

Heritage Overlay No.: 069
Citation No.: 181
Place: Melton Cemetery

Other Names of Place: N/A
Location: Corner of Centenary Avenue and O’Neills Road, Melton
Critical Dates: 1861-62 (establishment)
Existing Heritage Listings: None
Recommended Level of Significance: LOCAL



Statement of Significance:

The Melton Cemetery on the corner of O’Neills Road and Centenary Avenue is significant; as the only official cemetery to have existed in the Shire of Melton; for its historical and social significance to the district; for the architecture of its headstones and graves; for its relatively meagre beautification, which is to some extent expressive of the distinctive dry climate and rocky ground of the district, and as the place of interment of locally and nationally notable persons.

The Melton Cemetery is architecturally significant at a LOCAL level (AHC D2). The architecture of many of its headstones, and the arrangement of many of its graves, portray changes in style and taste since the 1860s; a number display a skilful use of carved marble. The

cemetery is a good example of funerary customs and tastes dating from the mid-nineteenth century in a predominantly rural district.

The Melton Cemetery is historically significant at a LOCAL level (AHC B2, H1). It is thought to contain the remains of numerous Aboriginals, and the remains of many of the district's early European settlers. Its headstones record much of the history of the area. Famous horticulturalist Baron von Mueller originally chose trees to beautify the cemetery. While it is unlikely that any specimens of his exotic species survive (two associated with him are thought to have been removed, and the few exotic species that survive in the cemetery are poor specimens), the she-oaks that predominate today were also a major species recommended by von Mueller. Although far from traditional in terms of its plantings, the cemetery is a prominent example of the thwarted attempts by Europeans to establish traditional plantings in the dry and bushfire-prone climate, and on the rocky ground that characterises the Melton district.

The Melton Cemetery is socially significant at a LOCAL level (AHC, G1). It is valued by many of Melton's residents whose ancestors, family or friends are buried there.

Description:

The cemetery is a 2.4 hectare plot of rectangular land on the south-east corner of O'Neills Road and Centenary Avenue Melton. It appears to contain no historical structures or fencing. Its landscaping is dominated by She-Oaks (*Casuarinas stricta*), with only a few mature exotics, mainly Monterey Pines (*Pinus radiata*). Its grave sites and headstones date from the 1860s to the present, portraying the variety of headstone design, burial customs, tastes and wealth over that period.

There are many beautiful nineteenth century monuments, generally the earliest being simple, and becoming more elaborate in the late nineteenth century.

The renovation program undertaken by the Shire since 1997, including columbaria and beam plinths in lawn gravesites, adds interest to the old section of the cemetery.

The cemetery may have archaeological significance, providing potential to discover more about the early burials and lifestyles, including of the early Aboriginal inhabitants who are thought to be interred there.

History: ¹

Establishment and History

There was no provision for a public cemetery in the 1852 survey. The burial of the deceased took place on private land or if sufficiently affluent, taken to Melbourne. Both Charles Franks, killed in 1835 and George Hyde, who died in 1843, were buried in the Old Melbourne Cemetery. Public agitation for a local cemetery gathered momentum during the late 1850's and continued until a public application was presented to the Government 27 August 1860.

¹ This history is primarily by Judith Bilszta, and unless otherwise cited all the information is from her research 1978-1981 using Cemetery Books which can no longer be located. (The burial register used by the Shire to 1995 is a copy of the updated register prepared from this research.)

A meeting of the public was held in Raglan Hotel, 27 April 1861, Simon Staughton in the Chair. Its purpose was to elect Cemetery Trustees and petition Government to establish a Registry office for births, deaths and marriages. The trustees elected were:- Frederick Newnham (Baptist); Alexander Blackwood (Presbyterian); John Moylan (Roman Catholic); Simon Staughton (Church of England); Samuel Kitson (Independent); and Arthur Westlake (Wesleyan). John Corr, local school teacher was elected Secretary to the Trust.²

The land obtained for the cemetery was 6 acres of former cattle holding paddock 1.5 miles from the township. On description had it as: ‘ground heavily wooded and unfit for cemetery’.

The early business of the Trustees was in obtaining a grant from the government for a post and rail fence (£24.12.7). Unfortunately this fencing left some grave sites outside the cemetery. A contract for clearing excess timber (‘grubbing trees, saplings and stumps’) was awarded to Irish & Co. (£18.4.0).

On 17th January 1862 (p.89) the Government Gazette published the Melton Public Cemetery Rules and Regulations. To raise funds gravesites were sold for £1 each on 20th June 1862. The second issue, at reduced prices (at 15, and 5, shillings each) was in September 1862. About 90 sites were sold, but when the plans were drawn up a number of disgruntled purchasers were permitted to exchange plots.

Unfortunately the plans for the cemetery changed a number of times during the nineteenth century, causing confusion and anguish. The first of three plans for the cemetery layout, prepared in 1861, was found in the Shire Office in 1978. In this first plan some graves on the east boundary ran east-west. The second plan, prepared 1869, has not been located. The third plan was prepared in 1874 and remained in use until the 1990’s. Adoption of this last plan created more problems for the Trustees when early grave purchasers, who held title deeds, found their gravesites were under pathways, under trees or were beyond the section boundaries. These sites were expunged from the plan. In 1895 A. Shebler, Acting Shire Secretary, had the following notice printed in the *Express*:

‘All persons holding titles for land in the Melton cemetery are requested to send titles to me for correction in accordance with the New Register, for which no charge will be made.’³

Ongoing problems with tree roots and shallow stone forced further minor alterations.

In later years saplings presented an ongoing problem: a scrub exterminator was hired in 1890; and in 1891 and again in 1895 instructions were released regarding scrub removal. In the 1870’s the sheep put in to keep the grass down were found to damage graves.

Cemetery documentation was never complete. The first Grave Register was abandoned when the third site plan was introduced and denominational sections altered. The Burial Register holding information relating to graves contained many interesting notations, such as ‘stony ground’, ‘second interment’, ‘ground previously purchased’, ‘coffin in here’ etc. The Order and Instruction Book provided details of deceased - district history, family history, public health history, etc - and burial instructions.

² The estimated population of district at the time was:- ‘English church 158, Scotch church 197, Roman Catholic church 252, Wesleyan 27, Baptist 15, Independents 10. Total 659. Not known 388. Total in district 947.’

³ *The Bacchus Marsh Express*, 6/5/1893

A hiatus occurred in the Trust documentation between 1873 and 1882 so the location of 17 interments must be an educated guess. The Cash Account Book is the only way of identifying burials that occurred during this period.

In addition to all income and expenditure, the books contain records of tree planting, path construction, repairs following bushfires, shoring required for graves dug in area of underground stream (running north-east to south-east across the Presbyterian section), stonemason's fees, fencing, a 400 gallon tank for water, etc. Buildings erected were a Sexton's shed 1922, removed; and public toilets, first proposed 1912, opened 1921, removed 1983.

In 1911, the Trust resolved to prosecute all who stole trees from the cemetery. Receipts show that 200 trees were personally selected by Baron von Mueller for Cemetery beautification works. The selection included 50 She-oaks. Of all just three survived to 1980 – a cypress and two pines. If the Cashbooks are correct 606 trees were planted within the grounds in the 120 years prior to running water being installed. However bushfire, rabbits and drought destroyed all but a handful. A line of sugar gums along the O'Neill's Road boundary, planted 1930's, were removed in late 1992 when major new beautification works commenced.

Rabbit poison figured prominently in the Cemetery Trust records. Arsenic was purchased by the hundredweight prior to 1940.

Six iron garden seats were purchased from North Melbourne in 1873 costing £5 in total. The Melton Historical Society secured the last two remaining seats for the Willows Park in 1980.

Funerals and funeral rites engaged the community. As the horse gave way to the motor car, funerals became even better attended. The purchase of cars by Messrs Hurley and Jongebloed (1917) are noted in funeral reports. Mr Preuss, undertaker from Bacchus Marsh, used a motorized hearse from 1915, quickly followed by Hjorth and Shebler, local undertakers.

The physical condition of the cemetery gave rise for serious concern from a very early date. The *Express* of 9 January 1875 noted the dreadful state of the cemetery and the want of formed paths for mourners. Public concerns about dead trees, overburden, rabbits, want of pathways, the condition of the fence, long grass, broken glass and lack of water continued to be aired in the *Express* until the mid 1990's.

There was a reprieve in the criticism though, when in 1905 an article in the *Melton Express* by Christopher Crisp included an article on the Cemetery.⁴ His account was of a gentle ramble through the cemetery, and although his praise was subdued, his criticisms were also mellow. He described a country cemetery 'in fair order ... much better than many others.' It was 'substantially fenced with posts and four rails with good entrance with wicker gates. So far the past and present generations have done their duty admirably...'. Weeds on the gravel paths were something that he gave his own formula to counteract. He noted that 'nothing seems to have been done in the way of planting trees and shrubs. That will come, when funds permit, of placing a resident sexton in or near the place'. He paid tribute to Trustess Messrs. Harkness, Atley, Spring, and Shebler, then gave his impressions of the monuments of note or curiosity. He made a good fist of recording the names and making judicious comments on all of the Melton identities and prominent families that he passed, including Westlake, Porter, Kitson, Backhouse, Minns, Parkinson, Missen, Grant, Barr, Scott, McPherson, Robertson,

⁴ Presumably (although it may have been his son, also Christopher) this was Christopher Crisp, editor of the Bacchus Marsh Express, and an influential political commentator on a wider level, being credited with influencing Alfred Deakin and others, strove to educate public opinion on issues from protection, industrial relations, Federation, as well as local issues (Rundle, JH, in Pike, D (ed), *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Vol.3, p.495)

Luke, Blackwood, Green, Carberry, Carew, McDonald, Ryan, Hoare, Harkness, Moylan, Mawson, Cameron, Burke, Alkemaide, Commerford, Watts, Ferris, Myers, 'etc'.⁵

The Cemetery Trust was responsible for the upkeep of the Simpson grave through a small fund, other graves were maintained by families. Stones damaged by wind or movement of ground were, in the main left until all hope was gone and fell in pieces around the area. Realising the responsibility for the upkeep was beyond a few, George Minns, Shire Secretary, had the Trust transferred to Council control (c.1922). The orderly management of gravesites, the erection of stones and the conduct of persons visiting the cemetery date from that time.

Burials and Memorials

The earliest authorized burial date is the 5th November 1861. Of the first 10 burials, seven were children under 12 months of age. One was the burial of Toybee, an Aboriginal boy who died of dropsy.

Early wooden memorials have been destroyed by bushfires and time. Only that of Ann Scott (1873), constructed by her husband Robert, was saved, but not returned to the grave. (It is held by the Melton and District Historical Society.) A number of wooden markers from the 1860's diphtheria epidemic disappeared in the 1920's when the state of the cemetery gave rise to correspondence in the *Express*.

Stone monuments generally date from the 1860's and reflect the status, social and religious attitudes of the community. The earliest stone marker (April 1857) belongs to the Burke family of Toolern Vale; it includes a record of members of the family not buried in the grave. There is austere upright marble, with some base relief ornamentation, over the grave, and railings. There are three graves, Patrick's being at depth of 4'6" due to rocks. Others in the family (Jeremiah and wife) were buried Melbourne.

The Moylan family purchased three graves in 1864 and 1871. The Michael Moylan family (including two stillborn) grave is of white marble, with a (broken) upright Celtic cross, by Jageurs of Royal Park.

The Atley grave is another of Jageurs' design, and features elaborate, decorative carving. This stone is barely in position, being in that area of the cemetery most badly affected by clay. Foundations and memorials in this section are so badly cracked some have been removed in the interests of public safety.

Other early pioneer families represented include the Grants, solid unadorned bluestone reflecting the Scots Presbyterian outlook, the Porters with identical flat white Italian marble stones, now badly damaged by an accident with a Council vehicle. Adherents to the Independent faith, the Porters chose to be interred away from their neighbours. Nearby, to the south, in a copse of acacia trees at the south east corner of cemetery, rest the bones of Aboriginal people found on *Greenhills* station. Matthew Ingle Browne had the remains removed to the Melton Cemetery, and paid for the Presbyterian minister to read a prayer. The internment book (lost) indicated 'bones of aborigines', but it is not known how many bodies these represented. Close by are the bones of workers from the old Rockbank quarry, killed when the shot exploded unexpectedly. Buried beside the Kororoit, their remains were exposed several times after floods.⁶ Eventually, Sir WJ Clarke had them brought to the Cemetery.

⁵ *Melton Express*, 2/9/1905

⁶ *Bacchus Marsh Express*, 12/2/1881

Mary Ryan of the Raglan Hotel is responsible for the most elaborate of the 1870's memorials. Her tribute to her 35-year-old husband, Michael Ryan, cost £200 and was brought from Melbourne by horse and cart.⁷

Ralph Parkinson's memorial, in the Anglican section, does not mention his community life. He gave every widow an annual bag of flour and a load of wood. Grazier, speculator, Councillor and active churchman, he was respected for his progressive agricultural pursuits. His elaborate relief cross stone with a heavy cast fence was designed by Huxley-Parker, monumental masons and marble polishers of Swanston street who were responsible for the William Mawson tombstone. He and his brother John had their mother's elegant upright marble stone with a *fleur de lis* fence erected by Chalmers and Clutten, of Exhibition and Lonsdale Street, in 1881.

The headstone of James Kerr and his wife also records the death, in an epidemic, of children John, James, Andrew, Mary, Margaret and Agnes. Unfortunately, the stone, an open book on a lectern was erected on an adjacent grave in error, where it remains to this day. Not all the children listed are actually buried in the grave.

Another grave involving multiple children is that of John Commerford who worked as head stockman on Clarke's *Rockbank* station. His wife and two daughters died from eating poisonous fungi thinking it was mushrooms. Their tombstone, by W. Phillips of Swanston Street, is a marble upright with base relief shoulders, shamrocks and other embellishment. The lead lettering has been removed; the cast iron fence on bluestone foundation, now in the final stages of decay.

Dr Charles Backhouse, an Irish surgeon, spent the latter part of his life in and around Minns' hotel. His final years were such that the Police intervened and had relatives in Ireland, wealthy landed gentry, forward money for his assistance. That arrived in time to give the deceased an elaborate funeral and a more elaborate tombstone that provides full family details. Unfortunately, the lead lettering has been carefully picked off over the years leaving just the tiny holes to which it was attached.

Hannah (Granny) Watts, the local midwife after whom Melton's main park is named, is perhaps the most honored historical figure in the Shire.⁸ Hannah Jane Lynch, born in Armagh, Ireland in 1832, arrived with her husband George Burns at Geelong in 1854 before renting the farm about 5 kilometres out of Melton. George died early in a horse fall.⁹ Hannah's burial is in the plot she established for 'her beloved husband'.

On 21st November 1863 Hannah married William Watts, and they built a stone and mud house on selected land at Toolern.¹⁰ After many years of voluntary service to the local population as midwife and 'bush nurse', Watts established herself as a professional midwife later in her life. Her 'Lynch Cottage' (demolished) in 1911 was officially recognised as Melton's first hospital. Until the development of Base Hospitals in regional towns (mostly after the Second World War), most small country towns had a private hospital established by a midwife. Grannie Watt's 'book', a meticulous record of her practice, in 1917 listed 290 births that she had attended since 1886, as well as surgical operations, and assistance to visiting doctors with preparations for burial. The last entry, of the birth of Thomas Watts

⁷ *Bacchus Marsh Express*, 28/2/1874

⁸ Starr, J, *Melton: Plains of Promise* (Melton Shire Council, c.1985), p.88

⁹ Historical Notes on 'Granny Watts', by Melton District Historical Society (Edna Barrie), and Mary Tolhurst.

¹⁰ *ibid*; Starr, *loc cit*

Minns, was two months before she died on 21st October 1921. The book became famous as an impeccable genealogical reference in a time when births were not always well registered.¹¹

Many of the families that descend partly from Watts also feature prominently in Melton history, including: the Hogg, Burns, O'Donnell, Kennedy, Jongebloed, Tarleton and Tolhurst families.¹²

The *Gisborne Gazette* reported on Hannah Watt's funeral in 1921:

‘On Friday 21st October passed away one of Melton's most interesting and honored residents in the person of Mrs Hannah Watts, familiarly and affectionately called Grannie Watts.

The deceased lady who had reached the patriarchal age of 90 years has been identified with the district for 63 years during which time she nursed several generations of Melton citizens, while in the absence of medical aid residents looked to Grannie as their doctor, philosopher and friend. Hundreds in fact we might say thousands of people held the deceased in veneration. In the hour of trouble, sickness or death the striking personality of Grannie was always to be found bringing comfort and consolation to the afflicted. A woman of great energy and determination combined with superior intelligence, Grannie conquered difficulties that would have made many falter...’¹³

The *Gazette* noted the immense (for Melton) cortege that accompanied her remains to the Melton Cemetery. The 51 buggies plus horse riders were ‘a testimony of the respect in which the deceased was held’, and her death had left a ‘void which it will be hard to fill.’

Vincent Buckley, distinguished Australian poet (1927-1988) is a noted burial from more recent years. Born in Romsey, educated at Melbourne and Cambridge Universities, Buckley was deeply passionate about Australian culture, in particular its roots and affinities with Ireland. In his autobiography he remembers his Condon great grandparents who settled at Toolern Vale. The ruins of their property are still standing, and their paddock is still known as ‘Condons’.¹⁴ After serving in the RAAF he became deeply involved in post-war intellectual debates. He published seven volumes of poetry, edited *The Faber Book of Modern Australian Verse*, won many poetry prizes, was poetry editor of magazines including the *Bulletin*, and a well-known essayist, reviewer and editor. He was Professor of English at Melbourne University, where in 1967 he was awarded a personal Chair. He was awarded the Dublin University Prize in 1977, and the Christopher Brennan Award from the Fellowship of Australian Writers in 1982. In 1992 the Australian Centre at the University of Melbourne instituted the Vincent Buckley Poetry Prize. On his grave are the words: ‘He was the piper walking in the front of battle.’

Another burial is international sportsman, shooter Donald Mackintosh. In response to public concern the Melton Historical Society arranged the restoration of the Donald Mackintosh stone during the year of the Sydney Olympic Games at a cost of over \$1000.

¹¹ *ibid*, p.98

¹² *ibid*, pp. 89, 91-92, 93, 96, 165, 199

¹³ *The Gisborne Gazette*, 28th October 1921. See also the *Melton Express*, 29th October 1921.

¹⁴ Buckley, Vincent, *Cutting Green Hay: friendships, movements and cultural conflicts in Australia's great decades* (Penguin Books, Melbourne, 1983), pp.3, 4, 8, 13. ‘Condon's Outbuilding (former dairy)’ on the Diggers Rest-Coimadai Road has been identified as a site in this Heritage Study (Site No.19).

Thematic Context / Comparative Analysis:

Melton Historical Themes: ‘Community’; ‘The Aboriginal People’.

Known Comparable Examples:

There are no other official cemeteries in the Shire. The lack of an official cemetery in the area until 1861, combined with meager resources of many in the district, may have contributed to the remarkable number of early grave sites that are scattered around the Shire, most unmarked, but locations roughly known within the local community.

Condition:

Good. Although numerous individual graves are in poor condition.

Integrity:

Substantially Intact. Although individual graves have been damaged/disturbed.

Recommendations:

Recommended for inclusion in the Melton Planning Scheme Heritage Overlay.

Recommended Heritage Overlay Schedule Controls:

External Paint Controls:	<i>No</i>
Internal Alteration Controls:	<i>No</i>
Tree Controls:	<i>Yes – all old trees, including she-oaks.</i>
Outbuildings and/or Fences:	<i>No</i>

Other Recommendations:

- Consideration be given to preparing a Conservation Management Plan, which would include a survey and restoration program, including sources of funding.
- It is recommended that an Incorporated Plan be prepared and implemented into the Planning Scheme for the Melton Cemetery that would outline areas and elements of significance and identify planning permit exemptions.



*Old iron fences and headstones, in setting of she-oaks.
(This may be the Westlake tombstone described by Crisp.)*



A section of more elaborate headstones.