

Life in Our Cemeteries

Pambula Cemetery

13th April 2024

Pambula cemetery is located on the lands of the Yuin nation who have occupied this area for thousands of years.

Colonisation around Pambula (called Panbula until 1884) began in the 1830s with the Imlay Brothers moving stock to the Pambula river flats. A village grew at South Pambula originally on the river flats but continuing floods along the river meant that the village moved to higher ground at the current location. The river flats were used by tenant farmers who grew crops, including potatoes, which were exported to Sydney, Melbourne, and Van Diemen's Land.

By 1846 the village was developing and had at least one store. By 1851, when there was a flood in May, the village was reported to have 200-300 inhabitants living in 'frail Australian huts' and only two substantial buildings which were public houses.

Early burials took place in a cemetery on the southern side of the river, but this cemetery also flooded and remains and headstones were washed away or covered in silt.

In 1855 a location for a cemetery was surveyed and mapped to the north of the current site on the road to Merimbula between Merimbula Lake and the sea. I don't know whether this site was ever opened for burials.

Land at the current site was 'dedicated to religious and public purposes' in 1863 and was cleared for a cemetery in 1876. Burial grounds were not built on church land but each public cemetery in Bega Valley was set out in the various sects, so people were buried with their own religious denominations. Pambula was set out with the largest area for Church of England with Roman Catholics in a slightly smaller area and small areas for Presbyterian, Wesleyan, Independents, Jewish and 'other denominations. Some gravestones from the South Pambula cemetery were moved to this cemetery and some plaques have been placed in this cemetery remembering those people who were buried in the old cemetery, but the markers have been lost.

The first Anglican Church was built in 1866 and the Roman Catholic Church was built in 1868. By the mid 1880s the village had grown to such an extent that it was declared a town. A town hall was built in 1883 and residents had formed a Progress Association by 1884. The Pambula Dairy Company opened a butter factory in 1898 and butter was exported to London using the Oakleaf brand. This factory closed in 1974 because of competition from margarine. Another important local industry was oyster farming.

The population of the town was highest in 1901 and then gradually declined until 1971. After 1970 the population of Pambula increased rapidly as tourism increased and timber workers moved into the area to work in the wood chipping industry. The population of Merimbula was small until after the Second World War then increased rapidly, the result was that Pambula cemetery has served both Pambula and Merimbula communities.

For more information about Pambula history there is a self-guided walking tour around the village accessed through the web site or QR codes on buildings around the town:

<https://pambulabusinesschamber.com.au/pambula-village-history-trail/>

Information about the history of the Butter factory can be found at
<http://www.monaropioneers.com/towns/Pambula/Pambula-Butter.htm>

A cemetery is another a source of information about the social, economic, cultural history and demographic history of a village or a locality.

A cemetery serves a community's emotional, religious, and cultural needs.

The importance of cemeteries to any community was highlighted by the Archeological survey done at the Bega High school site (the cemetery at the Bega High School site was closed by 1910 and a new site created on the southern approaches to the town) which said:

'Burial grounds are important elements of both historical and contemporary landscapes. They represent a central component of the social and physical makeup of a place and for this reason are highly significant in terms of cultural and spiritual values.

In Pambula cemetery we can observe changing fashions around burials: burials with a monumental headstone and in a lawn cemetery, and several different options for interring cremated remains with small memorials. We can also observe changing beliefs around death and dying and an afterlife from more religious to more secular images and epitaphs. The cemetery also shows the changing demography of the area with fewer older graves and many more modern ones.

The older graves are looking quite dirty but please resist the urge to clean or repair them without looking into the process carefully. The grave markers and monuments are the responsibility of family members and descendants.

The National Trust of NSW 'Guidelines for Cemetery Conservation' (web address below) is an excellent guide to what you can and cannot do in a cemetery, considering the legal and ethical obligations of doing any work in a cemetery.

https://www.nationaltrust.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/cemetery_conservation_guide.pdf

Also, Heritage NSW site has some useful information and links:

<https://www.heritage.nsw.gov.au/applications/state-heritage-items/standard-exemptions/14-burial-sites-and-cemeteries/>

The monuments and plaques use signs and symbols to give us clues to the beliefs and hopes of the deceased, and of the loved ones who designed the monument or plaque. For the older graves the meanings and religious symbols you may see here in Pambula and at other district cemeteries, can be interpreted using guides such as this one:

<https://blog.billiongraves.com/gravestone-symbols-from-a-to-z/>

With the increases in digital technology, web sites are being developed that geolocate gravestones and upload details and photographs so people all over the world can find

graves for family history and other research. These projects are also great for future researchers as detail is collected which may not be available in the future as monuments degrade over time.

One example is the Billion Graves project:

<https://nb.billiongraves.com/cemetery/Pambula-Cemetery/152306>

You can sign up on this website and add entries from your own family or local cemetery.

A similar website is Findagrave:

<https://www.findagrave.com/cemetery/2496457/pambula-cemetery>

Further information on Bega Valley cemeteries is available at Bega Library branches:

Monumental Inscriptions, Known Graves and War Memorials in the Bega Valley Shire,
2010 produced by the Bega Valley Genealogy Society.
R929.5 MON LCH,

Prepared by
Dr Fiona Firth
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