

**Welcome speech delivered by Professor Timothy F Rohl AM, resident of Overthorpe at the unveiling of a plaque commemorating Sir John Hay, 22 June 2015.**

Ms Upton, Mr Harwin, Councillor Marano, members of the Woollahra Plaques Advisory Committee, members of the Australian Garden History Society, members of Council who arranged today's event, Ms Rosemary Foot and guests. It is my pleasure to welcome you, on behalf of all owners and residents, to Overthorpe.

The current owners of Overthorpe take our stewardship of the part of Sir John Hay's original garden we have responsibility for very seriously.

There are many stories told about the origins of Sir John Hay's original garden – some are true, some apocryphal and some just fanciful. What does appear to be true is that the original garden was established as an experimental garden – a laboratory to test which trees and shrubs would or would not grow in this area.

This is quite different to setting out to establish a great garden. Good gardens take time – great gardens take planning.

Overthorpe's garden falls into both categories. Over time, this garden has been a general repository for trees and shrubs and a grand garden for an important home. The original Overthorpe was demolished in the 1980's and replaced by the two apartment blocks here today.

During these transformations, many of the original trees planted by Sir John Hay were removed or have now died. Some are in the process of senescence now.

The various owners of Overthorpe have all had a strong attachment to the garden. Fifteen years ago there was a magnificent magnolia in the garden. It was much loved and when it began to die it started to droop. It was so loved, the owners supported it with a huge RSJ which supported it until its eventual death.

Other trees, all of which started out as small trees have reached maturity and then self-destructed. We recently lost a magnificent fig tree – it must have been over 200 foot height and well over 100 years old – because one of its lower branches had become so heavy that it gave way one night and tore the

tree in half. What was left was so dangerous the whole tree had to be excavated.

Trees have to be pruned and shaped if they are to survive and flourish, and the most important species need, if it is at all possible, extra space to grow and showcase themselves.

We have learnt many things about maintaining this garden. And I must acknowledge the Heritage Council of NSW and Woollahra Council in this learning process – especially Mr Andrew Simpson who is with us today.

Important gardens don't just happen – they require constant care, maintenance and above all planning.

Care and maintenance is vital. In this respect I acknowledge our own garden committee, our building superintendent Mr Tony Kelly who has overseen the gardens for nearly thirty years, and Mr Sandy Meagher – our gardener who maintains the garden on a regular basis.

Planning is essential. We are slowly returning the garden to Sir John Hay's plan. The great Phoenix palms are being restored to their prominence along New South Head Road and the magnificent rainforest garden, along the perimeter of Bibaringa, is being rebuilt with the gentle Bangalow palms in the original garden.

There are some important species in the central garden which are being threatened by unplanned rapacious species such as Cocos Palms and Camphor Laurel trees. These palms and trees are always self-seeded or bird seeded, or epicormic runners from old trees and seem to grow in the most undesirable places. They often grow strong crowns which, when they grow into the crowns of important species, disfigure and eventually kill off the important species. That's what happened with the giant magnolia and could easily happen to some of the important trees still growing today. A good example of this can be seen in the centre garden and between the Phoenix palms.

We also have some very rare species which we are keen to look after. One such is the Coolamon or Watermelon tree which is supposed to be indigenous to the Byron Bay area and rarely found in Sydney. It produces glorious coloured fungi on the upper branches each year and is most distinctive. The one we have will eventually die and we have already taken steps to replace it with 5 trees propagated from the original.

In recognition of today's ceremony the owners of Overthorpe are delighted to present to Mr Simpson 5 young Coolamon trees which we hope he might find homes for in the municipality.

The current owners of Overthorpe are delighted with the plaque recognising Sir John Hay and we hope to continue his good work.

Thankyou

Timothy Rohl  
Chairman  
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