

Bronte House: Waverley's oldest property



Bronte House, 1986

Bronte House's story begins in 1836 when William Mortimer Lewis, Colonial Architect, bought 42 acres of land at Nelson Bay. He began a house on his land but, when an economic depression hit in 1843, was forced to sell the property before its completion.

Robert Lowe, an English barrister and later NSW parliamentarian bought the property as a 'country residence' and finished the house in 1845. He and his wife Georgiana were some of the Bronte House's most charismatic inhabitants, despite only being in residence for four years.

The house changed hands quickly over the next couple of years, until the Ebsworth family bought the property in 1882. They were the longest private owners of Bronte House, the family occupying the property over three generations.

In 1948 the Ebsworths sold the house and its grounds to Waverley Council. The Bronte branch of the Red Cross applied to Council to rent two small rooms and the kitchen at the rear of the property. Council agreed and the Red Cross had their home at Bronte House until 1969. An evening card party was held by them each week to raise money for their rent.

The house was fully restored by Council and is now leased out. Notable amongst recent lessees was Leo Schofield, whose love of the gardens is explored in his book *The Garden at Bronte*.

Bronte House is designed in the picturesque style; its features include romantic circular and hexagonal corner turrets, deep bay windows, and pierced wooden tracery. A second story was added to the house in the 1880s.

The house is built of sandstone with a slate roof. It has two fronts, one at the western entrance and the other on the opposite side, with a stunning view over the ocean.

The original approach to the house was by a gravel carriageway, now Bronte Road, which curved down the hill from Charing Cross, terminating in the circular drive still in front of the house.

The estate to which Bronte House belonged was extensive. It included the cliff to the south of the house, where the property's stables were located, Bronte Gully and Bronte Park and even the beachfront itself.

You can view part of Bronte House and its entire garden on one of its open days.



Sketch of bamboo in Bronte House garden by Georgiana Lowe (the bamboo was planted by her) c. 1845-1849.

Georgiana Lowe's sketches

Georgiana Lowe was a skilful artist and enthusiastic gardener with knowledge of botany. She played the major role in the initial landscaping of the Bronte House gardens, incorporating native and exotic plants into picturesque walks.

She loved Bronte House, where she and her husband, Robert Lowe, entertained the intellectual elite of the colony. In a letter to her family in England she enthused about her new home:

'We have a little estate of 42 acres, four miles from Sydney on the sea; it is lovely beyond conception. We have given only 420 pounds for it.'

To her mother, she writes:

'The scenery resembles Jersey, but is far more beautiful – the vegetation is so lovely. We have a beautiful bay to ourselves [Bronte Beach]; we have a waterfall of sixty feet and this runs though a fine valley [Bronte Gully]; it is a most romantic spot and just suits my tastes.'

The garden was also a commercial success and Georgiana Lowe sold the surplus produce she grew at the Sydney markets. The gardener at Bronte House at this time was Hugh Beattie, and together with Georgiana they became the first in Sydney to successfully grow waratahs.

In a letter to her mother-in-law in 1847 she describes her garden:

'I am in the garden all day and quite delight in cultivating our place. My brother John has sent me a large collection of the new annuals and vegetables. I shall have great pleasure in watching them....I have just been planting seeds that were collected on Dr. Leichardt's [sic] expedition. A gentleman who accompanied him gave me a few seeds of each new flower and tree discovered. I intend to make drawings of our new place.'

In 1849 the Lowes returned to England. Robert Lowe subsequently became Chancellor of the Exchequer and was given a peerage, becoming Viscount Sherbrooke. The Lowes never returned to Bronte. Despite this, they were both known in their later years to speak affectionately of their time in Sydney in a cottage overlooking the sea.

In recent decades, particularly under Leo Schofield's occupancy of Bronte House, the garden has undergone a complete restoration. Schofield re-established and extended the original gardens planted by Georgiana Lowe and the garden now looks much as it did during the Lowe's time. It has been described as 'a small scale botanic garden, a repository for rare and beautiful plants.'

Georgiana Lowe did make the drawings she wrote to her mother-in-law about. Over seventy of these original sketches have survived and are held in the Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW.

These evocative sketches of Bronte House and its gardens, Bronte Park and the beachfront provide us with our earliest impressions of the area.



Bronte House, view from Bronte Beach, by Georgiana Lowe, c. 1845-1849.