

Royal Western Australian Historical Society's
Annual Pioneers Memorial Service
on Sunday 1st June 1969 at St Bartholomews Chapel, East Perth Cemeteries,

Citation by Christopher Adam, Scotch College

People go 'into "cemeteries for a variety of reasons. Some, of course have little choice. But of those who walk-in, I suppose the largest group come to pay their respects to the dead. They notice little about a cemetery except the particular grave in which a friend or relative is buried.

People who are interested in history are more likely to look at a large number of gravestones and to read the inscriptions carefully; and thoughtfully I am sure you have done exactly that in this unique cemetery.

I should like this afternoon to ask you to look at a few other features of this cemetery. Indeed I shall suggest to you that it is quite fascinating for anyone who is interested in history to leave aside the inscriptions and to concentrate their attention first on the location of the graves, the materials used to construct the tombs and headstones, and the style and decoration of the gravestones.

If we examine the graveyard we can discover some interesting facts from the position of the graves. The oldest tombs before 1860 are situated on the west side of the present church; All the old graves are here. Was this a prestigious position in which to be buried in the Swan River Colony? Or was it merely an unwooded area of ground?

Originally, when Town Lot R1 was given over to the cemetery, neatly surveyed paths criss-crossed the total site. With the uneven pattern of growth these paths became blocked by graves. This feature can be seen in many English churchyards, as well. Why did it occur? Did the authorities simply open up new areas anywhere, or was it because families and relatives wished to be buried together?

The number of graves in the various religious groups is one of the interesting sidelights on life in Perth in Victorian times. No one would be surprised to find twice as many Anglican graves as those of any other denomination; the colony was clearly very British.

But the names on many of the Roman Catholic headstones show that difficult times in Ireland forced hundreds of Irish people to emigrate to Western Australia. I am sure you will have noticed also the Jewish graves with their distinctive symbols and wording. A few Japanese headstones remain standing, a tribute to Asians who died far from their homeland, and were buried in alien soil.

I can find only two aborigine graves in this cemetery; I suppose it is understandable that most of the native people preferred to be buried in their own way and in their own burial grounds.

It is somehow rather sad, that the different religious and racial groups thought it necessary to keep their graves in separate sections of the cemetery; that pioneers who stood shoulder to shoulder in life facing such tremendous difficulties should find it necessary to be separated in death. One of Man's oldest building materials is stone. Our early settlers constructed an enormous number of buildings from it, and also made graveyard memorials from it, The early settlers of the 1830s in Perth were able to find only sandstone and some slate for their gravestones, These rocks lay along the coastal plain,, All the older gravestones, then, are made from either the powdery, easily destroyed sandstone, or the slate which tends to split with age.

Later, after 1860 when the colonials were pushing into the heart of our State, new stone forms - red granite, quartzite, feldspar - were used for headstones. These were harder? Longer-lasting.

So we can see, merely from the type of stone of a grave, how old the grave is, and, by reference to geological maps, how far the colony had expanded, It is also worthwhile noticing that transportation of heavy stone from the inland only occurred after a substantial road had been built, and so new stone forms generally reached the cemetery about four or five years after initial exploration.

Already we have made some accurate guesses about the size, type and religion of early Perth and the extent of exploration and good transport communication in Western Australia, merely by a glance at the layout of the tombs and their construction, without studying their inscriptions.

From the style of gravestone, we can trace the effect of Victorian England on her colonies. The early stories cure simple rectangular oblongs with hemispherical tops. The later graves, after 1860 are more elaborate: they possess fence railings and occasionally "foot-stones". Then, after 1875 the full tide of Victorian English grandeur washed over Perth, and the tombs are incredibly varied in design and ornamentation, with pillars and caskets, and intricately carved pall clothes and urns. The multiplication of such graves reflected the colony's growing sophistication: one British visitor in 1880 said:

"The condition of society in the whole of Western Australia was decidedly agreeable and bespoke a greater refinement than is usually to be found in new countries."

In keeping with the flourish of design in gravestones, ornaments on graves bloomed, after about 1875. Previously few carvings had enhanced the plain, stone, low artistic fervour reached a peak.

An enormous confusion of artistic expression flowered in the cemetery. Most were a standard form copied from England -clashed hands, the broken chain, the snapped flower, garlands, birds, and, of course, crosses in all the varied heraldic patterns.

Three graves are of particular interest because of their ornaments: they bear coats of arms. The study of these reveals a very great amount, both about Perth sophistication and the actual families concerned. The Commander-in-Chief of "Western Australia and all its dependencies", Lt. Col. Andrew Clarke, Mr Edward Hamersley and Mrs Eliza Barrett-Lennard have escutcheons engraved upon their tombs.

The study of heraldry is complex and difficult: it has a language of its own with lions couchant, beacute, flanches or, cross-crosslet fitchees and a hundred other terms. But its value is clear when applied to gravestones such as these. It can tell us a great deal about the proud and ancient families whose members found a last resting place in this historic cemetery.

I mention heraldry as one of the historical tools which could be applied more often to research in Western Australian history. It is perhaps surprising that one can find no truly Western Australian symbols on the tombstones in this cemetery. I found no black swans and no kangaroo paws. Perhaps those who carved these stones were afraid of provoking a storm of protest like that which greeted the announcement of the State coat-of-arms. They preferred to use less provocative designs!

May I draw attention to the fact that we have learned a great deal from this cemetery and have not read a single word on the gravestones.

What is the overall impression which anyone receives who makes an intensive study of this cemetery? It is surely one of deep admiration for the strength and courage of the early settlers in this State.

Their trials and tribulations are writ large here: droughts, floods, fires, epidemics took their toll of the tiny band who were so far from their homeland.

And yet they stayed. The temptation must have been strong to climb on board the next ship that arrived and leave this barren sandy soil forever. But they stayed; they rebuilt houses lost in floods or fires. They replanted crops destroyed by drought or disease. They brought up their families under incredibly difficult conditions. They taught their sons and daughters to share their strength and their faith. This cemetery, with its crumbling monuments to people now dead for a hundred years shows clearly the belief of our early settlers that they were under God's protection and that their faith in Him would ultimately enable them to build a great city.

Look around you, their faith was justified: they have built a great city. If we can share their strength, their courage, their faith, we shall develop a way of life, a quality of life, worthy of those who are buried here.