

THE MAGIC OF MR CANT'S GARDENS

There is not much left of Mr Cant's gardens. Some old palms and cypress dotted around the extensive acreage, two avenues of deciduous trees, several groves of gums. They are the straightest, tallest gums I have ever seen, chosen, I assumed, as an anti-polluting barrier between the cement works and the town. You might have guessed that the town where Mr Cant established his famous gardens was the (former) cement town of Kandos.

'Famous?' I hear you say. Well according to the *Mudgee Guardian* he built up quite a reputation around Australia in the thirty-nine years he was employed as chief gardener at the works. The gardens were certainly the most popular venue for Kandos residents and visitors on a Sunday afternoon. But let me back track a little.

In 1926 Bill Cant arrived in Kandos with his new bride Dorothy (née Lutton) to begin his career as head gardener, in the employment of Harold Schroder general manager of the cement works. Harold Schroder had already started a landscape garden in 1920 which was 'something new to Kandos' and he was keen to expand this company garden. It wasn't unusual in those days for large companies to surround their industrial complexes with ornate gardens. There are two in Sydney that have partially survived: those of the Mungo Scott/Goodman Fielder flour mills and the Davis Gelatine factory.

You might wonder what was the purpose of these gardens. Certainly to impress. Companies wanted to promote a strong corporate image; and especially encourage confidence in the company, its products and share-holdings. Companies also saw advantages in providing pleasant surroundings for their staff. There is therapeutic value in beautiful surroundings, and they engender pride and community support.

It seems strange to us today that a company would employ up to six gardeners to maintain a company garden, as was the case in Kandos. The reality was that in the first half of the twentieth century wages were low, gardeners were plentiful and there was less company greed, less accountability to share holders and a greater sense of responsibility to the community. So in Kandos the cement company's gardens grew and flourished, together with the gardens surrounding 'Warburtie', the general manager's house high on the hill overlooking the town and the works.

There are photographs of both gardens in the Kandos Museum. Sweeping lawns dotted with ferns, palms, shrubs and specimen trees; colourful displays of bedding plants; avenues of trees; a scattering of seats; paths, a fountain and fish pond; all provided a striking setting for the company office. Built in the style of a Californian bungalow with wide verandahs, columned piers and ornamental gable, the office was the focal point of the garden. Unfortunately, in 1966 this beautiful building burnt down.

They say a photo is worth a thousand words but articles in the *Mudgee Guardian* bring the gardens to life even more than the photos in the museum. 'Chief Magi Cant' was the name given in 1937 to the head gardener who 'has indeed done wonders here with his magic wand in the shape of a spade...he has transformed a hideous and shapeless mass into a thing of joy

and beauty... people imagine they are in a land of enchantment...beautiful gardens abounding in fragrant blooms of glorious colours'. You would say he did need magic to counteract lack of water, poor soil and industrial pollution. His reputation as local garden guru grew. Not only did he freely give advice on garden matters, his tomato and lettuce seedlings (produced in his bush house) were a popular purchase at Miss Solomon's store and kikuyu runners taken from the cement works lawn started many of the lawns in Kandos. Every Friday boxes of fruit and vegetables, produce of the vegetable garden and orchard, were sent up to the many managers on the hill.

Among the plants that earned Bill Cant praise in the *Mudgee Guardian* during the 1930s were a fine collection of delphiniums and zinnias, banks of climbing roses, extraordinary dahlias ('one that Mr Cant has named "The Old Man" is twelve inches across the bloom'), and a wonderful show of gladioli. At the first Rylstone Kandos Show the non-competitive display from the works gardens 'won approval and much comment'. His reputation was extending around Australia. In a 1937 article 'Mr Cant has succeeded in placing Kandos on the map in the gardening world and in the Botanical Gardens in Adelaide one can see a fine rose which is called the "Kandos" rose'. Unfortunately that rose hasn't surfaced in other records though a racehorse called "Kandos Rose", which ran in 1929 and 1930, might have some connection to it. His gladioli corms were dispatched to South Australia, Geelong, Victoria and Sydney.

Unfortunately, vandalism occurred in the old days just as it does today. In 1933 there was the headline 'Beautiful Gardens Destroyed' and the news that garden beds had been trampled and plants torn up and destroyed. The company revealed it had already spent four thousand pounds creating the gardens but instead of closing them they employed a watchman.

The gardens at "Warburtie" high on the hill were also a drawcard for the town and company though of course access was only by invitation. Being on sloping land there was a great deal more excavation and formative work to do than on the flat area of the cement works. Photos show extensive rockeries, steps and terraces as well as an impressive pond and fountain. In 1936 the *Mudgee Guardian* reported that 'The gardens at "Warburtie" are looking well, especially the magnificent showing of gladioli of which Mr Cant has about 1000 bulbs planted, all showing magnificent blooms with wonderful colourings'. While very few of the original plants and structures remain, the gardener's hut of ash-brick cement (with a log fire and hand-basin) looks very solid, though it was not used by Bill Cant whose family were housed in a cottage on the grounds of the cement works.

Besides constructing and tending the gardens Bill Cant and his team built tennis courts (now a car park) and a bowling green. A greenkeeper's certificate helped him broaden his reputation and had him visiting Sydney bowling clubs to share his expertise.

I have to admit that learning about Mr Cant's gardens saddens me – that something so beautiful has drifted into memory and the pages of the *Mudgee Guardian*. It was inevitable of course. As the company faced higher wages and costs, more pressure from share-holders, the need for more parking spaces, and safety and security issues, its gardens needed to become like many domestic gardens, easy-care. It began to happen after Bill Cant retired in 1965. I

don't know what recognition he received then but at least the company, in 1951, had recognised his efforts with an engraved wristlet watch for 25 years' service.

The most obvious legacy Bill Cant left the town of Kandos are those groves of gum trees, blue gums, Pat thinks, and he tells me they were planted under instruction by the cement company to provide timber for the mine. Bill collected the seeds from up near Dunn's Swamp. In the end the timber wasn't suitable for the mines but the trees proved prolific and are still growing all over company land.

Help capture our history

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