

Unearthed: how the Warrnambool cemetery works

Description



Warrnambool Cemetery Trust secretary, Clive Rayner: "The cemetery is a very interesting place".

Words and photos by Carol Altmann

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #A5CECD;"] T [/dropcap]here is both a solemnity and a fascination about cemeteries, especially one as old and beautiful as the Warrnambool cemetery which houses almost as many dead as are living in the city: around 28,000 people since 1854.

Yet for all of the times I have walked through this calm, historic space, I have never really understood how it operates, in the sense of:

- who owns it;
- who decides what headstones are permissible;
- what happens when an old headstone falls down (as is happening now);
- is there a central database of who is buried there and;
- does anybody live in the heritage-listed house that has the quietest neighbours in Warrnambool?

To find out the answers to all these questions and more, *Bluestone* spent several hours with the very informative and forthcoming **Clive Rayner**, secretary of the Warrnambool Cemetery Trust.



Lean on me: ageing tombstones are either repaired by family willing to spend the funds on restoration or laid down to avoid causing injury.

Image: Bluestone Magazine.

The first thing Clive explains is that the cemetery land is owned by the State Government and the seven-member trust is answerable to the Department of Health, which oversees the laws that govern cemeteries in Victoria: the trust ensures these laws are followed.

"We never have any trouble filling vacancies on the trust (which is re-appointed every five years). The cemetery is a very interesting place," he says.

As can be expected, there are a lot of rules and regulations that govern public cemeteries, from coffin sizes and plot depths to what can and can't be done in the grounds.

It is, for example, illegal to play sport, fish, bathe, hunt or camp in a public cemetery, just in case you were inclined to play a spot of lawn bowls or set up the Coleman tent for an overnight stay.

More seriously, however, the trust is responsible for ensuring that cemeteries run smoothly, that they

are well kept (most of the old Warrnambool cemetery is hand mown) and that it strikes a balance between the sensitivities of the bereaved, public safety and long-term preservation of the grounds.

This brings us to monuments.



A modern, retro-fitted memorial sits alongside a simple, less conventional monument in the old part of the Warrnambool cemetery. Image: Bluestone Magazine.

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #A5CECD;"] A [/dropcap]s Clive explains, monuments are designed and installed by stonemasons in consultation with the bereaved, but there is no hard and fast rule that all memorials have to be traditional.

“The families or friends work with a stonemason who can advise them on what they can and can’t do, but the trust does have discretion too,” Clive says.

Special requests can be put in writing to the trust which will then make a decision on whether the monument is legal or appropriate, including whether it will last long-term, the size and how it will be installed. There are a few examples of what might be called less traditional monuments around the grounds, such as a rustic wooden cross in the lawn section.

The trust also monitors temporary items placed on a gravesite.

“Some graves can become virtual shrines and so we have to make sure we keep that under control, while also, of course, remaining sensitive,” Clive explains.



Another example of a less conventional memorial that sits within the old section of the Warrnambool cemetery. Image: Bluestone Magazine.

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #A5CECD;"] E [/dropcap]recting a monument is one thing, but maintaining it is quite another, as is beginning to show on some of the graves in the old part of the cemetery.

Wrought-iron surrounds are rusting away, slabs have broken up, and about 10 elaborate headstones are threatening to topple over while others have already succumbed.

“Sometimes with the very old graves we are unable to find a family member or, if we do, they are not interested in spending the money needed for the repairs. In that case, if a headstone is going to fall down, we will remove it and lie it down on the grass,” Clive explains.

At the other end of the spectrum, descendants of some long lost souls have sought permission to mark previously unmarked graves in the old cemetery, or replaced simple wooden markers with a more permanent memorial.



The heritage-listed stone house built in 1878 for the sexton (cemetery manager) has not been used as a dwelling for some years. Image: Bluestone Magazine.

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #A5CECD;"] W [/dropcap]hich is a lovely segue into genealogy and whether there is a central database of cemetery records.

“We are working toward that,” Clive says, “it has been 10 years in the making already and we are probably still some months away from being finished”.

At the moment, anyone with a surname between A-S can be located by the cemetery trust using its

computers, but S-Z is still in hard-copy ledgers: 28,000 people is a lot of names to transfer.

The trust office is one of the rooms still used in the heritage-listed house on the cemetery grounds. Built around 1878, the house was designed for the sexton – the manager of the cemetery – but is no longer used as a dwelling.

"It has no windows on the north side, so you can imagine how cold and dark it can be in here in winter," Clive says.

As we talk, a woman from Adelaide pokes her head into the office and asks Clive if he can check the record about her relative, one of Warrnambool's early settlers. He scratches down the details on a Sticky Note and promises to email her.

"We get a lot of that and I try to help where I can, especially if people have come from a long way," he says.

For a place that honours the dead, the cemetery is surprisingly full of intriguing life.

[box]A new Warrnambool cemetery east of the city will be announced shortly and will be the first new location in more than 150 years. It is expected to start operating within five to eight years.[/box]

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Author

carol