PIONEER CEMETERIES AS TOURIST ATTRACTIONS

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Equating cemeteries with tourist attractions may appear somewhat bizarre but it is a practicality which cultural resource managers need to address. Nowadays pioneer cemeteries attract considerable attention from the general public. Such historic sites are important not simply because they are the burial places of known and unknown pioneers and of our forebears but because they are able to demonstrate a number of features. These are changing attitudes to death, the symbolism of funerary rites, sectarian differences and the fact that our pioneers were probably far more cosmopolitan than we have hitherto dared to admit.

I will briefly examine some of the reasons for tourist interest in old cemeteries before discussing ways in which such sites can be made more interesting for visitors without destroying the fabric of the individual site. My comments will focus particularly on a major conservation project at the McLeod Street Pioneer Cemetery in Cairns, North Queensland between 1988 and 1989 as well as a minor project last year at Wyndham: Western Australia’s northernmost town.

The two sites differ markedly. The two hectare Cairns cemetery was used from 1876 to 1946. It was established soon after the first European settlers established themselves at Trinity Inlet. The cemetery site was ill chosen. It is in part of the low lying interdune network characteristic of much of the coastal plains in the area. As such, the water table rarely drops below about a metre. That in itself presented real headaches for the Cairns councils of the day when it came to conducting funerals in the middle of the wet season. Cairns has an annual rainfall of over 2,000 millimetres, most of which falls in December to March.

Wyndham is a remote port renowned for its harsh climate and, once, as a meat processing centre for the Eastern Kimberley region. Afghan camel drivers would collect loads from the port and transport them over the semi-arid inland to even more remote cattle stations and mining camps. The town has no less than three cemeteries relating to these pioneering days. Two, in which mainly Europeans were buried, are in the gravelly footslopes of the sparsely vegetated flat-top hills which surround Wyndham on the landward side. The third, known as the Afghan cemetery, is further inland and, although nowhere near as gravelly comprises soils which must have challenged the prowess of many a pick wielding grave digger.

In speaking of pioneer cemeteries I am referring to those cemeteries which have been closed for several decades, contain the remains of early colonial settlers and are, all too often in a neglected state.

In this paper I have adopted a fairly liberal definition of the term ‘tourist’. In this context a ‘tourist’ is referred to as anyone who is visiting a population centre other than that in which he or she normally resides. The visit may be for pleasure, or in pursuit of a hobby such as genealogy, but excludes purely business trips.

Visitor characteristics

Why then do pioneer cemeteries attract attention from the touring public? In the absence of any definitive study of this element I will draw on my own observations in Northern Australia. The Cairns Pioneer cemetery appears to attract a diversity of intrastate, interstate and overseas tourists in addition to those local residents whose forebears are buried there. Wyndham visitors are predominantly intrastate travellers with a small but still significant proportion of interstate four wheel drive enthusiasts.

Many visitors to the Cairns cemetery are:

• searching for the graves of their forebears;
• interested in local history and see pioneer cemeteries resources as invaluable;
• simply idling away a few spare hours;
• seeing the cemetery as a pleasant park-like setting in which to spend time escaping from the hustle of a major tourist centre;
• cemetery enthusiasts who simply enjoy wandering among the headstones allowing their own imaginations to recreate an undoubtedly fictitious past;
• or are students on educational outings.

This illustrates a diverse range of interests, but is probably a fairly typical profile of visitors to any pioneer cemetery.

As cultural resource managers we need to be aware of this range of interests of the contemporary user group and to give them due consideration when undertaking conservation planning. With that awareness we need to conserve sites with a sensitivity to their origins and
to initiate adaptation only where it is essential for the preservation of that site or where it may assist in interpretation and an appreciation of the need for site conservation.

**Conservation planning and action**

One of the first moves of the Cairns Pioneer Cemetery conservation project, after completing a statement of significance and a conservation plan, was a clean-up of the site. Intrusive vegetation was removed to avoid further damage to the remaining headstones and grave surrounds. Individual graves were weeded and the litter removed.

Library and genealogical research was initiated to develop biographies of those buried in the cemetery. We knew, for example, Charles Kingsford Smith's grandfather, Richard Kingsford was buried there. We also established that he was a former Mayor of Brisbane, a member of the Queensland parliament and, later, Mayor of Cairns. But what of the poignant story of the Redden family who lost five children aged between one and five years? Who was Peter Cullender and what caused his accidental death during construction of the now famous Kuranda railway line? Why are so many Chinese, Japanese and Pacific Islanders buried in the cemetery? Edited biographical details explaining issues of this nature will eventually be published by the Cairns City Council.

While this work progressed volunteers and council staff worked on the practical conservation issues, the site was fenced with a picket fence to separate it from the adjacent railway line. The fence design was based on that reputedly used at the cemetery for a short period. It was preferred to erecting a wooden post and plain wire fence which appears to have been used for most of the cemetery's operational existence.

To discourage vandals driving cars among the headstones it was decided to erect low pine post and rail fencing on the two street frontages. Such unobtrusive fencing was considered more likely to attract the general public who may have felt deterred had a picket fence been erected around the entire site.

Vandalism was initially a problem but actually decreased markedly as public support for the project increased. There was a brief spate of vandalism again a few months ago but public criticism of those activities by the local media seems to have had the desired effect.

Removal of the destructive self-sown wattles and some of the pine trees planted during the 1960s left the cemetery rather bare. To have removed all of them would probably have been historically the most accurate conservation measure. What would have remained was a two hectare site of unattractive lawn and a scattering of headstones. This would hardly be an attraction to visitors or a way to deter would-be developers from seeking reallocation of the land.

Professional tree loppers were contracted to remove the unwanted trees. Once they had been cut a portable stump grinder ground the roots back to ground level. The roots were left to gradually rot away; in the wet tropics this is expected to take about three or four years.

We decided to leave some of the pines, to plant additional *Melaleuca* and a few other local native trees within the cemetery and to plant the adjacent streets with Golden Penda *Xanthostemon chrysanthus*, a spectacular rainforest species. Those of you who have visited the tropics will appreciate the wisdom of ensuring some shade exists for visitors. The former entrance was replanted with Crotons *Codiaeum pictum* and other plants replicating a 1901 planting scheme described in an early edition of the Cairns newspaper.

In selecting species for planting within the cemetery two criteria were applied. First, the trees had to be native to the area. Secondly, they had to have a deep root system which would not damage the graves. The shallow rooted wattles had proved disastrous in this regard.

Applying that same concept to Wyndham resulted in recommendations to minimize surface wash as a result of flood rains by cutting diversion channels outside and above the two European cemeteries and encouraging the re-establishment of native grasses within the cemetery grounds. Self-sown trees in those cemeteries were not causing any damage and it was proposed they remain as shade trees.

**Visitor information**

Cemetery signage is an important consideration. Tourists are not going to visit even the most impressive pioneer cemetery without adequate directions. In Cairns standard metal signs simply stating 'Pioneer Cemetery' were erected along the adjacent main access routes. Routed timber signs were strategically located on the perimeter fences.

Signage needs to be simple and attractive. It must also be easily visible for those seeking direction to the cemetery. Signs within the cemetery should be simple and in sympathy with the nature of the site.

The production of an inexpensive brochure is worthwhile for visitors interested in the history of a particular cemetery. The Cairns City Council has produced and regularly updated a simple two colour brochure which outlines the history of the McLeod Street Pioneer Cemetery and the stages of the conservation programme. It provides contact addresses for those seeking more information or who are able to add to the biographical data base.

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At regular intervals the Cairns City Council has featured special functions at the McLeod Street Cemetery. They usually coincide with Heritage Week or similar occasions. Guided walks prove popular on such occasions.

**Conservation principles**

Because much of the significance of our early cemeteries lies in the layout and architecture, such measures as shifting headstones to build pioneer walls are best avoided. Similarly, cementing broken headstones flat on top of a grave is inappropriate. The historical significance of a cemetery is totally destroyed by such actions.

It is of interest in Cairns, for example, that the casual burial patterns adopted by the first settlers gradually gave way to denominational zoning and to more regimented rows of later burials. Was it a casual lifestyle, lack of suitable tools and machines or just a wish to dig the hole quickly in order to get back to the 'cards and ale' that contributed to this casual pattern?

In Cairns there are several stories of graves dug so shallow because of a high water table that the top of the coffin sometimes reappeared again a few days later. To stop such 'occurrences', according to newspaper reports, holes were drilled in the coffins so they would fill with water and sink. Some locals would wander through the cemetery after a funeral and probe the ground with their umbrellas to check the depth of the coffin.

Pioneer cemeteries in major tourist areas in the wet tropics face other contemporary conservation problems. How, for example, do you cater for wet season access to the site while still maintaining the overall fabric?

We compromised somewhat in this regard. In recent years a well established pathway has been worn across the site. We surveyed an area along virtually the same route which avoided all identifiable graves. A paving block pathway was then laid. Now I could never condone such a practice in drier regions but in the wet tropics on former coastal dunes we would have had a major problem, from erosion (and bogged visitors), had we ignored contemporary usage patterns. Admittedly, it was a track worn initially by local residents and tourists now make use of the pathway and seats council have placed along it. It is also a useful track for older visitors and those in wheel chairs.

In Wyndham it would be necessary only to combat the erosion problem to provide a suitable base for pedestrian visitors. The gravelly soils provide a suitable foundation for most visitors who, in any case, tend to visit during the cooler and drier months.

Few pioneer cemeteries have all interments identified by headstones. Cairns is no exception. Of the 2,501 burials only 310 had headstones in 1988.

**Headstone restoration**

Many of the stones were broken; all were covered with lichen growths. These were progressively repaired and cleaned. We used brass dowels and waterproof araldite for the repairs. The marble headstones were cleaned with diluted bleach. Soft bristle brushes were used to scrub the headstones. Particular care had to be taken around the lead lettering. Low pressure hoses were used to deliver copious quantities of rinse water after cleaning. We avoided the application of any clear coatings over the surface as this technique has proved unsatisfactory elsewhere. However, several modern products are available, but testing is inadequate at this stage to apply them in tropical regions.

**Grave markers**

Because of surface soil movements over the years and its sandy nature at the Cairns cemetery, we discovered many grave markers had been covered by up to 75mm of soil. These were rediscovered using metal detectors. We were able to positively identify an additional 200 graves in this way.

Brass plaques on concrete plinths now identify the last resting places of these hitherto unidentified pioneers – many of whom are from such far flung regions as Sweden, India, Ireland, New Caledonia, Italy and Japan. Such markers add further interest for tourists to this locally significant site as well as providing a fitting tribute to those who battled malaria, floods, hookworm, tropical ulcers and miner's phthisis to lay the foundations of a now prosperous tourism and sugar region.

**Conclusion**

Whether tourists visit the site for its genealogical, architectural or nostalgic value is secondary to the fact that pioneer cemeteries can be conserved and interpreted to fulfill a diversity of roles. Tourism is an important one of those roles.

Research on the conservation and interpretation of pioneer cemeteries in tropical areas has been minimal. Consequently our work has necessarily been experimental in many respects. Climatic problems present a major hurdle to be overcome. Experience gained in our work to date at both Cairns, and to a lesser extent, Wyndham, suggests several measures outlined above are suitable both as conservation processes and as means of making visits to such cultural sites more worthwhile experiences.

**Endnotes**

The conservation of the McLeod Street Pioneer Cemetery in Cairns was primarily due to the efforts and enthusiasm of the late Mayor of Cairns, Alderman Keith Goodwin who, along with the pilot and nine colleagues, was killed in an air crash on 11
May 1990. This paper is dedicated to Alderman Goodwin’s memory.


2 *Cairns Morning Post*, 19 April 1901, p. 2.