

War graves' status under review

By BRET CHRISTIAN

Karrakatta Cemetery staff are examining anew the records of World War I Diggers' graves.

This follows an outcry over the refusal to allow Claremont schoolkids to place crosses on soldiers' graves that have been stripped of their headstones.

With the Claremont RSL, the children have painted small wooden crosses that they were told could not be placed because permission was needed from the soldiers' next-of-kin (*Cemetery bosses refuse kids' war graves crosses,*

POST, July 10).

A spokesman for the Metropolitan Cemeteries Board (MCB) said the graves were private, and it was often difficult, if not impossible, to trace relatives.

The board told the RSL that where grave grants existed, it was not legal to give permission.

But Claremont RSL sub-branch president David Thomas said that if the grants had expired they were administered by the MCB, which could give its own permission.

Many graves without "grantees" had been swept up in the cemetery renewal program

and marking them with crosses would be respectful and educational for the students, Mr Thomas said.

The RSL has so far identified 47 graves of war veterans who were buried in the general part of Karrakatta Cemetery about 100 years ago, before the War Cemetery was established in the 1930s.

The MCB spokesman said that since the POST publicity, staff had begun examining the status of each soldier's grave.

Once the RSL gave details of a ceremony it wished the schoolkids to carry out, suitable graves might be identified and approved.

Family plea for pioneers' graves



Chris Douglas and Di Collins want to save their colonial ancestors' graves from "renewal" at Karrakatta Cemetery. Photo: Paul McGovern

The gravestones of some of WA's earliest colonists are being demolished to free up space at Karrakatta Cemetery.

Chris Douglas and Di Collins, two descendants of the pioneering Douglas family, are fighting to save the resting places of their colonial ancestors from "renewal" by the Metropolitan Cemeteries Board.

"We're not just looking at one set of families, we're looking at all pioneers," Ms Collins said.

"We have a shallow history of just a few hundred years.

"I think our early settlers and their families should be looked after."

Ms Collins and Mr Douglas are descended from Thomas and Phoebe Douglas, who emigrated from Cambridgeshire, England, to the fledgling Swan River Colony in 1853.

The Douglases were among the earliest settlers of South Perth and were instrumental in establishing the area's first Wesleyan church.

Thomas Douglas is generally credited with being the first orchardist and dairyman in South Perth, according to the chronicle *Peninsular City*.

"The Douglas family – Thomas and his many children – were the most prominent among the Wesleyans living and working on the South Perth foreshore," recounts the book.

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The family owned the land that was later occupied by the suburb's Chinese market gardeners, who grew produce on the foreshore from the late 1800s to the early 1950s.

"Douglas Avenue and Lake Douglas are named after our family," Mr Douglas said.

"With other families they built South Perth."

Mr Douglas said he and his relatives had raised \$2265 to extend the grant on Thomas and Phoebe's grave for 25 years, but that other Douglas graves were still under threat.

"One of their daughters has had her grave renewed already," he said.

Under the renewal process, new graves are created between old graves, and the old graves' headstones are removed.

The nearby graves of Douglas sons William and Frederick have expired grants, meaning they are liable for renewal.

Both were sea captains on the south coast, who helped chart the sea route from Albany to Adelaide, via Esperance.

Captain Frederick Douglas, who commanded the schooner

Grace Darling, was revered in Esperance for his daring 1894 rescue of the passengers and crew of the steamer Rodondo after it struck a reef south of Israelite Bay.

"The passengers souvenired the Grace Darling, or all that was movable, as mementos," recounts Maritime Albany Remembered.

"[Captain Douglas] was then fined 40 pounds for being late with the mail and 40 pounds for broaching the cargo, causing a lot of controversy at the time."

Chris Douglas said his and other colonial families' graves should be preserved in perpetuity.

"We think they should all be retained because of the whole family's historical impact," he said.

Metropolitan Cemeteries Board spokesman Andrew Fox said the Douglas family graves were in a section that was proposed to be renewed in 15 or more years.

"This may or may not proceed, given the demand for burial land at Karrakatta, but we mark the schedule 25-plus years in advance so that we have the greatest possible

chance of touching base with as many interested parties as possible," he said.

"Prior to renewal taking place there is a detailed community consultation process, a key component of which is the assessment of submissions received, information noted on the cemetery records over the years, and a historical assessment of the area and individual graves.

"This is then considered by our Monument Assessment and Advisory Committee which comprises a representative from the Office of War Graves, a genealogist, a historian and a heritage architect, to name several members."

Mr Fox said the renewal of graves was a delicate balance of maintaining history while ensuring Karrakatta Cemetery could still meet community needs.

"The [Douglas] family have opted to repurchase the tenure, so even if renewal did occur, the plot would remain unaffected," he said.

"This option is available to the majority of families, with many opting to utilise plots for additional family interments."