

The French Garden at La Perouse by Ivan Barko, published in Branch Cuttings, Issue 35, June 2011 of the Australian Garden History Society

On 26 January 1788 two French ships, Boussole and Astrolabe, anchored off the future Frenchman's Bay in Botany Bay. Lapérouse, his officers and his men were exhausted. Only six weeks earlier the natives of Tutuila in Western Samoa, then the Navigator Islands, had massacred several members of the expedition, including Astrolabe's captain, Fleuriot de Langle, and scientist Chevalier de Lamanon.

The ships had sailed from Brest in 1785. Although the expedition was well organized and well endowed, the journey had become strenuous. Scurvy was growing. Although only one died, many suffered its effects. In 1786 astronomer Lepaute Dagelet thought he was dying and Lapérouse, in a confidential note to a friend confided "when I return you will take me for a centenarian, I have no teeth and no hair left".ⁱ

De Langle had believed fresh drinking water was the remedy. His death was due to his attempt to collect fresh water before leaving the Navigator Islands - by which time the French had overstayed their welcome.

Lapérouse did not share de Langle's belief that stored drinking water deteriorated and needed frequent replacement. He was convinced that provided water was pure, it would remain so.

He considered sauerkraut, malt and spruce beer the best remedies, but more importantly attributed great value to cleanliness - personal hygiene and uncluttered surroundings, neither easy to implement on the crowded ships of the era.

The recurrent theme on scurvy in his journals is the importance of a good diet, quality liquids and solids (e.g. wine and flour) and fresh produce. In a letter from Botany Bay he praised the benefits of roast beef and beef steak, tortoises, fish, herbs and fruit. As early as September 1787 he paid tribute to Surgeon Rollin on Boussole, who also believed in prevention.

Awareness of the value of a diet, fresh vegetables and fruit, explains why gardener, Jean Nicolas Collignon was encouraged to plant "European seeds" wherever the expedition landed. Whether they hoped to derive benefit from these before departing (they left on 10 March 1788, after just six weeks) or considered the plantings an integral part of their civilising mission, Collignon always attempted to grow European plants on stopovers.

After the First Fleet had transferred to Port Jackson the very day of the arrival of the French (26 January), the site was left to Lapérouse, except for intermittent objections from Aborigines.

A camp was established somewhere between today's Lapérouse monument, the Museum (former Cable Station), Father Receveur's grave and the Frenchman's Bay beach. Although several contemporary descriptions of it by visiting British officers (including future governors King and Hunter) exist, they don't mention the garden explicitly.

Philip Gidley King's account says:

I found him [Lapérouse] quite established, having thrown round his Tents a Stoccade, guarded by two small guns in which he is setting up two Long boats which he had in frame. An observatory tent was also fixed here, in which was an Astronomical Quadrant.

Clockes &c under the Management of Monsieur Dagelet Astronomer, & one of ye Academie des Sciences at Paris.

The first (and last) descriptions of the garden we have are by French visitors in 1824, when its traces were still visible and its reputation alive.

These were by men on board *Coquille*, under Duperrey's command. Everything we know is in their accounts, being:

VICTOR LOTTIN:



Aerial view of likely garden site Copyright Department of Lands (2008)

An enclosure in which Lapérouse had vegetables sown is still there, it has kept the name of the French garden. It is surrounded by a hedge but the inside is almost uncultivated; some vegetables saved by the detachment perished because of lack of water. We searched in vain for a flower in this plot located at 300 paces' distance from the tower; everything was dry and burnt. We were told that Governor Macquarie had

intended to plant a beautiful garden in that place and keep its name.

RENÉ LESSON:

As Frenchmen, as travellers, we wished to pay our tribute by visiting the spot on which the illustrious and unfortunate La Perouse wrote the last dispatches which have arrived in Europe, the encampment which he formed at the north point of Botany Bay. There he made a garden in which he sowed plants to be used as remedies for his crew so weakened by sickness.

The English have respected this piece of land, which bears the name of French Garden among them, and this garden to-day, partly uncultivated, formed in the sandy scrub (lit. sands of the heath), provides some vegetables for the soldiers who are quartered in a small tower built a short distance away on one of the points of the bay. The fruit trees are dead and could not take root here, shaken as they are by the winds from the sea. Quickly growing weeds have taken possession of the greater portion of its surface, like a symbol of the vain toil of man. A wretched wooden fence surrounds this plot, which Governor Macquarie had planned to have enclosed with substantial walls.

Unless some forgotten document suddenly emerges or excavations reveal the remains of the hedge or the surrounding ditch, that is all we are likely to know of the Botany Bay French garden. Baron Hyacinthe de Bougainville who as leader of the expedition of *Thétys* and *Espérance*, visited Sydney in 1825, left descriptions of the camp, without explicitly mentioning the garden. But we can credit him with instigating and funding construction of the Lapérouse monument, for which he obtained the support of Governor Sir Thomas Brisbane.

ⁱ Letter to Lecoulteux de la Noraye, 7 February 1788, translated by John Dunmore, in *Where Fate Beckons – The Life of Jean-François de La Pérouse*, Sydney, ABC Books, 2006, p. 248 & p. 275.