



TOWN OF GAWLER

# Gawler's Cemeteries

Pioneer Place,  
Willaston Cemetery  
and  
Church of England Cemetery

## **Gawler Public Library**

Institute Building, 91 Murray Street  
Gawler SA 5118  
Phone (08) 8522 9213 Fax (08) 8522 9212  
Email: [library@gawler.sa.gov.au](mailto:library@gawler.sa.gov.au)  
Website: [www.gawler.sa.gov.au](http://www.gawler.sa.gov.au)



2.

**Pioneer Place (Park)** was not always the beautiful open space that it is today. It was the site of Gawler's first cemetery. The land was allocated for the town's public cemetery on the original plan by Colonel William Light. It was a rectangular section on a hilltop, bounded by Murray Street, Horrocks Place and Union Street. The first recorded burial was two-year old Ellen Fielding on 10 January, 1847. Until 1857, when the first Gawler Council was incorporated, the cemetery had no form of management and the records of burials were kept by the Minister of St George's Anglican Church. The land was used for burials until 1870; graves were dug in all parts of the cemetery, many having headstones and iron railing fences. A total of 471 people, a large number of them children, were interred in this cemetery. Henry Calton is reputed to have read the service at these early burials.



Pioneer Place, Gawler, 2008  
(Town of Gawler, Gawler Heritage Collection)

Health issues prompted the closure of the cemetery. A petition from residents during 1858 motivated Council to apply for a grant of 50 acres at Willaston for a new cemetery. The Surveyor-General thought that this was an unnecessarily large portion of land and limited the cemetery to 10 acres only, with a surrounding band of land. By 1860, the ratepayers of Gawler were calling for the closure of the old cemetery as it was generally thought that its close proximity to the town was a health hazard and that the unkempt contaminated ground would transmit disease to the residents. Sentiments were mixed, however, and at a meeting held at the Prince Albert Hotel during May 1861, the resolution was passed: 'That in the opinion of this meeting it would be unwise at the present time to close the cemetery and would be a great hardship to compel every person to bury their dead at so great a distance as the intended new cemetery'.

3.

At a Council meeting during 1863, ratepayers presented a petition containing over 200 signatures requesting that the cemetery be closed. In a report in *The Bunyip* of February 6, 1864, the cemetery is described as 'an evil which is a growing one and should be dealt with at once. Every family burying a relative therein feels a vested right in the ground, and the longer it is left open the greater will be the outcry at its closure'. In July 1864, a resolution was passed by Council which prohibited further burials at the cemetery. By July 1866, Council had reached unanimous agreement that the new cemetery should be immediately opened and that a curator would be employed to dig graves, keep accounts and plant gardens. *The Bunyip* of July 20, 1866, contained an announcement that the new cemetery would be open on 1 August, 1866 and that leases were available on allotments. The old cemetery remained open until June 1870 when the following appeared in the Government Gazette (6 June 1868): 'Proclamation ordering, directing and proclaiming that the cemetery shall be totally closed and cease to be used as a cemetery saving nevertheless the right of all persons who have acquired a portion of the said cemetery for a vault or grave to bury any member of their families therein'.

The last part of the clause caused concern to members of Council and many people believed that they could go on burying family members in the old cemetery. A solicitor was consulted and his opinion was that the original trust deed for the town did not confer upon any person the right to any portion of the Cemetery. This left the way clear for the cemetery to be closed.

The McKinlay Memorial was erected at the entrance to the old cemetery in 1875. Shortly after, the slate wall was built behind the memorial to prevent earth falling against it and causing discolouration to the stone.



McKinlay Memorial, Murray Street, Gawler, date unknown  
(Town of Gawler, Gawler Heritage Collection)

During the years after closure, the cemetery was left in a neglected state. Broken down fences were removed and large pepper trees which were growing on Murray Street were removed to prevent damage to the wall. A decision by Council in 1908 to move the remaining headstones and railings to one small area and to level the rest for planting with ornamental trees and shrubs resulted in a writ being taken out against Council to prevent the action. The legal battle continued into 1911 when an injunction was issued to restrain the Council from removing the headstones from graves. The matter was settled out of court and Council agreed not to remove any more headstones or railings.

After World War I, the Wattle Day League established a wattle Memorial Grove to fallen soldiers within the grounds of Gawler Oval. When the trees failed to thrive, the Grove was moved to the old cemetery. As the Wattle Day League went into decline, the garden began to revert to wilderness until the RSL assumed responsibility for maintenance. A boxthorn hedge which had been planted on the boundaries of the cemetery in 1892, was removed from two sides. A cyclone fence was erected, neglected tombstones were recovered and repaired and placed in a row in the remaining recognisable portion of the Cemetery.

#### **The Wattle Day League**

On 1 September 1910, the first Wattle Day was celebrated in Sydney, Adelaide and Melbourne. The aim of the League was to have the wattle accepted throughout Australia as the nation's native flower and to be viewed as a symbol of 'home, country, kindred, sunshine and love - every instinct that the heart most deeply enshrines'. (Sydney Morning Herald, September 1, 1910)

The area remained neglected until 1933 when the old cemetery was dedicated as parkland, except for a strip of land 320 feet long and 12 feet wide on the eastern boundary where headstones were stacked. During 1936, this strip of land was also dedicated as parkland. Gawler Progress Association had approached Gawler Council to start the process by which Councils could obtain possession of such areas and convert them into places of beauty instead of lying neglected, with no real ownership.

Following the proclamation that the old cemetery would revert to parkland, the Progress Association proposed that the Centenary of the State of South Australia was an appropriate time to rename the area 'Pioneer Place'. This occurred during a dedicatory service which was held on 4 October, 1936.

5.

State Town Planner, Harry Chalklan Day, presented the first draft plan for Pioneer Place in May 1937. It included an entrance structure, a cross of memorial formed by concrete edging with rosemary planted inside the cross, headstones removed to a memorial strip screened by a hedge on the eastern boundary, and fences on the eastern and southern sides. In the centre of the area, six palms in a circle with another in the middle would be planted to represent the mayor and six councillors.

Gawler celebrated its Centenary in 1939 during a week of festivities. The culmination of the week's events was a pilgrimage to Pioneer Place where a ceremony of dedication to the pioneers of Gawler was held and the proclamation declaring the area a park was read by the Mayor. Profits from the Centenary celebration were used for improvements to Pioneer Place.

Pioneer Place has been maintained by various groups with Council having overall management responsibility. Prior to World War II, the RSL provided voluntary assistance. This was continued by the Improvement Committee and Common Cause volunteers during the war years. They cleared the reserve of weeds, especially around and inside the memorial cross and in the Soldiers' Memorial Gardens. During the 1950s, the Apex Club planted lawns and roses and in 1989 the Rotary Club of Gawler erected a stone cairn with the names of the people who were buried in the old cemetery listed on bronze plaques.



Pioneer Place, Gawler, 2008  
(Town of Gawler, Gawler Heritage Collection)

6.

Over the years there have been a number of proposals for additional uses of the area: construction of a Cross of Sacrifice (1928); relocation of the James Martin statue to the entrance (1937); construction of the Gawler Free Kindergarten (1950 - 1951); car park (1950-1951); relocation of the McKinlay Memorial to a central position, the wall removed and the ground sloped for grass planting (1969).

More recently (1997-1998), headstones which had been stored for many years at the Council depot, were cemented onto bases near the entrance to the Willaston Cemetery.



Headstones  
relocated from  
Pioneer Place to  
the entrance of  
Willaston  
Cemetery, 2008  
(Town of Gawler,  
Gawler Heritage  
Collection)

Pioneer Place, date  
unknown  
(Town of Gawler,  
Gawler Heritage  
Collection)





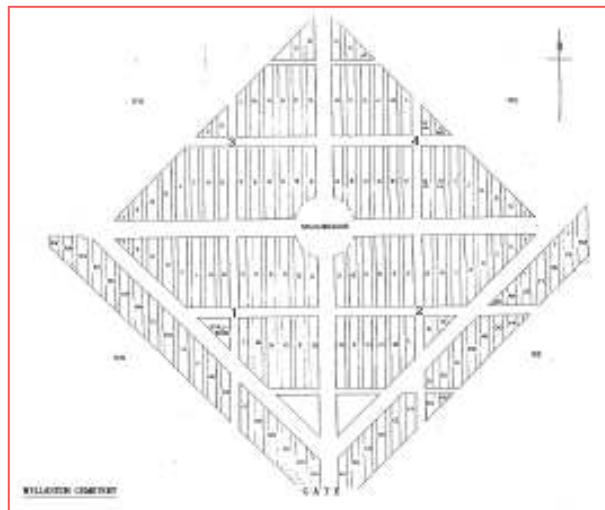
7.

**Willaston Cemetery** situated at Dawkins Avenue, Willaston, was opened on 1 August, 1866. It was one of the first large public cemeteries to be established after the passing of the Regulation of Cemeteries Act in 1862. It reflects contemporary social attitudes towards the location, management and layout of cemeteries in the mid-19th century. It is noted for its high quality monuments and outstanding collection of cast-iron work associated with Gawler's role as an industrial centre.

Willaston Cemetery, 2008  
(Town of Gawler, Gawler Heritage Collection)



The first burial occurred on 18 November, 1866 and was that of Mrs Sarah Woodward Clement, aged 35 years, first wife of Edward Clement, Gawler Councillor and Mayor. The funeral was attended by a reported 700 people, some of whom would have been transported in the sixty vehicles that followed the hearse. *The Bunyip* described the cemetery at this time as a pretty place, securely fenced with an iron gate at the entrance and turnstiles on either side for pedestrians.



Plan of Willaston Cemetery  
(Town of Gawler, Gawler Heritage Collection)

Willaston Cemetery occupies almost fourteen acres, including the strip of natural bushland which surrounds it. The grid layout of the cemetery is in the shape of a diamond with the points at north, south, east and west. Two roadways cross the centre of the diamond grid and meet in the middle. From the two main roadways, a series of paths run amongst the graves. The walls of the columbarium situated in a circular area in the centre of the diamond hold cinerary urns. The first burial of cremated remains was that of Margaret Wilson on 4 June, 1933.

### Still Born Section

During 2002, Gawler Council heeded calls from the community and announced that a memorial would be built in the Stillborn Section of the Cemetery. After a number of stalled attempts the memorial was eventually unveiled at a ceremony on 16 June, 2007. Speaking at the unveiling, Councillor Lillian Bartlett said that it was hoped that the memorial would provide a private and dedicated place where grieving families might find solace.



Stillborn Memorial at Willaston Cemetery, 2008  
(All photographs: Town of Gawler, Gawler Heritage Collection)



The cemetery does not have specific denominational areas however at a Council meeting on 31 March, 1868, the Reverend C. A. Reynolds urged that a separate area be reserved for the burial of members of the Church of Rome. A motion was passed to allow this to occur. It is possible that an area for Lutheran burials was also set aside, as were a number of rows for military graves, pauper burials and stillborn babies.

In 1885 Gawler Council, following trends that were occurring in other parts of the world, determined to beautify the cemetery by changing the bush-like appearance to one of a cultivated reserve where people could not only visit their loved ones but also take a scenic stroll and perhaps enjoy a picnic. Today the cemetery contains a number of mature eucalypts and pine trees. The belt of bushland which surrounds the cemetery was left untouched and has been identified as a site of significant remnant vegetation which was worthy of conservation.

### Remnant Vegetation

Willaston Cemetery is significant for its belt of bushland which contains a variety of rare, uncommon and endangered plants, including Mallee box, *Eucalyptus porosa* Woodland, that was once part of the old Gawler pine forest (1840-1860). Unfortunately, in many areas, alien flora has competed strongly with the indigenous herbaceous flora and only a small selection of the latter still survive there.



Remnant vegetation at Willaston Cemetery, 2008  
(Town of Gawler, Gawler Heritage)

The Gawler Heritage Study of 1998 recommended that Willaston Cemetery be heritage listed. The cemetery was described as an 'exceptionally fine South Australian cemetery' featuring 'significant iron-work and monuments; contains rare species of native flora; has significant historical associations; and commemorates many significant South Australians'. The cemetery was confirmed as a State Heritage Place in the South Australian Heritage Register on 8 November, 2001.

10.



Willaston Cemetery, 2008  
(Town of Gawler, Gawler  
Heritage Collection)



Some of the significant people who are buried at Willaston Cemetery are:

### **John McKinlay**



John McKinlay's grave at  
Willaston Cemetery, 2008  
(Town of Gawler, Gawler  
Heritage Collection)

John McKinlay was born in Scotland in 1819, came to Australia in 1836 and later was a pastoralist near the River Darling. In 1861 he led an expedition across Australia in search of Burke and Wills and reached the shores of the Gulf of Carpentaria on 3 May, 1862. In 1865 he led a party to explore the Northern Territory. On his return he took up residence in Gawler where, in 1863, he had married the daughter of his friend, James Pile. As a tribute to the memory of this intrepid and skillful explorer who was known as 'Big John', a monument was erected in Murray Street, Gawler, adjacent to Pioneer Park. He died on 31 December, 1872.

### **James Martin, MLC**

James Martin was born in Cornwall in 1821. For health reasons, James Martin migrated to South Australia in 1847 and arrived in Gawler on June 15, 1848 with a dray containing his young wife, some furniture and a few tools. Possessed of a natural ability for anything mechanical, James Martin commenced and built up a business in the town and at one time he employed around 700 men on a property that covered 18 acres. He began by manufacturing farm implements, moved on to mining machinery and finally railway locomotives and rolling stock.



James Martin's grave at  
Willaston Cemetery, 2007  
(Town of Gawler,  
Gawler Heritage Collection)

James Martin's influence on the town was far reaching over half a century and he became known as the "Father of Gawler". He was president of the Gawler Institute (1858-60 and 1867) and for eight years (1861-64, 1868, 1877-78 and 1887) he was Mayor of Gawler. He also held office in the Agricultural Society, the Freemasons' Lodge of Fidelity, the Building Society and the Gawler Rifles, and was a foundation member of the Gawler School of Mines. From 1865 to 1868, James Martin was the Member of Parliament for Barossa and from 1885 until his death in 1899, he was a Member of the Legislative Council.



James Dawson's grave at  
Willaston Cemetery, 2007  
(Town of Gawler, Gawler  
Heritage Collection)



### **James Dawson**

James Dawson JP arrived in Gawler from Alloa, Scotland, in 1868. In 1869 he built a wheat store at Gawler South and three years later he built the Albion Flour Mill to process the locally-grown wheat. He was a Mayor of Gawler (1877), a member of the Gawler Institute Committee and an active member of the Presbyterian Church. He died at the age of 55 on 14 January, 1882. The memorial at Willaston Cemetery was erected as a mark of respect by the people of Gawler and unveiled on 14 February, 1883.



(Town of Gawler, Gawler Heritage Collection)

### Cemetery gates and fence

The cast iron gates at the entrance to the Willaston Cemetery were carefully Restored during 2002. They are a fine example of the elaborate lace work that was typical of the foundries of Gawler.

### George Nott

Dr George Nott, MRCSE, was born in 1820 in Westminster, London. He migrated to Australia on the *Amity Hall* in 1850 with his wife and two children. They first lived in the Lyndoch Valley and arrived in Gawler in 1852. During the 20 years he resided in Gawler, he became one of the most popular and well-respected citizens of the town. He was said to be “genial, versatile, public-spirited and a skillful surgeon and physician with a generous disposition”.

Dr Nott was a gifted artist, theatrical actor, poet and writer of wit. As a member of the Humbug Society he became the first editor of *The Bunyip* and his *A short sketch of the rise and progress of Gawler (1860s)* was the earliest published history of Gawler.

George Nott was interested in political matters and served as Mayor of Gawler (1865). He died on 9 December, 1872. The monument of Aberdeen granite which marks his grave was erected by the residents of Gawler.



George Nott's grave at Willaston Cemetery.  
(Town of Gawler, Gawler Heritage Collection)



**Church of England Cemetery** at Cheek Avenue, Gawler East was designed by Canon (then Reverend) Coombs in 1861 on four acres of land which was purchased for £55. The centre plot contains the remains of Canon Coombs. Many of Gawler's early Anglican settlers are buried in the surrounding plots. The first section of the cemetery was consecrated in April 1864 by Bishop Augustus Short. The first curator was William Barrett. George Loyau, in his *Gawler Handbook* (1885), stated that the cemetery was 'well laid out and kept' and 'admired and approved by visitors'. He also commented on the attractiveness of several of the tombs and monuments.

The cemetery was not always well cared for and during 1992, a volunteer curator began restoration work.

Two small graders were used to remove weeds and ground cover that had



St George's Anglican Cemetery, Cheek Avenue, Gawler East, 2008.  
(Town of Gawler, Gawler Heritage Collection)

been allowed to build up over many years. This was followed by intensive spraying to maintain weed control. In August 1995, the Archbishop of Adelaide consecrated the rear two acres of the cemetery land, a task that had been overlooked for over 100 years.

Over the years, maintenance work has been carried out by a number of groups. Corrective Services personnel painted the wrought iron grave surrounds and planted shrubs and ground cover. The young unemployed people who were part of the LEAP program also assisted in the maintenance of the cemetery. They were responsible for painting, weeding and general maintenance and preparation of the site for tree planting and a watering system. Some members of the St. George's congregation supported the shrub and tree planting program by purchasing plants and trees in memory of loved ones.

The cemetery was re-named St Georges Anglican Cemetery Gawler; Est. 1861 during 2001 when the decision was made for it to be truly non-denominational and not restricted to those of the Anglican faith.

Some of the well-known people who are buried at St George's Cemetery are:

### Canon William Henry Coombs



Canon W H Coombs, date unknown  
(Source: Coombe, E H *History of Gawler, 1837-1908*)



Grave of Canon W H Coombs at St George's Anglican Cemetery, 2008. (Town of Gawler, Gawler Heritage Collection)

William Henry Coombs was born in England in 1816. He came to Gawler to take up the position of clergyman in response to the appeal of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel after a plea from Governor Gawler to send a minister. He left England with his wife in July 1846, having been ordained a Deacon. After arriving in Gawler, he began to conduct regular Church of England services at Stephen King's flour mill. He was ordained a priest in Trinity Church, Adelaide, on 29 June 1848. In 1854 he was appointed rural dean of Gawler and became a minor canon of the Cathedral of Adelaide in 1858. His ministry at Gawler lasted almost 50 years; he died suddenly at the age of 79 on 23 August, 1896.

In addition to the memorial to his memory at St George's Cemetery, three stained glass windows in honour of his dedication to the parish of Gawler adorn the eastern wall of St George's Church in Cowan Street.



### Richard Holland

Richard Holland, who died on 25 November 1881, was buried initially in a vault underneath the stone stairs in the conservatory adjoining the front part of Holland House at Turretfield. According to *The Bunyip* of December 2, 1881, that was his long-held wish. The interment took place in front of 150 people, the funeral service being read by the Reverend A. Sells of Lyndoch.

The deceased was encased in three coffins: a cedar shell, a lead coffin and a highly polished cedar coffin. When Richard Holland's will was read the trustees discovered that it required everything to be sold. On 7 December 1881, the body was removed from the vault and re-interred in St George's Cemetery.



The grave of Richard Holland at St George's Anglican Cemetery, 2008.  
(Town of Gawler, Gawler Heritage Collection)

### Beatrice McConnell



Headstone on the grave of Beatrice McConnell at St George's Anglican Cemetery, 2008.  
(Town of Gawler, Gawler Heritage Collection)

Beatrice (Trix) McConnell lived all of her life in Gawler. Trix was just three months old when her mother died; she was raised by her grandmother and aunt.

Trix never married and the one constant thread in her life was the community of the Transfiguration Church where she attended all her life. In her early years she was a keen photographer and stamp collector. Noting that the girls of the town needed a diversion, Trix took up the challenge of creating a Brownie and Girl Guide group at Gawler. She was involved with the group well past her eightieth year.

Trix spent her last few years at the James Martin Retirement Village.

## Roma Waite

Roma Waite came originally from Western Australia. She took up library studies and teaching late in life, working at various schools including at Thomas More College. She was appointed as a library adviser for the South Australian State school system and helped to set up and advise on libraries in schools. During the 1980s, Roma Waite went to work as a volunteer at Trinity College Gawler. She was responsible for establishing the library at Trinity and for many years she assisted with professional tasks. Her dedication and contribution to Trinity College generally and to the library specifically, was recognised when the library was named after her.



Headstone on the grave of Roma Waite at St George's Anglican Cemetery, 2008.  
(Town of Gawler, Gawler Heritage Collection)

Roma Waite was a devoted Christian and was associated with the Anglican Church in Gawler for many years.

## References

- Allery, Linda *Willaston Cemetery*, 1998  
*The Bunyip*  
 Coombe, E. H. *The History of Gawler, 1837-1908*  
 Ellis, D. and L. *Gawler 1838-1968*  
*Gawler Registers: Baptisms, Marriages and Burials, 1847 to 1870*  
 Interview with Colin Fidock, 30 October 2008  
 Kraehenbuehl, Darrell N. *Pre-European vegetation of Adelaide: a survey from the Gawler River to Hallett Cove*  
 Loyau, George E. *The Gawler Handbook*, 1885  
 O'Connell, Beatrice E. *Looking back: recollections of the Church of England in Gawler 1846-1996*  
*Pastoral Pioneers of South Australia*  
*Pioneer Place*, researched and compiled by Anne Halliday, 2004

Researched and written by Anne Richards, Librarian, Reference and Research Services