**Rocky Hall Cemetery**

**prepared by Dr Fiona Firth October 2023**

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.

A visit to the Rocky Hall cemetery Show us traces of the lives of past community members including their spiritual beliefs and beliefs in an afterlife.

In the 1830s European squatters moved sheep and cattle onto the Monaro Tablelands and the coastal river flats along the far south coast of NSW. The Imlay brothers grazed sheep and cattle in the Towamba area in the 1830s, as well in the Bega and Kameruka areas. Their interests were taken over first by the Walker Brothers and then by the Twofold Bay Pastoral Association who were able to secure leases for vast areas of land around Bega, Kameruka and Towamba valley by the 1850s. From 1842 to 1849 Ben Boyd briefly occupied land on the tablelands and beyond and pushed a route along the Towamba River and up Big Jack Mountain to link his inland interests with his short lived enterprises in Twofold Bay.

The gold rush to Kiandra in 1860 meant an influx of people using the newly developing port at Merimbula. A map produced at the time shows routes from Merimbula to Nimmitabel and from Kameruka to Wyndham and Bibbenluke via Tantawanglo Mountain. This map also shows ‘Boyds Road’ from Twofold Bay to Cathcart on the Big Jack Mountain route, indicating a house of accommodation and an inn at the roadside at the head of the Towamba River.

Europeans who came to NSW and Victoria during the gold rushes of the 1850s and 1860s wanted to buy land from the government to start farming and other rural enterprises. In 1861 the NSW parliament passed the Robertson Land Settlement Acts which allowed men and women with some savings to buy land from the government using a scheme called conditional purchasing. In the years following the passing of this Act, land along the banks of the Towamba River and its tributaries was taken up.

As the new landholders took up conditional purchases a village grew at Rocky Hall with a hotel, a shop and, by the early 1880s, a school and a church. In 1884 the school had 60 pupils. Rocky Hall with its relatively isolated location always had a small population of farmers. These farmers took to dairying in the 1890s establishing a butter factory by 1899. The factory operated until 1922. Corn and potatoes were grown and wattle bark stripped for extra income.

The district’s population was highest in the 1890s to 1900s then gradually declined into the 1950s and 1960s. There were some newcomers in the 1970s adding to the population and building new houses.

With the growth of the village from the 1870s, Rocky Hall cemetery was dedicated in 1880. There were separate sections for the Church of England, Roman Catholics, Wesleyans Presbyterians, and a section for general burials. There are now 41 monuments but there are also many unmarked graves.

The older graves are looking quite dirty but please resist the urge to clean 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/>

**Symbolism of the Headstones**

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 Rocky Hall, 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://billiongraves.com/cemetery/Rocky-Hall-Cemetery/152517

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/2701421/rocky-hall-cemetery>

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

Monumental Inscriptions, Known Graves and War Memorials in the Bega Valley Shire, 2010 produced by the Bega Valley Genealogy Society

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