

Cemeteries: Bringing History to Life

October 13, 2019

Notes by Heather Arnold, Secretary of the South Eastern Historical Association.

This seminar jointly hosted by the Narre Warren & District Family Group and the South Eastern Historical Association was attended by 43 people. We were very pleased with the turn-out and the whole day was a success.

Session 1: Friends of Cemeteries groups and Brighton Cemeterians. Presented by Jan Rigby & Lois Comeadow

Jan and Lois are part of the Brighton Cemeterian Group - a not-for-profit community group working actively with Southern Metropolitan Cemeteries Trust, the administrators of Brighton General Cemetery. They hold regular tours and produce many interesting publications, which you can find out about on their website <https://www.brightoncemeterians.org.au/>

Jan and Lois spoke about the role of a Friends Group and some of their interesting burials. As Jan said, 'every grave has a story to tell and it's amazing what stories we find' They also talked about their project to have memorials erected on the unmarked graves of World War One veterans. One of the issues that Friends Groups have is the fact that all graves are owned by the family and not the Cemetery, so they do not have the freedom to repair existing headstones or erect headstones without first establishing who 'owns' the grave and getting their permission.

Lois has spent twelve years transcribing all the original burial registers and they now have an on-line data base, available via the website. It was a great presentation.

Session 2: Mornington Cemetery and its website. Presented by Val Wilson and Murray Adams

Val is a member of the Mornington & District Historical Society and the 'author' of the website *A Guide to the Pioneers' graves in the Mornington cemetery*. The website won the Multimedia History Award in the 2013 Victorian Community History Awards and you can see it here <http://www.morningtoncemetery.com/>. In the Queen's Birthday Honours List in 2015, Val received an Order of Australia Medal for 'service to the community of Mornington as an historian' She is the author of the book *The names on the Mornington Honour Roll 1914-1918: who were they?* Murray Adams is the Mornington Peninsula Shire's Digitisation Officer and worked with Val on the website.

Val spoke about the history of the cemetery and some of the interesting burials. She also talked about the history of gathering the information and the process of creating a website. It is a fabulous website and a real credit to the hard work of Val and Murray and their colleagues.

Session 3: Mourning Customs presented by Libby Skidmore, Bass Valley Historical Society.

Libby is the President of the South Eastern Historical Association and the Secretary, Treasurer and Archivist at the Bass Valley Historical Society. Libby was a Primary School teacher in her professional life and in her spare time she is also an J.P and an artist. Libby's mother, Sheila, wrote a history of Red Hill and both her parents were involved in Historical Societies and the SEHA so not surprising that she also has an interest in history. Her interest in costumes came about due to an interest in theatre and she has a collection of mourning clothes as well as underwear through the ages.

Libby gave an engaging presentation about mourning customs - clothing, burial practices, mourning jewellery, mourning food, mourning stationery, mourning periods etc. She also talked about the influence of Queen Victoria - who wore mourning from the death of her husband, Prince Albert in December 1861, until her own death in January 1901.

Session 4: You can learn a lot in a cemetery: dead men do tell tales. Presented by Jane Rivett-Carnac Narre Warren & District Family History Group

Jane is a long-term member of the NWDFHG, their treasurer and an indefatigable organiser of their Cemetery tours, of which there have been many over the years. The Group produces wonderful books which accompany the tours – see the list of titles on their website

<http://www.nwfhg.org.au/>

Jane had some practical, interesting and amusing advice about the role of cemeteries in family history - starting with the need to get the death certificate to establish what cemetery the deceased is buried in; looking on-line for cemetery details and maps before you set out - but remember, not all cemeteries have an on-line register or they may just have photos of the head stones but do not record all burials. What you might find on a headstone - name, maiden name, children, occupation, religion, affiliations (such as a member of the Freemasons, RSL) There are also pitfalls for relying on cemetery information - the information on a headstone may be wrong; the person may not actually be buried in the grave in spite of what is said on the death certificate or the headstone, not everyone has a headstone. Jane also had some Health & Safety advice - if you are going wandering around a cemetery, tell someone where you are going. You may be the only one there and if you roll an ankle by falling on uneven ground, help may be a long time coming, also beware of snakes and so wear gumboots.

Session 5: Interesting cemetery tales and humorous epitaphs. Presented by Dr Celestina Sagazio

Dr Celestina Sagazio is historian and manager of Cultural Heritage of the Southern Metropolitan Cemeteries Trust. She previously worked as an historian for the National Trust of Australia (Victoria) for twenty-six years. The SMCT look after Springvale Botanical Cemetery, the Melbourne General Cemetery, Brighton Cemetery, Dandenong Cemetery and St Kilda amongst others.

Dr Sagazio is the author of many books including

- *Cemeteries: our heritage.*
- *Italian craftsmanship and building in Victoria.*
- *The National Trust research manual: investigating buildings, gardens and cultural landscapes*

Celestina gave an amusing presentation, looking at interesting graves and epitaphs as well as a look at the history of some of our significant cemeteries such as the Melbourne General Cemetery.

Victorian Community History Awards

We had a varied group of people present from many different groups and the next day the Victorian Community History Awards (VCHA) were being presented and we had five people present with connections to the awards –

- Pam Rothfield - author of *At Home on the Hill: Stories of Pioneers in the First 30 Years of the Phillip Island Cemetery 1870-1900*, which was shortlisted in the Local History Projects category

- Fay Van Dyk - a member of the West Gippsland Genealogical Society whose *publication A Tribute to Those Who Served: Remembering WWI Service Personnel Who Are Buried or Memorialised in the Warragul Cemetery West Gippsland* was shortlisted in the Small Publications category
- Pauline Hitchin who is a member of the Sale Historical Society – the *Sale Water Tower Museum* by Peter and Ann Synan was shortlisted in the Historical Interpretation category.
- Carol Barton was involved in the book *Along the Line: Caulfield to Oakleigh Rail Stories* by Glen Eira Historical Society Inc, which was short-listed in the Oral History Award category.
- My blog - Carlo Catani - <https://carlocatani.blogspot.com/> was shortlisted in the Multi Media section.

The venue was the Conference room at the Casey Complex at 65 Berwick-Cranbourne Road, Cranbourne. We are grateful to the City of Casey for allowing us to use this room at no charge. The South Eastern Historical Association provided morning tea and nibbles, thank you to Robyn Robie for shopping for the provisions, and the members of the Narre Warren & District Family History Group did a sterling job, cleaning up, keeping the kettle boiling and many other useful and practical tasks on the day.

Lynne Bradley, President of the Narre Warren & District Family History Group, and I were the organisers and we were both thrilled at how the day went, the calibre of the speakers and the enthusiasm of the audience.

Heather Arnold