



## COBURG HEADSTONES – SPEECH by DR JAN PENNEY

When GMCT was established in 2010 Coburg Cemetery was perhaps the most neglected cemetery of the 18 in our portfolio. But it had one strong point – a vibrant Friends group who immediately began to lobby GMCT to get things done. Overdue maintenance needs began to be addressed but the issue of hundreds of old headstones stacked in the tin shed was a difficult one to resolve. These had been removed in the 1980s as part of a movement to turn sections of the cemetery into a grassy pioneer park. It was not a popular move, and it attracted a lot of critical media attention. The movement lapsed but the headstones remained in storage.

Something had to be done. As a conservation historian I was convinced that the headstones needed to be replaced back on their original site, but this vision was not shared by all. Eventually, after a long and onerous process, everyone agreed on a strategy originally developed by the History and Heritage Working Group.

The History and Heritage Working Group was set up in 2015 and operated for a little over 2 years. We met bimonthly and completed many projects but this was the most difficult one to resolve and we sometimes thought it would never come to fruition. I was the Chair of the Group and its members were Lee Anthony representing the Friends of Coburg Cemetery and family historians, David Downes from the Genealogical Society of Victoria, David Weatherill, military and family historian, Di Rule, Chair of GMCT, Tony Clark, military historian and writer and June Dugina, historian, author and community member. Most of these hard-working people are here today and I thank them for their insight and especially their perseverance.

But to me, once we had made the decision, the most interesting thing was that every one of these headstones, over 500 on my last count, were placed by someone to remember a loved one. I wanted to find out who these people were and what had happened to them over their lives.

Up to date I have written about 420 biographies of these people and, as many graves contain several burials, I have stories on about 1,000 actual people.

And although every family and headstone has a story to tell, sometimes I made some unexpected discoveries. Like the connection with the Kelly Gang for instance. In the Methodist Section in two graves which have not yet had their headstones replaced lie two sisters, **Eleanor Jane Kee** and **Mary Ann Morton** and **Eleanor's husband Chun Kee**.

Eleanor and Mary Ann were oldest daughters of **Ellen Salisbury**, the sweetheart of **Joe Byrne** from the **Kelly Gang**. Ellen was pregnant when Joe was put in Beechworth gaol for horse stealing and there he met Ned and the other gang members. While Joe was incarcerated Ellen married **Martin Byron**, Lordy Byron as he was known, a ne'er do well alcoholic 20 years her senior, a man who was constantly gaoled for public drunkenness,



thieving and assaults. He also ran an illegal grog shanty on Black Dog Creek where the Kelly Gang often drank while they were hiding out from the police.

Ellen worked in the shanty while bringing up her 10 children. Ellen was friendly with Ned's mother and sister and she took supplies out to the men when they were hiding in the bush and carried letters back and forth. Supposedly Joe Byrne spoke Cantonese, which he had learned from the Chinese miners at Beechworth, and perhaps that familiarity was why, later in life, Eleanor chose a Chinese husband.

Both Eleanor and Mary Ann, who remained close all their lives, moved to Melbourne to work as house servants around Malvern. Eleanor had one child out of wedlock as a young girl and two with Chun Kee when they lived in Crossley Street in Melbourne's old Chinatown. When Chun Kee died in 1917 Eleanor buried him in the Methodist Section at Coburg and reserved the adjacent grave. She was left with two small children to bring up as well as her older illegitimate daughter. Many of the Cantonese Chinese in Melbourne took the Methodist faith and several are buried here.

When Eleanor died in 1935 her three children buried her in the grave beside her husband. All three eventually married and had children of their own, but it is not known if they ever visited the cemetery over the years.

Mary Ann married a widower, **Thomas Sylvester Finnigan** in 1927 when she was 47. He had four children with his first wife and was the well-known racing cyclist who won the rich Austral Wheel Race in 1898. The prize money of 240 gold sovereigns was enough for him to set up Malvern Star Bicycles which eventually made him a wealthy man.

So, Mary Ann went from being an older charwoman in a Malvern household to being a well-off wife. When her husband died after in 1951 after 24 years of marriage, it is interesting that in all his family records this long marriage is never mentioned, his children must have insisted that he be buried with his first wife at Springvale Cemetery. And he was. When Mary Ann died in 1962 the remaining members of the Bryon family buried her with her sister at Coburg Cemetery. So, Coburg holds the two daughters of Joe Byrne's sweetheart, Ellen.

Others also buried under these headstones reflect connections with past historical events. Many of those tombstones removed were placed in 1919 and reflect the impact of the dreadful Spanish Flu pandemic which swept Australia after the end of WW1. For **Frank Dickens**, the impact on his family was almost too much to bear. He and his wife **Emma** had 8 children but baby Charles died soon after birth, Elsie May only lived one year. Daughter Florence died in 1909 as did his wife.

Frank managed to bring up the three younger boys with the help of his older daughters, Alice and Amy who never married and shared a room in their little rented house in Preston. But in mid-April 1919 Amy died at home of the Flu. Because the disease was so contagious



burials were held almost immediately and Frank trudged out to Coburg Cemetery on Thursday 10 April to see her into her grave in the Church of England Section. When he returned home, Alice was dead in her bed. So, on the next day, Friday, he made the trip again.

Others like **Jack Holt** returned home from WW1 after being badly gassed in France. His lungs never recovered and he died two years later leaving a young wife alone. Many of these graves hold returned WW1 soldiers who died of war injuries in the following years. Others mention sons who lie buried overseas in France and Belgium but who are remembered here.

Some headstones are of those with no family in Australia. **Annie Fidler** who lies buried in the Church of England Section, was a single woman, an adventurous and dextrous felt hat trimmer whose skills were in much demand in the days when every man wore a felt hat to work no matter what trade he plied. Annie came alone to Melbourne from Denton, a major felt hat making town in England where her sisters also worked in the trade.

She took up a position in 1908 at Denton's Hat Factory, established in Nicholson Street, North Fitzroy in the 1870s. It was named after the town of Denton back in England and the factory building, which is still in existence and is on the Heritage Register, was designed by William Pitt, the architect of the Princes Theatre and the Rialto buildings among other famous Melbourne buildings.

Annie lived just up the road from the factory and when she died suddenly in 1923 at her home her work mates missed her dreadfully. A group led by her supervisor Mr Woodley placed a death notice in the newspapers and paid for the headstone to be erected over her grave. Her will revealed that she had just paid a 15 pound deposit for a ticket home on the Orient Line steamship company's mail ship to go and visit her sisters. Now she would never go home again.

Neither would **Hugo Romstead**. Hugo was a Finnish man who was driving a truck heavily loaded with metal screenings which lost control in Cotham Road, Kew when the steering mechanism failed. The truck hit a tram standard at speed and caught fire. Hugo and his mate Claude Cecil Groves got out but both men were severely burnt.

Hugo lasted four days and Claude lasted seven. Both men suffered dreadfully. Hugo had no family in Australia but the Stanhope family and a Miss Vera McIntosh, she was a special friend, both placed notices in the newspapers. He was only 34 years old and, as his death certificate stated 'parents unknown', maybe no one knew how to contact them.

Workplace accidents were quite common and many a man went to work and did not come home. **Arthur Evans** was a Melbourne City Council electrician who was working with a mate disconnecting the power to the old Dalgety and Company's building in Little Collins Street in 1924 when the overhead parapet collapsed on top of him. His mates pulled him out of the



rubble but he was already dead. The Coroner called this simply an accidental death but that was no consolation to his remaining children.

For in the grave where Arthur was placed in 1924 was his son baby Arthur who had died in the Children's Hospital in 1919 of some childhood illness and his wife Sarah who died just 14 days after her little son. Arthur was the sole parent of his remaining three children who were then made orphans by his death.

Others like **Frederick Arthur Charles Hines** were crushed to death when a large bale of duck cloth fell from a trolley and jammed him between it and another. Again the Coroner called it an accidental death. And accidents were common on the new fangled electric trams and extended rail lines. Many transport workers killed on the job are buried here at Coburg.

A different sort of workplace accident happened to **Walter Ferguson**, an undertaker of Collingwood. Walter was driving his favorite horse drawn hearse along Holmes Street in Coburg in September, 1924 when he struck trouble. He was taking Mrs Dickson of Greeve Street, Fitzroy to her last resting place at Coburg Cemetery when one of his horses suffered some sort of fit. Walter struggled to release the stricken horse from his harness which took some time, and quite a bit of effort.

Once he had settled his horse he returned to his journey but the strenuous effort had been too much for him. At the gates of the cemetery he fell from the box seat at the front of the carriage and hit the road. Walter was dead before the wheels passed over him. A mourner in a following coach then drove the hearse containing Mrs Dickson to Coburg Cemetery while others took Walter's body to the Melbourne Hospital and then on to the morgue. Mrs Dickson's funeral went ahead as planned but without her undertaker and Walter's staff began to plan his own funeral.

Walter was a member of the Salvation Army so his fellow soldiers were invited to attend his funeral which left from his house in High Street, Northcote, as were his fellow members of the Victorian Master Undertakers Association. He was also a member of two lodges whose members were asked to meet the cortege at the gates of Coburg Cemetery at 11.25 am on Tuesday, 14 September. But they were asked to refrain from wearing full Masonic regalia, perhaps because the Salvation Army was a bit ambivalent about Masonic Lodges and their ceremonies. Although Coburg Cemetery had a Salvation Army Section Walter was buried in the Methodist Section as his wife, Louisa, was Methodist.

Many of these graves hold young men who drowned in the nearby Merri Creek which had several deep holes or in Coburg Lake, a popular but treacherous swimming hole. The basalt for Pentridge Gaol had been mined there and many did not appreciate the dangers of deep, cold water when showing off to their mates or girlfriends. Few could swim in those early days and simply bathed in the cool waters so if they got out of their depth they simply sank.



Grappling hooks were used to bring them to the surface and some local families lost more than one child in these waters.

Children died from diphtheria, an often fatal disease for young children before the advent of broad spectrum antibiotics. Other like the babies of the Anderson and Redding families seem to have had some genetic disease. Both **Sarah Jane Anderson** and her daughter **Margaret Emma Redding** lost four babies each, aged between 1 and 21 days old. The eight babies are buried together in a one family grave. On the headstone was written "Our Darlings".

How those mothers must have worried each time they fell pregnant. Young Maggie had become pregnant at 16 and was hurriedly married off to an older fishmonger so she and her mother were both pregnant at the same time for the next few years.

Many mothers died in childbirth, or soon after, and often the baby did not survive either. **Sarah Jane Williams** died in September 1916 at her parent's home 3 days after giving birth. She had married the year before and like many young mothers she returned to her mother to give birth to her first child. Her mother had had 11 children so was well versed in childbirth but something went wrong and Sarah died. The baby was probably buried in the communal graves which existed for each religion as new-born babies were often not baptised and did not require a family grave.

Then there were the victims of terrible accidents. **Arthur Smale**, (the family called him Jock), worked in the boot trade and had joined the 4<sup>th</sup> Australian Division Army Corp. Arthur and his mates had been at their regular shooting practice at the Williamstown Rifle Range on Saturday afternoon 5 March 1933. The normal practice was that every rifle and machine gun was checked by an officer before it left the shooting range, and that no ammunition was allowed out of the range area, but mistakes were known to happen.

Arthur and his mates were walking along Kororoit Creek Road on their way to the North Williamstown railway station to catch their train home when the accident happened. Some other recruits walking nearby started throwing stones and the next moment the gun carried by Arthur's mate, William Horton, went off. The bullet hit Arthur in the head and he died instantly. The Coroner's report was thorough but no one admitted being the officer in charge responsible for checking the rifles as they left the range. It was simply an accident.

For Arthur's parents it was simply an agony they had to bear. He was given a semi-military funeral and all recruits were invited to rendezvous at the corner of Bell and Nicholson Street, Coburg to march behind the cortege. It would then make its way up to the Cemetery where Arthur would be buried beside his baby brother. The Smale family are very well represented at Coburg Cemetery and Arthur lies with two of his brothers, For some years after his family placed poignant memorial notices in the newspaper every year on the anniversary of his death attributing his death to God's will in accordance with the simple Methodist faith that God has a plan for all.



When her husband, **Ernest Rupert Allen**, died of the Spanish flu pandemic on 11 March, 1919 in the newly created Infections Diseases Hospital within the Exhibition Buildings, Ruby thought this was the worst day of her life. She had to bury her young husband at Coburg Cemetery and somehow take care of her two little children.

Ernest was a grocer who worked for **Mr Allchin** in his Plenty Road, Preston, store and the family lived nearby in David Street. After the burial she and the children quickly moved to Canning Street in Carlton, to live with her parents. She could not bear to be alone.

They had barely settled in after the move when tragedy struck. On a Wednesday afternoon her eight year old son **Rupert** was playing near the Amess Street railway crossing, now part of the Inner Circle Parklands but then a working rail line, with a friend he had met.

A witness, **Mrs Ann Martin**, was walking nearby and saw the dreadful accident happen almost in front of her. It was a sight she never forgot. The train from Fitzroy was travelling very slowly but Rupert ran straight in front of the engine which passed over his little body killing him instantly. The mangled corpse was taken to the Morgue and his mother and grandparents were notified of this terrible accident. The concerned engine driver told the court that he had blown his whistle hard to warn the lads and had his head out the window as he passed close to them travelling very slowly as he was going to yell at them for playing on the tracks.

Ruby's brother told the court that his nephew was familiar with the crossing as that was the path to their primary school but trains were infrequent. Rupert was on his way back to school after having lunch at home when he was killed. Now Ruby only had little Marjorie left. They laid Rupert beside his father at Coburg Cemetery.

Other deaths were not accidents. Suicide was fairly common and many men died by their own hand and are buried in these graves. It was common for men to use their own cut throat razor to slit their throats. Others chose a gun. **Richard George Sibun** had been depressed for several months before he shot himself. He had been a seagoing engineer in the Merchant Navy throughout the war but had been invalided out of the service. Richard had borrowed a revolver from a neighbour, telling him that he had a cat worrying his chickens.

To spare his wife the anguish of finding his body at home, Richard took the gun into his place of employment, Michaelis Hallenstein and Co, at Footscray. There he quietly shot himself in the temple. Richard had suffered terribly from insomnia and from not being able to go back to sea. The Coroner declared the death had occurred during a period of temporary insanity which meant he could be buried in sacred ground in the Methodist Section. Had he been declared sane there would have been problems over his burial as ministers of religion were not supposed to hold a service over a person who had committed suicide by choice.



Some of the information for these stories came from newspapers. Divorces were reported in great detail as were coroner's reports, wills and probate reports as well as salacious press reports on abortion trials. Arson, assaults and accidents were written about using gory details not common today. And the formal dates of weddings and births reveal many a shotgun wedding.

While compiling these biographies I have tried to be considerate but truthful. Every family has a story to tell and every family has a past they might prefer to remain hidden.

**Sarah Turton** never knew that her son Stephen, who killed himself in the front room of her home, had been married for some time and had a son, that is until she read the death notice placed by his wife in *The Age*. Stephen shared the sleepout at the back of her house with his brother, and both swore to the Coroner that he was a single man who lived at home. True as far as they knew but he was married and a father.

I must pay tribute to the Genealogical Society of Victoria as it was their careful transcription of every tombstone at Coburg Cemetery carried out in the 1980s as part of Victoria's Sesqui-Centenary celebrations that detailed the actual physical records of each and every transcription. I have used these records to compile these stories and I thank David Downes, the President, who was kind enough to send me a copy. And in some ways it was chickens coming home to roost as I was an historian for the 150<sup>th</sup> Committee at the time and had made the suggestion that this was one way to get local historical societies and groups like GSV involved in celebrating Victoria's past so many years ago. I am so glad that suggestion was taken up.

The Friends and GMCT and I will now work together to get all these stories out to the public in some digital form, perhaps using QR codes placed on the concrete of each grave or online. I have thoroughly enjoyed finding out about these diverse and interesting people and hope you have enjoyed hearing about just a few of them.