

ZOO KEEPING

At Botany on the southern side of Sydney, the local council is developing an imaginative 'pleasure garden', a modern idea with roots firmly bedded in the district's rich history. An essential element in the project is a National Trust classified historic building, the former Sir Joseph Banks Hotel, a building which grew like topsy during its period of great popularity in the middle of the 19th century. Though privately occupied now and not open to the public, a casual inspection from the street reveals the original two-storey pub of 1840, the curved wing added about 1860, and the enormous Italianate-style two-storey wing, added about 1870.

Resting quietly now in its old age, in the mid-19th century the Sir Joseph Banks Hotel was a very popular weekend resort for Sydney

people. It was not so much the indoor entertainment as its outdoor features that drew the crowds. This is what inspired Botany Council.

In the 1840s and 1850s the hotel's grounds extended to the shores of Botany Bay and were the colony's first zoological and botanical gardens. The publicans also imported elephants, Bengal tigers, and bears to add interest. Other attractions were walkways and arbours, sports areas (including Australia's first professional foot-racing track), an amphitheatre and huge lunch pavilion.

As Sydney developed, the Sir Joseph Banks Hotel slowly declined, and in the 1920s the estate was subdivided, with the remnant bayside gardens becoming a public park of vacant lawn.

Botany Council has now decided to re-create the flamboyance of the Victorian era



gardens, and bring the area back to life. With a plan prepared by its landscape architect Andrew Prowse, a \$200,000 NSW Bicentennial Council grant, and generous sponsorships from industrial corporations in Botany (an area of major industry in Sydney), the running track has been rebuilt and the rich Bay Gift professional foot race reintroduced.

And the animals are returning. Council has commissioned renowned animal artist William Rees, of Perth WA, to sculpt a host of large-scale animals from concrete and cement fondue for the children's playground (an example is shown above).

In another part of the

park, Council has commissioned the construction of a 'herd' of life-sized elephants in galvanised pipe and mesh. Eventually, these will be covered by creeping fig, to create 'topiary' elephants. In the meantime, a Sydney company, Spraygrass Landscapes, has been engaged to grow grass over the frames to give the right impression.

Pergolas have also been rebuilt, exotic shrubs planted and, at the main entrance to the park at Waratah Street, there is a flag terrace with a raised dais and a 19th-century-style yardarm flagpole for flags. It's a 20th-century pleasure garden, drawing inspiration from the original site of 100 years ago. □

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