT TWO GARDENS IN THE YARRA VALLEY. HELEN COLLIER EXPLORES THE TWO GARDENS HE REPORTEDLY CREATED.

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Much has been said, but little evidence recorded of Guilfoyle's own garden at his weekend in Healesville, or his laying out of other private gardens in the Yarra Valley.

Healesville was one of Guilfoyle's favourite areas for collecting new species and varieties of plants. In his book *Australian Botany*, Guilfoyle lamented, "how little is known by the people of Melbourne of the treasures of our flora in the charming spots adjacent to the metropolis. The tickly wooded glens and fern tree gullies...", was where he found new species of ferns for his gardens.

On 21 August, 1893, Guilfoyle's wife Alice purchased a 22.2 acre block of land on River Street in Healesville. The prime lot was on the north side of the Watts River, on which they reportedly built a fine seven bedroom timber house (believed to have been later destroyed by fire) and, given William's profession, it is then assumed he designed the gardens. They named their country residence Mt Yule after their son William James Yule Guilfoyle.

Sub-tropical vegetation was always a trademark of a Guilfoyle garden and Mt Yule reflects much of this unique style. Exotic gardens were in Guilfoyle's blood – his father Michael had been proprietor of the Royal Exotic Nurseries in London's King's Road. The family emigrated to Sydney when Guilfoyle was 13, and his later garden designs suggest he remained heavily influenced by his English heritage.

In 1868, he spent five months on a voyage of scientific discovery in the South Sea Islands. It was primarily a collecting expedition for him, and he brought back many exotic plants for Sydney's Botanic Gardens, and his father's nursery. By the 1890s, his designs combined the finesse of the stately gardens of England with exciting new exotic sub-tropical plants. He favoured grand entrance gates, winding tree-lined driveways, sweeping lawns, panoramic vistas, dense sub-tropical shrubberies, exotic species and ostentatious rockeries. Solitary exotic palms and pines were often transplanted into his designs and became focal points of his gardens.



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In its day, Mt Yule may well have matched that description, with its winding kilometre long driveway approached via a narrow entrance bridge, flanked by brick, square sectioned columns and tall iron gates. On the lower section of the climbing driveway, an avenue of poplars can still be made out, and the top section, near the site of the original house, is lined with broad canopy arbutus unedo (strawberry trees). Such slow growing trees suggest evidence of a formal design, and one hundred years ago, they would have been planted as part of a long term vision.

John Van de Linde, local landscape gardener, points out more trees at Mt Yule celebrating their centenary - cypress, elm, pine, poplars, cedar and rubinea. Four Algerian oaks date back 120 years, surviving drought, fire and flood. Without plans or photographs it is not known how the land has been used over the last 120 years. Where the kitchen garden was, or where the homestead garden began; it is impossible to see now.

For the ten years he owned Mt Yule, Guilfoyle was Director of the Royal Botanic Gardens in Melbourne so he would have divided his time between homes in Jolimont, East Melbourne and Healesville. He sold Mt Yule in 1902 but only retired from the gardens in 1909, three years before his death.

Steps are in place to preserve Mt Yule. The Shire of Yarra Ranges undertook a heritage study of the property in 2000 and made recommendations to conserve it, should a planning permit ever be sought.

As to other gardens in the Valley he may have designed, many books about Guilfoyle credit him with having laid out and designed the gardens at Dame Nellie Melba's home, Coombe Cottage, in Coldstream. This is possibly due to architect's drawings marked with "copy to be sent to William Guilfoyle 1911." While Guilfoyle may have discussed the gardens with Melba, her Estate maintains

she implemented her own garden design.

There is only one other reference to Guilfoyle designing a garden in the Yarra Valley, in *The Oxford Companion to Australian Gardens*. The entry states the property's name Banool in Yarra Glen, c1905. It claims there is unequivocal evidence that the gardens were designed by Guilfoyle. At the time Banool belonged to Robert A. Ramsay, Victoria's Post Master General, who had bought the property as a weekender in approximately 1875; when the Yarra Glen - Christmas Hills Road opened.

A letter between Ramsay's wife Isabella and her son Robert, dated 13 May 1879 refers to Mr. Guilfoyle of the Royal Botanic Gardens coming up to Banool to, "give hints on tree planting". Robert died aged 40 in 1882, and in 1899 his wife Isabella and their two sons purchased neighbouring homesteads in Victoria's Western District: Mooleric and Turkeith in Birregurra. They kept Banool as a weekender.

Later letters demonstrate that Guilfoyle and Isabella Ramsay became good friends and remained so for years, culminating in Guilfoyle designing the two Birregurra homestead gardens for her, which remain true to Guilfoyle's plan today. Plans held at the State Library of Victoria are evidence that Guilfoyle laid out the Ramsay's garden at Mooleric in 1903. Original Farm Work Books for Turkeith contain Guilfoyle's plant lists for 1905, 06 and 07. Isabella and Guilfoyle's letters discuss plantings and how best to nurture the seeds he was sending her on the train and by mail.

The similarity in plantings at the Yarra Valley and Western District properties could also support the theory of Guilfoyle's influence in Banool's gardens. In a letter dated July 22, 1903 Guilfoyle boasted to Isabella he was sending her seeds from a Chilean wine palm, the first seeds that he had collected from a palm in the Botanic Gardens. Historic Garden Advisors who



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visited Banool 15-years-ago described the palm as, "the finest specimen in Victoria" - an immense Chilean wine palm stands proud in Banool's wild gardens. Banool is also home to a substantial Algerian oak with six colossal main branches, similar in age and condition to those same species of oak at Mt Yule. A *cussonia spicata* (spiked cabbage tree) at Banool mirrors the one thriving for over a century at Mooleric. An exotic palm tree directly to the right of the front verandah at Banool, is the same tree visible, in its infancy, in the Ramsay's century old black and white photos. In the same series of photos, a large shaded rockery can be seen to the right of the driveway's turning circle at Banool. Remains of this rockery are still evident at Banool and rockeries were a known favourite installation of Guilfoyle's. On leaving Banool's gardens, the owner points out a prickly Moses wattle - another unusual and typical Guilfoyle choice.

It cannot be proved as to whether Guilfoyle actually laid out the gardens at either property, but when historic garden advisors from the Royal Botanic Gardens visited Banool in 1989 and Mt Yule ten years ago they noted the plantings of significance. His landscape designs were copied by many gardeners at the time, but given his personal involvement with both properties, it is understandable that many believe he was directly involved with the gardens.

His obituary in the local paper also referred to plans he had drawn up for the beautification of Queen's Park in Healesville. Parks Victoria cannot verify if the present day Queen's Park is in fact his design, however.

In 1894, the Gardeners' Chronicle remarked that in his late middle age, "Mr. Guilfoyle leaves everything to ramble at will - everything to be as though it happened." Perhaps it is poetic, simply maintaining the status quo, that these Yarra Valley gardens that may have been his, are now rambling at will.

Yarra Glen and Healesville Historical Societies would be grateful for any further information readers might have about either Mt Yule or Banool.

OPPOSITE PAGE The monkeypuzzle tree. A towering oak tree at Mt Yule. THIS PAGE Anyone for tennis? The bridge and entrance from River St. Circa 1950.

