A monument for the citizens of Greater Bendigo by Goldfields architect, William Charles Vahland (1828-1915)

*Pall Mall from Bridge Street, Bendigo, State Library of Victoria, c.1906.*
The great public buildings he designed are one of the finest collections of Victorian buildings in Australia. His grand architecture has captivated visitors and local residents for generations.

But just as significant were the simple and affordable houses he designed for working people, which were financed through the building society. It was the original house, land and finance package, and allowed them to own their own home and turn a city of tents and muddy mine shafts into a community.

Vahland built institutions too, not just buildings. He was a founder of the Bendigo Mutual Permanent Land and Building Society, now Bendigo and Adelaide Bank. He remained on the board for more than 50 years and for 38 years was its Chairman and Managing Director. Bendigo Bank is a memorial to Vahland, just like the Town Hall and Capital Theatre.

Thanks to the generosity and vision of many local businesses and people, we are thrilled to reinstate the Vahland drinking fountain to the city. This once forgotten historic treasure will now be a permanent reminder of the outstanding contribution Vahland made to Bendigo.

In 2014 the Mayor received an email suggesting that as 2015 would mark the 100th anniversary of Vahland’s death it would provide a fitting and overdue opportunity to recognise his contribution through the restoration of the drinking fountain.

Using the 100th anniversary as the catalyst, a fundraising campaign was launched and the rest is history – the project’s time had come. Interested residents and local businesses jumped on board and have replicated the public subscription process that funded the original installation of the drinking fountain and lights in 1881!

Everyone who has been involved in the restoration becomes captivated by its story and how it represents elements of the city that we know and love today. From the conduit boring machine that was made in the same location that Vahland was born, to the engineer whose father recast one of the missing lions’ heads, to the people who remember the horse troughs when they were in the kangaroo enclosure at the Botanic Gardens or the central obelisk when it was sitting in a roundabout – many people have a story to tell about this missing piece of the city’s history.

The restoration and reinstatement of the Vahland Drinking Fountain has been an ambition of the City since its formation in 1994. Various unsuccessful attempts have been made over the years to increase awareness of the project and to fund its installation.
HISTORY

The Drinking Fountain was designed by William Charles Vahland in 1880 and was one of three fountains that formed a triangle in the centre of Bendigo.

The other fountains were the Alexandra Fountain at Charing Cross – Bendigo’s most prominent intersection – and the Cascades in Rosalind Park, where the government buildings of the Bendigo goldfield were located. To complete the triangle was a drinking fountain that would service horses, dogs and people at the junction of Bridge Street and Pall Mall – a large area where hansom cabs, horses and carts, and bullock trains could turn or pull up to rest and water before entering the centre of Bendigo.

The Drinking Fountain lights were gas lit and the water was carted in to fill the troughs. It would have also provided a viewpoint for those willing to climb it during festival times. Early postcards and photos of the Easter Festival show people crowded around, over and up the Drinking Fountain as the parade went past.

After 25 years of continuous use, the Drinking Fountain was dilapidated. When the Discovery of Gold Jubilee statue was proposed in the early 1900s this functional corner at the north end of Pall Mall was identified as an ideal location for improvement. The Drinking Fountain was dismantled, replaced by the statue and the fountain pieces were dispersed throughout Bendigo, decorating intersections or continuing their original function of providing drinking water for animals. It would be more than 80 years before the fountain pieces were collected with the aim of reconstructing the Drinking Fountain.

TIMELINE

1880 – 81 Alexandra Fountain, Rosalind Park Cascades and Drinking Fountain planned and constructed. The Drinking Fountain was located at the corner of Farmer Lane and Pall Mall, now known as Howard Place.

1901 – 02 The 50th anniversary of the discovery of gold on the Bendigo goldfield was commemorated with the Gold Jubilee Exhibition. At the end of the exhibition there was over £1000 surplus and a commemorative statue was proposed.

1902 – 06 Charles Douglas Richardson, noted Australian sculptor of the Statue of Mercury (1899), which stood atop The Age building at 253 Collins Street, Melbourne, was commissioned to sculpt the ‘Discovery of Gold Jubilee’ statue. The statue is said to be modelled on Queen Victoria.

c.1905 – 06 After 26 years at Howard Place, the Drinking Fountain was dismantled and the Discovery of Gold Jubilee statue was put in its place. This statue is now registered as a statue of heritage significance to the state of Victoria and is on the Victorian Heritage Register.

Post 1906 Parts of the Drinking Fountain are dispersed throughout Bendigo – the central stone elements to the intersection of Lyttleton Terrace, Williamson and Queen Streets and the water troughs to the kangaroo pens at White Hills Botanic Gardens. The metal light elements and the stone buttresses are lost during this period.

1990s – 2000s The remaining parts of the Drinking Fountain are located and transferred to the City of Greater Bendigo Depot. Some preliminary conservation works are undertaken on the stone elements and all remaining pieces are transferred to storage. In 1994, plans to reconstruct the Drinking Fountain were drawn up and in 2005 plans to place the fountain to Bull Street at the Pall Mall intersection were made. These attempts were unsuccessful.

2013 As the 2015 centenary of the death of William Charles Vahland approaches, the project to reconstruct the Drinking Fountain is successfully proposed and gains the support of the German Heritage Society, the Bendigo Bank and the National Trust of Australia (Victoria).

July 21, 2015 The fundraising campaign to restore the Vahland Drinking Fountain is launched.

September 2016 The Bull Street extension is officially gazetted as William Vahland Place.

October 2, 2016 The Vahland Drinking Fountain is reconstructed, restored and unveiled on William Vahland’s birthday in William Vahland Place.
My initial response to the discovery of part of the Vahland Drinking Fountain then situated in the centre of the Williamson Street and Lyttleton Terrace roundabout was, “What is that?”

Akin to striking gold, covered in dust and grime from years of traffic emission, the elegant, polished and engraved Harcourt granite central column atop tooled granite base sections could not be mistaken for anything other than crafted elements of high quality, reflecting an early period of architectural sophistication so out of context on a roundabout.

The decision to restore and place the Drinking Fountain in Bull Street adjacent to the Law Courts, close to the original location, was the catalyst to ask the local community if any of the missing components had been repurposed and were still in existence.

This endeavour revealed the location of the lower water troughs which had fulfilled a similar functional need at the White Hills wildlife enclosure. Having exhausted the search for the remaining components, the focus was directed towards achieving authentic reproduction of the missing parts. This led Council to investigate the Vahland design, and very poor photographic records, to faithfully reconstruct the granite buttresses, develop patterns and cast the decorative bronze framework which supports the cluster of four glazed lantern style lights, consistent with the original form, scale and architectural detail.

Assembly of the components, with some other original parts recrafted, provides the opportunity to reflect on the creativity of Vahland and celebrate his legacy.

The journey to reinstate the fountain has touched many people. The enthusiasm and respect for Vahland’s creation has been demonstrated by all involved and it is most pleasing to record the way it has been completed to very high standards and quality by Victorian artisans, mostly local.

Don Goldsworthy OAM
City Architect, City of Greater Bendigo
WITH THANKS

Many people and organisations have generously contributed to this project. The restored Drinking Fountain is a monument for the citizens of Greater Bendigo to enjoy now and in the future.

The Vahland Drinking Fountain project has been made possible by the partnership between the:

Bendigo Bank
German Heritage Society
National Trust of Australia (Victoria)
and the City of Greater Bendigo

This project has come to fruition through the continued dedication of this partnership.

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Frances & Harold Abbott Foundation
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William Charles Vahland as a young man, Goldfields Image Library, c.1860s.