

## COLLECTION OF DATA FROM CEMETERIES

<http://www.brandis.com.au>

In 1995 I was living in a small country town in the South West of Western Australia called Cranbrook and I decided to transcribe the cemetery inscriptions from the local cemetery as my effort towards genealogy. A bit of thought, a shareware program called cemrec.exe and away I went.

Hopefully these pages will teach you what to avoid, what to do and how to do it. I just wish I had found pages like these when I started out.

### STEPS TAKEN

1. Approached the local Shire Council Office to get a photocopy of the cemetery map. The Shire councils in Western Australia are responsible for maintaining the burial records and a map of the cemetery is very often part of this.
2. Went to the Cemetery and handwrote, verbatim everything on the headstones, making a note of which grave site each was from by referring to the map. At the same time I wrote down notes to myself, eg: wife of deceased in next grave. Grave in disrepair. This grave is covered with flowering Sturt Desert Peas etc.
3. Went back to the Shire Council Office and handwrote a copy of the burial register. (Suggestion – ask if you can take a photocopy home with you, even a few pages at a time – it will save a lot of handwriting)
4. Having got all the facts together I then processed the data into the shareware program cemrec.exe (this piece of DOS shareware is no longer available and I have not found a similar one that is as good)

I felt a bit like a ghoul at the first Shire Council Office I approached, as the person I requested the map from was young and could see no sane reason for me to ask for a copy. It took a bit of talking and explaining how genealogy has a large following who often can not get to the cemetery their relatives are buried in. Or that the headstones may hold the missing key to just who 'John Doe' is related to.

It was finally my offer to donate a hardcopy of my data once it was completed that convinced her I was genuine and not some morbid creature of the night. <g> My next effort was much easier as I took along a copy of the previous cemetery's booklet and used that to explain why I wanted what I wanted.

The maps for most of the cemeteries I have done have been mammoth efforts – each one covering a AO page so the photocopying was done much more readily if I offered to help. One thing I found out quickly is that most people don't know that the lid on a photocopier can be lifted off, thus allowing much easier maneuvering of the original map.

I also found it was easier not to ask for the burial register to be copied at the same time – I would request it to be ready to be picked up at a later date. Always offer to do the copying yourself if you know how – it may be the deciding factor that proves you are serious or may take a load off an overworked office person.

## AT THE CEMETERY

### HINTS:

If doing this in Australia take the following items with you to the cemetery.

- Hat with a brim
- sunscreen
- water to drink
- pad
- pen
- long stick (to shoo the snakes away or part the weeds from in front of a headstone)
- a mirror (to reflect sunlight and therefore shadows onto badly worn inscriptions)
- mobile phone (call for help, arrange pickup of the kids if you are running late etc)
- digital camera (to take photos of the graves/headstones/features)
- MP3 player, some pleasant music or a audio book will help pass the time

Most of these items will fit in a small waist pouch and are well worth their carrying.

### Alternatives –

A hand held recorder could be used if you were careful of spellings and were used to dictation.

A hand held computer could also be used but be aware it will get very heavy towards the end of a day. Batteries may also be a problem and the screens are hard to read in bright sunlight.

I used a pad and pen because I could draw a diagram, sketch a graphic and have a written record to refer back to. If I do this again I will make sure to take the digital camera too.

As I did my transcribing in several trips a sequence of transcriptions proved helpful. I had the map copied to 8 A3 pages which I took with me and marked off as I went. In this way I did not redo any I had done the previous trip and I could see at a glance what was left to be done.

Standing at the foot of each grave I gained a sense of awareness for each grave. It was sad to see the small ones, the well tended ones gave a sense of caring and the overgrown ones made me wonder where their families are now.

I started by looking at the grave, was it marked in any way? Some had small fences around the barren ground, some had heavy stone covering the entire grave and some were simply marked with sea shells. Each had a character of its own.

I have recently discovered digital cameras and feel that one of them would have been a great addition. I could have then put the database and photos onto a CD and distributed them around cheaply.

Noting down the inscription verbatim made for a more time consuming effort but well worth it. I also noted what shape the headstone was, if there were flowers on the grave, any ornamentation was noted down as was the exact location of the grave.

My original page looked like this (except in my dreadful scrawl)

Grave #11 C/E  
section

In  
Loving memory of  
John DOE  
Born 1901 – Died 1944  
The Lord giveth  
The Lord taketh  
Blessed be the name of the Lord

Marble plaque. Grey granite surround with lichen growing on it. Crushed granite on grave.

Grave # 12

Our darling  
Johnathan  
Infant son of  
John & Jane DOE  
Died July 3 1935 – aged 6 months

Marble plaque. Grey granite surround with crushed quartz on the grave.

At the top of each page is the name of the cemetery and the date it was transcribed.

I have since made up a form that fits the bill better, and take a stack of these with me. I can fill in a few sheets, head back to the car to store them, grab a quick drink and head back out. It makes me take a water break – which I tend to forget if I don't have a forced reminder.

## TRANSCRIBING THE BURIAL REGISTERS

I have found that these vary as greatly as the cemeteries themselves. Some are written in neat legible handwriting some are written by people in a hurry. Always though the basics are there.

If you need to stay in the Office to do the transcribing, take plenty of paper, pen and your walkman! Yes, you will find some soothing music will help the time go by without distracting you from your task.

Again, transcribe verbatim. Include all that is written, even the bits that seem unnecessary for they will be the bits someone will ask for more detail on.

## INPUTTING THE DATA

This is where a bit of forethought goes a very long way. Consider how you are going to collate all this information together into a cohesive whole.

Card index?	Old fashioned but not to be ruled out if you do not have computer access or the group you are doing this for does not have one. Card index can be transferred to database at a later stage.
Database	Can be set up with as many fields as you like. Sort by field, search by field. Allows data manipulation. Reports can be generated on specific issues
Spreadsheet	Can be sorted by column to allow for alphabetical sorting on surnames etc. You can spread the data out
Word processor	Can allow you to key the data in, sorting will not be available unless you have one of the more recent word processors that allow sorting on tables.

## CARD INDEX

SURNAME, FORENAMES	Cemetery name
Birth date & place	Address of cemetery
Death date & place	Grave location details
Age	
Inscription:	
Remarks:	
Cross reference:	

Simple system that has been used by libraries for decades. Can only be sorted on one field at a time.

## DATABASE

Using a relational database you could set it up with several tables that interlink. You could use all the fields or some of the fields in your system. Using a flat database would be using the same fields, in a single file.

### CEMETERY TABLE

FIELDS	DATA
Cemetery	Cemetery is individually listed by nearest postcode, country, cemetery number - so Meekatharra Cemetery in Western Australia is 6642AUS001 if there was a second cemetery in Meekatharra I could then use 6642AUS002 etc.
Name	Cemetery full name
Address	Address of Cemetery (could use GPS data if known)
Address2	Nearest town
State/County	State or County where the Cemetery is located
Country	Country where the cemetery is located
Remarks	More details on description of location, state of repair etc.

### INSCRIPTION TABLE

Grave location	Grave Number, description eg: Grave No. 12, RC section, Right Front row
Legibility	I = illegible, P = poor, F = fair, G = good
Date	Date data was collected at cemetery
Recorder	Your initials, followed by date of birth eg: Jennifer Ruth Brandis, b. 27 Aug 1955 is JRB550827
Inscription	Verbatim wording on headstone
Xref	List where else you got information eg: Burial Register held at XXX Shire Council.
Remarks	Details and comments concerning grave condition, if next grave is related etc.

### PEOPLE TABLE

Surname	Surname of person mentioned
First name	First names of person
Maiden	Maiden name
Age	Age when died
Death Date	Date died
Death Place	Place of death
Date of birth	Date of birth
Place of birth	Place of birth
Relationship	Relationship to deceased – use 'self' if is the deceased

## SPREADSHEET

Using a column for each field, list the data down the screen. Sorting is available by column.

At a later date you can save the file as a comma delineated file that can be imported into any database you may later decided to use.

## WORD PROCESSOR

This can be more difficult to use, as the number of fields does not lend itself to a word processor in a table format. You would need to consider using a similar format to the card index, which would not be able to be sorted. Not a good solution as the idea of collection this data is easy access to specific data.

However this may be a good format to use if your intention is to simply print the information.

## PERSONAL RECOMMENDATIONS

At this stage I would recommend using either a database or spreadsheet for the data. Any of the newer word processors allow you to mail merge to a catalogue using your database/spreadsheet data. In this way you have the best of both worlds. A searchable system on your computer that can be easily exported in a printed format if required.

Remember to give a copy of your data (printed and/or electronic) to the relevant Shire, local historical society and library. You do not want to see all this work lost when your children toss out what is not relevant to their interests.