BOX HILL CEMETERY HISTORY

Box Hill, sixteen kilometres east of Melbourne, is today a thriving business centre with extensive shopping facilities and a population that has become more diversified in recent years with an influence of residents from Asian countries.
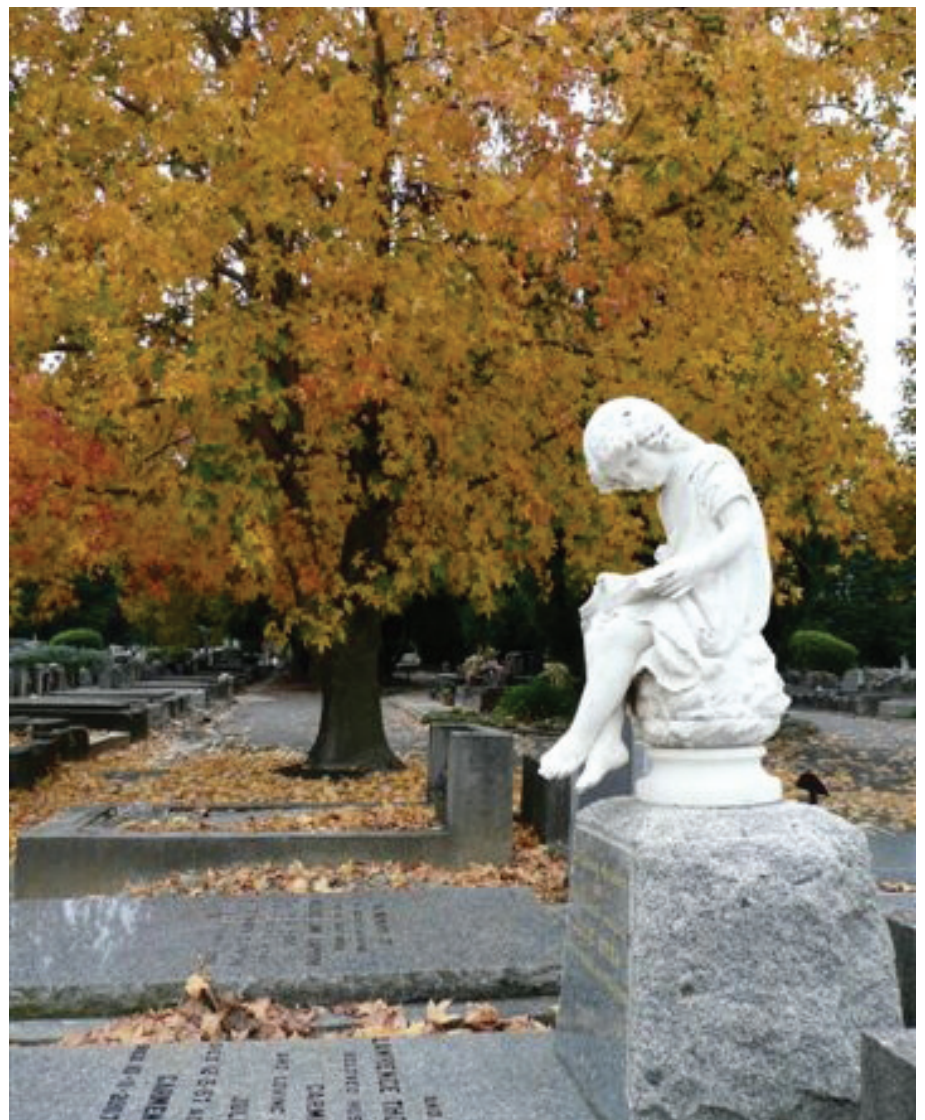
The area was first settled in the later 1840's and was predominantly a farming community, but with the advent of the railway service from Melbourne in 1882, it gradually became more residential in nature as orchards and market gardens were developed into housing estates. Box Hill was proclaimed a city in 1927.

The first moves to establish a cemetery in the area were made in 1872 when seven local residents were appointed as trustees at a public meeting and an area of twelve acres set aside for use as a burial ground. A Government grant of £10 was received for the erection of a fence around the site. The first burial was that of a three week old child, Jessie Lavenia Smith, and this took place the day after the cemetery was officially gazetted on 29th August 1873.

After the rail service had been extended from Camberwell to Lilydale in 1882, an additional area of 1.2 hectares was added between the existing site and the railway line. This small section has always been referred to in cemetery records as the "New Survey". The first internal roadways were constructed in 1874 and these were thrifty-three feet wide. The earliest scale of fees were set out in May 1875 and the sexton was instructed to meet funerals at the front gate and collect the fees before allowing entry into the cemetery as they wanted no bad debts.

Until 1979 the main entrance to the cemetery was from Whitehorse Road via an attractive tree lined drive. The fine entrance gates and former office building and public shelters inside the gates at Whitehorse Road still stand today, but are no longer part of the cemetery. It was customary for mourners to walk behind the funeral cars along the drive and across the railway line into the cemetery proper through a large imposing archway built in 1923 to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the cemetery. The main entrance was relocated to Middleborough Road in 1979 to obviate the need for funeral cars to cross the rail tracks. Early records state that application was made by trustees for a foot bridge over the railway line for the safety of pedestrians – there were three trains a day. A wooden bridge was erected and in spite of a move in 1890 to remove it, the bridge remained until the line was electrified in the early 1920's.

A dominant feature within the grounds of the cemetery border is the Columbarium built in 1929 as a repository for ashes. This was designed by architects Rodney Aslop and Bramwell Smith and built by T. J. Crabb. It is listed on the register of Heritage Victoria. Constructed in the form of a Greek cross, the structure is surmounted by a central octagonal tower with copper dome. Externally, the building has a distinctive Mediterranean flavour with its red Spanish tiled roof, buff walls and well proportioned arched entrance porch. At the time of its construction, the tower and dome was considered to be one of only a few examples of its type, probably the best known one being on the Little Metropoli Cathedral in Athens.

Another of the cemetery's historic assets is the large bell that is rung each day shortly before the closing of the gates at 5.00 p.m. to allow sufficient time for visitors to leave the cemetery. This bell, given to the cemetery in 1927 was previously used at the Box Hill Fire Station to alert volunteer fire fighters to a fire emergency in the area. The bell was manufactured in Manchester, England in 1886 and its sound can be heard well beyond the confines of the cemetery. It is regarded by nearby residents today as a local icon.

In 1934 the cemetery was further extended with the addition of seventeen acres adjoining which had previously been used as a recreational reserve. The local council agreed to transfer this site to the cemetery for £7,000 which was used to establish a sports ground nearby. This transaction brought the cemetery to its present size of thirty-one acres.

With little scope for the provision of any new burial sites, the cemetery was officially closed in 1984 and the trust therefore embarked on a project of building a mausoleum complex on a staged development basis. The first section with provision of 130 crypts was completed in 2003. The building was funded by public subscription through the sale of crypts on a pre need basis and was fully paid for on completion. Sales exceeded all expectations, and a second stage was

added in 2005 providing an additional 216 crypts. These buildings although independent of each other are linked at the roof line. They incorporate elements of the Californian Bungalow style of architecture, and crypts are faced with imported granite shutters. They were built by Milne Construction Co. The Trust proposes to add a third and final section in the near future that will provide an additional 528 crypts on six levels. This will generate funds to cover the long term sustainability of the cemetery. It is anticipated that the project will be completed in 2012.

Much of the outdated infrastructure within the cemetery has been replaced in recent years. A more functional works depot with upgraded storage facilities was provided in 2007 and on 1st May of this year a new administration and staff amenities centre was officially opened by Councillor Helen Harris, OAM, City of Whitehorse. In conjunction with this occasion a rose garden established in front of the building was formally dedicated. Each of the three rose beds are named after past trustees. The Aspinall bed is named after Joseph Aspinall, pioneer settler and one of the original trustees. The Whitney bed is named after Jeanne Whitney, first female trustee and the Parer bed is named after Francis Parer, who was the longest serving Trustee of the cemetery. This rose garden provides 130 sites for the memoralisation of cremated remains, with

plaques fixed to polished granite desks.

Box Hill Cemetery is the final resting place of several prominent citizens of bygone days. Among them are Sidney Myer and William Angliss, business men and philanthropists, C. J. Dennis, poet, Eduard Borovansky who established the Borovansky Australian Ballet Company, Lex Davison, racing driver, H. C. Sleigh, shipping magnate and founder of the Golden Fleece Petroleum Company, Robert Campbell Edwards, tea and coffee merchant, Joy (Hester) Smith, artist and Jane Sutherland, Box Hill Artists Camp.

The Cemetery is currently governed by its own trustees as a Class B Cemetery Trust under the Cemeteries and Crematoria Act 2003, but the outdoor operations including burials and ground maintenance were outsourced to Lilydale Memorial Park and Crematorium in 2008 under a contract agreement.

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