

Wild Gardening on Fern Island [Brisbane Botanic Gardens]

The extraordinary landscape creation in the Brisbane Botanic Gardens that came to be called 'Fern Island' was arguably the most significant innovative treatment found in the research whose creator can be identified.¹ Curator Walter Hill contrived Fern Island in the low-lying middle of the Gardens, out of an existing lagoon created in 1828 by Charles Fraser.² One early representation of the island was in "Slater's Pocket Map of The City of Brisbane, 1865".³ Examination of Hill's Annual Reports has not identified the exact date of the construction of the island in the middle of the old lagoon, but he wrote of an idea "that a Lagoon should be made on the left side of the main entrance-gate, to match that on the right-hand side, but with an island in the centre where different plants of an ornamental nature could be grown."⁴ This lagoon on the left-hand side of the main entry was never carried out. The old lagoon in the middle of the Gardens was used to create Fern Island, which was well established by 1879 when Hill reported:

The large and deservedly famed collection of ferns and foliage plants, all in the most exuberant growth on the Island surrounded by the Aquarium and bamboo plantation, increases yearly both in beauty and attraction. During the past year several additions have been made, including *Cyathea Smithii*, *Cyathea Cunninghamii* (Hook), *Dicksonia lanata*, *Dicksonia fibrosa* (Col.), *Alsophila Leichhardtiana* (F.M.), &c. Large clusters of *Epiphytes*, viz., *Platynerium alicorne* (Desv.), *Platynerium grande* (J. Sm.), and *Thamnopteris nidis* (Pres.), have been placed in convenient places under the shade of the bamboos, also on both sides of the main entrance gate. These splendid specimens of *Epiphytes* were taken from trees felled on the bank of Nerang and other creeks in the vicinity, and were bought to Brisbane by steam, and do not seem in any way to have suffered during their transit.⁵

Hill's masterpiece consisted of a long cigar-shaped island surrounded by a moat-like body of water, called an aquarium in the early days, around which was the famed bamboo grove. Two small wooden bridges spanned the depths to enable visitors to reach the island, and a path encircled the outer edges allowing further access. The planting scheme for this 'hidden world' within the bamboos, was jungle-like with an eclectic mixture of native and exotic plants: favouring palms, tree ferns, epiphytes and other tropical foliage and feature species. Hill reported in 1876 that "many additions have been made to the fern and palm island during the past season" which indicates the prominence of palms at this stage.⁶ The rate of growth of this wild garden meant that it was regularly 'overhauled' – herbaceous material was replanted and larger plants replaced – at irregular intervals, including the following instances: MacMahon reported remodelling and replanting Fern Island in 1902, and Bick added more tree ferns in a general overhaul in 1931.⁷ Unfortunately, Bick filled in the moat in 1936 after years of malfunctioning hydraulics, which ended the life of the water feature.⁸ However, the popularity of Fern Island in the 19th and early 20th centuries is confirmed by the quantity of photographic views taken of the place, some of which were used as postcards (Figures 6.28 - 6.30).⁹

¹ This does not discount the importance of bush-houses in Queensland garden history. The widespread and long-term use of bush-houses makes this phenomenon the most significant Australian innovation of all.

² Refer Journal of Charles Fraser, In Steele, J.G. (1975), *Brisbane Town in Convict Days, 1824-1842*. St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, pp. 112-113

³ This map was published recently in Longhurst, R. I. (1992), *South Bank: An Historical Perspective from then until now*. South Brisbane, Qld: South Bank Corporation, pg. 17.

⁴ Hill, Walter, "Report on the Brisbane Botanic Gardens", in *QV&P* 1873, pp. 1319-23; pg. 1319.

⁵ Hill, Walter, "Report on the Brisbane Botanic Gardens", in *QV&P* 1879, Vol 3, pp. 967-77; pg. 967. Modern scientific names for these plants are: **Soft tree fern** is *Cyathea Smithii*, from New Zealand; *Cyathea cunninghamii*, is another tree fern, from Australia, Tasmania and NZ; *Dicksonia lanata* and *Dicksonia fibrosa* are tree ferns from NZ; *Cyathea leichhardtiana* syn *Alsophila Leichhardtiana*, is a Queensland/NSW tree fern; the last three species all occur in Queensland – **Elkhorn fern** is *Platynerium bifurcatum* syn. *Platynerium alicorne* (hort. non Desv.); **Staghorn fern** is either *Platynerium suberbum* syn. *Platynerium grande* var. *bambourinense*, or *Platynerium grande*; and, **Bird's nest fern** is *Asplenium nidus* syn. *Thamnopteris nidis*. [NOTE: *Cyathea australis* (rough tree fern) and *Cyathea cooperi* (scaly tree fern) more common species from Queensland but are absent from this list.]

⁶ Hill, Walter, "Report on the Brisbane Botanic Gardens", in *QV&P* 1876, Vol 3, pp. 979-87; pg. 980.

⁷ Hamley, Helen (1995), "Historical Review," Section 5G, In Sim, J.C.R. (1995), "Brisbane City Botanic Gardens Conservation Study: Final Report", unpublished report for the Landscape Architecture Section, BCC, pp. 18-22.

⁸ Annual Report 1936.

⁹ 25 views were noted from the JOL and BCC Historic photographic collection in Sim, J.C.R. (1995), "Section 5F", "Brisbane City Botanic Gardens Conservation Study: Final Report", unpublished report for the Landscape Architecture Section, Parks and Gardens Branch, Department of Recreation and Health, Brisbane City Council, pg. 66. The earliest of these were: dated 1867 (JOL negative # 89083) by Verney; and, 1869 (JOL 89074).



Walter Hill's 'Wild' Fern Island is set within the bamboo grove and surrounded by a moat-like water feature. Two small bridges connect the island to the mainland.

Source:
JOL negative # 100082

Figure 6.28: c.1876 Fern Island, Brisbane Botanic Gardens



Detail of planting on Fern Island in the Brisbane Botanic Gardens shows treeferns, several palms species, a Screw-palm (*Pandanus* sp.) and the rough stone walls that encircled the island. A perimeter path also follows this edge.

Source:
JOL negative # 46967

Figure 6.29: c.1878 'Wild' Tropical Planting on Fern Island



Photographer unknown, but print shows captioning for a publication. About 1890s.

Source:
Brisbane City Council Historic Photographic collection, negative # A438-2, undated.

Figure 6.30: Bridge to Fern Island
