



Cemetery Conversations

The Newsletter of the Friends of St Kilda Cemetery Inc.

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Wanton Destruction

Vandals damaged over thirty headstones at St. Kilda General Cemetery in a senseless attack in March 2007. It is estimated that the destruction may have amounted to around \$500,000 though many of the monuments were perhaps irreparably damaged.

Detective Senior Constable Brett Daly from St. Kilda Police said that the vandals entered the locked cemetery between 4:00 pm on Tuesday 20 March and 7:00 am on Wednesday 21 March 2007 and "desecrated and destroyed" the headstones.

Some of the monuments, such as a bluestone column in the Wesleyan "B" Compartment of the Cemetery, weighed several hundred kilograms. The extent of the damage and the size of some of the monuments indicated that more than one person was involved.

Russ Allison, Chief Executive Officer of the Necropolis, described the attack in *The Age* as "wanton criminal damage without any regard for either history or the descendants of those people". He said that "some of the headstones are totally irreplaceable and some of the craftsmanship you just don't get in Australia any more".

The damage mostly occurred in the Church of England "D" and Roman Catholic "C" compartments of the Cemetery although some damage was also inflicted on graves in the Church of England "B", Church of England "C" and Wesleyan "B" compartments,

The Necropolis has been busy checking records to help track down living relatives of those buried in the damaged graves but with limited success.

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The attack is the second major instance of vandalism in 18 months. In November 2005, while the Alexandra Street wall was being reconstructed, vandals entered the Cemetery and damaged about 20 monuments mostly in the Roman Catholic "A" and "B" compartments. In one case, a marble angel atop a pedestal in the Roman Catholic "A" compartment was speared through the centre of the ledger slab over the grave.

Repairs to the graves will also be challenging. Apart from the difficulty in contacting descendants, the *Cemeteries and Crematoria Act 2005* prohibits Cemetery Trusts from using their own funds on the repair and restoration of monuments.

While some monuments suffered minor damage and could be reset or repaired, one marble headstone in the Church of England "B" compartment was broken into over a dozen small

fragments.

Police have appealed for anyone with information to contact the St. Kilda Criminal Investigation Unit on 9536 2626 or Crime Stoppers on 1800 333 000.

Anyone wishing to check the names of the graves should contact The Necropolis on 8858 8204.



Photo courtesy Geoff Austin
Toppled bluestone column - Wesleyan "B" compartment



Photo courtesy Geoff Austin
Toppled marble statue - Roman Catholic "A" compartment

Cemetery Conversations will be undergoing a redesign in the coming months to coincide with the launch of a new Friend's website and fresh new logo.

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Tilly Aston and Carisbrook Cemetery

Carisbrook is a small town of 700 people located 160 kilometres north-west of Melbourne near the regional centre of Maryborough. The town flourished in the 1850s following the discovery of gold but, like so many communities, its fortunes waned with the decline of mining.

Perhaps Carisbrook's most famous daughter is Matilda Ann ("Tilly") Aston who was born on 11 December 1873. Her parents, Edward Aston and his wife Ann (née Howell), had migrated from Gloucestershire to Kapunda, South Australia, in 1855 and two years later moved to Carisbrook. Edward was a boot maker in the town. Tilly was the youngest of the Aston's eight children.

Tilly had defective eyesight from birth but became totally blind just before her seventh birthday. However, during her formative years her parents had taken every opportunity to bring to her attention the beauty of nature which she was to draw upon in her poems and verse. Tilly went on to become a writer, poet and teacher and was instrumental in the establishment of the Victorian Braille Library. She lived the last part of her life in Windsor where she died on 1 November 1947. She was buried in the St. Kilda General Cemetery in a modest grave.

In 1881 shortly after she went blind, Tilly's father died. He was buried in the Carisbrook Cemetery. In her "Memoirs of Tilly Aston", produced in 1946, Tilly records the experience of her father's passing:

By the end of my eighth year my father had left us for the higher life. The shadows of that period are still heavy and sad, as I recall the pageant of death, the casket, and the flowers, the mourning and tears, the crepe bands and the long cortege that followed our dear one to the cemetery.

Carisbrook Cemetery was to become a point of pilgrimage for Tilly. She describes the cemetery in a chapter of her memoirs entitled "My Little Shrine":

It was Springtime, and a day of blue skies and gold-radiance, when I made one of my pilgrimages to the lowly shrine of my parents. The wide, white road, with its gleaming gravel from the mines near by, led me through shading gum-trees, to the gate of the cemetery; and not many paces more brought me to

the spot where they sleep side by side.

It was a lovely place in which to rest: verdant grasses, sometimes invading the graves, rustled and whispered about me as if afraid to break the hush over all, shimmering stems of shell grass shook their trembling seeds, and, decking the narrow avenues between the mounds were flowers, wild flowers - spider orchids, scarlet runner with blossoms like rubies, billy buttons tall of stalk and plump of bloom, daisy peas and wild geranium, the beautiful darlings of the bush lands around Carisbrook.

I remember how, as children, we loved this place. Here, where the cattle browsed not. Nature had full scope for her glories. In those days the lurking snake and scuttling lizard had few terrors for us, and we gathered our Springtime garlands in this garden of peace.

The Aston's first child also died at Carisbrook. Eliza was born at Kapunda, South Australia but the journey to Carisbrook proved too much for the infant. Out of concern for their child's wellbeing, Edward and Ann took it in turns to carry Eliza from Port Melbourne fearing that infant would not survive the jolting of the wagon. However, not long after arriving at Carisbrook little Eliza died. Sorrow was to revisit the Astons a few years later when four-year-old George drowned in Deep Creek.

Edward and Ann Aston are buried in a very simple grave in the Methodist (Uniting) compartment of Carisbrook Cemetery. For anyone in the area, the Cemetery is worth a visit. The gleaming gravel track described by Tilly Aston is now a bitumen road. In the middle of the Cemetery are a number of mature oaks and elms. While the Cemetery has the usual array of marble and granite monuments, it also contains a number of slate headstones. The use of slate for cemetery headstones was not particularly widespread in Victoria and is more typically found in the central goldfields region. Carisbrook has a small but very fine collection of slate memorials in excellent condition.

The original cemetery at Carisbrook was the Bald Hill Cemetery a short distance east of the town. This cemetery was predominantly in use between 1851 and 1857 when the Carisbrook Borough Council requested a new cemetery site on the Amherst Road (the present Carisbrook Cemetery).

The first person to be buried in the new Carisbrook Cemetery was Senior Constable Edward Barnett of the Victoria Police. He was shot at the nearby Havelock Diggings on the night of 31 January 1858 whilst, according to his monument, "...gallantly performing his duty in endeavouring to arrest an armed bushranger...". His grave takes the form of a simple tomb chest.

(Sources: Aston, M., "Memoirs of Tilly Aston - Australia's blind poet author and philanthropist" (1946); Green, O., "Aston, Matilda Ann (1873 - 1947)", ADB Vol 7 p 118-119) 🐾

Photo courtesy Geoff Austin



Carisbrook Cemetery with Aston grave in foreground



The case of Charlotte Conley

“It is charitable to suppose that it was out of sentimental consideration for the position of the gentlemen who were practically upon their trial at the late inquest of Mrs. Conley, that the jury exonerated everybody connected with the catastrophe from blame. Justice requires us to state emphatically that the verdict is directly contrary to evidence. If each juryman had re-considered the effect of his verdict in this case, he will see that he declares it to be possible that patients may be hacked about in right and wrong directions, and that the implements used in the operation may be sewn up in their insides, without any one’s [sic] being to blame in the matter.”

So thundered an outraged *The Herald* editorial of 9 November 1876 on a jury finding that no blame could be attached to the tragic death of Charlotte Conley (c1830-76) who died on 23 September after an operation at the Alfred Hospital the previous day.

The circumstances of Conley’s death was first reported by the newspaper in late October with the extraordinary claim that *“it was found that a sponge and a pair of bull-dog forceps was found in the body”*. Not surprisingly, Conley’s husband, Robert was not satisfied with the treatment she had received and wrote to the Coroner, Dr. Richard Youl requesting an inquest into the circumstances surrounding her death. This was an era when death by scalpel was not only a topical issue, but was often met with silence from an overly sensitive medical profession. As *The Herald* contended;

It is now too obvious that operations are undertaken for the sole purpose of performing them, of acquiring knowledge and skill, and the desire for medical distinction...

Indeed, that the case of Charlotte Conley was investigated at all was due to the obstructive manner of the Alfred Hospital. As reported by *The Herald*;

On inquiry, he [the Coroner] was informed at the [Alfred] hospital that the case had been an ordinary one, and the facts were suppressed from him, which he considered to be very reprehensible. Otherwise he would have held an inquest at once.

At the inquiry held on 6 and 8 November, evidence was heard from three nurses and seven surgeons, familiar names like Walter Balls-Headley (1841-1918) the renowned gynaecologist. But it was the conduct of the operating surgeon Dr. Robert Robertson (1843-1910) who was under the spotlight. Conley, who had been suffering for the last 16 months had previously been in hospital in January 1876. Five days before her death, an examination took place. Dr. William Rankin believed Conley was suffering from general dropsy and not an ovarian tumour and advised an ‘exploratory operation’ which Dr. Robertson

agreed to perform. Rankin’s opinion was not noted in the consultation book until after the operation. Dr. Robertson was assisted by Dr. Girdlestone, two men of forceful character. An incision to the belly was made causing an artery to bleed on the right side and a forceps was applied. An examination was made and soft cancer was seen to attach to the ovaries growing from the uterus. Girdlestone advised not




Grave of Charlotte Conley and her brother Henry Lee at St. Kilda Cemetery

to proceed, but Robertson after consultation with other surgeons present, decided to attempt removal of the cancerous matter. Things hardly got any better, when Dr. Robertson dissected the peritoneum mistaking it for the cyst wall. Those watching proceedings knew the mistake, but as Dr. Featherstone said to Dr. Martin who wanted to intervene, *“Stand by and keep your mouth shut”*. Some cancerous matter was removed, but a haemorrhage quickly set in and in haste to stitch up the wound, the sponge and forceps were left in the belly. As the jury was to find *“Charlotte Conley died of exhaustion, shock and haemorrhage caused by a surgical operation. The jury found that no blame attached to the operator Dr. Robertson...they would beg that the attention of the managers of the Hospital be called to the manner in which the books are kept and the consultations are held.”* (Source: *The Herald* 3 Nov 1876 p3, 6 Nov 1876 p3, 8 Nov 1876 p3 & 9 Nov 1876 p2) 🐾

Distinguished Visitors

In April 2007, the Friends were pleased to host a visit to St. Kilda Cemetery from distinguished members of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia. Archbishop Hilarion (the ruling Bishop of the Diocese of Australia and New Zealand) and Father Michael Protopopov (Dean of Victoria, Tasmania, South Australia, Western Australia and the Australian Capital Territory) were given a tour of the highlights of the Cemetery. 🐾



Father Michael Protopopov (left) and Archbishop Hilarion on their visit to the St. Kilda Cemetery

Photo courtesy Geoff Austin



Celebrating St. Kilda

Around one hundred people turned out at the Cemetery on Sunday 15 April 2007 to celebrate the 150th anniversary of the formation of local government in St. Kilda.



Port Phillip Mayor, Cr. Janet Bolitho in the St. Kilda mayoral robes

Miller and Melanie Eagle.

A short sketch featuring Meyer Eidelson (in the role of Cr. Benjamin Cowderoy), Clare Larman (as the wife of Cr. Brice Bunny) and Maureen Hartly (as the wife of Cr. Alexander Fraser) was performed. Four cemetery tours were



German beauty, Mrs Maria Bunny, wife of Cr. Bunny (aka Clare Larman)



Mrs Mary Fraser, wife of Cr. Fraser (aka Maureen Hartly) and Cr. Cowderoy (aka Meyer Eidelson)

conducted during the afternoon focussing upon the graves of former St. Kilda mayors buried in the Cemetery. The afternoon was a collaborative effort between the St. Kilda Historical Society, the City of Port Phillip and the Friends. 🐾

Friends of Cheltenham and Regional Cemeteries Inc.

In May this year, a new Friends' group was formed joining the success of the Brighton Cemeterians Inc. (2005), and the Friends of Boroondara (Kew) Cemetery Inc (2006).

The Friends of Cheltenham was formed to "raise awareness by promoting the conservation and appreciation of the Cheltenham and Regional Cemeteries as places of local, state and national importance". The group is focussed on the historic Cheltenham Pioneer Cemetery (1865) and Cheltenham Memorial Park (1933) whilst the Brighton Cemeterians Inc. continue the excellent work promoting the Brighton General Cemetery. In addition to seeking new members, the Group is keen to obtain stories on people interred within the burial grounds for publication. 🐾

Have an interest in the Cheltenham Cemeteries?

Friends of Cheltenham and Regional Cemeteries Inc.

A new not-for-profit community group has been formed to raise the profile of the four historic burial grounds in Melbourne's south-east under the administration of the Cheltenham and Regional Cemetery Trust.

The Group is seeking stories on people interred.

Membership is just \$5.00 per annum!

To learn more about the group, visit
www.focrc.org

email info@focrc.org or write to the Secretary at
PO Box 2958, Cheltenham Vic 3192.

NEW MEMBER

And welcome our newest Friend, Jenny Cowen of Caulfield.

New members are always welcome. 🐾

Office Bearers and Contacts

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