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NEWSLETTER

Footscray Historical Society

May 2015

Footscray's Avenue of Honour

On 23 April, 2015, Nam Quach, Mayor of Maribyrnong officiated at the tree planting ceremony. Our secretary Bill Horrocks addressed the crowd gathered at the Memorial Garden, Footscray Park. Here is an abridged version of his speech.



Nam Quach and Bill Horrocks doing the shovel work on 23 April.

Footscray 'Avenue of Honour' reclaimed with 146 new trees along Geelong Road marking the Centenary of Gallipoli.

Image source: City of Maribyrnong

In 1920, Emma Jemima Tout, my great grandmother-in-law, wrote a sad and poignant letter to the Minister for Defence. She had been sent a form, to be signed, witnessed and returned, acknowledging that a memorial had been placed on her son's grave in France.

She apologised for the delay in returning the forms (her son was reported killed in 1917, three years before) and wrote that she was

'fully convinced (with thousands of other mothers) that my son has no grave as he was reported missing'

and proposed that a better solution would be to have a place where *'mothers could place a wreath on the anniversary of her boy's death instead of a stone put up where she would never see it' . . .*

For the families who grieved the loss of loved ones – and (in the Great War) there were many – a tree represented a tangible memorial, somewhere they could visit in place of a grave.

John Dargavel, author of *More to Grief than Granite: Arboreal Remembrance to Australia*, (2009), said that trees represented growth. *"They were a future, they were pleasant, green and peaceful."*

And “. . . *the most important difference between arboreal expressions and all the monumental and built expressions is the fact that trees like all living things must grow, age, decay and die.*”

In Footscray, the question of an Avenue of Honour was first raised in October 1917, but did not emerge again until 1939 when Footscray's *Tree Planters' Association* supported one.

. . . *the cost of each tree was to be borne by the families.*

But war got in the way. Nevertheless, the tree planters were patient and persistent. In June 1947, an Avenue of Honour Memorial Committee, under the auspices of the Footscray Council launched a public appeal to raise £3,500 to create “The Avenue of Memorial Trees four deep from boundary to boundary”.

The Committee wrote:

No more fitting memorial to keep evergreen in our minds the memory of men and women, who, in the flower of their youth, gave their lives so that we might live in peace and freedom, could be better symbolised by creation of a beautiful avenue of trees through our city. The initial section is from the Footscray Park to the Somerville Road intersection at the estimated individual cost of £3.7.0 which also covers name plate, tree guard etc.”

The committee found it difficult to locate the names of those who served so *The Advertiser* helped out again and called for relatives and friends to send in particulars. Did I mention that the cost of each tree was to be borne by the families? *The Advertiser* was authorised to say that if nominators could not afford the cost they could send names anyway and the Trust might be able to fund as many as they could.

Consideration was also given to setting up obelisks at each end of the avenue. We can see the original one marking the start of the Avenue. It bears the simple inscription, “Lest we forget.” Gabe Aarons, blinded veteran of World War 1

was given the honour of unveiling the monument on 19 September 1948.

£2,500 was eventually raised by public appeal and planting day was announced for 2 August 1947. The plan was for the Governor to plant the first tree outside Geelong Road Primary School. Relatives would do the plantings, the public being asked to stand by for instructions from loud speakers. If anyone was in doubt about their role they should ask a scout. Scouts, guides and school children particularly from Kingsville State and Geelong Road who acted as tree guardians received certificates of appreciation. They pledged that they guard the trees to the best of their ability. Over time it was difficult to maintain the avenue. *The Mail* reported on 21 Sept. 1969 that the Avenue needed action. Many trees had died or had been removed, others looked sickly and even name plates had been removed during road works. On 27 July 1977, *The Mail* reported that the brother of Captain Walker could not find his plaque.

Plaques were lost when Geelong Road was widened in 1972. Footscray Council officers were not able to help Mr Walker. Eventually it was found and is now in place in the Memorial Garden, Footscray Park.

Controversy raged throughout the 1980s, 90s and the first decade of this century as some aggrieved residents wanted action to repair the avenue and locate all of the lost plaques. Notable citizens were caught up in the maelstrom of publicity that ensued. Finally . . . a solution was found. It is there before us today in the form of this beautiful Memorial Garden.

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An example of plaques installed in the Memorial Garden