Cemeteries:
Their Significance and Conservation

Celestina Sagazio

Humankind has developed many different ways to remember and to be remembered, ranging from the simple and modest to the grand, the unusual and the bizarre. Cemeteries provide superb examples of individual monuments, and the total cemetery environment can in itself be a monument worth preserving. It is a mistake to view only the graves and memorials as historic elements worthy of preservation: buildings, structures, fences and gates, gutters and paths, plantings, layout and landscape qualities are also important elements of cemeteries.

The National Trust has long had an interest in cemeteries, classifying both public and private burial grounds and individual monuments. The National Trust in Victoria produced a publication, Cemeteries: Our Heritage (1992), and formed a Cemeteries Advisory Committee, comprising many of the leading cemetery experts in Victoria, with the purpose of raising community awareness of the heritage values of cemeteries. The National Trusts in the various other States have done, or are doing, similar work. The Australian Council of National Trusts is presently drafting a set of national cemeteries conservation guidelines, and we have pushed the importance of following the principles of the Burra Charter.

The Burra Charter still remains a mystery to many people outside the heritage field, but the excellent publication The Illustrated Burra Charter (1992; 1994) and various other conservation publications and reports have improved an understanding of, and access to, the principles and guidelines. It is gratifying to see that the Burra Charter was mentioned in the Australian Standard publication, Headstones and Cemetery Monuments, which is a booklet produced to inform people in the cemetery industry about appropriate construction and maintenance practices. The publication contains the statement:

Works on monuments identified as being of cultural significance should be in accordance with the Burra Charter and its guidelines. Such monuments may require approaches and conservation procedures different from those in this Standard.

Serious problems are associated with cemeteries. Many cemeteries are in a poor condition or being undermined by unsympathetic development and over burials. In recent years there has been a critical shortage of burial space in Melbourne and other cities and this factor will continue to place added pressure on existing cemeteries. The uncertainty continues with the talk of privatising our burial grounds. In our cemeteries work the National Trust hopes to draw attention to the management and maintenance problems faced by cemetery trusts and to show that the community and the government should be doing more in solving these problems. In Victoria, cemeteries have been very poorly funded by the government, and many cemetery trusts do not have sufficient funding to carry out works. In 1994-95 the Victorian government allocated a very meagre sum of $27,000 for the maintenance of public cemeteries, which number over 500 in the State. Furthermore, Victorian cemetery trusts do not have the power under the existing Cemeteries Act to carry out works on monuments. Rather it is the owners of the rights of burial who are required to maintain monuments. Cemetery trusts can direct owners to repair a monument which is 'in a state likely to cause danger to life or limb or is not in thorough repair and proper condition'.

It is not only a matter of needing more money to improve cemeteries. There needs to be a change in attitude or a broadening of views by some authorities. Not enough is generally known about the history and development of our burial grounds. Furthermore, it seems that many cemetery trust officials are unaware of, or do not fully appreciate, the importance of the various historic elements of cemeteries. Some heritage practitioners must also share some of the blame for the lack of appreciation of our burial grounds for they have largely neglected cemeteries in heritage debates and local conservation studies. Cemeteries have been, in many ways, the poor relations in heritage conservation.

There is no doubt, however, that as Australians develop their interest in the history of their country and of their families, and visit historic sites, cemeteries are becoming increasingly popular and appreciated more than ever before for their historical, social, architectural, botanical and aesthetic values. Cemeteries offer an invaluable insight into the past, and are a unique record of our heritage.

Sometimes they can reveal more about our past than can other places or documentary sources. Whereas many buildings are demolished or altered over the years, numerous cemeteries are essentially time capsules, often providing the least altered physical evidence of our changing cultural attitudes. Other cemeteries are valuable for conveying a sense of process and change.
not only help explain our past, they also provide a sense of continuity and identity. So our burial grounds reflect vital aspects of our social, religious, folk, architectural, literary and botanical history which are not found in such a combination in any other place.

Each cemetery can tell us much about our society, reflecting one or more historical themes. These include the status and influence of various social classes and religious groups, the importation of cultural attitudes, architectural and artistic styles, the high rates of infant mortality, and the importance of local industries or trades. Cemeteries are therefore rich in symbolism and meaning. Broken columns, for example, represent a life cut short, and draped urns date back to the Roman cremation urns as symbols of remembrance, with shroud cloths symbolising the shroud of Christ. Other monuments commemorate the deceased’s occupation or interests as well as the craftsman’s skills. Walter Lindrum, the world champion billiard player who was so adept at the game that the authorities had to change the rules, is appropriately commemorated with a marble billiard table, complete with cue and billiard balls (Fig. 1). The monument was executed by the prolific Italian stonemasons, A. Giannarelli and Sons.

Some of the types of cemeteries are churchyard, goldfields, ethnic, Aboriginal mission, provincial, rural, private and lone graves. Cemeteries reveal people’s tragedies, hardships as well as successes, excesses and humour. How many people would not be moved by the tragic deaths at Pennyweight Flat (Castlemaine, Victoria) of some 200 children and babes in arms in the 1850s (Fig. 2). They perished when epidemics of illnesses such as influenza and dysentery swept through the Forest Creek diggings. And how many would not be affected by the tragic death of a schoolboy at Maldon when a formerly unstable headstone fell upon him? We have used this case to draw people’s attention to the dangers of unstable and deteriorating headstones. A fulsome inscription is on the headstone of Thomas Fulton, engineer, in the Melbourne General Cemetery. It reads in part: ‘He was a good man and strong-upright-humane-generous-Christian. A steadfast friend, a kind master, a useful citizen.’ Perhaps the word humble was forgotten!

The time is ripe for considering positive strategies and solutions to the various problems facing cemetery managers. There are many examples, both overseas and in Australia, of successful conservation projects involving local community groups, municipal councils, heritage bodies and governments. There are also examples of cemeteries that have tourist appeal and potential. A case in point is Sydney’s Gore Hill Cemetery, where extensive consultation, research and a conservation management plan combined to good effect. Recently a detailed conservation plan has been completed of the Williamstown Cemetery in Melbourne, and the authors, heritage architects Nigel Lewis and Richard Aitken, are involved in supervising...
future conservation works. The conservation plan has provided a blueprint for the layout of undeveloped areas.

It is not necessary to give a detailed account here of how cemeteries have developed over the centuries, rather a brief survey of some of the main modern cemetery developments will serve to deepen our understanding of the significance of cemeteries. Cemeteries in Australia have been influenced by both European and American burial trends with respect to memorial designs and layouts.

Up to the beginning of the nineteenth century, burials in the western world remained mostly in churchyards and these were replaced by modern cemeteries for important reasons. By the start of the last century, the lack of adequate space for further churchyard burials within city limits had become a matter of public concern. So city planning reformers, led by the French, tried to solve the problem of overcrowded, unsanitary cemeteries by designing new burial grounds. Burial within or outside of churches was prohibited. Cemeteries would be located on the outskirts of settled areas and would no longer be overcrowded. The Père la Chaise garden cemetery was established in Paris in 1804, and became the model for the great metropolitan cemeteries such as Kensal Green and Highgate in London, established in the 1830s.

These cemeteries were like botanical gardens with their curved pathways, chapels, gate lodges, rest pavilions, imposing evergreen trees and shrubberies. The cemeteries were vast, divided into sectors and plots, and characterised by a very large variety of monuments, many of which were mass produced at greatly reduced costs.

In mid-Victorian Britain two fashionable cemetery designs emerged. First, cemeteries had a grid-like layout. Roadways, the rows of plots and the divisions between compartments were set out with straight line boundaries meeting at right angles. Second, cemeteries had a romantic design, following a freer and naturalistic pattern. Pathways curved and met at acute angles, often following the contours of the landscape. These designs were adopted in Victoria. St Kilda Cemetery is an example of the grid-like layout, while Boroondara is an example of the landscaped Romantic garden cemetery.

The American cemetery developed as a progression from the English, with its emphasis on integrating the monuments with the landscape. This type of burial ground was known as ‘rural’ or ‘garden’. There were informal curved paths, lakes and a substantial number of trees and shrubberies planted. The quietness and the beauty of nature was emphasised with minimal distracting stonework and artificial objects and no enclosures. A good example is Gracelands Cemetery, Chicago which displays the American emphasis on the landscape qualities of cemeteries. Fawkner Memorial Park is perhaps the most representative of the American cemetery design in Melbourne.

The rituals of death were a part of everyday life of people of the Victorian era. Many thousands of people died from diseases and illnesses resulting from unsanitary conditions and lack of medical knowledge. Most people believed in an afterlife, and cemeteries, which were more like public parks, were popular for family outings. Cemeteries at that time were not considered morbid, but were really a celebration of life. In the twentieth century people’s attitudes have changed dramatically, and our burial grounds have been transformed. Many people today are frightened of death and shun cemeteries, for the more people see of death the more uneasy it makes them. So if we want people to show more appreciation of, and concern for, our burial grounds people’s attitudes must be changed.

During the twentieth century there has been a rapid rise in the practice of cremation, reflecting society’s changes of attitudes to hygiene, taste, economy and sense of equality. Over time people have come to believe that the elaborate memorials and burial practices of the last century were too expensive, pompous and hideous. Now the latest fashion is to be as discreet as possible. We have seen the creation of lawn cemeteries which feature standard plaques on grass, and memorial parks which are devoid of elaborate headstones and individually enclosed plots.

European migrants have also changed the face of our cemeteries. Their memorials are now dominating our burial grounds, and are just as revealing of social and religious values and symbols as the older monuments erected by our pioneers. Rows and rows of these well-kept marble monuments are often decorated with their fresh and artificial flowers and extravagant religious symbolism. Perhaps some of us should emulate the migrants and develop a more healthy attitude towards cemeteries by taking time to visit and look after our graves. If we cannot change people’s attitudes to death, perhaps they can be educated to think of cemeteries as part of the historic environment: cemeteries are generally at least as important as buildings, and in some cases, even more so.

It is because of this historical background that horticultural and botanical experts argue that appropriate trees and shrubs should be retained and planted in cemeteries. Evergreen species were traditionally used, such as pines and cypress trees, and each had a symbolic meaning. Trees with strong vertical lines were thought to elevate the soul heavenward, hence the common presence of conifers in cemeteries. The cypress was said never to grow again if once cut and was therefore considered significant in symbolising dying forever.

There are comprehensive plants lists for the guidance of cemetery managers included in the publications compiled by the National Trust of Victoria and of New South Wales. Many people like wattles and gum trees - they are Australian. they are appealing and were popular in the
1970s and 1980s. According to the experts, however, they do not generally belong in cemeteries for historical and aesthetic reasons; they also cause damage to monuments and paths. Cemeteries often contain indigenous plants that may now be rare due to clearing and grazing in adjoining areas. For instance, at Majorca Cemetery in Victoria the ground flora is dominated by Kangaroo Grass (Themeda triandra). In the Truganina Cemetery, north of Werribee, is one of the few stands of Button Wrinklewort (Rutidosis leptorrhynchoides), which is listed as endangered in Victoria and Australia.

The principles and guidelines of the Burra Charter are diffused in the Victorian Trust's Cemeteries: Our Heritage, as well as in other cemetery publications by the NSW Trust<sup>3</sup> and the Department of Planning of NSW<sup>6</sup>. In the Victorian book there is a section on how to research cemeteries, for as the Burra Charter tells us gathering historical evidence is the vital first step in conservation practice. There is information on the cultural significance of cemeteries, and in the case studies used there is a statement of cultural significance and advice on management problems where appropriate. We broadly adopted the main categories of cultural significance outlined in the Burra Charter: historic, social, aesthetic and scientific, and explained the different conservation terms.

There is also a section in the Victorian Trust’s publication devoted to the conservation of cemeteries. A number of major management problems associated with preserving older cemeteries are identified: the lack of a conservation management plan, lack of funding, poor or aging infrastructure; vandalism, deterioration of monuments and grave sites, older, decaying and inappropriate tree species, and declining financial resources.

Our main recommendations are:
- the establishment of a heritage cemetery fund
- use of heritage advisers
- the establishment of a central cemetery advisory service within the government
- heritage grants
- public appeals
- sponsorship of individual monuments
- tours and sale of brochures.

We examined the feasibility of establishing a public appeal to restore the John Alexander Burnett monument (1853), the first grave at the Melbourne General Cemetery (Fig. 3). We had hoped that the National Trust appeal would attract publicity and encourage local groups to start their own appeals through the National Trust’s tax deduction scheme. But the Burnett monument, which is made of Barrabool sandstone, is in a very poor condition. The exercise would have meant reconstruction rather than restoration, thus altering the original fabric too much, and would have been too costly. We are presently assessing the feasibility of restoring a number of monuments at the Melbourne General Cemetery, including those of not-so-prominent men and women.

The heritage practitioner’s perception of what constitutes cultural significance has generally changed and broadened in recent times as people’s knowledge has increased and research methods have improved. For example, in the early days of the National Trust in Victoria several monuments were classified in the Melbourne General Cemetery. It is not surprising to learn that they were grand monuments of prominent men like John Pascoe Fawkner (Fig. 4), one of the founders of Melbourne, and Lieutenant-Governor Charles Hotham, of Eureka Stockade infamy (Fig. 5). The graves of not-so-prominent men, women and children did not make the grade. In 1993 the National Trust, after detailed research was undertaken, classified the whole of the Melbourne General Cemetery as a historic place of national significance. Developed from the early 1850s, it was Victoria’s first modern burial ground: a seminal example of picturesque cemetery planning in Victoria, and probably Australia.
It is useful at this point to note that the Historic Buildings Council of Victoria, a statutory body, would find it difficult under the present *Historic Buildings Act* to register whole cemeteries. It can, and has, registered individual monuments as buildings or structures. One of the few monuments protected by the Register of Historic Buildings is the superb Springthorpe Memorial at Boroondara Cemetery, Kew. It is one of Australia's most impressive monuments, and it has recently been restored through funding from the Historic Buildings Council. Under the proposed new Victorian Heritage Act (which will come into force in March 1996), the Heritage Register will include historic places rather than just historic buildings, and as a result, it is assumed that whole cemeteries will be eligible for registration. However, there still remains a grey legal area involving the ownership of the monuments and plots. For instance, if the new Heritage Council decided to register the entire Melbourne General Cemetery, which is located on Crown land controlled by a committee of management, it may still have the problem of informing each owner of the right of burial of the proposed heritage listing - an administrative nightmare!

The Victorian National Trust is working on a project whereby significant and representative examples of cemeteries in Victoria will be systematically assessed and nominated to the Register of the National Estate - the State's burial grounds and lone graves comprise a category which is under-represented. It is encouraging to learn that cemeteries are a priority in the 1996 National Estate funding program. It will be interesting to see if the recently announced Commonwealth Government tax incentive scheme to encourage owners of heritage listed buildings and structures to undertake approved conservation work will be used for cemetery monuments.

The Victorian Trust has had an encouraging response to its publication and the establishment of its Cemeteries Advisory Committee, which is made up of heritage professionals and representatives of various government departments, the cemetery industry, historical and genealogical societies. We have attracted a growing number of inquiries from general members of the public who have expressed concern about the condition of their local or favourite cemeteries. Others want advice on restoration methods for their family graves. We have started compiling a central register of competent trades people and restorers. We are producing brochures and making use of the various newsletters and journals of the members of the committee to educate the public about cemetery issues. We would like to extend our educational role by sending speakers around the State to discuss conservation issues with local groups and cemetery trusts.

An exciting response has come from a member of one of the Friends of Cemeteries groups in Victoria. Mrs Carol Holsworth has set up the Holsworth Cemetery Endowment.
Fund to encourage the conservation and enjoyment of rural cemeteries. The National Trust will advise on the applications to be approved and the conservation methods to be adopted.

There is a lot of work ahead of us and some obstacles to overcome. There is a good opportunity for all parties - representatives of the government, cemetery industry, community groups and heritage bodies - to work together. It is important that we continue to communicate with each other so that the best possible information and expertise is available to interested parties, enabling informed decisions to be made about the conservation and future planning of our cemeteries.

Celestina Sagazio is a senior historian with the National Trust of Australia (Victoria) and has been instrumental in the Trust's activities in relation to cemeteries. She is editor of Cemeteries: Our Heritage.

Endnotes

4 ibid, p 13.
5 National Trust of Australia (NSW), A Guide to the Conservation of Cemeteries, National Trust of Australia (NSW), Sydney, 1982; National Trust of Australia (NSW), Cemeteries: A National Trust Policy Paper, National Trust of Australia (NSW), Sydney, 1987.
6 Department of Planning (NSW), Cemeteries: Guidelines for their Care and Conservation, Department of Planning (NSW), Heritage Council of New South Wales, Sydney, 1992.