Carlton Community History Group

NEWSLETTER

Issue No. 12   **February 2019**

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Melbourne General Cemetery

During its 165 years of operation, the Melbourne General Cemetery in Carlton has become the final resting place of many of the important figures of Victoria's and Australia's colonial and later history. These include the founder of the University and Public Library Sir Redmond Barry, surveyor Robert Hoddle, explorers Burke and Wills, seven Premiers of Victoria and several Prime Ministers of Australia. However the managing of the cemetery by its trustees has been a source of considerable controversy.

The cemetery in Carlton was in fact Melbourne's third cemetery. The first was a small burial site in what is now the Flagstaff Gardens. There is a memorial in the Gardens to commemorate those very early burials. The second, established in 1839, was a much larger walled cemetery on what is now part of the Queen Victoria Market. (Part of the old cemetery wall can still be seen among the stalls at the Market). But the rapid growth of the town meant that within a decade it was already too small – and the town itself was expanding into that area. A new cemetery further out was first proposed in 1849. After the discovery of gold in 1851, with people pouring in and the population
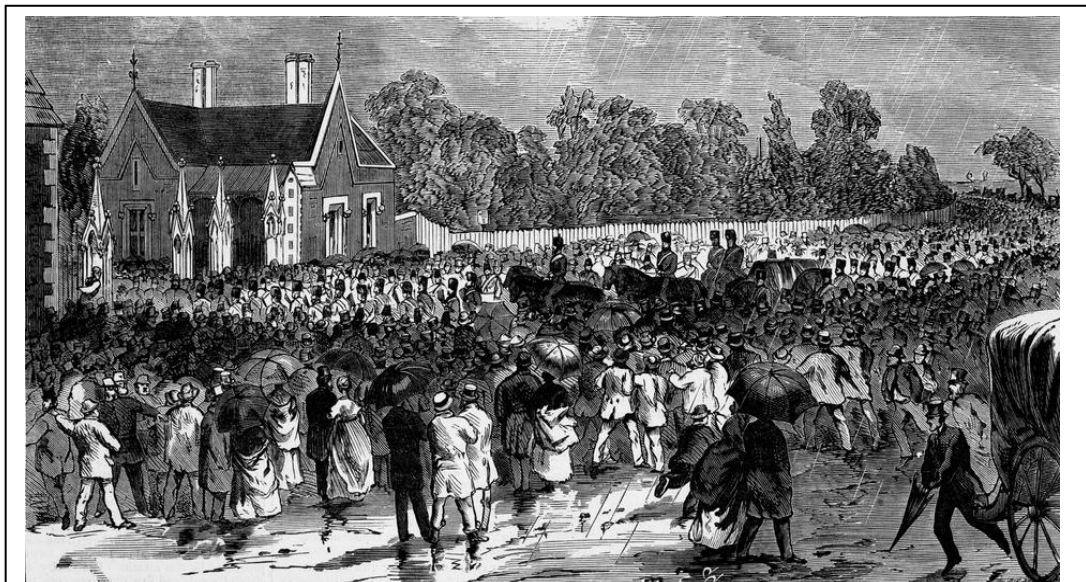
Melbourne crowds flock to see the funeral of a soldier accidently killed during the Queen's Birthday review in 1871 by an explosion of a mine. The procession is entering the original gate of the cemetery on its western side. Princes Park is to the right of the illustration. (Source: State Library of Victoria).

exploding it was realised that it needed to be ten times the size of the old one - 106 acres compared to the old cemetery's 10 acres. The new cemetery was established in 1850 and its first burials took place in 1853. At that stage the area around the cemetery (that we now call Carlton) was just empty bushland. It was another 20 years before it became full of suburban streets and terrace houses.

When it opened, the new Melbourne General Cemetery was a very up-to-date institution for its time. Its 106 acres were carefully divided into areas for each of the main religious groups. Unlike traditional churchyards, it was intended to have a park-like atmosphere with open areas and lots of ornamental trees and shrubs, rotundas and rockeries. In its heyday in the late 19th century, the cemetery was a pleasant place to stroll around on a Saturday afternoon. But soon the need to find more burial spaces for an ever-increasing population undermined these good intentions and the result was an overcrowded and neglected cemetery. See page 4 for details.

Interested in learning more about the historic Melbourne General Cemetery and some of the fascinating and notorious characters buried there?

HISTORICAL WALK AND TALK

MELBOURNE GENERAL CEMETERY

Saturday 27 April 2019, 10am till 12 noon

This walk is organized jointly by the Princes Hill Community Centre and the Carlton Community History Group. It is a very popular walk so please register online in advance to ensure you have a place. Cost is $10.
Website: http://princeshill.org.au/programs/107-2/ Email: enrolment@princeshill.org.au
Phone: 9387-7740

Interested in local history?
Then join us in the Carlton Community History Group and help preserve our past for the future.

Are you interested in working on any of the following projects?
- Researching your own family history as it relates to Carlton;
- Recording oral history, stories and recollections of former residents;
- Researching topics for future editions of this Newsletter;
- Helping to maintain our Facebook page;
- Publicising the Group and its activities;
- Seeking grants to fund specific projects.

Sounds interesting? Then contact us to see how you can be involved.
Email: cchg@y7mail.com   **Website:** www.cchg.asn.au

Local History News

Exhibition on women in the fire brigade

The Royal Historical Society of Victoria's first exhibition for 2019 commemorates the important contribution that women have made to Victoria's fire and rescue service. It marks the 35th anniversary of the Metropolitan Fire Board first opening its doors to operational women. The exhibition will run from Friday 25 January until Friday 22 February 2019 at the RHSV's rooms at 239 a'Beckett Street, Melbourne. It features photos, interviews and historical research that capture the stories of just some of the women who have helped shape the MFB.

Talk on pre-European history of Richmond

On Sunday 24 March in the Richmond Library, Dr Gary Presland will talk about the 'Pre-European Culture in the Richmond Area'. For thousands of years before European settlement, the area of Richmond was part of the estate of the Wurundjeri-willam clan, who were part of the Kulin nation.

Old advertising sign uncovered

In late 2018 an interesting old sign advertising Glen Valley Tea was uncovered when a building housing the Spanish Club in Johnston Street, Fitzroy was demolished (see photo right). CCHG has alerted the City of Yarra to the historical importance of the sign, and to the fact that it was in imminent danger of being damaged by graffiti or by the building of the new structure on the site of the Spanish Club.

Remembering the 1918 Armistice

The Richmond and Burnley Historical Society in collaboration with the Richmond RSL and the City of Yarra will commemorate the anniversary of the Armistice that ended the First World War in 1918 by planting a Lone Pine seedling in the Barkly Gardens in Richmond and erecting a commemorative plaque. They will also be working with local schools to help students learn about the sacrifices of local men during the First World War – and will plant Lone Pine seedlings in their school grounds.

A recently uncovered advertising sign from a bygone age in Johnston Street, Fitzroy. (Photo: CCHG)

Memorial restored in Edinburgh Gardens

In 1919, a memorial was erected in the Edinburgh Gardens, North Fitzroy, in memory of members of local sporting clubs who died in the First World War. When erected the memorial was a free-standing walk-through entrance to the gardens. But over the years it became neglected, and ended up being hemmed in by an electricity supply sub-station and the rear wall of the bowling club. Recently however the Fitzroy History Society and the City of Yarra have organized for the memorial to be restored and enhanced. The names of the 38 men who were killed have now been restored and appear on a memorial plaque on a wall. On the rear wall of the memorial (and of the bowling club) there is now an enlarged photo of the Australian Training Units team that played an exhibition football match in London in 1916.

Do you have an interest in Social Media?

The Carlton Community History Group is looking for someone with an interest in history and social media to look after our Facebook page. We would supply news items and photos for the page and answer any inquiries. But we need someone to manage the process and to make sure that the page is active – which it is not at the moment.

If interested contact Jeff at jeffann@bigpond.net.au

Making more space for burials

The original intention of the designers of the Melbourne General Cemetery that it should have a park-like atmosphere with lots of open space was soon undermined by the practical realities of accommodating more and more graves. The city's expanding population demanded ever more burial space, and these early concepts gave way to the need to find more and more burial sites. Gradually the lawns and open areas, and even some of the winding paths, were used to accommodate graves.

By 1904, just 51 years after it was opened, the place was full up and the sale of graves was stopped, although burials in already sold sites continued. In the decades that followed, the on-going costs of maintenance with no income from sale of sites put pressure on the limited financial resources of the cemetery, and a long period of neglect occurred. The cemetery became very run-down and there was wide-spread vandalism and theft of brass decorations.

However in 1927 the overcrowded and run-down cemetery was re-opened. An area in the south-west of the cemetery that had been a formal entry drive, complete with cast-iron gate and stone gatehouse, was closed and made available for new graves. (On a modern map of the cemetery, this is the area between First Avenue and Princes Park Road. The old gate was where the fountain is now). The entrance gate and gatehouse were moved to where they are now, on the southern boundary on College Crescent. A new administrative building and residence was built there in 1934-35 using the stone from the demolished former gate-keeper's cottage.


The original gate and gatehouses on the western side of the cemetery in 1880. These were demolished in the 1930s, and reconstructed in modified form on the southern boundary in College Crescent. (Photo: D. McDonald, State Library of Victoria).

By the 1940s, all this new ground was also used up and the trustees were resorting to filling in roadways and footpaths with more graves. From the 1950s to the 1970s the cemetery sold old 19th century pauper graves for reuse as private plots. Although somewhat unethical, this was in fact lawful, as a pauper burial did not bestow a legal claim on the land. What was more dubious however was the reselling of plots that had been sold many years before but had remained unused. In the 1960s and 1970s it got even worse. The trustees began covering over very old gravesites with earth and re-selling them to unsuspecting migrant families as burial plots.

So flagrant were these abuses that in 1978 a government inquiry was held, the result of which was that the trustees were forced to resign, and criminal charges were laid against some staff

members. In 1980 the running of the cemetery was handed over to a private company, the Springvale Necropolis. The Necropolis has since expended considerable sums on restoring decrepit infrastructure and making the old cemetery a little tidier and more pleasant for visitors. They have also been able to generate revenue by selling plots for cremated ashes, and by building three mausoleums, which are very popular with the Italian community in particular. Mausoleums contain above ground burials, which were illegal in Victoria until a few years ago. But migrant groups, particularly the Italian community lobbied to have them built.
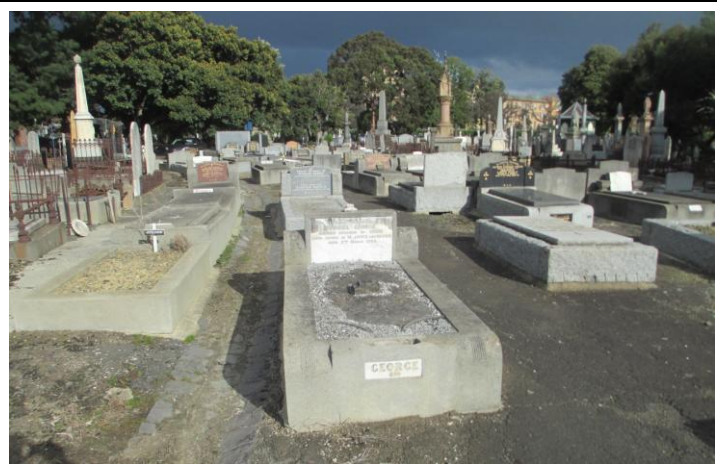
Graves placed in the middle of what was originally a road in the cemetery (Photo: Jeff Atkinson)

Did you know

No area set aside for Aboriginal burials
The Melbourne General Cemetery was designed with dedicated sections for each of the main Christian denominations, and even one for Chinese burials. But it had no allocated space for Aboriginal people (although there is one notable Aboriginal grave, that of Derrimut who reputedly saved the life of John Pascoe Fawkner). The lack of a burial area for indigenous people is particularly notable as the earlier cemetery on what is now Victoria Market did have a dedicated section for deceased Aboriginal people.

The earliest buildings in the cemetery
The oldest surviving buildings in the Melbourne General Cemetery are the Jewish mortuary chapel of 1854, and the Catholic mortuary chapel of 1871. The Jewish chapel is located near the so-called "Jews' Gate" a special entrance provided in the 1850s for Jewish funerals that leads directly to the chapel and the Jewish compartment within the cemetery. The Catholic chapel has crypts that are intended as the final resting place for deceased Catholic priests. The dedication ceremony of the chapel, which took place on Sunday 10 September 1871, was attended by a crowd of 10,000 to 15,000 people, a sign of the respect that Catholics had for their priests.

The oldest structure in the Melbourne General Cemetery, the Jewish mortuary chapel, built in 1854 just after the cemetery opened.
(Photo: Jeff Atkinson).

Restricted entry to the cemetery
In the 19th century the cemetery was renowned for its restrictions upon entrance. No person was permitted to enter on horseback, and the number of carriages was strictly monitored. In 1860 the gatekeeper objected to the use of two plumed horses at the head of a procession for a pauper burial. Paupers, who received subsidised burials, were expected to be modest in their accoutrements of mourning. There were also restrictions on pedestrians. One-way turnstiles permitted people to exit but not enter the grounds when gatekeepers were absent.

Poor treatment of paupers' graves

In the early days it was the practice of the cemetery to leave the grave of a pauper open for days or weeks, so that it was ready to receive the coffins of other paupers on top. In January 1900 *The Age* reported that a gentleman 'had seen a coffin floating in an open grave filled with water in the pauper section of the Melbourne General Cemetery'. It was, he said, 'sheer recklessness of the interests of public health and decency to leave graves open in that matter' (*The Age*, 19 January 1900, page 7).

Complaint over inscription on tombstone

In 1878 a Daylesford man complained about the inscription on the tombstone of his former wife. She had left him in 1863 and eloped with a man named John Willison who had 'lived with her since in adultery'. It was Willison who had written the description on the tombstone. Despite the moral scruples of the cemetery trustees, Willison's possession of burial rights overrode any objections from the woman's former husband.

Football crowd burns gate

In the 19th century the trustees objected to the use of the cemetery as a short-cut to and from the Carlton Football Ground in Princes Park. On a typical Saturday afternoon after a match, thousands of people would flow into the cemetery and across to the other side as a short-cut to other parts of Carlton. In 1887 cemetery workers assembled a wooden fence that cut off access from Princes Park and the football grounds - but football fans burnt it down. *The Argus* wrote that 'the attack and defence of a fortified place is one of the most interesting operations of war, and if the place happens to be a cemetery, victims can be disposed of in the field of battle'. (*The Argus*, 5 February 1887, page 13).

The grave of Marcus Clarke, author of 'For the Term of His Natural Life', who died at the age of only 35. The broken column signifies a life cut short.

Symbolism of mortuary monuments

The monuments that relatives place above the graves of their loved ones often have symbolic meaning. One example would be the Celtic crosses sometimes found on Irish Catholic graves (and sometimes on Scottish Presbyterian graves). Another would be the draped urns common on many graves, which is possibly a reference to the cremations of ancient Rome. The photo (right) illustrates another – the broken column that signifies a life cut short, a person who died before his or her time.

Source on the history of the cemetery

One of the best sources of information on the history of the Melbourne General Cemetery is the book *The Melbourne General Cemetery* by former Carlton resident Don Chambers. It is unfortunately out of print, but available in the Carlton and Fitzroy libraries.