

From Melbourne to Cragside

A journey to two
remarkable places

One of the special things about the National Trust is being part of a wider international movement. Around 70 different nations and territories are joined under the umbrella of the International National Trust Organisation (INTO), and National Trust membership unlocks access to over 1,000 places around the world. These sites range from the grand to the humble and from landscapes to ruins, with priceless collections and countless stories to tell. Not only is this an incredible resource for the traveler, but there is also much that can be learnt about caring for our own significant places through the shared experiences of our colleagues overseas.

This was recently highlighted when the concept of a 'twinning' relationship between Rippon Lea in Melbourne and Cragside in the UK was raised by the Secretary-General of INTO, Catherine Leonard. 'Twinning' is an informal arrangement where places with similar characteristics build connections to help realise common goals. After an initial online meeting between the two sites, it was agreed there was more to be explored and valued in an ongoing relationship. A successful application to the TAP-INTO grant program saw both Cragside General Manager John O'Brien and myself make reciprocal site visits in late 2023. These visits quickly revealed why the two sites are very well suited to 'twinning.'



Cragside, by Justin Buckley



Cragside conservatory, by Justin Buckley



Rippon Lea Estate garden, by Neisha Breen

Cragside is one of the great Victorian-era properties of the UK National Trust and one of only 26 designated 'treasure houses' in their portfolio of over 500 sites. Located near Rothbury in Northumberland, Cragside was the home of William and Margaret Armstrong. Armstrong was a hugely successful industrialist, engineer, and a keen inventor, particularly in electricity and hydraulics. He revolutionised freight handling around the world with his advances in hydraulic cranes, and harnessing waterpower would also become a central feature of Cragside.

Moving into armaments and shipbuilding saw him amass great wealth and helped cement Britain's naval, military, and industrial supremacy. For this, he would be knighted and later granted the title of 1st Baron Armstrong of Cragside. Armstrong's Elswick Works in Newcastle stretched for a mile along the River Tyne and employed 25,000 people.

Cragside was initially a treeless Northumberland moor. The 1,000-acre landscape was transformed through the planting of an estimated 7 million trees and shrubs, and the creation of lakes and gorges. A modest hunting lodge would become a colossal Arts and Crafts House. It is billed as Britain's original smart home and was the first house in the world to be lit by hydroelectricity, generated by harnessing and storing water across the estate. The innovations and gadgetry employed at Cragside led to Armstrong becoming known as the 'Magician of the North.'

Rippon Lea at 40 acres (now 14) may seem diminutive by comparison but the similarities between the two sites are significant. The home of Frederick Sargood, Rippon Lea also employed innovative technology around water, sanitation, and sustainability. The lake at Rippon Lea is the centerpiece of a remarkable irrigation and drainage system that collected water from the surrounding area, not only irrigating the substantial garden but utilising waste within the house and stables as liquid fertilizer. This system has been critical to the survival of Rippon Lea's garden, a garden of international significance. Rippon Lea was also one of Melbourne's first homes to have electricity, supplied through its own private generator.

Despite living on opposite sides of the globe, there are few degrees of separation between Armstrong and Sargood. Sargood played a key role in building the defence capability of the Victorian colony. Victoria was particularly anxious about the threat of the Russian navy sailing into Port Phillip Bay. In 1880, Sargood was chosen by the Victorian government to appear as their representative in London at a Royal Commission into colonial defences. On his return to Melbourne in 1882 he was elected to Parliament and made the first Defence Minister of an Australian Colony. The nascent Victorian defences needed boats and ordnance and Sir W.G. Armstrong and Co. were the world's leading manufacturer of both. Victoria commissioned two gunboats from Elswick and Sargood welcomed the *Albert* and *Victoria* into Port Phillip on June 24th, 1884. A range of 'Armstrong

guns' were also purchased, and these can be seen in public parks today, such as 'the Cannons' in Williamstown and close to Rippon Lea at Hopetoun Gardens in Elsternwick.

This raises the tantalising question - might Sargood have met Armstrong during his time in the UK? Initial research has uncovered correspondence between Sargood and the company, arranging a date to inspect the Elswick Works. If Sargood did make it to Newcastle, might he have made it to Cragside, where clients were entertained and treated to live demonstrations of Armstrong and Co. firepower? We do know that on his return to Melbourne, Sargood undertook a significant redevelopment of his home and garden, no doubt inspired by the latest ideas and technology he had been exposed to in the UK.

It is early days but the twinning of Rippon Lea and Cragside has already been of great benefit. Despite differences in scale, visitation, climate and resourcing, the challenges of managing and conserving these two places are remarkably similar. In short - providing the best care and conservation possible, while raising the ever-increasing funds required to do so. In meeting this challenge at Rippon Lea, it is pleasing to report that we are getting valuable help. Elsewhere in this edition, you will read about the wonderful legacy left by Bruce Gardner through the Gardner Morrison Trust bequest. Funds from the Trust will support the gardens of Rippon Lea (and Como and Barwon Park) in perpetuity. Along with the Rippon Lea Endowment Fund (established by Ron Andrews

in the 1990s) this support is crucial to ensuring special places like Rippon Lea are preserved for future generations. A key benefit of the Gardner Morrison Trust will be to fund an exchange, allowing members of our garden team to travel to and experience working at Cragside. Through this initiative, Bruce's legacy will continue to grow while we expand our team's knowledge and skills; furthering the burgeoning relationship between these two unique properties.

Justin Buckley
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