

Talking headstones, monuments and other grave issues!

An interview with George Gibbons – The National Trust of Australia (NSW) Cemeteries Advisory Service

Project	State-wide heritage service
Type of work	Strategic advice
Funding	\$22,500
Project cost	\$52,500
Local government area	State-wide
Applicant	The National Trust of Australia (NSW)

Project aim To enable the National Trust of Australia (NSW) to deliver a state-wide cemeteries advisory service with practical advice about the care and management of heritage cemeteries

Funding focus This program targets funding for the delivery of state heritage focused strategic heritage products and services with measurable impacts and heritage outcomes

"I am still constantly surprised at how faithfully cemeteries can represent communities and their history." Dr George Gibbons



George Gibbons (right, obscured) advising descendants of the original settler on restitution of his isolated grave near Bombala



George Gibbons examines a grave at Katoomba General Cemetery

A long-time interest in monumental stone, the history of European settlement and mining history led retired geologist and academic Dr George Gibbons to working with the National Trust six years ago to provide a cemeteries advisory service

The Heritage Office recently spoke to George about his work with the National Trust of Australia (NSW)

Are there any particular cultural or physical characteristics that are associated with cemeteries in NSW?

In most respects, the physical characteristics of NSW cemeteries (and

Australian cemeteries generally) are derived from British practices, especially church cemeteries.

Not having an established church, however, Australia has many "general cemeteries" with different denominational sections on the one area of Crown land. From pioneering times we also have a great many lone graves and small, privately owned family cemeteries.

Do you have a favourite cemetery in terms of its historical or aesthetic attributes?

My favourite cemetery would have to be [Gore Hill Memorial Cemetery](#) on Sydney's North Shore. Years ago I was involved with the National Trust's campaign to save this quite wonderful site and I am now one of the trustees. It was created when the Lower North Shore declared the planned Rookwood site to be too remote for its needs, so in some ways Gore Hill is Rookwood in miniature.

What do you consider as the main challenges and highlights of the cemeteries advisory service provided by the National Trust?

Often it is my task to work closely with people involved with maintenance of a particular monument or a proposed cemetery clean-up and suggest alternative solutions to problems. For example this may involve cutting off an offending root that is causing a headstone to tilt, rather than felling a whole tree; or waiting until grave plantings can be identified in the springtime before pulling out "all the weeds".

The main challenge of my role is to achieve these results sometimes within a fifteen minute phone call. A major highlight is when these people "see the light" in such issues, or when they ring back later to report satisfactory progress.

What are the major issues covered in the revised conservation guidelines - particularly in relation to legislative and technological changes?

The National Trust has published guidelines for cemetery conservation. These guidelines have been updated and will be reissued in illustrated form later in 2008. Some technical details have been changed to reflect changes in practice, such as the use of stainless steel dowels rather than bronze in monument repair, and the use of concrete piles to support monuments. The guidelines also include important regulatory changes such as the Heritage Office's standard exemptions for maintenance works, and legislation which now enables cemeteries to use previously reserved but unused burial plots.

Is there much community interest in the work of the National Trust and the cemeteries advisory service?

Yes, there is growing interest in this area by councils, local community organisations, historians and private individuals researching their family

trees.

One of the pleasing trends has been the improved management of general cemeteries by local councils who now have formal regulations governing monuments in their historic cemeteries.

Do you give many public talks and presentations on the work of the National Trust Advisory Service

I am often called upon to make presentations and give talks on the advisory service. In recent years I have spoken to groups at Parramatta, East Gresford, Braidwood, Mittagong and Wollongong and in 2008 I am already booked to speak at Gore Hill, Warialda and the Upper Hunter. These groups include cemetery 'friends' groups, family history and historical societies, local councils, and cemetery trusts. In most cases the general public is invited, and this is in some ways the most important group, because church, council and government support for conservation depends ultimately on community support.

Have there been any surprises in field visits to cemeteries?

Surprises in cemeteries range from catching canoodling couples, to coming across black snakes, to finding unusual flowers from neglected grave plantings among the undergrowth. There have also been a few cases where I have unexpectedly met people in cemeteries with whom I've previously only had telephone contact. Also some monumental inscriptions are a surprise, like one of a gunshot victim at Ophir near Orange, with a pseudo-biblical curse from the grave: "And in his anger he slew him but the Lord visited him with a sore affliction for the same".

How important is the local cemetery to a community's understanding of its cultural heritage and identity?

I am still constantly surprised at how faithfully a cemetery can represent and reflect a community and its history. The inscriptions are important, but many other features also tell a story. Monumental styles reflect the good times and the hard times; relative numbers of graves show the highs and lows of population; groups of children's graves denote epidemics.

In a more general sense, there are changes over time reflected in cemeteries: in religious attitudes, architectural styles, sentimentality, and public demonstrativeness. Similarly the growth of nationalism is shown by the use of native plants on tombstones in late Victorian times. Regional preferences are similarly reflected. The trees in most cemeteries date from long before the local council took on their management, but it is amazing how often the dominant trees in the cemetery are also found in the local park or the main street.

How do you deal with cultural or religious sensitivities in working with trusts and other organisations?

Cultural and religious sensitivities are rarely an issue, though they obviously require respect.

Local disputes or jealousies between interested parties are potential problems, as is the city-country divide. It is important always to stress and respect local ownership of a project, both to encourage trust and to retain enthusiasm for the future.

How significant has support from the Heritage Office funding program been to aid the National Trust's cemeteries advisory service.

The financial assistance provided through this funding grant enables the National Trust to provide a cemeteries' advisory service that is both a useful resource and also a way of promoting cemeteries conservation.

The National Trust's advisory service and the Heritage Office work closely to support each other's objectives. The Trust's information database on cemeteries covers all general cemeteries in the state as well as most churchyards, family cemeteries and lone graves and the Heritage Office is able to call upon this valuable resource when comparing site values in evaluating proposals for grant funding.

With thanks to Dr George Gibbons, The National Trust of Australia (NSW)