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Dr David Jones completes the story of Sydney designer Max Shelley who moved to South Australia after being demobbed from the Royal Australian Airforce in 1945.

The Mysterious Mr Shelley in Adelaide

Max Shelley in the 1920s. Photo: Courtesy Mrs Rosemary Ross.

Kemp employed Shelley as 'Chief Designer' from 1945 until his untimely death in 1954. In this position Shelley designed and supervised the planting and construction of many medium to large institutional, commercial, industrial and residential projects undertaken in Adelaide during these years, including Le Fevre Hospital, James Hardie's factory estates, and projects in the new town of Elizabeth.

Two apprentice landscape designers and a works crew of eight served under Shelley. The designers were Robin Hill and Richard (Dick) Massey. Hill recalls that Shelley was passionate about random Mintaro slate, formal garden patterns and 'lines', the use of roses and typical English flowering plants available in the Kingswood Nursery, and the use of arbors. Kemp also apparently asked Shelley to provide much of the landscape design advice in the Adelaide print media that appeared under Kemp's pseudonym, 'Grevillea'.

In executing these designs and planting works Shelley always prepared plans, often with Robin and Dick drafting layouts and final watercolours. Shelley’s manner was very organised, 'pedantic', ordered, and 'well-groomed', echoing his air force training.

Shelley idolised his daughter, and the rumours persist that he was associated with the English poetic Shelley family. He lived in a boarding house apartment in Hawthorn, within walking distance of the Kingswood Nursery and his office. On 12 April 1954 Shelley died from “asphyxia” and was buried at the West Terrace Cemetery in Adelaide.

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