Friends of Coburg Cemetery President's Speech at GMCT's reinstatement celebration. 11 March 2021.

Hello everyone, thank you for this opportunity to be here today and to say a few words at this very special celebration.

Around 160 years ago this land was set up as a burial place for the growing village of Pentridge.

Over the decades this space has been:

- compartmentalised
- expanded
- built on
- left to crumble
- vandalised
- maintained
- and changed.

The roads, buildings, paths, niche walls, sheds, fences, gates and trees have been

- erected
- planted
- removed
- replaced
- improved
- and changed.

These memorials, gravestones, graves and statues have been:

- broken
- weathered
- purchased with borrowed money
- imported from Europe
- polished and cleaned and loved
- invaded by trees and rose bushes
- homes for birds and animals
- photographed, written about and enjoyed by walkers and visitors
- and used as backdrops for photos, stories, tours and community activities.

This cemetery has experienced

- controversy
- theft

- neglect
- misappropriated funds
- complaints of pollution
- deaths on site
- rivers of tears
- mountains of flowers
- but also big fancy funerals with hundreds of mourners
- state funerals, official processions and guards of honour
- and, more recently, tours, scavenger hunts and exercise activities during 2020 lockdowns.

Around 40 years ago the managers of this cemetery wanted to make more changes. The Trustees of the 70s and 80s conducted a formal study into the use and possible future of this space. Several proposals were presented and the idea of removing most of the stones and creating a park with meadows and lawns and gardens took shape.

- A few hundred stones were removed.
- The community said no.
- Several hundred headstones sat in a shed for several decades gathering dust and spiders.

In 2011 the Friends of Coburg Cemetery came along. We started bringing more people into the cemetery, running tours, telling the stories and sneaking looks into the shed and wondering what we were going to do about all those old gravestones that were not on the graves where they belonged.

In 2015 the GMCT set up the History and Heritage Working Group – a group of professional historians, genealogists and people with a special interest. These included Dr Jan Penney, Lee Anthony, David Down, David Weatherill, Dianne Rule, Tony Clark, June Dugina. This group wrote histories, shared stories, collected and published data and documents, initiated projects like the ANZAC Poppy Tile project, the restoration of the Williamstown cemetery fountain, a digitisation project and, most importantly for us today, the reinstatement of headstones at Coburg Cemetery.

This group worked tirelessly: negotiating, lobbying and organising with GMCT staff to find ways to get those stones back where they belong.

Encouraged by the History and Heritage Working Group's efforts and the ongoing questions and requests from Friends of Coburg Cemetery, GMCT staff worked to find ways to get government permission to fund and to implement this major project.

Members of the Friends of Coburg Cemetery have researched names, hunted up families, searched for locations of the graves, and worked with GMCT to identify where the stones needed to be placed.

And look what we have done!

This celebration today is a direct result of the hard work, determination and dogged perseverance of many people who, without expectations of personal benefit or glory, have restored an important part of our community's history, have righted a wrong and made a lot of families very happy.

As a spokesperson for Friends of Coburg Cemetery, but also on behalf of many people - family members, historians, community members - who have expressed their gratitude for these headstones being carefully and professionally placed back onto their resting places: thank you. Thank you to all those who worked to make this happen. You should all feel very proud of a job well done that will be appreciated for decades to come. Thank you.

Julie Stratford, 11 March 2021