

## Brighton Horticultural Society

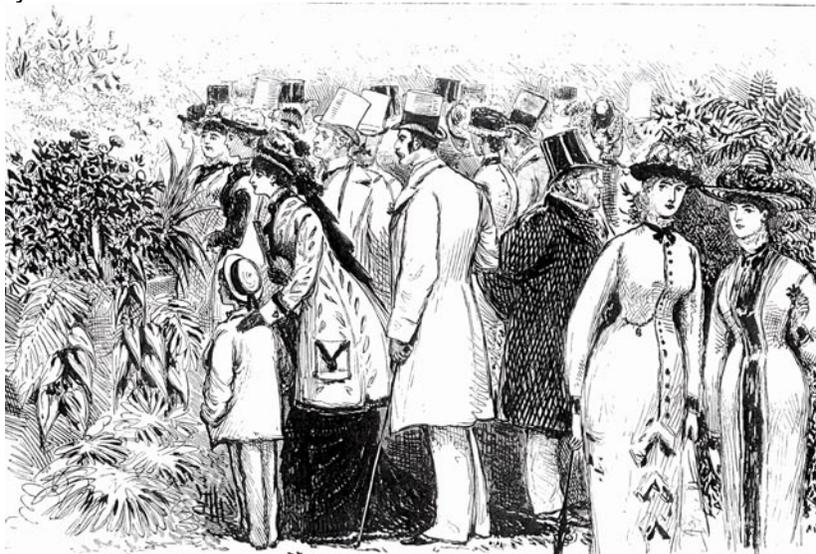
From the musty tomes and the worn, well thumbed records of the Brighton Horticultural Society emerge the shades and shadows of people and events of the past. From the yellowing pages drifts the faint but persistent perfume of lavender and potpourri. The rustle of crinolines is heard and if you turn the pages rapidly enough the aroma of choice cigars and the redolent bouquet of fine port become apparent.

The shades take shape and we can discern the features on the men and women who contributed much to the progress of the infant colony of Victoria. The Earl of Hopetoun, Lord Brassey, Captain and Mrs Ward Cole, Sir Thomas Bent, Bishop and Mrs Moorhouse, Judge Higinbotham, F. G. Moule, T. T. a'Beckett, J. B. Were, men and women who became legends in their own time. People who not only lent their force of character and energy to a gracious yet creative era, but who took part with a keen personal interest in the domestic and cultural activities of the community in which they lived.

Amongst these activities were those connected with the Brighton Horticultural Society which, with its formation in 1856, signified the civic pride which its members exhibited in their efforts to create a garden city.

In 1862 the Brighton Horticultural Society held its first annual Flower Show at St. Ninian's, the home of Captain George Ward Cole. It was a particularly successful event and St. Ninian's became the venue of subsequent shows until the construction of the Drill Room of the Brighton Artillery Company. This building was located on the Drill Grounds which lay between Middle and Outer Crescents and subsequently became known to generations of Brightonians as the *Wilson Recreation Hall* or the *Wilson Rec*. Over one hundred and fifty functions of the Society were staged there.

By 1867, the annual *Gala Festival of Flowers* as it was then known, had become a social event without parallel in the growing municipality. Vice-regal patronage was annually extended and on one occasion it is recorded that three Colonial Governors attended simultaneously.



The Brighton Flower Show, Australasian Sketcher, 1878

In 1869 the *Gala Festival of Flowers* had grown to such proportions that it lasted for three days. By the 1880s the event had assumed the characteristics of an industrial fair. Exhibits included articles as widely diversified as patent fire and cooking stoves, farm implements and carriages. On these occasions the Drill Grounds were dotted with colourful marquees and stands, and all Brighton, including their dogs, were there to see and be seen.

Around the perimeter of the area stood gleaming carriages and phaetons, together with the associated bloodstock of fashionable Melbourne. From the mansions on Church Street hill, from Hawthorn, Kew and Prince's Hill and as far afield as Box Hill, they came. Crinolines swept and rustled majestically through the throng of spectators forming an effective foil to the rich colour of the naval and military uniforms and to the sombre yet elegant garb of the top-hatted citizenry. It is recorded that 8,000 people attended one of the shows during this era.

Within the hall itself, all was colour and fragrance. Artificial fountains splashed and sparkled amid simulated fern gullies and stands and tables exhibited masses of rhododendrons, azaleas, roses and carnations. Vegetable production which had become synonymous with the Brighton-Moorabbin area was accorded special recognition and huge quantities and numerous varieties proclaimed the success of the growers.

During the 1880s it was customary for the Society to join with the Royal Horticultural Society in staging a three day show in March at the Exhibition Building in Melbourne. Apart from the public shows and displays, domestic activity within the Society was kept at a very high level. Regular monthly meetings were held at which lectures were given.



Thomas Bent with judges and prominent exhibitors at the Brighton Horticultural Society's Show in 1889

With the coming of trams to Brighton and the extension of the railway, with its consequential subdivision of the old established properties, the way was prepared for the advent of a new type of resident to the area. The new citizens of Brighton became just as garden conscious as those of earlier years. The Society enjoyed a resurgence

and greatly increased activities until the outbreak of the First World War.

During the war years the lady members mainly bore the brunt of the maintenance of the Society and the old Drill Room was pressed into service on a grand scale. The recurrent appeals of the war years were assisted financially by activities staged by the Society, and it is on record that on one of those occasions in aid of the Red Cross over £800 was raised by the sale of plants alone.

The post war depression of the 1920s curbed the large scale activities of the members for a number of years, although annual shows continued to be held. During these years monthly meetings were held in a small hall in Wilson Street immediately adjacent to the Town Hall. The building was known as the *Old Wooden Shed*, and is the site now occupied by the Municipal Gardens.

It was not until 1932 that the Society began once more to take its place in the forefront of local municipal activity. Membership increased to such an extent that, with the outbreak of the Second World War, the Society was able to carry out a similar role to that which it had pursued during 1914-1918.

*The above is an edited version from the article in the Brighton Horticultural Society Centenary Souvenir Booklet, 1962. The following is a footnote by Di Reidie.*

The Society continued on after the War. There are no records at hand until the late 1960s. Perusing these it can be seen that it was still extremely active continuing to hold hugely successful annual Spring and Autumn shows in the Brighton Town Hall, with the support of Brighton Council.

The newsletters record many and varied activities right up until the late 1980s - slide afternoons, expert guest speakers on any plant or topic you care to name and many other diverse topics. Monthly competitions were held, 'cut flowers', 'pot plants in bloom' and 'specimen camellias' to name a few. Church Street caravan sales (remember them?) added to the coffers as did the 'opportunity table' and garden tours were common.

In June, 1986, in celebration of Victoria's 150th anniversary a garden competition for Brighton residents was initiated. It offered prizes in three categories; Section 1 was for an average size home garden, Section 2 was a small town house, villa or flat garden and Section 3 a condominium or community complex. The newsletters and minutes contain the names of many well known local identities that made Brighton their home (and garden).

Sadly, the Brighton Horticultural Society closed its doors for the last time earlier this year, but we are fortunate that they presented us with their records - a great treasure that will be well cared for.

*From Journal No. 153, Spring 2010*

