



God's Acre: the religious values of cemeteries

By Lisa Murray

*I like that ancient Saxon phrase, which calls
The burial ground God's Acre! It is just:
It consecrates each grave within its walls
And breathes a benison o'er the sleeping dust.*

*God's-Acre! Yes, that blessed name imparts
Comfort to those who in the grave have sown
The seed that they have garnered in their hearts
Their bread of life, alas! No more their own.*

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow
God's Acre – first two stanzas



Englishman Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's poem *God's Acre*, first published in 1841, was a celebration of Christian faith in the resurrection. This was the first time the phrase, adopted from modern German, had been used in the English language. But it encapsulated an important idea. In the nineteenth century the cemetery, through its graves, memorials and landscape, was a source of religious consolation and an affirmation of faith. And it is this idea which is central to our understanding of the religious values of heritage significance found in burial grounds. Cemeteries reflect the religious beliefs and customs of different sections of the community. These are demonstrated in the customs and rituals associated with burial and commemoration.

common in government land grants for a distinct and separate site to be surveyed for a burial ground. The church and churchyard were often placed adjacent to one another, such as the Church of England church and burial ground at Booroowa. However, sometimes there was some distance between the church and cemetery, with sightlines and views establishing the relationship between the two. In assessing the heritage significance of cemeteries it is important to consider the vistas between religious buildings and the cemetery and aim to maintain these visual relationships.

The government provided the land for burial grounds but handed over the management of burials and the actual sites to the clergy. This set a precedent, which would shape the future design and management of cemeteries in the colony. The introduction of the Church Act of 1836 ensured that all religious denominations could administer their own burial grounds, sounding the death knell for the Church of England's monopoly over the burial of the colonists. The clergy of the Churches became protective about their right to consecrate burial grounds, charge fees for burial, and control the land. The burial registers and cemetery plans of cemeteries form important archival records that document and enhance the religious heritage of cemeteries.

By the 1840s, it was common practice for the government surveyor-general to group denominational burial grounds together, separated from the churches, on the outskirts of the town. This grouping of burial grounds foreshadowed the future design of general cemeteries. Examples of country cemeteries that were originally denominational cemeteries clustered together in parallel alignment include Braidwood Cemetery (which still has separate entry gates to the different denominations from the road), Bungendore Cemetery, and the original Queanbeyan Cemetery.

1836 legislation provides for diversity

The model for burial grounds which was imported from Britain as part of the colonists' cultural baggage was the parish church and churchyard. As communities were established and grew in the colony, religious authorities could apply to the government for a grant of land, either as an individual grant for a burial ground or as part of church lands which also incorporated a church and often a school.

The customary area for the appropriation of church land up until the 1850s was three acres: one acre for a church, one acre for a burial ground, half an acre for a school and a half acre for a parsonage. While some churchyards were placed around the church, it was more

Marking changing demographics and circumstances

In 1845 the colonial government tried to establish a truly general cemetery, with no denominational distinctions. However sectarianism led to widespread objections and the concept was abandoned. Instead

Cross monument with the crown of victory and the hand pointing upwards to heaven. This monument design by Job Hanson, a Sydney monumental mason, won a prize at the 1879 Sydney International Exhibition. Catholic No:1 Cemetery, Rookwood Necropolis. Photo: Lisa Murray. | Russian Orthodox section, Rookwood Cemetery. Photos: National Trust Archives





Chinese section, Rookwood Cemetery. Photos: National Trust Archives

the churches won the right to have their own denominational portions within the area dedicated as general cemetery for the whole population.

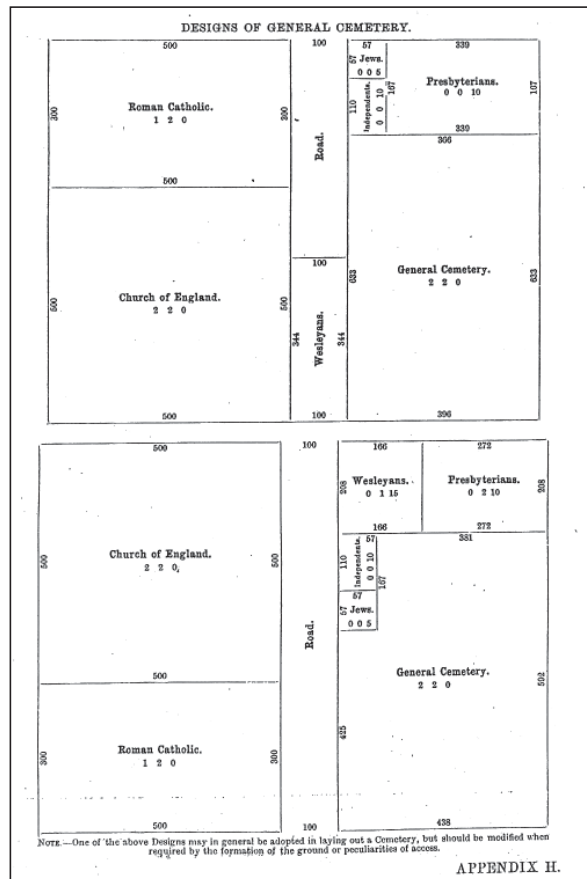
The first burial ground in a rural area to be surveyed, laid out and officially described as a General Cemetery was Dungog General Cemetery in 1848. By 1859 the design of general cemeteries had been standardised by the NSW Surveyor General's office: eight acres to be divided into separate areas for the six main religious denominations (Church of England, Roman Catholic, Presbyterian, Wesleyan, Independent, and Jews) proportionate to their representation in the 1856 census figures. A seventh, generic area (known confusingly as a general area) was set aside to bury all other denominations. The standard general cemetery design with a central avenue and seven allotments based on religion was applied to nearly all rural general cemeteries surveyed in NSW in the late nineteenth century.

Formally established churchyards and cemeteries were a physical declaration of a denomination's presence in the community, equally important as the church. Today a cemetery may have heritage significance for particular religious groups and/or individuals because it may contain burials of a particular religious order, or demonstrate the longevity of their parish community. The cemetery at Cooranbong, for example, provides a comprehensive documentation of the development of the Seven Day Adventist Centre in the township, their headquarters in NSW and major settlement in Australia, from 1897 to the present. Alternatively, the cemetery in some country localities may be the sole remnant of the once active congregations, or indeed the whole town, a reminder of changing demographics and circumstances.

Symbolism and motifs

In the newly settled colony, the churchyard or cemetery became an important cultural institution in which the social order could be established and a person's identity with the community could be defined. Statements of status, class and religion were constructed within and upon the landscape of the cemetery. Some groups constructed chapels and robing rooms in their cemetery area. Headstones and inscriptions were clear statements of religious affiliation and social identity.

The symbolism and motifs embellishing grave-markers varied amongst the different religious denominations. It is possible to make some generalisations about the types of symbols favoured by different denominations from the 1850s to the turn of the twentieth century. Roman Catholic monuments up until the 1880s were predominantly Gothic in design. Seraphs and angels were common motifs. Crosses were utilised on the majority of memorials. The Celtic Cross in particular was favoured, reflecting the predominance of Irish immigrants amongst the Catholic denomination in the nineteenth century. The Crucifix was another favoured form of the cross, again reflecting the theology and practices of Catholicism. Iconic representations of the Virgin Mary, Jesus, and the Saints were also prevalent. A late example of this can be seen in Morpeth Catholic Cemetery. A headstone carved



The two standard designs for general cemeteries promoted by the Surveyor General's Office from 1859-1897. (SRNSW: Surveyor General: NRS 13937, NSW Surveyor General's Department. *Regulations for the employment of Licensed Surveyors*. 1882. [3/8705A])

by Thomas Browne of Maitland, commemorating Patrick Griffin (died 1888), features St Patrick, St Francis, the Virgin Mary with two angels and a crucifix.

Protestant memorials differed markedly in their style and ornamentation from those of the Roman Catholics in the nineteenth century. The differences between Protestant sects is more subtle, but still discernible. The Gothic style and the cross were shunned as being too popish and iconographic for funerary monuments (although Gothic remained the most popular architectural style for protestant churches). The Classical style (also known as the Greek Revival/Italianate) style was the preferred choice. Angels and weeping widows could be found on Church of England headstones, but figurative sculpture, or even figurative bas-relief carving, was less popular amongst non-conformists such as the Presbyterians, Wesleyans and Independents. The Methodists (Wesleyans) tend to be more subdued and humble in their choice of monument design than other Christian denominations, reflecting their theological position. Obelisks and pedestals with draped urns were popular large monuments, particularly with Church of England and Presbyterian adherents.

Nineteenth century Jewish graves are particularly interesting in symbolic representation. They function as a foil to developments in monument design for Christian religious denominations. Up until the 1870s, many Jewish monuments exhibited a liberalism which was contrary to orthodox teaching. This teaching held that God should not be represented symbolically and that only a limited number of symbols of the Jewish faith were to be utilised on headstones (these include – the blessing hands; the seven branched candlestick, or menorah; the Star of David; and the jug). As the orthodox Jewish faith