

Wollongong Wesleyan/Presbyterian Cemetery.

As you will recall, in early January 2009, vandals extensively damaged a large number of headstones and monuments in the Wesleyan/Presbyterian section, the last remaining pioneer cemetery in Wollongong.

Last year I was informed that Council had allocated funds to go ahead with restoration work on the graves. However, that idea seemed to have fizzled out. Nothing was mentioned by Wollongong Council until I was informed that restoration would commence on Monday 19th April.

When I arrived that day the stonemasons were already busy. One of them handed me a 4 page leaflet headed "Monuments in Memoriam", a business that is a part of Rookwood Necropolis, giving information on the work to be done over the next two days in the Wesleyan/Presbyterian section of the cemetery. The pamphlet states:

"Monuments in Memoriam do not expect to complete the repairs to all the above-listed gravestones as part of the two day sample project, but will be working towards completing as many of the above repairs as is possible while following the best-practice techniques specified in the National Trust (NSW) Guidelines for Cemetery Conservation.

The advantages with this area is that it is high visibility, contains a good range of types (quick/easy to complex), and allows good access to enable work to proceed efficiently. This should both make a significant impact on the vandalised landscape and exemplify the high standard of repairs which can be completed at a reasonable cost. Although there will be some loss of efficiency vis-a-vis an intense week-long project during summer daylight hours, Monuments in Memoriam are confident that there will be noticeable improvements in the appearance and safety of the historic Wesleyan/Presbyterian section of Wollongong General Cemetery.

If all parties are pleased with the repair work, this project could be Phase 1 of a full repair for all the monuments vandalised in the cemetery."

I heard last year that Council was committing \$80,000 to the restoration of the graves. Since that time I have received several responses (1) that Council planned the restoration program in stages, (2) Council was not going ahead with the \$80,000 work and (3) that restoration would be sometime in the future.

Yet, reading the comments in the leaflet stating that this work was a two day sample project and could be Phase 1 of a full repair for all monuments, I questioned who was paying for the two days work. I was informed by Monuments in Memoriam that there would no charge for this service.

I truly hope that this is not a one-off project. Otherwise that could mean that it will be a long time before we see any further work carried out.

I was amazed how painstaking a job these stonemasons did in piecing together a headstone from a large number of bits. It was worse than a jigsaw puzzle. I was so taken in by it that I took some photos.

Take for instance John and Celina Jolliffe's headstone pushed over onto the concrete slab covering the grave and shattered into 12 or more pieces. Then to watch a stonemason drill holes in the pieces of marble and join them back together piece by piece with marine-grade stainless steel rods. He worked on that headstone for the whole day and the following day set the headstone upright again on its sandstone base. It was fortunate that the lead lettering at the breaks had remained intact rather than falling out and lost when the headstone crashed onto the grave.

William and Mary Browne's grave had a 7 piece sandstone tall pedestal with a draped urn on the top. While the base was relevelled each section was drilled and heavy steel rods put in place before a hoist lifted each heavy piece in place before the monument became once more one of the most eye-catching ones in the front of the cemetery.

Then there were the simpler tasks such as regluing Charles Buckle's tablet and little Annie Grant's tiny headstone back onto her small grave.

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One book style headstone had the masons conduct an extensive search amongst pine needles and other dead leaves and branches to recover a piece which was a significant part of the inscription. Once found the work could only then commence of restoring the tablet on the headstone.

It was a rewarding time to document a pile of broken marble and sandstone and watch the masons restore a headstone back to almost its former glory. Of course, there will always be reminders of that January day in 2009 as the smaller chips are lost in time and will never be found.

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