

Australia by Coach

Nigel George of Artecology created the original Australian Terraces and, 12 years later, has finished the job

The first time I arrived at the work site of the Australian Terraces at Ventnor Botanic Garden early in 2005 I was utterly unprepared for what I would find. I remember it very well because I was greeted by a scene of utter devastation, a bombsite, complete with huge crater and more mud than you can possibly imagine. Tyre tracks from diggers and dumpers 18 inches deep crisscrossed the apocalyptic, plantless view laid out before me. It seemed clear to me that the people in charge here had lost

their minds! It crossed my own mind that maybe they'd ingested some subtropical leaf extract in an attempt to 'get creative' and had instead gone completely bonkers!

My worries weren't allayed much when the men in the crater made their way up to greet me. "We want you to build a bloody huge rock face for us, there's no natural rock up this end of the garden and we need you to stabilise that bank so we can plant it." On its own the idea sounded okay, a big job for sure but I was used to that. It was the next bit that got me worried all over again. "We've heard you can use recycled materials to make the armatures for your sculptures and stuff," one of the men said to me. Later I came to know this chap as one Chris Kidd. "That's right, we can do that," I replied. "Good," came his blunt retort, "cos we've got two big old coaches coming for you to work with." And so they did.

A few weeks later the coaches were craned into position on the bank beneath the cricket clubhouse and my own team started work to convert the lumbering metallic carcasses into an Australian red rock edifice complete with aboriginal art. We had hardly started turning coach to stone when the message came to us that we had to stop work. Behind the scenes, unbeknown to us, a battle had been blazing. Various individuals from outside the Garden had mobilised themselves with a resolve to put a halt to the apparent madness going on at VBG. We put down our tools and walked away, not sure if we would ever return.

Several weeks later a jubilant Simon Goodenough called me to say that he'd fought off the naysayers and with a few changes to the plan we could begin work again. The changes were that the rock colour must blend with the natural rock nearby and the height of the rock face must be lowered. At the time these changes seemed like a small

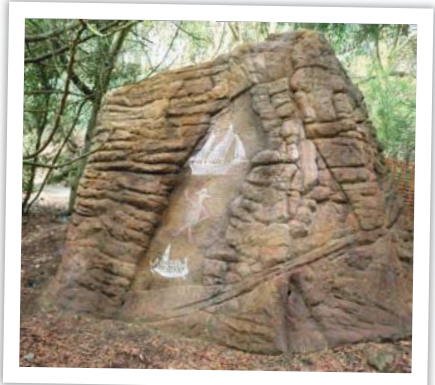


Trip to Australia: Chris Kidd leads the tour

price to pay, so a JCB was brought in to pummel the coaches down to an agreeable height and shortly after that we resumed the sculptural work.

That was then, and now the vision (that had always been in the minds of Chris Kidd, Julian Winslow and Simon Goodenough) is there for everyone to behold and, my word, what a work of total genius it is! Gone is the mud bath bombsite and in its place is the gloriously naturalistic landscape of an antipodean tree fern forest. It's a masterpiece of design, an amazing manmade fern gully that has no equal in the UK, I'm sure. Those spindly eucalyptus sticks that I watched being planted over a decade ago are today beautiful trees in a new eucalyptus copse that casts its playful shadows over two long lost coaches. Once upon a time a bank covered in sculpted concrete by me and my team is now adorned with an extraordinary array of mosses expertly applied by nature herself.

Apparently a renowned biologist has called this place a 'successful synthetic ecosystem'. I really like the sound of that!



Arrival of the 'White Fella' by boat



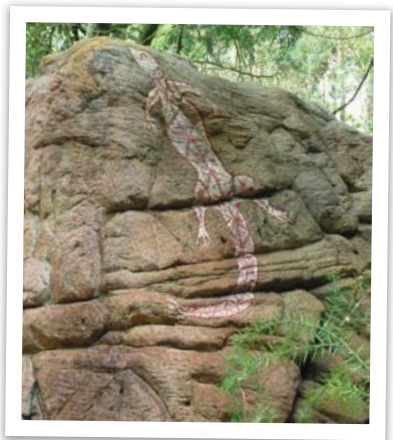
Nigel George with indigenous paintings on Dream Time Boulder

So 12 years later ... at the request of the same Chris Kidd I find myself in the rubbish yard at VBG looking for useful scrap metal to make another armature for another chunk of faux rock to be located in the Australian Terrace. This time Chris wants me to stick to the original plan, he wants it to look like red sandstone rock and he wants it to feature the artwork of the indigenous Australian people. We call the project 'The Dream Time Boulder' after the native Australian Dream Time belief system that still prevails today.

In the rubbish collection area at the Garden we find some pieces of old fence, a big old gate and some odd bits of scaffold. We take them back to our studio in Chale and reform them, reshape and weld them together until we are happy that we have an armature that will help us create the effect we are after – a wind sculpted boulder, like the ones in Kimberley Australia – the place where generations of Aboriginal people

have carved and painted their life stories on to the sandstone walls of caves and cliffs.

As well as the new rock colour and the artwork I was keen to give the new feature some purpose beyond the aesthetic. Through my own work, that we call *Artecology*, my team has in the past created sculptures that double as hibernacula. These are simply places for wildlife to retreat to, make homes in or overwinter in. Since the new structure was to be hollow, this new boulder in the Garden seemed to us like a perfect opportunity to create the largest purpose-built hibernaculum we've ever made. So then, with the armature in place in the Australian Terrace, we called on Garden staff to help us stuff its interior with all manner of garden waste. Branches, twigs and leaves were packed inside the framework, providing a complex network of organic material for vertebrates and invertebrates to find shelter or make homes.



Hibernaculum: a perfect shelter for vertebrates and invertebrates

Once the fake rock sculptural work (made from a mix of sand, cement and pulped newspaper) was complete, with some holes here and there for wildlife to get in and out, we set about completing the aboriginal-style artwork. With Chris Kidd as our guide we chose to create a hybrid rock art feature showing indigenous people's artwork through the ages.

So our Dream Time Boulder artwork begins with a depiction of a family group from a tradition known as Gwion Gwion. These people created their images on rock walls around 17,000 years ago. Some experts say their paintings could be significantly older than that; either way, by 10,000 years ago the Gwion Gwion people had all gone. Anthropologists think that climate change around this time made the Kimberley area inhospitable to humans. It was a further 3,000 years before humans returned and



Stylised imagery of spirit beings and creator gods

started to paint on the rock walls again. This new era of creativity is known as Wandjina and with it comes a new subject matter. Interestingly, gone are the elegant family portraits of every day life seen in the Gwion Gwion tradition and instead we find stylised imagery of spirit beings and creator gods. To me this shift in imagery is interesting: could it suggest something of the trauma of climate change on the human psyche maybe?

As you wander around the rock you will see the final images – the arrival of the 'White Fella' by ship. Here the story ends, as the arrival of Europeans sparked the end times of the aboriginal rock art tradition . . . Quite simply, they painted no more!

And so ends my story . . . I think!