

HISTORIC CEMETERIES and RURAL GRAVES IN THE ACT

By Anne Claoué-Long

Last year, the National Trust of Australia (ACT) gained funding from the ACT Governments' Heritage Grants Program to investigate historic cemeteries and rural grave-sites in the ACT.

Readers can be forgiven for assuming limitations to such a project, since the nature of many of these sites in the landscape has kept hidden. This aspect of our region's history and heritage. While some sites, such as St John's churchyard, the Colverwell Graves and Cuppacumbalong Cemetery, are well known and have been entered in heritage lists, many smaller historic cemeteries and individual grave sites are neither marked in today's landscape or publicly acknowledged in any way. The project finally located and identified over fifty historic sites, providing insights into attitudes to death and approaches to the burial of the dead in the region's early settlement.



Photo Anne Claoué-Long

Before the passing of the Public Cemeteries Act of 1936, which regulated all burials by requiring use of official public cemeteries, the early settlers of the region could choose any site they liked to bury their dead. Early deaths and burials were recorded in the parish registers of Christ Church, Queanbeyan, and then St John the Baptist. However, not all deaths and burials were recorded, as this was made compulsory only with the granting of self government to the Colony of New South Wales in 1856. Even then, the precise locations of most reported outlying burials were not supplied. For these reasons, many of the locations of early burials are either imprecisely known, or not known at all, and may never be located.

In the earliest years of settlement in the 1820s, deaths resulting from accidents often resulted in the expedient of burials in any convenient nearby spot. Elaborate burial rituals and formal mourning were impractical in the harsh conditions at these very edges of European settlement, especially as the population of the district consisted largely of single male workers with no accompanying family to attend to such matters. Even towards the end of the nineteenth century, burial could be rough and ready. Tales tell of make-shift coffins comprising two slabs of wood

and the strips of wooden packing cases. The grave in one instance was an old mine shaft! In another the deceased was wrapped in two blankets and then covered by a slab of wood before being buried in a grave directly next to the hut he had lived in.

A common burial area was eventually established in 1838 in a paddock adjacent to the Elmsall Inn at the junction of the Molonglo and Queanbeyan Rivers (now "The Oaks" homestead) in the area we know as Oaks Estate, which borders Queanbeyan. The location at a river crossing point was evidently thought convenient for ease of access, and the proximity of inn to cemetery provided an amenity for funeral wakes. The softer soil of the river flats also allowed graves to be dug to an appropriate depth. Unfortunately, this same logic led to the loss of grave-sites in other riverside cemeteries in times of flood, notably in 1870 at Cuppacumbalong and 1925 at the Queanbeyan Riverside Cemetery

As a public cemetery, the Oaks Burial Ground did not segregate different denominations. This fact perhaps accounted for the establishment of the Honeysuckle or Pialligo private cemetery in the early 1840s on the banks of the Molonglo River (near the present airport site), which appears to have catered for the many Presbyterian settlers employed on the Duntroon estate.

Meanwhile, devout Anglicans wishing to be buried in a consecrated Anglican cemetery were taken to the All Saints Chapel, Sutton Forest, a considerable distance to the northeast of Goulburn. It was only in 1845 that the Church of St John the Baptist, with its associated churchyard, was built on the Limestone Plains to provide a local Anglican cemetery. As the population grew, with the development of Ginninderra village to the north of the Limestone Plains, another Anglican church, St Paul's, was established with a graveyard, in 1861. Today, nothing can be seen of either church or cemetery, with at least eighteen burials, located now in an area of urban open space surrounded by the suburb of Evatt.

At the time, there was in the area no known consecrated Catholic cemetery closer than Gundaroo or the Roman Catholic portion of the Queanbeyan Riverside Cemetery, opened in the early 1850s. The more numerous Methodists fared somewhat better, organising their own cemetery with small wooden chapel at Weetangera in 1874. Forty-four burials are recorded here, although most are unmarked. The church is long gone but several fine headstones remain.

Public or general cemeteries catering to different denominations were also established for the outlying settlements of Hall in 1887 and Tharwa in 1889, and are still used for those communities today.

While public cemeteries and churchyard burial grounds existed, the logistic difficulties of transport resulted in some families burying their dead in unofficial private sites closer to home. When one of the earliest settlers at Naas, William Herbert, died aged 80 in 1857, he was buried in the bush rather than the Queanbeyan cemetery because of difficulties in crossing the high waters of the flooded river. Likewise, when Elizabeth Shiels died from tuberculosis at her parents' home in the Namadgi area in 1922, the family found that they were cut off by floods from cemeteries both at Cooma or Adaminaby, so they buried her near her homestead and next to her infant brother, who had died in 1886.

Some isolated burials in the bush became the nuclei of larger family or community cemeteries with particular affiliations, on private property. This ensured that burials were easily accessible

for commemorative family visits. The Lanyon and Cuppacumbalong cemeteries are examples, as are the now lost local cemeteries in the Naas valley, at the Ginninderra Cemetery Paddock, and at Tuggeranong near Rose Cottage. However, most rural bush burials took place when departed loved ones were laid to rest close to the homestead, the plots remaining small and for immediate family only. When the two young girls from the Colverwell family drowned in 1837, they were buried close to the family homestead in the present Kowen Forest area and their graves marked by carved stones. It is thought that three other family members are also buried there in unmarked graves. When Henry Phillips, a smallholder at Uriarra, died in 1913 aged 89, he was buried next to his infant son in a simple fenced homestead plot at their property of Sherwood. His wife Eliza was also buried there when she died in 1922. In a grander gesture, the wealthy Gibbes family established a private family vault in the grounds of their Yarralumla homestead in the 1860s and 1870s, and when the family sold the property, had the bodies exhumed and reburied at St John's churchyard.

There are many references to settler homestead burials, especially of stillborn babies and of infants. Several burials are recorded along the Majura Valley, in what is now Kowen Forest and south of the ACT in the Tidbinbilla, Naas and Namadgi areas. Most of these remain unmarked.

The historic record also mentions traditional Aboriginal burials, such as that of Onyong at Tharwa and an Aboriginal burial ground in the vicinity of Ginninderra and Charnwood, which was still used after white settlement. In 1864, Jimmy the Rover, a local Aboriginal chief, was buried by white settlers in accordance to ancient Aboriginal rites in the absence of others of his tribe to undertake the burial. Later in time, the records tell of the burials of Aboriginal people just outside the boundaries of general cemeteries and then, towards the end of the period of study, within them.

The ACT National Trust's project of historic cemeteries and rural grave sites in the ACT highlights many themes in our history: the impact of white settlement on traditional Aboriginal life; the remote nature of the area in early settlement; the everyday dangers of accidents resulting from horse riding, carting with heavy drays on rough dirt tracks; the difficulties of transportation; and the dangers of drowning in the changeable waters of the rivers where proper bridge crossings were established late in the history of settlement. A feature of our history was inadequate health care, and the prevalence of diseases now preventable with vaccinations and modern antibiotics. Lack of ante- and post-natal care also accounted for high rates of maternal and infant deaths. .

Most telling is the loss of memories of sites of clear importance and value to the early settlers of the area; and in many respects the study was made fifty years too late. Much of the knowledge of the early cemeteries and rural grave-sites in the area has been lost in recent decades as older members of our community have themselves passed away.

Resulting lack of knowledge and appreciation of these historic heritage sites has resulted in at least three old cemeteries being compromised by modern road developments in Evatt, Ginninderra and Tuggeranong, and one being submerged under the waters of Lake Burley Griffin. The National Trust hopes that increasing publicity will lead to greater recognition of the ACT's historic cemeteries and rural graves sites by both the authorities and the wider public, with official acknowledgement, commemoration, and in some cases full heritage listing and protection to follow.

