

NAME OF PLACE

**BURNHAM BEECHES
(INCLUDING THE ALFRED NICHOLAS MEMORIAL GARDENS)**

LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREA

Shire of Sherbrooke.

LOCATION/ADDRESS

Sherbrooke Road, Sassafras, 3787.

CADASTRAL INFORMATION

Part Allotments 11, 12, 13, 14, 15 and 22, Section G, Parish of Monbulk, County of Evelyn.

TYPE OF PLACE

Hill Station Garden.

EXTENT OF CLASSIFICATION

See attached plan.

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Burnham Beeches, developed for Alfred Nicholas c.1929-39, the residence erected 1930-33, much of the garden donated to public ownership by his family as a memorial in 1965, and the residence now converted to a hotel, is of State significance:

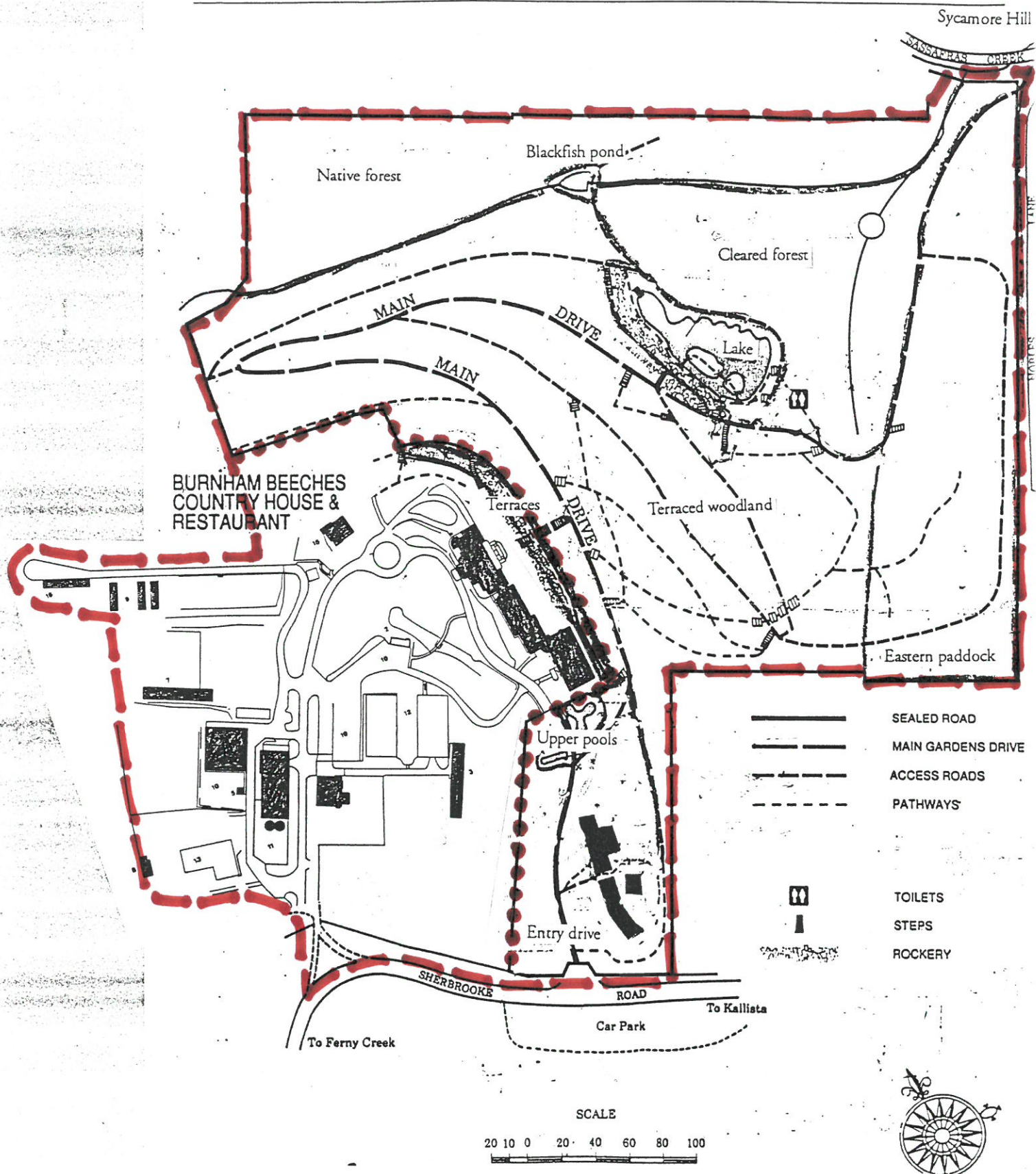
- as a property created by the vast wealth of its owner in a period of world economic depression: this is best exemplified by the residence and outbuildings; comprehensive water reticulation system; the massive scale of the terraced rockery; the extensive rockery around the lake and waterfall; the vast extent of the constructed landscape; and the continuity of a tradition of hill stations from the nineteenth century (and the inescapable parallels with his brother George and his property Alton at Mount Macedon);

- for the boldness of its conception: this is demonstrated by its size (approximately 13 ha of landscaped garden which is equivalent to almost half of the area of the Royal Botanic Gardens) and the massive scale of most components; by the confident manner in which the steep terrain has been controlled by terraces, paths and water features; by its predominant planting of large trees and shrubs rather than detail planting; by its bold use of stonework in rockeries, walls, paths and water features; by the incorporation and landscaping of neighbouring land as part of the garden (e.g. the tan track);

- for the survival of considerable planting (especially tree planting) incorporated or envisaged by the owner Alfred Nicholas, his designer Hugh Linaker and gardener Percy Trevaskis: whilst not displaying the same range as the original planting, the garden still maintains a fine collection of conifers, mature indigenous trees (notably Eucalyptus regnans) and exotic shrubs;

- for the retention of buildings and structures from the original garden layout: these include the gates, stone walls, boathouse, Blackfish Pond outlet, brick enclosures (presumably for compost), paths and steps;
- for its aesthetic qualities: these are derived from the maturity of the original design concept and best demonstrated by the drive, terraced woodland and lake (although in some areas, notably the terraces, the planting is over-mature and inappropriate to the original design);
- for the continuity of major design themes, including stonework, planting (especially the combination of indigenous and exotic planting) and water features;
- as a property renowned for its completeness and attention to detail: Burnham Beeches comprised extensive residential accommodation, large garden, sufficient rural land to enable self-sufficiency and a complete range of complementary outbuildings;
- for the manner in which the residence provides a dominant focus for the landscape and garden, an aspect heightened by the radical adoption of the moderne architectural style;
- for the historical and social significance of the owner Alfred Nicholas and his family, noted for their part in the 'Aspro empire'; the designer Hugh Linaker, best known for his bold landscape schemes for The Shrine and Domain in Melbourne; and the involvement of the local community in the construction and maintenance of the property.

The residence is of National significance as one of the finest examples of the Art Deco mansion in Australia. The design by Harry Norris sits uniquely at the mid-point between the decorative zig zag moderne of the 1920s. The vast three-storey house, built in reinforced concrete, is a rare, elaborate example of its type in Australia and comparable with works in Britain and the United States. Built for a wealthy industrialist, Burnham Beeches is a period exemplar of the up-to-the-minute high style living and entertaining of the 1930s in Australia.



Extent of designation

Boundary between Burnham Beeches (left) and Alfred Nicholas Memorial Gardens (right)

HISTORY

The Dandenong State Forest was reserved in the 1860s and 1870s and the Parish of Monbulk was largely excised from the State Forest and opened for selection in 1893. The area now forming Burnham Beeches was first selected in that year, cleared and farmed.(1)

The Burnham Beeches land was acquired by prominent Melbourne merchant and Aspro manufacturer Alfred Nicholas in or by 1929. Alfred Michael Nicholas was born in 1881 at Majorca, Victoria, eldest son of Michael Nicholas, Cornish miner, and his Geelong-born wife Ellen, nee Anstee. Alfred was educated in the state system, established himself as a grocer and later as an importer and merchant. His younger brother George Richard Rich Nicholas was born in 1884 and achieved fame as a pharmacist who manufactured Asprin in Australia during WWI (when German supplies were cut off). In April 1917 the name 'Aspro' was adopted and registered. Alfred, who had moved to the United Kingdom temporarily with his family, launched an English company, Aspro Ltd in 1927. Success enabled both Alfred and George to lavishly endow the public. Alfred established gardens at his city residence Carn Brea in Auburn and at Burnham Beeches, his mountain retreat. Alfred Nicholas died of coronary vascular disease at Burnham Beeches on 26 February 1937 and was buried in Brighton cemetery. His estate was valued for probate at almost £827,000.

During 1929 sixty workmen were engaged to clear the Burnham Beeches site and construction of the residence, to a design by Harry Norris, architect, commenced in c.1931. Percy Trevaskis, to whom Nicholas was introduced at the 1929 Chelsea Flower Show, was brought out as head gardener to superintend the gardens at Burnham Beeches. Because of the naming in 1929, the planting of both Green and Copper Beech was accentuated; many being planted in the grounds and on the roadside nature strips. As a result of the steep terrain, rockeries became a natural way of creating interesting terraces and rock pockets, complete with water falls, bridges and lily ponds. In 1933 one hundred and fifty trees were imported from England and a low loading five wheel Scammel 3 ton truck was purchased to transport advanced trees and shrubs around the grounds.

The structure of the residence was completed in 1934 and the Nicholas garden was featured in a substantially complete form in Australian Home Beautiful in 1935. The lake at Burnham Beeches was constructed c.1937-39 although Alfred Nicholas died in February 1937 and he presumably never saw the lake filled.

As a wartime emergency during 1941-44, Burnham Beeches was used as a 50 bed children's hospital although this institution returned to Mt Eliza in 1944. The residence was apparently unoccupied during 1944-48 and underwent renovation in 1948-49. In 1955 Burnham Beeches was remodelled for the Nicholas Institute for Medical and Veterinary Research.

The Nicholas Institute closed in 1962 and ideas for the future of the property were canvassed by Carnbrea Pty Ltd, the Nicholas

family company. In February 1964 the Premier requested L H Smith, Director of National Parks, to form an ad hoc committee to advise on State acquisition and in their report (July 1964) two principal recommendations were made:

- (i) That every effort be made to accept the offer of the 'Burnham Beeches Lakes Area', and that it be dedicated as the A M Nicholas Memorial Garden.
- (ii) That the offer of the area known as 'Sycamore Hill' be accepted, and that it be developed as a world-class arboretum, under the control of the Royal Botanic Gardens, with provisions for picnicking facilities.

In August 1965 the Alfred Nicholas Memorial Gardens were formally handed to State control by Maurice Nicholas and Margery Pearce (nee Nicholas) in memory of their father. Management was undertaken by the Shire of Sherbrooke and conditions attached to the gift included a requirement for proper maintenance and public access. Sycamore Hill was given by Carnbrea Pty Ltd to the University of Melbourne.

There was considerable controversy in July 1968 when the Shire removed almost 100 mature Mountain Ash trees from the entry to Alfred Nicholas Memorial Gardens. Three acres of the garden (including the section cleared by the Council in 1968 and the upper pools) was leased during 1971-73 to the Robson and Koslowski families who ran a miniature village known as 'Kindyville' on the lawn beside the front drive. In August 1973 Alfred Nicholas Memorial Gardens was transferred to the Forests Commission. Management of the Alfred Nicholas Memorial Garden was transferred to the Department of Conservation Forests & Lands (now Conservation and Environment) in 1985. Much work has been done since then (and indeed since 1973) including renewal of bridges, restoration of the front gates (1989-90) and long overdue maintenance and rejuvenation of the garden.

In 1981 the Burnham Beeches residence and surrounding land was sold and in March 1983 Burnham Beeches opened as a luxury hotel. The residence was extended in 1986 resulting in the destruction of the Nicholas swimming pool and tennis court.

DESCRIPTION

The main drive is approached through an impressive entry with wrought iron gates (bearing a pair of leaping deer) suspended from large stone pillars. To the left of the entry drive the planting consists of towering indigenous Eucalyptus regnans (Mountain Ash) interplanted with Cryptomeria japonica, Ulmus x hollandica 'Purpurescens', Acer saccharinum, Pittosporum eugenoides 'Variegata', Fagus sylvatica, Acer pseudoplatanus, Ulmus glabra 'Lutescens', Picea sitchensis, Thuja plicata, Thujopsis dolabrata 'Variegata', Acer negundo and Cedrus deodara. These trees have an understorey of Kalmia, Rhododendron and Azalea. To the east of the drive, the construction of the new depot and creation of a lawn and garden have greatly opened the area.

Closer to the residence, ornamental ponds are located on either side of the drive and a new link now connects the entry drive to the main lake drive. Stone paved paths encircle the ponds and small bridges cross the water. The smaller of the two pools (on the west of the drive) is sited beneath huge Eucalyptus regnans and several exotic trees - Acer palmatum and Acer pseudoplatanus, Thujopsis dolabrata 'Variegata' and Chamaecyparis lawsoniana. A middle layer of planting comprises Dicksonia antarctica (Soft Tree Fern), Rhododendron arboreum, Azalea, Fatsia japonica, Euonymus europaea and Acuba japonica.

The dividing line between the Alfred Nicholas Memorial Gardens and Burnham Beeches is marked by a cyclone wire fence. The original flight of steps runs perpendicular to the terraces. The terraces on the east side of the fence are now dominated by trees rather than low plants. A stone retaining wall divides the terraces from the main drive to the lake and within the terraces rockwork is included to create planting 'pockets'. The main drive to the lake follows the contours with a sharp bend at the western extremity of the site. The main drive is augmented by two secondary tracks: one runs directly from the horseshoe bend to the north end of the lake and another bisects the main woodland area and doubles back to rejoin the main drive above the waterfall. Pedestrian paths also cross the area and permit a wide variety of routes to the lake to be chosen by the visitor. Numerous red brick structures dot the area and it is assumed that these were early compost bins. The dominant tree planting of this area is Eucalyptus regnans and Acacia melanoxylon with specimens of Sequoia sempervirens, Acacia elata and Acacia dealbata, Cryptomeria japonica 'Elegans', Prunus serrulata, Picea smithiana, Catalpa bignonioides, Pittosporum eugenoides and Pittosporum eugenoides, 'Variegata', Ulmus glabra 'Camperdownii', Pseudotsuga menziesii, Cupressus macrocarpa, Fagus sylvatica and Corynocarpus laevigatus 'Variegatus'. Under the trees are Rhododendron, Dicksonia antarctica, Cornus sp. (Dogwoods), Acer palmatum, Hydrangea cvs, Kalmia latifolia, Ligustrum sp, Cotoneaster pannosus, Sycamore seedlings, Camellia, Euonymus, Viburnum and Acer species.

The lake is currently the best maintained area of the garden and forms a focus for the design. To the west is a terraced garden with some of the most consistent rock walling currently found in

the garden, to the south-east is a waterfall (over which the first glimpse of the lake is obtained), to the south are public toilets (erected c.1965) and to the east is a section of cleared bushland. The main trees around the lake are Acer palmatum, Carpinus betulus, Ginkgo biloba, Salix babylonica, Betula sp, Sciadopitys verticillata, Michelia figo, Chamaecyparis obtusa and Chamaecyparis obtusa 'Variegata' among terrace planting of Clivia sp, Chamaecyparis lawsoniana (a pair either side of south-eastern entrance to lake), Ulmus glabra 'Lutescens', Liquidambar formosana (rare), Nothofagus fusca, Metasequoia glyptostroboides, Cornus, Sorbus and Populus species. Peripheral planting amongst these trees includes Kalmia latifolia, Rhododendron, Photinia and Cornus. the islands are planted with Ginkgo biloba, Prunus serrulata cultivars and the bridges are festooned with Wisteria cinensis.

The Blackfish Pond is located approximately 50 m north of the main lake. It is fed by a small creek which runs along the northern boundary of the property. The centre of the lake has a large circular inlet which acts as an overflow outlet and water is conveyed under the roadway via a pipe. A timber jetty extends from the south-eastern edge of the pond to the centre. The pond is surrounded by Dicksonia antarctica, Phyllostachys aurea (Fishpole Bamboo), Acer palmatum, Cornus sp, Hoheria populnea, Rhododendron, Pittosporum eugeniioides 'Variegatum'.

A long triangular area bounded on the north and west by the property boundary and to the south by a small creek, a tributary of the Sassafras Creek, is densely covered with Eucalyptus regnans (Mountain Ash), Acacia melanoxylon (Blackwood), Acacia dealbata (Silver Wattle), with a dense understorey of Dicksonia antarctica (Soft Tree Fern) and the ground fern Polystichum proliferum (Mother Shield-fern). To the east of the gardens is a large cleared triangular space sloping from south to north.

The approach to Alfred Nicholas Memorial Gardens passes to the north of the Sherbrooke Forest and this native bush forms a dense barrier when looking out of the garden and Burnham Beeches property. Two large Fagus sylvatica (Beech) flank the main entry to Alfred Nicholas Memorial Gardens while smaller specimens (Fagus sylvatica and Fagus sylvatica liverrsii) form a row on the road verge. The road adjacent to the Burnham Beeches estate is planted with Cupressus macrocarpa (Monterey Cypress) and Pseudotsuga menziesii (Douglas Fir) - planted in two rows - with remnant Mountain Ash, Silver Wattle and Pomaderris complementing the mature tree canopy.

ANALYSIS

Alfred Nicholas conceived Burnham Beeches in the tradition of hill stations or mountain retreats, so named from their derivation in colonial India. Features of nineteenth century hill stations which were adopted by Nicholas included the steeply sloping site and terraces layout, the huge range of plants capable of cultivation in a cool temperate climate, recreational facilities (such as a swimming pool and tennis court) and enough land and a range of buildings to enable a measure of self-sufficiency.

The garden was full of grand gestures exemplified by the extraordinary length of the terraces, the extensive use of rockwork, the lavishness of the water reticulation system and the general boldness of the plan. The dominance of man over nature was most powerfully displayed by the extensive use of transplanted trees and in the manner in which the approach roads were planted with beech trees to extend the influence of the property. The garden at Burnham Beeches was very much a 'plantsman's garden'. There was a strong emphasis on rare and unusual plants and much of the garden was designed to 'display' plants. Hugh Linaker was involved in the design and his main hallmark was his bold landscape schemes; his contribution to Victorian history is as a pioneering landscape architect in a period before that profession was given due regard.

Gardener Percy Trevaskis played a large part in the creation of the Burnham Beeches landscape. Trevaskis was born in 1903 and served his apprenticeship on Lord Aldenham's estate and received early practical training at Barr & Sons Nurseries and in the Rock & Alpine Garden at Kew Gardens, London. Trevaskis lived in the grounds of Burnham Beeches in a timber cottage and was head gardener throughout the formative period of the garden. He was responsible for much of the rockwork on the upper levels, the alpine rockery, superintending the planting and transplanting of many shrubs and trees and maintenance of the landscaping.

Rockeries were used extensively at Burnham Beeches. They have a long history that can be traced back to grottos with Classical origins, a revival in the eighteenth century landscape gardens, inclusion in nineteenth century picturesque gardens and romantic Edwardian gardens. Rockeries were used extensively by Guilfoyle (especially c.1897-1900 along the new Alexandra Avenue) but mainly for succulents and cacti. There appears to have been a transition in Victoria in the late 1920s and 1930s from succulents to Alpine plants for rockeries and Alfred Nicholas was in the forefront of this development locally. Regrettably many of the rare plants used by Nicholas have now disappeared.

Throughout this garden, indigenous plants, especially trees, were carefully retained by Nicholas. The massive indigenous Eucalyptus regnans (Mountain Ash) were a feature of the garden and small specimens were carefully preserved along with mature specimens to ensure that a continuous tree cover would be provided for many decades. Bushland along the creek, including Mountain Ash, tree ferns, Blackwood and Silver Wattle, provided a contrast to the open areas and also to those areas where

exotic planting predominated. The garden also displays a mix between indigenous and exotic plantings. The major area where this planting is found is in the extensive woodland between the house and lake. Here Eucalyptus regnans and Acacia melanoxylon were retained and interplanted liberally with tree ferns (or retained indigenous specimens).

The collection of exotic trees was one of the prime features of the original Burnham Beeches garden and many fine exotic specimens are still retained. In almost all cases, however, these trees are far more significant as a part of the garden than as individual specimens. The exotic plantings, particularly the Ginkgo and Fagus trees provide fine autumn foliage effects for the garden. Many of the exotic trees were transplanted as advanced specimens and some plants were even imported from England.

The Alfred Nicholas Memorial Garden gains much of its significance through the effective and distinctive use of materials. Rockwork and, to a lesser extent, metalwork are two major materials used in the garden. The rockwork theme is represented in several major uses: the entry gates, the rockery in front of the house, the rock retaining walls, the rockery above the lake and the steps in the woodland. The metalwork theme is represented mainly by the fine wrought iron gates with the bronze leaping deer affixed to each gate and lamps surmounting the posts. Elsewhere metal was used extensively on the residence for balconies and railings.

There are several other gardens in the Dandenongs that are comparable to Alfred Nicholas Memorial Gardens although few are as significant historically and none constitute such a remarkable landscape vision. The most comparable are Mawarra, Pirianda and the George Tindale Memorial Garden. Mawarra, located in Sherbrooke (close to Alfred Nicholas Memorial Gardens) was laid out about 1930 by Edna Walling and remains one of her most intact garden designs. Pirianda, created by the industrialist Ansell is a consciously designed landscape and has an important collection of English woody trees, imported from the well-known British nursery firm of Hilliers. The garden also incorporated an Alpine rockery, similar although far smaller than that at Burnham Beeches and a remnant fern gully. The Tindale garden is known chiefly for its rich collection of rare and unusual plants, especially bulbs and woody shrubs.

There is a collection of gardens in the Blue Mountains of New South Wales that are directly comparable with Alfred Nicholas Memorial Gardens. At Leura, Labor Party 'Doc' Evatt's property Leuralla has wide drives (suitable for car access) through an extensive garden with spectacular views across the Jamieson Valley. Everglades, also at Leura, was designed by Paul Sorenson for Sydney businessman Henri Van de Velde in 1933-47. It features a series of descending terraces, indigenous vegetation interplanted with exotics and a lake below the residence. The garden, now managed by the National Trust of NSW, retains many mature exotic trees, especially conifers. The sandstone ridge at Leura and Katoomba had relatively poor soil and encouraged gardens with spectacular views but further north,

especially at Mount Wilson, a cap of basalt provided rich volcanic soil. Many gardens at Mount Wilson were created in the late nineteenth century (similar to Mount Macedon) but others were created or extensively modified in the interwar period; surviving examples include Yengo, Wynnstay and Nooro.

In summary Burnham Beeches drew on picturesque landscape traditions by use of distant vistas to Sycamore Hill and in the winding drive leading to main features (residence and lake) but also incorporated elements of formality such as the axis from the house. Alfred Nicholas followed in a long tradition of plantsmen, with emphasis on individual specimens often at the expense of a unified overall effect.

REFERENCES

- (1) This classification report is based on the report by Nigel Lewis/Richard Aitken Pty Ltd, 'Alfred Nicholas Memorial Gardens Conservation analysis and Conservation Policies', prepared for the Department of Conservation & Environment, 1991; this report has been quoted with the permission of the Department of Conservation & Environment. A copy of the report is held on the National Trust garden file and this contains a full list of references for the information contained in the classification report.