

White Hills Cemetery



Headstone inscription and the murder story of THOMAS McELLIGOTT in June 1859:
This new story retells the finding of an old headstone dated 1859 at a land fill in 1938.

OBITUARY

McELLIGOTT, Thomas

Date of Death: 6/06/1859

Date of Burial: 7/06/1859

Interment Number: 1734

Cemetery: WHITE HILLS

Section: D2

Grave Number: 1734

There are three other people named on the headstone:

- Mary Jane LANPHIER who is the daughter of Thomas & Anne. Mary married John LANPHIER in 1885 (M-599) and she died 2nd August 1913 aged 55 years.
- Anne Magee who was married to Thomas at the time of the attack that led to his death. Anne remarried in 1861 (M-3841) to Arthur Magee. Anne died 10th May 1917 aged 81 years
- Jane SCANLAN who died 10th Aug 1876, Aged 73. She is the

mother of Anne Magee. Jane is named on this headstone but is buried in a different grave in White Hills Cemetery.

A full account of the murder of Thomas McElligott in June 1859 can be read [here](#).

Images:

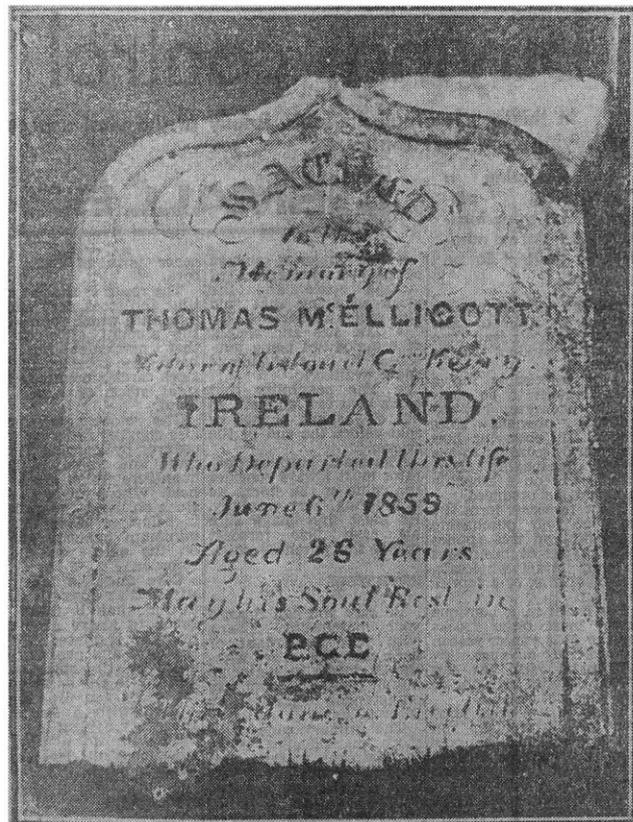
White_Hills_McElligott_1001.JPG

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Pioneer's Tombstone Mystery

From old tombstone.
Sacred to the memory of
THOMAS McELLIGOTT
Native of Listowl, C. Kerry
IRELAND
Who departed this life
June 6th 1859
Aged 26 years
May his Soul Rest in peace.
PCE
This stone is erected by his wife
Anne
as a sorrowful tribute
to a beloved husband.



Portion of the tombstone of Thomas McElligott, which has been deposited on a vacant block of land on Garden Gully Hill. McElligott, who was one of Bendigo's pioneer storekeepers, was brutally murdered by Chinese at Ironbark in June, 1859.

From new headstone.
In Loving Memory of
THOMAS McELLIGOTT
Native of Listowl, Co. Kerry
IRELAND
Died 6th June 1859
Aged 26 years
and his Daughter
Mary Jane LANPHIER
Died 2nd August 1913
Aged 55 years
also
ANNE MAGEE
Native of Limerick, Ireland
Died 10th May 1917
Aged 81 years
also
JANE SCANLAN
10th Aug 1876, Aged 73



Retyped from a clipping from the **Bendigo Advertiser** of Wed Apr 13, 1983
Story by David G Horsfall

Macabre murder, but goldfields bloodbath averted.

One of the most terrible murders committed on the Bendigo goldfield
happened 123 years ago,
and had a strange sequel 79 years later.

The murder, now long forgotten, could have resulted in the worst bloodbath in Australia's long and colourful history. That it did not is a tribute to the men of the old Bendigo; the same sort of men who managed to contain themselves on another occasion when the men of Eureka, at Ballarat, could not.

The murdered man was Thomas McElligott, a store-keeper, whose shop was not far from the present Chinese Joss House in Bendigo. The murder happened at a time when European miners on the Bendigo field were particularly hostile towards the Chinese, and it was committed by Chinese.

Not only that but there was a macabre overtone to the death of McElligott which may or may not have been lost on the people of that day.

Furthermore McElligott did not die immediately, but lingered for six days, and the assassins also injured his wife. The only man arrested was delivered into the hands of police by a Chinaman, was duly sentenced to hang, but managed to beat the hangman to the job.

A full account of the murder, its investigation, the inquest and trial can be read here.

Rumblings

Two other Chinese escaped the best efforts of police and citizens, and there were wark (*meaning pain, suffering, anguish*) rumblings of Chinese secret societies and an underground movement which facilitated their escape.

McElligott was an Irishman, 26 years of age. His White Flag store was near the Chinese camp at Long Gully and he had many business dealings with the Chinese there. He was known to let some of his customers buy on credit and, it was claimed, was heavy-handed when it came to repayments. In fact the week before the attack he had taken possession of five puddling mills from Chinese working on the Back Creek who had been unable to meet their repayments.

McElligott had rather curious prior history. Back in February of 1856 he was in partnership with David Barry in a bakery and Barry charged him with malicious damage. The charge was dismissed. Later that year (September) McElligott charged a Chinaman, Ah Hung, with the theft of a hen. The Chinaman was acquitted. In March of 1857 a German, Henry Muller, had occasion to take McElligott to court for trespass by McElligott's pigs which had got into his stables and even, his house on more than one occasion. McElligott was fined £5 with £1 damages. In June of the same year he was charged with assaulting one Wha Hing during some strife between Europeans and Chinese, but was acquitted.

Motives

Thus there could have been a number of motives, but the fact that the killing was obviously planned would suggest that McElligott, in Chinese eyes at least, was dealing very unfairly with those to whom he had advanced credit. The scene then was very different. McElligott's store was comparatively isolated and the Chinese lived in what could best be as a teeming camp - a mini world of its own with its own laws, courts and judges.

Unknown to the administrators of the goldfields the men they appointed as headmen at the Chinese camps were often also the leading dignitaries of secret societies which operated the hidden courts. These courts had a greater hold of the Chinese than the European courts, although Chinese, except when pressed by poverty into pilfering and petty thefts, were generally the most law-abiding of the goldfields citizens.

They had the power to inflict a variety of punishments ranging from monetary penalties, various sorts of physical penalties, and even capital punishment itself. The courts frequently exercised their lesser powers although their activities, naturally, were kept secret from Europeans. They satisfactorily dealt with most of the strife inside the camps, doubtless saving European courts countless hours of work, and thereby greatly enhancing the Chinese reputation for lawfulness.

The courts were generally held in temples - joss houses - which doubled as meeting places for the secret societies attached to them.

Rituals

The rituals of these societies, often startlingly similar to those of the Masons, involved the use of special clothing, language, signs and instruments. Among the latter were ritual arms, including halberds. Halberds were weapons which combined the functions of a spear and sword and were mounted on a pole.

They are still in ceremonial use, and their handles are, generally painted red. McElligott was killed with cutting instruments including a halberd with a red handle.

Three Chinese came to his store after dark on June 1, armed with knives and the halberd, which could only have been obtained from a secret society.

Thus, it would seem, that he had been tried for some wrong or wrongs of considerable magnitude by the society, sentenced to death and an execution squad ordered to inflict the penalty. They bungled their job.

Commotion

His wife, Anne, heard the commotion and came into the store screaming and received a number of wounds. The Chinese fled. McElligott lingered on and even had to suffer the amputation of an arm before he died.

Anti-Chinese feeling was already at a high pitch in Bendigo when the murder happened. European miners were upset by the way Chinese used water in their mining operations and had a number of grievances against them, including their exclusiveness (a factor forced upon them by being herded together in encampments).

Meetings that had been planned to protest against the Chinese were quietly cancelled and the more responsible Europeans urged restraint. The great Dr Backhaus warned his congregation in St Kilian's church against violence.

Tense

The diggings were tense, but quiet. Terrific pressure was put on the Chinese to turn in the murderers and unfortunate Chinamen suddenly found themselves arrested on suspicion all over Victoria.

The great Bendigo detective, Simon O'Neil, arrested all the headmen in the Chinese camps, ostensibly on suspicion of complicity, but probably to apply even more pressure.

Those arrested had the almost unbelievable euphonic names of Ah Sam, Ah Sing, Ah Song, Ah Pong and Ang Gue.

The Government appointed head sherrang at the great Long Gully Chinese camp was Ah Sam, a person who had enjoyed the highest reputation in both Chinese and European societies.

Ah Sam, however, was no angel. He lived in the chief Joss House and turned out to be the presiding genius of powerful tong (secret society) in Bendigo. Here it should be pointed out that most of the secret societies were benevolent and not sinister organisations.

Reward

Ah Sam promptly offered a substantial sum for the capture of the murderers. Then a frightened and starving fellow walked in out of the bush to the tent of a Chinese digger and asked for food. In no time he was handed over to the police. This fellow, Chew Ah Key, appears to have been the odd man out in the trio.

One of the strangest men on the goldfield at the time was a young Chinese linguist called Henley McCulloch. It was his contention that Chew Ah Key was a simple man from a different district in China who had been deceived by the secret society (not necessarily Ah Sam's) and by the other two assassins. Now all this happened at a very strange time.

Hostility

Not only was there growing hostility between the Europeans and Chinese but a major faction fight between two Chinese societies was coming to a head. Ah Sam appears to have been the captain in charge of one side and a Melbourne - based group spearheaded the other.

Both sides were busy importing supporters (enforcement men) from all over Victoria, even from the goldfields as far away as Beechworth.

It is thought that Chew Ah Key's accomplices were some of these men. He was able to name them, but that was not a great deal of use to the police and they were never caught.

Chew Ah Key appeared before the famous Mr Justice Barry (the same that founded Melbourne University and sentenced Ned Kelly) in the County Court at Bendigo on July 7, 1859, and entered a plea of not guilty.

Guilty

The jury took five minutes to find him guilty and Judge Barry sentenced him to hang.

He was to have been executed on July 18, but when the warders checked him they found he had hung himself from an iron bar on the gate of his cell, having first torn up a blanket and tied his feet and arms.

In October a Chinaman who gave information which led to his apprehension before Judge Skinner, they claimed the £100 offered by Ah Sam. The assessors decided in favour of the plain-tiffs. Ah Sam promptly went back to the Joss House and extracted the fine from the members of the society attached to it.

Bodies

McElligott, of course, was duly buried, and there his remains lay undisturbed until 1917 when relatives decided to replace the original headstone.

There are a number of other bodies in the same grave. In 1876 Jane Scanlon was buried there, in 1913 Mary Jane Lanphier and in May 1917 Annie Magee.

When the old headstone was removed it was taken to the monumental mason's yard and late in 1937 the mason decided to clear the yard and the stone was given to a carrier to take away.

It was found in May of 1938 on a vacant block on Garden Gully Hill only a few yards from the Bendigo to Eaglehawk tramline.

The discovery caused widespread speculation at the time.

The inscription on the stone read:
*"Sacred to the memory of
Thomas McELLIGOTT
native of Listowel,
County Kerry, Ireland,
who departed this life on
June 6, 1859, aged 26 years.
May his soul rest in peace.*

*This stone is erected by his wife
Anne
as a sorrowful tribute to a beloved husband."*

2nd new headstone at the White Hills Cemetery
The inscription on the present stone reads:

*"In loving memory of
Thomas McELLIGOTT,
native of Listowel, County Kerry, Ireland.
Died 6th June 1859.
and his daughter
Mary Jane LANPHIER,
died 2nd August 1913 aged 55 years,
also
Anne MAGEE
Native of Limerick, Ireland
died 10th May 1917
Aged 81 years."*

The text under the photo of the 2nd headstone:

This is the McElligott grave as it stands at the present time in the White Hills Cemetery. This picture is by the Advertiser's chief photographer, Cliff Pinder, son of the man who took the first picture.



Compiled by Pat & Ian Belmont
in January 2018 for the White Hills Cemetery