

# Cowra



ABOVE: The Japanese Garden and Cultural Centre at Cowra was conceived by Don Kibbler and designed by Ken Jakijima. Built into the Australian landscape, it represents the mountains, hills and streams of Japan. The gum trees left standing in the garden represent the Australian soldiers who were killed in the breakout. Photos: Hallmark Editions.

## A town like no other

Outwardly, the New South Wales town of Cowra, with a population of 9200, looks pretty much like any other small-to-mid-sized town in Australia. To drive through, from the welcome sign beside the Lachlan River to the exit on the highway that heads out towards Bathurst, takes all of six minutes. Along the way you cross a couple of traffic lights and pass half a dozen pubs, a department store, three supermarkets, nine motels and a pepper of restaurants. To stand in this main street, 330 km south-west of Sydney, is to be surrounded by the comfortable, reassuring backdrop that comes with a thousand country towns.

Appearances, of course, can mislead. Truth is, Cowra is a town like no other. What distinguishes it, and always will, is a date – 5 August 1944 – and an event that catapulted Cowra into the history books: the mass break-out of more than 1000 Japanese prisoners of war. It was a catastrophe that led to the deaths of 231 Japanese and four Australian soldiers, and the wounding of 108 Japanese and four Australians. In the early years afterwards, that date was once seen as something of a scar. In more recent times, it has become the town's proud badge.

BY HARRY GORDON

**E**ven the awful arithmetic of the casualty list does not convey the trauma that jolted the little agricultural

community of Cowra that day 65 years ago. The reality was almost beyond comprehension: it was the largest prison break in history, and the only land battle fought on



Aerial view of the Cowra POW camp taken the day after the breakout by Japanese prisoners. The camp, one of 28 POW camps in Australia during WWII, consisted of four compounds with a central strip known as 'Broadway': front right of Broadway is A Compound for Italian POWs, moving clockwise is B Compound for Japanese Other Ranks where all but three of 21 sleeping huts are burnt out, C Compound for Italian POWs, and D Compound for Japanese Officers, as well as Formosans and Koreans. Australian War Memorial, Image no P03160.002.

Australian soil in World War II. What mattered most to the locals was that there were enemy troops out there in the paddocks ... the paddocks of country Australia. And they were being stalked, mostly by untrained boy-soldiers, even by farmers with rifles and shotguns. The prisoners had stormed barbed-wire barricades around their prison, and now there were 334 of them roaming the surrounding areas. It would take nine days before they were all rounded up.

Nobody at the time, of course, knew – or was inclined even to think about – the profound effect the events of that day would have on the town's future. There was too much to do, too much to worry about. There was an urgency, fear and indignation, even some panic. Afterwards there was even, for some, a vague impression of shame. Contributing to all these unsettling moods was a bleak shroud of secrecy, imposed by the Australian government.

It was a sensitive time in the war when tens of thousands of Allied troops were being held captive by the Japanese, and the government was understandably concerned that news of a bloodbath in the Australian bush might become the trigger for reprisals in those prison camps. Sparse facts were made

public at the time; media correspondents were banned from entering the camp, and publication of any details related to the breakout, even the very name of Cowra, was banned. The censorship continued for a long time after it seemed justified; documents relating to the breakout and the court of inquiry which followed, remained classified for two decades.

It took a long time for Cowra to come to terms with the immensity of what had happened, and a lot longer for the events of that day to bring about a change in the very culture of the town. But that is what happened. A feeling of pride infused the place, first slowly and rather shyly ... and then, with the years, a mood of healing, compassion and hope took over. Today, Cowra is a confident town, one that embodies a spirit of goodwill, of reconciliation between former enemies – arguably more so than any other part of Australia. In 2001 the Japanese Ambassador, Atsushi Hatakenaka, called it "the spiritual home of Australia-Japan relationships". In 2005 it was judged the friendliest town in NSW, and these days, with plenty of evidence to support the claim, Cowra attaches to itself the bold slogan: 'Centre of World Friendship'.

At the war's end, there was much animosity in Cowra, as elsewhere,



Cowra No 12 Prisoner of War Compound. Huts of the POW compound destroyed by fire after the mass escape in the early hours of 5 August 1944. Australian War Memorial, Image No 073484.



Burial of Australian soldiers killed during the breakout. Australian War Memorial, Image No 044119.



The Australian World Peace Bell, located in Cowra's civic square, was awarded to Cowra in 1992 for its contribution to the aims of world peace and international understanding.

towards the Japanese – hardly surprising, given the fact that many husbands and sons from the town had spent recent years fighting against them, and some had lost their lives. One young woman, Sister Jenny Kerr, from the nearby village of Woodstock, had been among 21 Australian nurses massacred by Japanese soldiers in the waters of Bangka Strait after the sinking of the *Vyner Brooke* in 1942.

The first modest progress towards a new mood came in the 1950s, when members of Cowra's Returned Services League began making weekend trips to mow, rake and weed the unkempt burial ground which housed the bodies of Japanese killed in the uprising. This area was adjacent to the Australian war cemetery, and the ex-soldiers, led by club president Wilf Mills and secretary John Kennedy, made it clear that they weren't motivated by any kind of affection for the Japanese: just by a sense of respect for fallen soldiers.

The Japanese government, impressed by the gesture, undertook in 1963 to expand and maintain the cemetery, which became (and remains) Japan's only official war cemetery. Designed by the well-known Tokyo architect, Yura Shigeru, this beautifully manicured area became the final resting place of 523 Japanese who died in Australia during the war, including soldiers from Cowra, airmen shot down in the Northern Territory and civilian internees.

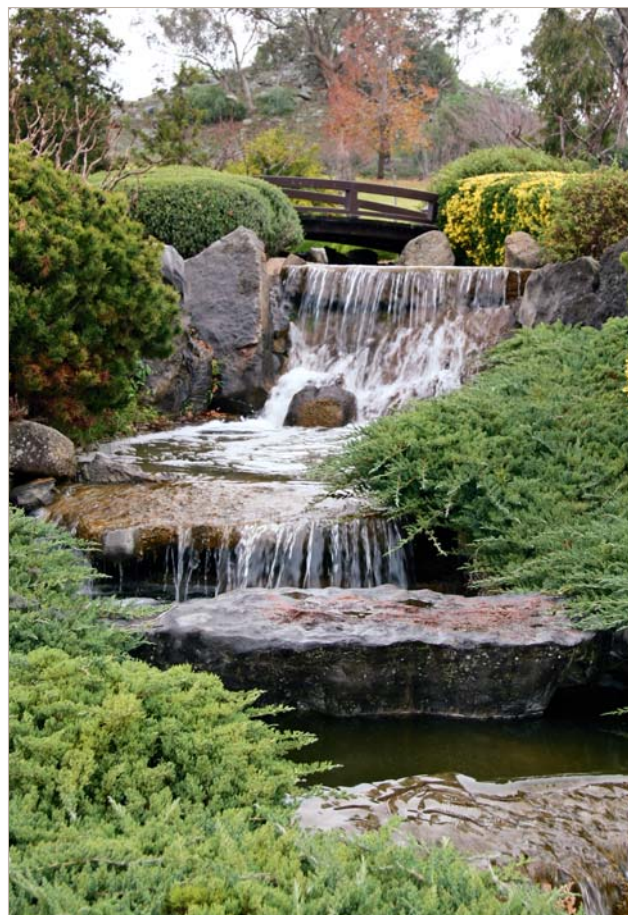
The bond between Japan and Cowra was further strengthened in 1979 with the opening of the town's magnificent Japanese garden, designed by Ken Nakajima, consulting architect to the Imperial Palace in Tokyo. The garden was built in two stages, with the purpose of

offering a sanctuary for the spirits of Australians and Japanese who died in the Pacific war, and was completed in 1986.

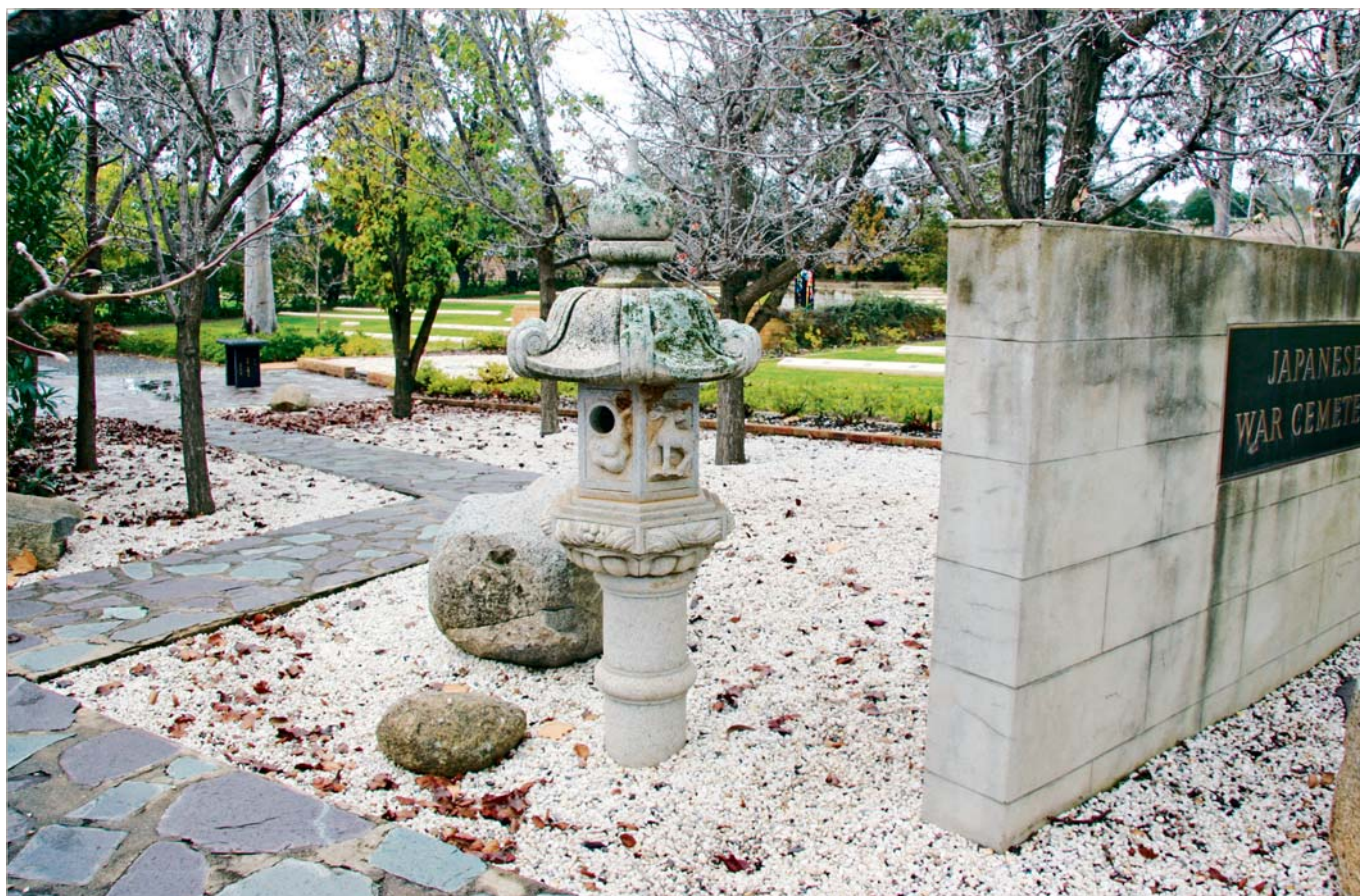
Reflecting the very landscape of Japan itself, melded somehow with the rocky outcrops of the hill into which it was built, the garden features cherry trees and maples as well as streams, waterfalls and boulders, including one huge flat Yogoseki rock, a place where Nakajima believed spirits would converge to find peace. The garden offered pleasures of sound as well as sight, and in its grounds were erected a Shinto-style entrance gate, a pottery house, a bonsai nursery, a tea-house and a cultural centre.

In 1988 the garden and cemetery were linked to the prison camp site (which had been cleared of its buildings in 1947) by an avenue lined with 800 flowering cherry trees. That 4 km avenue, the longest cherry-tree parade in the world, is the site of the Sakura Matsuri Blossom Festival every October. Don Kibbler, a builder whose idea it was to create such a garden to honour the war dead and symbolise the ties between Australia and Japan, sees it now as Japan's Gallipoli ... a place to which Japanese, young and old, make pilgrimages to reflect on the sacrifices of their soldiers. He believes its construction has been the catalyst for the succession of events which have reinforced Cowra's status as a place of peace.

One such event was the selection of the town as the site for Australia's huge world peace bell, one of 21 in the world. The first peace bell was installed at the United



Waterfall in the Japanese Gardens.



Japanese War Cemetery at Cowra, the only one in the world outside of Japan. Photos: Hallmark Editions.

Nations headquarters in New York in 1954, with the purpose of promoting goodwill throughout the world. It is constructed from coins melted down from 103 countries embraced by the UN. When the UN donated a replica of the New York bell to Australia in 1990, it was expected to be housed in Canberra. Instead, the Department of Foreign Affairs invited Cowra to take delivery of the bell, and it now sits in the town's civic square.

Another bronze bell, smaller but still impressive, known as a *bon-sho*, is a feature of the Cowra's Japanese garden. Modelled on a famous 1000-year-old Japanese bell, and donated by Japan's Inazawa Rotary Club, it has a soft, mellow sound that is said to radiate a sense of peace and calm, and to cleanse the mind of evil spirits.

The bells, the garden, the cemetery, the cherry blossoms and the Nagakura picnic park (a gift from the Japanese industrialist Saburo Nagakura) are some of the more visible evidence of Cowra's special relationship with Japan. The mutual awareness and affection has also been expressed in other ways, such as student exchanges between Cowra High School and Tokyo's Seikei High School every year since the early 1970s; the town's annual, week-long Festival of International Understanding, celebrated for more than 40 years; exchanges between the local Catholic school and Joetsu City, where Australian prisoners of war were held in Japan, and others between the town councils of Cowra and Joetsu; reunions between old soldiers, some of them former enemies, and their families; a local schoolgirl's gift of 1000 paper cranes to Nara High School; the return of Japanese swords souvenired during fighting in the Pacific;

## DRIVEN BY SHAME

The Japanese and the Italians, who made up the bulk of the 3000 inmates of Cowra's prisoner-of-war camp, had vastly different attitudes. The Italian prisoners were generally content: they worked on farms outside the camp, staged concerts, grew vegetables, played soccer, drank grappa, threw lollies to children from their trucks. Some fell in love, several fathered children; a few later married local girls, and some preferred not to return to Italy after the war.

The Japanese hated the place. They regarded their captivity as a deeply humiliating experience, one that brought shame to their families and their country. Their army code had instructed them to take their own lives rather than become prisoners. Most had been too weak, through sickness or wounds, to offer any resistance. Many adopted false names to spare their families dishonour.

This collective sense of shame was the overwhelming reason behind the mass escape bid launched by the Japanese on the frosty morning of 5 August 1944 – but its immediate trigger was official advice, the previous day, that some of them would be transferred to another camp. At 2am, as a bugle sounded, hundreds spilled from their huts to attack the three barbed-wire perimeter fences, armed with weapons fashioned from kitchen cutlery and gardening tools.

They carried blankets and baseball mitts to muffle the barbs of the fences. Behind them they left fires that ultimately destroyed 18 of their 20 huts, as well as about two dozen incapacitated comrades, who would soon commit suicide.

A major target was an unmanned Vickers machine-gun mounted on a trailer outside the outermost fence. The intention was to capture it, and use it against the Australian garrison. As waves of screaming prisoners charged at the fences, Privates Benjamin Hardy and Ralph Jones, still in their pyjamas, sprinted



A monument marking the site of the breakout above the POW campsite.

towards the gun. As soon as they reached it, Hardy began firing into the hordes converging towards them, with Jones feeding the ammunition belt. Their bullets left scores of bodies draped across the wire entanglements, but the Japanese kept coming ... until the two young Australians were finally overpowered and bludgeoned to death. When the Japanese took over the gun, they found its feed block had been removed, thus rendering it useless. (Six years later Hardy and Jones were both awarded posthumous George Crosses).

For the 334 Japanese who surged across the fences, freedom was fairly brief. During a round-up operation which occupied nine days, many chose to take their own lives rather than be recaptured. At least two were shot by civilians, and several by military personnel.

Lieutenant Harry Doncaster, from the nearby army training camp, became the only Australian killed in the round-up when he was attacked by a group of escapees. Private Charles Shepherd was stabbed to death inside the camp. A huge bronze sculpture in Cowra's Squire Park, unveiled in 1994, is dedicated to the memory of the four dead Australians, and to "the spirit of understanding which exists 50 years after the event".



One of the scattered ruins left at the site of the Cowra POW camp. Photos: Hallmark Editions.

and cultural swaps that have involved artwork, calligraphy, choirs, Catholic and Buddhist priests ... even lessons in having fun.

During one visit by members of the Cowra Kai (a Japanese association of former inmates of the prison camp), accompanied by their families, the Japanese entertained the locals with folk songs; in a reciprocal gesture with an outback flavour, their wives and daughters were taught the finer points of bush dancing ... involving heel-and-toe polka and a push-button accordion.

While Cowra's dominant international relationship has been with Japan, its Italian connection remains strong and affectionate. At the time of the breakout, in 1944, the prison housed more than 1100 Japanese prisoners and 1600 Italians. Unlike the Japanese, the Italians generally adapted to life in captivity, and most even came to enjoy it (see accompanying box). They worked on farms, ate well, drank wine and grappa, attended mass in the local Catholic church, played accordions, sang nostalgic songs, and occasionally flirted with farmers' wives and daughters. A few even managed to drink in local pubs. After repatriation to Italy after the war, some returned as migrants. They are remembered in the town, through two dedicated monuments and a vigorous Cowra Italy Friendship Association.

Apart from the first RSL members who tended Japanese graves in the 1950s, there were many who guided Cowra along the route it has taken. They have included the civic leaders A J 'Ab' Oliver, Len Whiteley, Barbara Bennett, Don Kibbler, the brother priests, Tony and Paul Glynn, the teacher, David Hobson, Tony Mooney, Marion Starr, Lawrance Ryan and Graham

Apthorpe. Pathfinders from the Japanese side have been the former airman, Marekuni Takahara, and the ex-soldier, Masaru Moriki, both now deceased, who separately wrote fond memoirs about their time in Cowra. Takahara, a chubby ex-stockbroker who came to resemble a small Buddha in a double-breaster, sometimes baffled people by claiming to be a graduate of Cowra University; he called it "the academy where I learned the essence of human life".

Two enduring images symbolise the spirit of Cowra, and they are captured in large metallic photographs that adorn each end of the Peace Pathway adjoining the Japanese Garden. One is of the old enemies Masaru Moriki and Wal McKenzie – one an ex-prisoner, one a former guard – sitting together on a bench in the garden.

The other celebrates an unlikely act of hospitality by May Weir, a farmer's wife who found three escapees at her door the day after the breakout. She sat them down and served them tea and scones, while she waited for an army truck to collect them.

It had to be Cowra's first recorded act of reconciliation.

### The Author

**Harry Gordon** is a historian, former editor of the *Herald Sun* and author of 15 books including *Voyage from shame: the Cowra breakout and afterwards* and *Die Like the Carp*. ♦

## Heritage Touring

Cowra, 310 miles west of Sydney, proudly identifies itself as a Centre of World Friendship. Each March it stages a Festival of International Understanding which celebrates a different international culture each year (2010 will be Hungary). In September, the Sakura Matsuri Cherry Blossom Festival held at the Japanese Garden and Cultural Centre celebrates Cowra's special connection with Japan. The Avenue of Cherry Trees is being planted to link the site of the POW breakout with the War Cemetery. Visitors can follow a signed walking trail through the camp ruins, and at the Cowra Visitors Centre, a hologram tells the story of the Cowra breakout.

For more information contact the Cowra Tourism Corporation, (02) 6342 4333.