




SHIRE OF CHRISTMAS ISLAND

SUBMISSION TO	Special Council Meeting 8 October 2009
AGENDA REFERENCE	5.3
SUBJECT	Christmas Island Cemeteries Management Plan
LOCATION/ADDRESS/APPLICANT	N/A
FILE REFERENCE	5.2.1
INTEREST DISCLOSURE	Nil
DATE OF REPORT	7 October 2009
AUTHOR	Chew Boon Beng, Manager Community Services
SIGNATURE OF AUTHOR	

RECOMMENDATION

That Council resolves to endorse the Shire of Christmas Island Heritage Management Plan – Cemeteries 2009 – 2019 (the Plan) as prepared by Ms Helene Bartleson.

That Council resolves to endorse all / part / selective recommendations as outlined in the Plan.

BACKGROUND

The Shire of Christmas Island has taken an active role in the management and maintenance of all cemeteries on Christmas Island since 1992 as a Cemeteries Board. The then Cemeteries Board comprised of 3 major ethnic community representatives and Council officers.

The Cemeteries Management Plan was the subject item presented for discussion by the former Chief Executive Officer at the Special Meeting of Council held on 12 May 2009.

At the Ordinary Meeting of Council held on 28 July 2009, the draft Cemeteries Management Plan was tabled for Council information. However, no formal decision has been reached on the matter.

COMMENT

The Draft Cemeteries Management Plan is again presented for Council deliberation.

STATUTORY ENVIRONMENT

Local Government Act 1995 (WA) (CI) and Cemeteries Act 1986 (WA) (CI).

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

There are policy implications arising from this matter.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

There are financial implications arising from this matter. An amount of \$10,000 is being budgeted in the 2009-2010 Budget to commence implementation of the Plan.

STRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS & MILESTONES

Objective 1 of the Government Environment is to "Provide good governance in line with the requirements of the Local Government Act and the culture of the Island".

Objective 4 of the same Environment is to "Effectively manage the resources of the Shire in line with the objectives of the Strategic Plan.

Strategy S4:

Work with other levels of Government to enhance service delivery.

CONSULTATION

On going community consultation is required.

VOTING REQUIREMENTS

A simple majority is required.

ATTACHMENTS

- Shire of Christmas Island Heritage Management Plan – Cemeteries 2009 – 2019 Final Draft prepared by Helene Bartleson.

**Shire of Christmas Island (Indian Ocean)
Heritage Management Plan
Cemeteries**

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Heritage Management Plan
Cemeteries**

2009 - 2019

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May 2009**

**Shire of Christmas Island (Indian Ocean)
Heritage Management Plan
Cemeteries**

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Shire of Christmas Island (Indian Ocean) Heritage Management Plan Cemeteries

1. Introduction

Around the world, as populations grow, the pressures on land use increase. One of the most complex and sensitive issues associated with this is the treatment of the deceased. In some heavily populated countries, over the past 50 years, the limited availability of land has meant significant changes to laws governing burials and cremation. As a consequence, some traditional funeral rites and associated religious/cultural practices have had to change, and others have disappeared completely.

While this has been particularly evident in Malaysia, Singapore, Hong Kong and mainland China, Australia has not been immune from these issues. For example, South Australia has had limited tenure rights on grave sites for more than 60 years and Western Australia has limited its initial burial rights to 25 years since 1986. The government of New South Wales, which has the largest and most culturally diverse population of all the states, began a wide-ranging review in June 2008 with the release of a discussion paper on Sustainable Burials in the Sydney Greater Metropolitan Area¹. Across all Australian mainland states and territories, Shire Councils are generally responsible for the development and administration of cemetery management plans, using the guidelines provided under the **Cemeteries Act**². These guidelines include specific sections relating to both heritage-listed cemeteries and provisions for the religious and cultural needs of groups within the community.

Christmas Island (Indian Ocean)

In 1958, when Christmas Island became a Commonwealth Territory of Australia, the appointed Administrator assumed responsibility for the management of its cemeteries. By the early 1970's, a review was needed to address concerns about the availability of sufficient suitable cemetery land to meet the future needs of the community. Key issues and recommendations in the resulting report³ remain relevant today. However, two additional factors with a significant bearing on cemeteries management planning for the decade 2009 – 2019 have emerged more recently.

- i. The establishment of the Shire of Christmas Island in 1992, and consequently, the need for the federal government to issue a delegation of management responsibility for cemeteries in an external territory, to allow the Shire to formally assume this role.
- ii. The inclusion of Christmas Island's cemeteries in the exceptional category⁴ on Australia's National Heritage Register.

2. Cemeteries of Christmas Island

There are five cemeteries on Christmas Island. Two are closed and the other three are still in use. All are heritage-listed, with considerable historical, religious and/or cultural significance to Christmas Island and Australia as a whole.

Closed cemeteries

The **Old European Cemetery** is on a rocky lower slope of the escarpment, adjacent to the old Christmas Island Club in Settlement. The cemetery contains a number of significant graves, including that of Dr. Sara Robertson, with its Victorian style 'broken column' marble headstone, and the memorial to the unknown sailor from the HMAS Sydney whose remains were exhumed in 2006 for re-interment in the memorial in Geraldton, Western Australia.

The **Old Chinese Cemetery** is on the side of Phosphate Hill, high on the escarpment above the golf course. Although closed for burials, it features prominently in the spiritual and cultural life of the community. It also has strong religious, cultural and historical connections to the Waterfall Road Chinese cemetery, with both cemeteries located according to traditional feng shui principles, including uninterrupted views of natural features that symbolise the 'bridge' to China.

Shire of Christmas Island (Indian Ocean)

Heritage Management Plan

Cemeteries

Open cemeteries

The **Christian and Islamic Cemeteries** are on the lower side of Waterfall Road and the **Chinese Cemetery** on the upper side, looking towards the golf course. These cemeteries contain significant graves, memorials, headstones and statuary whose interpretation is in many ways, unique to Christmas Island. Together with the closed cemeteries, they have become a kind of sepulchral museum for examples of cultural and religious traditions which the island's isolation has helped to preserve but which no longer exist in those parts of South-East Asia where they originated.

3. Heritage Management Plan - Cemeteries 2009 – 2019

This plan, prepared in the context of *Section 1 Introduction* and *Section 2 Cemeteries of Christmas Island*, addresses the restoration, management and ongoing maintenance of all five cemeteries and the protection of their surrounding vista within Heritage Guidelines, for the decade 2009 - 2019. The Plan is designed for immediate implementation, with a review every 5 years, and a comprehensive implementation report produced annually. As a priority in the Shire's Strategic Plan and Works Program, the Cemeteries Management Plan will require a substantial budget allocation and the development of a sequenced implementation schedule. This will be informed by key elements in the Cemeteries Management Plan and supported by expert input from approved providers. Those Plan elements which are critical to cemeteries restoration have been marked with a High Priority (HP). Some elements will be cyclic or ongoing (OG) and a few will be one-off items in the 10-year timeframe. The Cemeteries Management Plan will also provide the basis for initiatives such as heritage tourism and induction programs for local and visiting personnel, and support the preparation of associated funding submissions.

Updated Cemeteries Survey Maps (HP)

As a priority, each of the five cemeteries should be re-surveyed, using a topographical map format with a transparent overlay showing the location, aspect, headstone and marker-altar locations (where applicable), names (where known), and plot numbers of all existing/identifiable graves and ashes spaces. Vacant plots and ashes spaces with numbers should also be included. As part of a longer term plan, the Shire might also consider clearing the proposed extension of the Chinese cemetery on Waterfall Road beyond the Gordon Bennett Memorial and including it in this survey, with plots marked. At least two sets of hard copies and two digitised copies of the survey maps are recommended.

Such survey records of unique heritage cemeteries are themselves heritage documents of significant value. They have numerous practical applications in the short to medium term and multiple historical/research applications in the long term. For cemetery management purposes, they will provide an accurate basis for ongoing record-keeping and inform major works, such as the appropriate location/installation of pathways within the feng shui tradition; the removal of the asbestos pipeline at the rear of the Waterfall Road Chinese Cemetery; addressing the problem of soil slippage in the Chinese and Islamic cemeteries; developing the landscaping and planting schedules of all cemeteries.

Soil Slippage (HP), Landscaping (HP) and Maintenance (OG)

A multi-faceted approach, using a combination of community consultation, structural and landscaping solutions and expert advice, will develop the most appropriate, lasting, culturally sensitive and cost-effective ways to manage this problem structurally, particularly in the Islamic and Chinese cemeteries on Waterfall Road. At the same time, to help stabilise the soil and smother weeds without the use of poisons, confer with National Parks and Wildlife North about the possible use of a combination of weed mat and the planting of hardy, low growing groundcovers with flowers or foliage in culturally appropriate colours which can be maintained with edge-trimming and whipper snipping. As part of a Heritage Landscaping program, the selective planting of trees or shrubs where the roots will not damage graves, is also be appropriate. The careful removal of soil from around those graves and marker altars affected by slippage should also be included in the cyclic maintenance schedule. This process, known as "releasing," should be carried out in consultation with the Islamic and Chinese communities. Maintenance staff should receive practical training in the use of appropriate tools and culturally sensitive methods to do this without causing damage.

Shire of Christmas Island (Indian Ocean) Heritage Management Plan Cemeteries

Cemetery Plots and Ashes Spaces

It has become necessary to standardise the dimensions of a cemetery plot or ashes space, in order to maximise and effectively manage the number of suitable grave sites and ashes spaces available, to meet the anticipated increase in demand over the next decade. (This has been calculated using Christmas Island's population and burials data⁵ from previous years, combined with projected population numbers, age demographics⁶ etc).

Plot dimensions

The size of a standard plot will be set at the measurements currently used. All grave surrounds, headstone or grave markers, statuary, offerings and Earth God altars must be contained within these dimensions.

A single plot will measure 245 cm long x 140 cm wide x 183 cm deep.

A double plot will measure 245 cm long x 140 cm wide x 245 cm deep.

A double plot is the same length and width as a single but is deeper to accommodate a second burial. This system, increasingly used in mainland cemeteries to conserve grave space, is known as vertical stacking. Rather than placing coffins side by side in two plots, they are placed horizontally one on top of the other, in a deeper single plot. Graves will be excavated from the existing natural ground level of the plot. The artificial raising sites by such means as additions of soil or high based platforms, grave surrounds and canopies is not permitted, as it is not in keeping with the heritage status and cultural traditions of the cemeteries.

Ashes space dimensions

Each garden bed is 2 metres wide. All free-standing beds are designed to accommodate two rows of ashes spaces. The bed adjacent to the Christian cemetery fence, with its limited access to the second row will be allocated to double and family spaces. The size of a standard space will be set at the standard size of 1 metre x 1 metre. The bronze plaque, any flower or incense holder and/ or flowering plant must be contained within these dimensions. Plants will be limited to either a rose or a miniature frangipani. They will be pruned in the maintenance cycle, as required, to contain their spread. Flower vases should be a maximum of 25 cm high and made of unbreakable material. Artificial flowers are recommended but those who prefer fresh flowers are encouraged to place them in a container filled with damp sand rather than water, to discourage the breeding of mosquitoes. As in the Northern Territory and Queensland, fixed containers of sand will be provided near the entrance to the area. No provision is made for unattended naked flames which are a potential fire hazard.

A standard single space will measure 1 metre x 1 metre, with a 400mm x 400mm cement plinth and a choice of plaque size, from a minimum 100mm x 135mm to a maximum size of 280mm x 280mm.

A standard double space will measure 1 metre x 1 metre, with either a 400mm x 400mm or 360mm x 480mm cement plinth and a choice of bronze plaques.

Either a single square bronze plaque with a dual epitaph, to a maximum size of 280mm x 280mm
or

A single rectangular bronze plaque with a dual epitaph, to a maximum size of 300mm x 420mm

Plot and Ashes Space Allocation Options

For those who are eligible for interment on Christmas Island, grave plots and ashes spaces may be allocated either at the time of need for a one-off fee, or by reservation, with a renewal fee payable every five years. Both the one-off and the reservation fees include a maintenance component. All fees and charges are subject to annual review.

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The one-off plot fee covers the cost of grave excavation, provision of top soil fill, and the closing of the grave. The one-off ashes space fee includes the installation of the cement plinth and either a rose or miniature frangipani, as nominated.

The reservation fee entitles the individuals named to maintain rights of burial or ashes placement in their preferred location. It does not entitle them to ownership of the land and does not include the cost of grave excavation, provision of top soil fill, and the closing of the grave or the installation of the cement plinth and nominated flower. The costs of headstones, altars, grave surrounds and bronze plaques etc are the responsibility of individual families. Within 2 months of completing the installation of these items, a close-up digital photo of the headstone or plaque in jpg format should be forwarded to the Shire for inclusion in burial and heritage cemetery records, so that they remain up to date.

At the time of making the initial reservation, the names of all individuals with burial rights to the plot or ashes space must be registered with the Shire. Rights to the plot or ashes space cannot be transferred or on-sold. If the plot or ashes space is no longer required or renewal fees are unpaid, it is relinquished to the Shire for re-allocation. The named individuals remain eligible for burial on Christmas Island, but re-allocation of the original preferred plot cannot be guaranteed in these circumstances. When fees are due, The Shire will issue a Reservation Fee Notice with a standard payment period of 90 days. If necessary, one further Reminder notice only will be issued. Responsibility for maintaining current contact details to ensure delivery of reminder notices and any other relevant correspondence will rest with those individuals who hold reservations.

The fees schedules and reservations system will come into effect from January 2010.

Preparation and closing of graves and ashes spaces: fee schedule

Single or double plot \$1980.00
Single or double ashes space \$500.00

Sample for comparison: In 2007, the average cost of a on Christmas Island was approximately \$1800.

Reservation Fee schedule

Single or double plot: \$800.00 (\$160.00 per year)
Single or double ashes space: \$400.00 (\$ 80.00 per year)

NB Mainland fees – sample for comparison

Single plot: Large country town: \$1000.00 - \$1250.00 (for 2 years)
Metropolitan area: one-off fee averages from \$3000. - \$15,000 or \$20,000

Eligibility for Burial on Christmas Island

With significant pressure on the amount of suitable burial land available on the island, it has been necessary to establish a basic set of criteria to determine the eligibility of those wishing to be interred on Christmas Island. Proof of eligibility will be required.

- Those who were born on Christmas Island, their spouse and/or children. They retain eligibility whether they continue to live on the island or elsewhere.
- Those who have at some point, lived continuously on Christmas Island for a minimum of two years.
- Those who pass away unexpectedly during a visit to Christmas Island may be interred there.

Headstones Altars and Statuary

All headstones, altars and statuary should be chosen to fit within the specified dimensions of grave plots. The maximum height for these items is 1.5 metres. To assist the community in the selection of durable stonemasonry, the Shire will seek and distribute expert advice on headstone materials and design features recommended for local conditions i.e those best able to withstand exposure to tropical temperatures, humidity and monsoonal rain, salt-laden air and sharp-edged dust particles. Engraved

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epitaphs on all headstones should be clearly legible at the time of installation and regularly maintained. They are usually highlighted according to cultural traditions, in black, gold or red.

Ceremonial Burners

On Christmas Island, the tradition of permanent ceremonial burners for the offering of spirit money and paper effigies is strongly associated with its Chinese temples rather than the cemeteries. During funeral rites and other ceremonies in the Chinese cemeteries, it is customary for portable burners of various sizes to be used, as individual graves here do not traditionally include a burner.

Restorations, Cleaning, Repairs and Removals

In heritage cemeteries, unintended damage may be done through inappropriate repairs and cleaning, using materials, such as chemical based cleaners, abrasives, glues, cement and the wrong kind of paint. To actively involve the community and visitors in awareness-raising about preserving the island's heritage cemeteries, multilingual signs will be placed in them to indicate that restorations, additions, cleaning and repairs, may only occur after seeking advice and obtaining prior written approval from the Shire. In general, at the community's request, the Shire will undertake the necessary work on their behalf, including the supply and planting of selected trees in appropriate locations. Where the request involves traditional practices usually undertaken by the community as part of cultural and religious festivals, the Shire will provide guidance and support, as necessary.

Deterioration, accidental damage or instances of vandalism should be reported immediately, so that the Shire can record and assess the damage and determine the appropriate course of action. No stonemasonry, headstones, statuary or other items, damaged or otherwise, should be removed or replaced without prior written permission from the Shire.

Repatriation of remains

The Shire will provide information about the repatriation of remains on request. All associated costs and the obtaining of the necessary clearances, approvals and certifications are the responsibility of the individuals or families concerned. When remains are repatriated, a small bronze plaque, provided to the Shire at the family's expense, will be attached to the rear of the grave's headstone, which must remain in place on Christmas Island. Plaque specifications including size and information required on it will be available from the Shire.

Commemorative Memorials

An application to erect a commemorative memorial or statuary in any of the open cemeteries will be considered by the Shire on a case by case basis. Generally, these would be expected to acknowledge or celebrate events or individuals of considerable significance to the people of Christmas Island and meet with majority approval. Their impact on the surrounds in the nominated location would be assessed, in terms of aesthetics and design, construction requirements, space and height limits, and meeting cultural and heritage requirements. For example, to meet the traditional *tiān dì rén* (heaven, earth, mankind) hierarchy of the Waterfall Road Chinese cemetery, the height of any proposed structure would have to be lower than the Coolies Memorial. Fees may be applicable depending on the nature and purpose of any memorial or statuary proposed, and its location.

Recommendations:

1. That the Shire adopts the 10-year Cemeteries Management Plan and its associated heritage preservation protocols.
2. That the Shire begins the implementation of this Plan immediately.
3. That the Plan is reviewed every 5 years.
4. That a comprehensive implementation report for the Plan is produced annually.
5. That the Shire develops a sequenced implementation program for the Cemeteries Management Plan, including community awareness-raising strategies. A reference group will

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be formed, comprised of three councillors (named), Community Services manager, community representatives nominated by the Catholic church, Christian Fellowship, the Islamic Council and the Chinese Literary Association, and interested parties coopted by the reference group, to advise Council officers in the implementation of the Plan.

6. That the Cemeteries Management Plan becomes a priority in the Shire's 2009 - 2010 Strategic Plan and Works Program.
7. That the Shire allocates a budget for the implementation of the Plan, including employment costs for Council staff engaged in cemeteries work.
8. That the Shire submits to the Commonwealth and Lotteries West for funding to support the implementation of the Plan, including both major works and ongoing maintenance components.
9. That the Shire establishes a list of approved specialist providers and agencies with the expertise to support the implementation of the Plan – surveyor, heritage stonemason, heritage values and maintenance consultant, landscape architect, agency/government departments providing repatriation of remains protocols etc.
10. That the Shire includes the proposed Chinese cemetery extension beyond the Bennett memorial in the land survey updates.
11. That the Shire adopts the Plan's interment eligibility guidelines to ensure adequate interment space on Christmas Island for the next decade.
12. That the Shire adopts the Plan's standardised dimensions of grave plots and ashes spaces and associated fee schedules and optional reservation system.
13. That the Shire's annual budget adopt the fees and charges set out in this Plan, with fees and charges to be reviewed annually in accordance with the Shire's budgeting process.

References

1. Sustainable Burials in the Sydney Greater Metropolitan Area Discussion Paper, Department of Lands, NSW Government June 2008
2. Cemeteries Act 1986 Western Australia
3. Cemeteries (Christmas Island), Miscellaneous Reports and Correspondence, National Archives of Australia
4. Christmas Island Heritage Review, DCPs and Development Guidelines and Heritage Assessment Register, Godden, McKay and Logan, November 1998
5. Register of Births and Deaths, Christmas Island from 1949, DOTARS (Christmas Island)
6. Australian Bureau of Statistics, Canberra