



# Royal Botanic Gardens Victoria

Melbourne Gardens

## Melbourne Observatory ...a brief history

**“The stars are the landmarks of our universe” – Robert Ellery, Melbourne’s first Government Astronomer, 1870**

Construction of the Melbourne Observatory commenced in 1861 as a replacement for the Williamstown Observatory. In 1863, under the guiding hand of the Government Astronomer Robert Ellery (1827 – 1908), the Observatory performed a wide range of functions for the rapidly growing city of Melbourne. Far from mere star gazing, the Observatory staff provided critical scientific data which was essential for the smooth running of industries ranging from shipping to farming, from city business to politics.

Before the development of accurate timepieces, the now simple task of telling the time was an endless challenge for early Melburnians. By the 1870s Ellery and his staff had relieved this problem. The intricate timing instruments of the Observatory, kept accurate by daily calibration with the stars, were connected by telegraphic wire with the clock displayed in Bourke Street. Within a few years similar systems controlled railway station clocks at Spencer and Flinders Street and the Post Office.

The Observatory provided meteorological data, essential for predicting weather patterns in rural Victoria. Even Melbourne’s location was not finally determined until measures taken at the Observatory – together with those of Observatories in other major Australian cities – produced accurate longitudinal data for the continent.

The Observatory was also involved in activities including surveying, positional astronomy and star mapping, astrophysics, and geophysics. From 1891, Melbourne joined other observatories including Sydney and Perth to undertake the massive task of photographing and mapping the world’s Southern skies for the first time.

In 1869, the largest fully-steerable telescope in the world was installed at the Observatory. Known as the Great Melbourne Telescope, the device boasted a reflector of 48 inches and, it was hoped, would provide a wide new window into worlds beyond the skies. In an ironic twist replayed over a century later by the Hubble Telescope, the Telescope’s mirror proved too difficult and costly to provide the accuracy of image required, and by 1890 the Great Melbourne Telescope had fallen into disuse and was ultimately removed from the site. The building specially constructed to house the massive device still stands, and will form part of the final stage of the Observatory redevelopment.

Since losing their main function, the Italianate buildings have housed a variety of Government departments and instrumentalities, including Weights and Measures which closed in 1995 following the official handing over in 1992 of the Observatory buildings and lands by the State Government of Victoria to the Royal Botanic Gardens Melbourne.

The Observatory was the home for weather forecasting, time setting, setting weights and measures standards and for the surveying of Victoria. The distinctive shapes of the buildings, built and added to between 1861 and 1902, topped by sliding domes and opening roof structures evoke immediate recognition of their functions as devices for tracking and charting stars, watching the weather and keeping time.