

# Clearing the Pioneer Section at Ipswich General Cemetery: A History

**Maintenance of the historic Ipswich General Cemetery had become a problem for the Cemetery Trustees in the mid to late 1970s. The Queensland State Government leased the cemetery to the Cemetery Trustees who had a growing debt and insufficient funds to carry out regular maintenance.**

During this period it was not an uncommon practice in cemetery operations to clear the headstones to make maintenance operations easier. The Ipswich General Cemetery Clean up Campaign, known as 'C Day', was organised by Rev. Father John Dobson of the Catholic Church with the full support and co-operation of the Cemetery Trust, the City Council, the Trade Union Movement, and many Civic and Church bodies. The initial C Day occurred on 18 June 1977, with approximately 1,000 people from the Ipswich community attending the largest working bee since the 1974 floods. It was reported in the Queensland Times under the heading 'Cemetery became sea of bent backs'.



*Queensland Times, 16 July 1977*

During this initial clean-up, many pioneer headstones were deemed dangerous and the decision was made to move them or lay them flat so that they were not a danger to people.

A year after the first clean up day, another was organised with approximately 150 people attending in June 1978 to clean up the cemetery. On this occasion machinery, reported in the Queensland Times as the "mechanised army", was used to move many pioneer headstones to their current location in the northeast corner of the cemetery.

However, the cemetery clean-up disturbed the graves of a number of important people in Ipswich history – for example, Donald Campbell, Ipswich's first free settler after the Thorn family; Maria Macarthur, daughter of Australia's third naval governor Philip Gidley King and wife of Hannibal Macarthur, Ipswich's first police magistrate and; Peter Brown, a highly-regarded Mayor.

By 1979, the Cemetery Trust had acquired a \$43,000 debt and threatened to resign because they had insufficient funds to manage the cemetery.

On 27 September 1979, the Governor appointed Ipswich City Council as the Trustee for both the Ipswich General Cemetery and the Warrill Park Cemetery.

## CEMETERY BECAME SEA OF BENT BACKS

IT WAS organised with the precision of a military exercise and undoubtedly was the biggest community work bee Ipswich has seen since the 1974 floods.

About 1000 civic minded citizens — or roughly one resident in every 70 — made a gigantic sea of bent backs as they tackled the task of clearing the cemetery.

Weeks of planning were rewarded when the volunteers — active school-age youngsters in T-shirts and jeans right through to determined septuagenarians in wide floppy sun hats — descended on the site of tangled grass and aging stone-work like bees around a honey pot.

Sons were there before then and by midday on Saturday the cemetery fronting Warwick Rd was a sea of bent backs as more than 800 engaged in a practical demonstration of civic pride and community endeavour.

Others turned up yesterday to do their bit. It was reckoned to be the biggest community work stint held in this State.

It was total involvement by a cross-section of the city's residents — individuals, family groups and organisations.

It was easier to list the local groups who couldn't make it than to count off the donors who did.

Many among the regiments of soldiers came shouldering their own shovels, rakes and clip-cops.

There was a military precision about the whole manoeuvre, masterminded by a command post inside the main gates.

### Toiled

The cemetery, with its 31,000 registered burials, had been divided into 50 working areas, volunteers being allocated their sections, each under the direction of an overseer.

Gravestone teams from a dozen women's organisations toiled side by side with a small army of trade unionists mustered by the president of Ipswich Trades and Labour Council Basil McKee.

Their work was co-ordinated by waste-while-you-are-at-it-organiser and head cook, and bottle washer, Fr John Dobson, better known to his troops as "Dobbo."

### Donations

City Council cranes, graders, front-end loaders, other heavy machinery and trucks were hired on the ground and operated by a host of council workers contributing on a voluntary basis.

Tradesmen, painters, builders and plumbers expertly refurbished shabby cemetery buildings with materials donated by business houses which also provided other monies to finance the work bee.

Calabrese women set up tea and biscuit centres around the grounds and the Hotel Association donated a bar, which served 5000, supplied drinks.

A luncheon set out under a huge canvas shelter was supervised by the proprietors of the North Star and Koorich Hotels. Others who had weighed in with gifts of cash.

Continued P. 2

Operation clean-up at the Ipswich Cemetery attracted people of all ages. Eight-year-old Kyle Vinco of Ipswich is pictured, lending a hand during the massive job.

*Queensland Times, 20 June 1977*