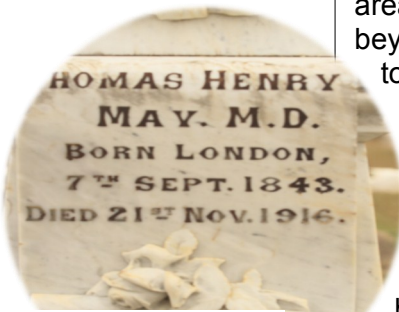


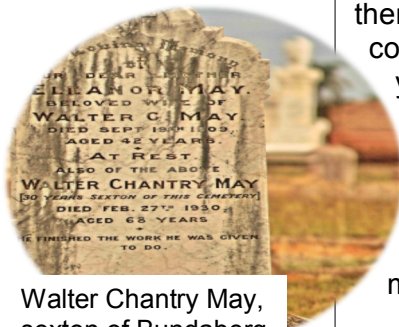
Bundaberg General Cemetery: a history



Alexander Walker helped choose the new cemetery site



T.H. May, one of Bundaberg's earliest doctors



Walter Chantry May, sexton of Bundaberg General Cemetery, c. 1900-1930



Richard Ruddell, Bundaberg's first mayor in 1881

“THE BOURNE FROM WHICH NO TRAVELER RETURNS”¹

The ‘bourne’ being referred to above is not the cemetery but the area of Bundaberg beyond the railway line to the west. Many people in Bundaberg’s early days did not think the town’s commercial area would extend beyond this border. That’s why Bundaberg’s original cemetery was sited very close to town; and why there was some consternation a few years later when a couple of forward thinking pioneers suggested a new cemetery be developed a few miles out of town.

The original cemetery in Bundaberg was on the block bordered by Woondooma, Woongarra, Maryborough and McLean Streets. The site was chosen by Thomas Watson and S. Johnston.² Unfortunately, as the records have been lost it is not known how many were buried here, or who they all were. However,

according to the local newspaper in 1923, a man named Gordon, and a Mrs Chapman, were the first to be buried in the original cemetery in 1869.²

Even from early on it was recognised that this location was not ideal. On 15 February 1873 *The Queenslander* newspaper published news from a Bundaberg correspondent in which it was stated: *The urgent need of a reserve for a cemetery has again been brought forcibly before us by the burial, almost in the middle of the town, of an old man who died here last week.*³

Clearly, something needed to be done. It took a recent arrival from Maryborough to provide the impetus. Walter Adams came to Bundaberg with his wife Mary in February 1872. He had experience as an Alderman on the Maryborough council which no doubt served him well as a civic leader in Bundaberg. (More on Walter Adams: [Adams \(Metropolitan\) Hotel](#), Lib News, v4 #3 Nov 2013-Apr 2014). Mr

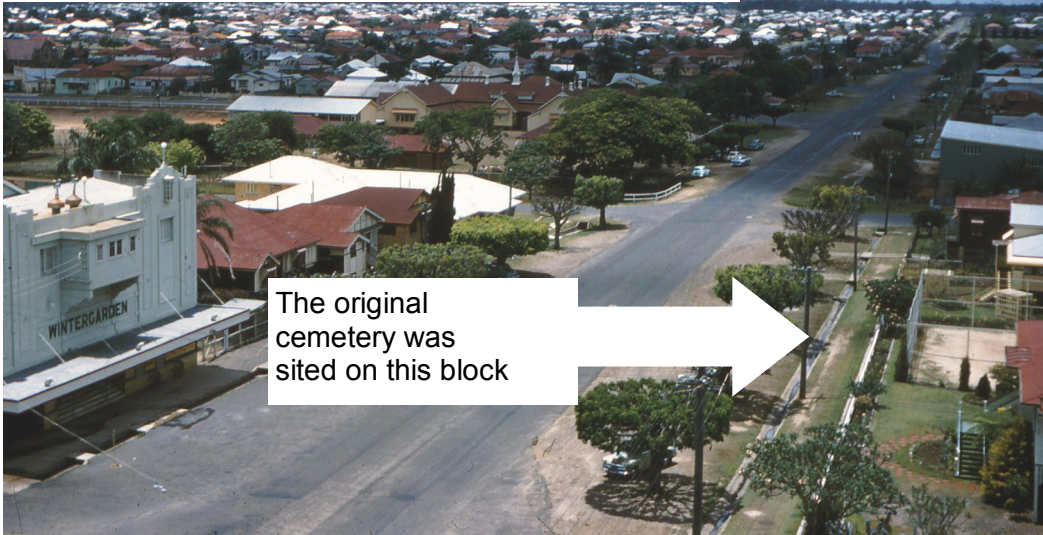
Adams helped form a Cemetery Trust and advised that, although “the future of Bundaberg no man could predict”¹, it would be wise to move the cemetery further from the centre of town. He had the support of Alexander Walker of Bingera, and together the two men chose the current site, about 3 miles (5km) from the Post Office, and applied to the government for its selection as a cemetery reserve.

Land grab

*We were not to get what we wanted without a struggle*¹ - W. Adams.

Soon after the land had been chosen and the application had been sent to the government, Bundaberg’s surveyor J.C. Thompson “cast covetous eyes upon it”¹. He proceeded to the Lands Office and selected 3000 acres with the proposed cemetery selection right in the middle. This land grab failed to impress Adams, Walker, et al. They promptly applied to the government, with opposition from Mr Thompson, to have the land set aside for its

bun01526: Maryborough Street, Bundaberg. Pre-1968.



original purpose. The government agreed and the land selected for the cemetery was to stand as such. Mr Thompson was allowed the surrounding portion of the 3000 acres he applied for. He later forfeited this selection as he found the land was unsuitable for agriculture.¹

The old burial ground

Even though the new Bundaberg General Cemetery was being used for burials from 1873, the old burial ground near the middle of town was still the resting place for many until 1881. In 1879 a correspondent wrote a blistering letter to the *Bundaberg & Mount Perry Mail*⁴, criticising the state of the old cemetery and the fact there were still people buried there. This correspondent felt that the cost of shifting the bodies to the new cemetery would be well and truly recouped by the sale of the land.

In August 1881 Alderman Adams moved *“that the Council request the Government to cause the removal of the remains of all bodies interred in the old burying place at the corner of Maryborough and Woongarra-streets to the cemetery”*.⁵ By late September 1881 the Mayor had received from the Colonial Secretary permission to have the bodies in the old cemetery removed and reinterred.⁶ A month later and tenders were called for the removal of the bodies.⁷

At their meeting on 2 November 1881⁸ Council took note of three tenders that had been received:

- Read & Willis £25
- J. F. Walker £35
- M. Meagher £45

Alderman Adams moved that they be forwarded to the Colonial Secretary and that the Secretary should also be informed that the value of the land was £60. Alderman O’Connell moved that discussion of tenders be left for the next meeting.

That meeting, on 30 November, was basically a repeat of that of 2 November, in terms of action on the cemetery. However, Alderman Adams did state that *“it was not creditable to have these ten or twelve graves in the centre of town”*.⁹ It is not clear whose, if any, tender was successful, and who removed the bodies. At Council’s meeting in January 1882 it was reported that the removal of the bodies from the old cemetery to the new had been completed.¹⁰

At some point afterwards a two-storey house was built on the site of the old cemetery. It was used as a doctor’s surgery and residence for a succession of different doctors until approximately the mid 1960s. In 1968 a Woolworths supermarket opened on the site, operating until 24 May 1986.^{11, 12} It is now the site of a number of businesses.



The site of the original cemetery, June 2014.

Developing the new cemetery

In the new cemetery's early days, and indeed years, it seemed almost impossible to get the government (State) to provide funds for infrastructure and improvements. The issue was at the forefront for the townspeople and stirred up much frustration with the government. The cemetery committee met at Adams' Hotel (now the Metropolitan) in early February 1876 to discuss asking for funds from the government. They elected to request £54 to complete the fencing and to apply for a grant of £255 for erecting a Sexton's house, clearing a further 10 acres, putting in paths and laying out the grounds.¹³

By 16 March 1876 the *Bundaberg & Mount Perry Mail* was reporting that the fence was nearly complete and the gates due to be hung. Several months later on 27 July the same newspaper reported on the completion of the fence and the gates, which protected the cemetery from grazing cattle. It was pointed out that the cemetery trust should not rest just yet - they needed a methodical layout, a plan of the grounds, a register of burials and a sexton in charge. Having these things in place was of significant concern as there was some worry that since the death of Thomas

Edward Thornton, then the only undertaker in town, on 12 April 1876, "few if any could tell the whereabouts of many of the graves".¹³

Another public meeting was held in July 1877 to discuss three very urgent matters, including a grant for the new cemetery. Walter Adams explained that the trustees had asked the government for £250 and been promised its



delivery, but they had yet to receive the sum. The trust had, to date, received only £100 from the government but had expended slightly more than that in fencing and administrative expenses.^{1,13}

Adams stated "he thought it was a disgraceful thing on the part of the Government to leave the grounds in such a neglected state, more especially as grants for this purpose could be at any time appropriated out of general revenue as the [Cemetery] Act provided..."¹³ It was difficult to earn revenue from the Cemetery while

it was in an unplanned and overgrown state which rendered it a fire hazard. Indeed earlier in 1877 a fire had taken hold and it was only because Mr Adams and his party were travelling past along the Bingera road that it was noticed and successfully contained.¹⁴

Eventually additional grants by the government over time did make possible

further improvements, including the building of a sexton's four-room cottage in February 1880, ready for its first occupant on 1 March of that year.¹⁵

The Sexton controversy

Challenging times were still ahead for the cemetery and its trustees. In November 1884 one trustee, S. Johnstone, was replaced after not attending to his duties. Around the same time the then Sexton, H. Austin, was relieved of his post with a month's notice after it was revealed he had been charging representatives of the

deceased for attending to graves without prior arrangements. He had also turned the morgue building into a room for harness and fodder and was accused of spending more time attending to private contracts than to his official duties.¹⁶

When the post of Sexton was duly advertised 34 applications were received. Four of the trustees met in December 1884 to consider the applicants. It was by all accounts a difficult task to choose just one person from the many fine candidates. A shortlist of three was chosen with the Chairman providing the casting vote which resulted in the appointment of a Mr Harrison.¹⁷

Soon after, Walter Adams felt compelled to pen a letter to the editor which appeared in the *Bundaberg & Mount Perry Mail* on Tue 23 December 1884. This letter was in response to something which had appeared in "another paper". In it he exercised his right to explain his action with regard to the appointment of the new Sexton. There was some concern that he had promised his support to one or more of the candidates. One of the other cemetery trustees, Mr Kendall, spoke to Adams in the days prior to the applications being read

and asked if a man named Harrison had approached him for support. Adams replied 'no'. According to Adams, Kendall then went on to say that Harrison was respectable and would suit the position well.

When it came time to nominate the person they thought should be appointed Adams put forward Harrison "...more from what Mr Kendall said to me than anything else..."¹⁸. In a surprising and shocking move Adams stated that Kendall then said that he didn't think Harrison should get the job as he was Catholic, that Catholics shouldn't be able to bury Protestants, and that the Catholics had their own cemetery. Walter Adams was greatly offended as he himself was Catholic, and he was also infuriated that a man "...should be debarred from earning an honest living on account of his religion..."¹⁸. Unfortunately no record of Kendall's side of the story could be found.

Free burials at an end

"The privilege of free interment of their dead hitherto possessed by the people of this town and district is now abolished".¹⁸

Free burials at the cemetery came to an end in 1879 when the trustees, pursuant to the Cemetery Act of 1865,

drew up rules and regulations for the cemetery. They were approved by the Governor and published in the *Queensland Government Gazette*²⁰, and also the *Bundaberg & Mount Perry Mail*²¹. Various fees and charges were to apply for burials, land for burials, re-opening graves or vaults, burials on Sundays, permission to erect headstones, copies of the register, and more.

The *Bundaberg Star*¹⁹ was critical of these new regulations and found fault with several of the new requirements:

- ◆ The Sexton couldn't dig the grave until he was shown a receipt signed by one or more of the trustees - "*Why should persons be put to the trouble of looking for Mr. Alex. Walker at Bingera, or calling at Adams' public house before they can bury their dead! The 'trustees' permission' indeed! Pshaw!*"

- ◆ The fees were "exorbitantly high"
- ◆ Interments on a Sunday were only

permitted between 2pm and 5pm - "*...during the summer months it may be advisable, in case of death from infectious disease or advanced decomposition that interments shall take place on Sunday morning.*"

- ◆ Plans for all tombstones and epitaphs had to be submitted to the trustees for approval and could be declined if the trustees thought it "inappropriate or unbecoming". Of the trustees the *Star* said: "*There seems to us to be altogether too much arbitrary power usurped by these irresponsible persons.*"
- ◆ The public were not consulted and the trustees were not fairly enough representative of existing denominations

However, the fees were here to stay and this marked the beginning of a more formal burial process and cemetery.

The Cemetery today

Today the Bundaberg General Cemetery is the final resting place for many of the district's pioneers, and those who followed and continued to build the Bundaberg and district

we know today. Trusteeship of the cemetery is now in the hands of Bundaberg Regional Council. This responsibility was originally transferred from the Cemetery Trust to the Bundaberg City Council in June 2001.²² Since Council amalgamations took place in 2008, Bundaberg Regional Council administers 9 cemeteries in our region.

Lawn Cemetery

The Bundaberg Lawn Cemetery is situated immediately beside the Bundaberg General Cemetery. The first burial was reportedly on 18 December 1965.²³ The lawn cemetery is, as its name suggests, an area where all the graves are covered in lawn, with a plaque at the head of the grave. By contrast the General Cemetery is a monumental cemetery. The graves have monuments up to 2 metres or so high and are often fully covered over, usually in concrete or marble. They may also have a fence surrounding them.^{24,25}



Thomas Garland, an early undertaker

RESERVE FOR CEMETERY, BUNDABERG.

County of Cook, parish of Bundaberg, portion
No. 29.

40 acres.

Commencing on the Bundaberg road three chains wide at a point bearing 210 degrees and distant forty chains from the east corner of portion 27, and bounded thence on the south-east by that road bearing 210 degrees twenty chains and two links; on the south-west by a line bearing 300 degrees twenty chains; on the north-west by a line bearing thirty degrees twenty chains; and on the north-east by a line bearing 120 degrees twenty chains and one link to the point of commencement.

« Cemetery reserve notice

The *Crown Lands Alienation Act of 1868*

"...provided that before any Crown lands are permanently reserved from sale for any public purpose, notice thereof shall be published in the Government Gazette for thirteen consecutive weeks..."

This notice, the first that could be found for the Bundaberg Cemetery, appeared in the *Queensland Government Gazette*, on 1st November 1873.²⁶

Hannah Elizabeth Thompson »

Surveyor J.C. Thompson's (the same surveyor who tried to stake claim on the cemetery land, see page 1) wife, Hannah Elizabeth, became the first person to be buried in the new cemetery in late August 1873.

She fell ill during a house party in Bundaberg. Over the course of the night she gradually became worse until she passed away at 8am the next morning from an "attack of paralysis" (stroke).²⁷

John Charlton Thompson died of consumption (tuberculosis) in Brisbane on 26 Nov 1878. He is interred in the South Brisbane Cemetery, Dutton Park.^{28, 29}



THE OLD BURIAL GROUND.—A correspondent writes,—“That standing disgrace to our common Christianity known as the old cemetery demands serious consideration at the hands of the clergy and all well thinking people. Right in the centre of the town, a few unkept graves and dismantled head stones mark the resting place of some of our earliest settlers and are ghastly reproofs of our callousness. Not only do cattle make in a favorite camping ground but it is subject to every other conceivable desecration. Can nothing be done to remedy such a state of things? Can the Progress Committee not take initiatory steps to arrange with the Government to disinter and remove the remains to the proper cemetery? The land would sell for far in excess of what it would cost to shift the bodies and would be the means of removing a sight obnoxious to the eye and painful to the mind. Failing this, surely a sufficient sum of money can be raised by subscriptions to fence the ground in.”

« The Old Burial Ground

The blistering letter from an unknown correspondent lamenting the disgraceful state of the original cemetery.⁴

man in charge. The house itself is a four-roomed cottage built of hardwood, the main building is twenty-four feet by twelve feet, divided into two rooms; the back or skillion part is twenty-four by seven feet also divided into two rooms, one having a brick chimney, so as to answer as a kitchen. There is also a verandah 7 feet wide to the front. The roof is covered with hardwood shingles, the main roof having four projecting gables, which give the place a picturesque appearance. The cottage is a credit to the trustees and contractor (Mr. W. Starkie), whom we understand has given the trustees much satisfaction. The house is spouted and supplied with an 800 gallon tank. A most complete residence in every way.



Sexton's House

The building of a Sexton's house in 1880 was exciting news. The installation of a Sexton at the cemetery meant that the grounds would be maintained and that someone would be on hand to protect the cemetery in case of fire or other disaster.¹⁵

1883 fire

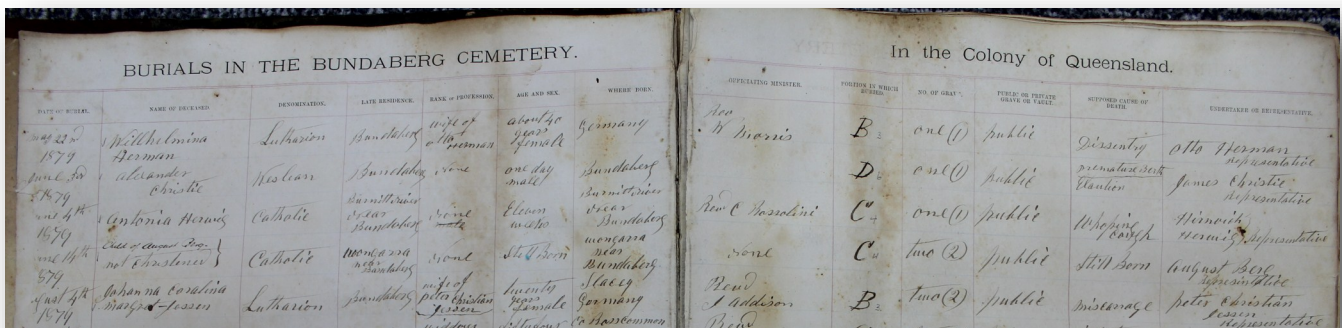


One of the worst fears for the cemetery at the time - fire. This serious blaze occurred in early September 1883. Only a Mr Chattin (who according to the burial registers was an undertaker) and his assistant were on hand to battle the flames which "...consumed their coats, lunch, and tool baskets, and scored the tombstones..."²⁰ The fire was successfully contained after an hour and a half of effort.

ON Wednesday afternoon a serious grass fire occurred in the Cemetery. The fire came from the roadside, and the high wind quickly carried the flames to the long grass about the graves. Mr. Chattin and an assistant, so quickly did the flames travel, were enveloped in fire and smoke, and hastily sought to save the cottage and the fences around the silent sleepers. A hard battle for an hour and a-half with the destroying element ended in its annihilation. There was no one on the ground except Mr. Chattin, and had he not been engaged there at the time the damage must have been very great. The fire consumed their coats, lunch, and tool baskets, and scorched the tombstones, &c. The grass is so dry now that it is impossible to tell how far a fire will travel once it gets a fair start. People should be very cautious in throwing down lighted matches, for apart from the damage a bush fire may do, the person known to set fire to the grass is liable to a heavy fine—and serve him right too. Mr. Chattin was much exhausted with his vigorous exertions.

Burial Registers

The Bundaberg General Cemetery burial registers from 1879-1995 have been digitised and made available from the [Heritage](#) section of the Bundaberg Regional Libraries' website. Records prior to 22 May 1879 have been lost. The first burial in the register, on 22 May 1879, is that of Wilhelmina Herman, wife of Otto Herman. She was born in Germany and died, aged 'about 40 years', of 'dysentery'. The registers are searchable by year, but the [Cemeteries website](#) can be checked for a surname if the year is not known. The early registers do have some entries which refer to "the old ground" or the "old Protestant ground", and this could refer to the original cemetery.



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 - ³ *The Queenslander*, Sat 15 Feb 1873, p10 (Trove online newspapers, <http://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper>).
 - ⁴ *Bundaberg & Mount Perry Mail*, Fri 28 Feb 1879, p2.
 - ⁵ *Bundaberg & Mount Perry Mail*, Fri 12 Aug 1881, p2.
 - ⁶ *Bundaberg & Mount Perry Mail*, Fri 23 Sep 1881, p2.
 - ⁷ *Bundaberg & Mount Perry Mail*, Fri 21 Oct 1881, p2.
 - ⁸ *Bundaberg & Mount Perry Mail*, Fri 4 Nov 1881, p2.
 - ⁹ *Bundaberg & Mount Perry Mail*, Fri 2 Dec 1881, p2.
 - ¹⁰ *Bundaberg & Mount Perry Mail*, Fri 13 Jan 1882, p2.
 - ¹¹ Rackemann, N. 1988. *Bundaberg and District Buildings and Structures with Notes of Historical Significance*. Bundaberg.
 - ¹² *Bundaberg News Mail*, Fri 16 May 1986, p3.
 - ¹³ *Bundaberg: a history from the newspapers 1862-1903, Volume 5: Government, Community Buildings*. Bundaberg Genealogical Association, 2009. pp1-6.
 - ¹⁴ *Bundaberg & Mount Perry Mail*, Thu 26 Apr 1877, p2.
 - ¹⁵ *Bundaberg & Mount Perry Mail*, Fri 27 Feb 1880, p2.
 - ¹⁶ *Bundaberg & Mount Perry Mail*, Tue 25 Nov 1884, p2.
 - ¹⁷ *Bundaberg & Mount Perry Mail*, Fri 19 Dec 1884, p2.
 - ¹⁸ *Bundaberg & Mount Perry Mail*, Tue 23 Dec 1884, p2.
 - ¹⁹ *Bundaberg Star*, Sat 24 May 1879, p2.
 - ²⁰ *Queensland Government Gazette*, v.24 no. 82, Saturday 19th April 1879. (Text Queensland, <http://www.textqueensland.com.au/gazette>).
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Photos: Picture Bundaberg, K. Browne, J. McCullough

Peta Browne, Bundaberg Regional Libraries