

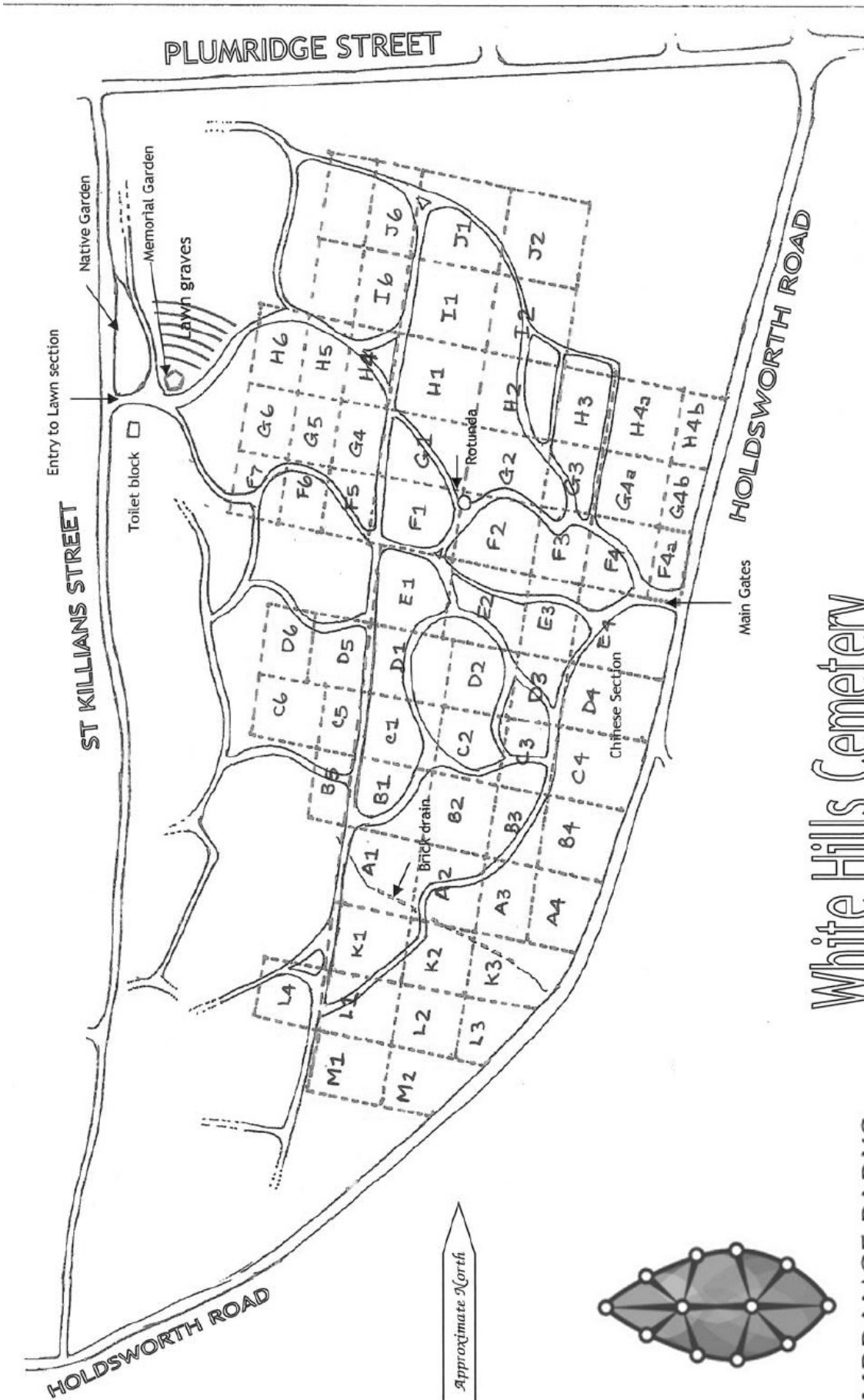
# WHITE HILLS CEMETERY – BENDIGO

## a Reflection



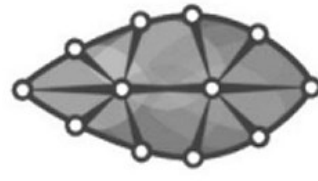
FIONA E. STANTON

In partnership with the  
Bendigo Historical Society Inc



# White Hills Cemetery

Holdsworth Road, White Hills



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# WHITE HILLS CEMETERY – BENDIGO

## a Reflection



*William Millar  
in Scottish dress as a member of the Bendigo Caledonian Society  
Photo Circa 1900 - courtesy Ron Millar*

A history of the White Hills Cemetery, the second largest in the goldfield town of Sandhurst, later called Bendigo, and the story of the dedicated early Sextons of this Cemetery. As the region of Bendigo became rich from the mining of gold and its township grew, so did the White Hills Cemetery. Mining accidents, miners' complaint and infancy death all played a part in the life and death of this hamlet community and its Cemetery. William Millar was the 2nd sexton and served for 34 years from 1877 to 1911.

## ***Dedication***

This book is dedicated to the sexton William Millar in recognition of his contributions to the White Hills Cemetery.

With the opening of the new gates in 1881, the Trustees with the hard work of Millar had transformed the whole atmosphere of the cemetery. It created a new distinct cemetery. Credit must also be given to the close contact with the Bendigo Council who had to plan and execute an extension to Holdsworth road to come up around the Bendigo Creek to join up with Plumridge Street and its bridge over the creek. The White Hills Cemetery became the only cemetery in Victoria where the Chinese and Jewish graves were seen by all visitors when they entered the cemetery as their sections were now at the front of the cemetery right by these new gates.

Previously all Victorian Chinese and Jewish burials occurred at the rear of a cemetery or in the least desirable locations. But it also gave the Roman Catholics a very prominent new section right in front of the gates leading up to the back Lodge. These new gates also allowed the future development of the extensive land to the North East with the Lutherans for the first time having their own denominational area. But most importantly now when one entered the main front gates all the inscriptions could be read as traditionally all tombstones faced the east and the rising sun.

Fiona Stanton

Some notes about the author

FIONA E. STANTON (BA GRAD DIP MUS STUD MTEACH)

Fiona is a graduate of the University of Sydney. She completed her undergraduate degree with majors in historical archaeology and anthropology before undertaking post graduate work in museum studies and teaching. She has been employed in historical research and education. She maintains a keen interest in family history and genealogy and is a descendant of William Millar.



This volume is the product of many hours of intensive research into Millar and his contributions to the White Hills Cemetery. It will appeal to those with an interest in the local history of Bendigo and surrounds.

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Cover picture

White Hills Cemetery - Main Gates from Holdsworth Road

Photo by Libby Luke

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## ***Introduction***

Cemeteries have social, historic and cultural values. They document the growth and development of our nation and contribute to our identity. The burial grounds and cemeteries around Bendigo reflect the rich history of the district. Following the first gold rush to the area in 1851 a burial ground was used in the town's centre at Bridge Street. This ground now lies under a parking lot within the old showgrounds. The White Hills Cemetery formerly known as the Lower Bendigo or Junction Cemetery, opened in 1854. It was used as a burial ground before that date and well before the beginning of civil registration in 1856. The Back Creek Cemetery opened for burials in 1858 in Carpenter Street and became known as the Sandhurst then Bendigo Cemetery.

Bendigo in the 1870's was on the cusp of greatness and its population was booming. Alluvial mining had finished more than ten years earlier and now, the exploitation of underground quartz reef gold was stalling. In the nearby hamlet of White Hills, men began to rework the old diggings through sluicing operations. Garrett Brennan, the first superintendent of the White Hills Cemetery had died and long gone were many of the Cemetery's founding concerns. The initial layout had been accomplished under hardship conditions. Brennan had developed the Cemetery for almost 20 years.

By the 1880's the Bendigo goldfields had become the richest in the world. Many public works were undertaken. Ornate buildings, wide tree-lined boulevards and popular parks and gardens reflected the city's newfound wealth and status. Under William Millar's custodianship the White Hills Cemetery flourished. Substantial works were carried out, walkways formed, denominational sections extended, landscaping and beautification took place. Millar was instrumental in many of these improvements by way of his practical recommendations to the Cemetery Trustees. Through a common sense approach and a readiness for hard work, this unassuming man guided the Cemetery into its prime. Millar earned the respect of the Trustees and his community during his long association with the Cemetery.

As he witnessed the rise of the Cemetery, he lived to see its fall. Post 1900 the White Hills Cemetery, beset with financial woes and competing for burials with the Bendigo Cemetery, began a downhill slide until the trustees resigned in April 1926. Responsibility for the Cemetery was reluctantly accepted by the Bendigo City Council in 1928.

There is scant public information about the White Hills Cemetery in the late 19th century. Literature records the significance of the Chinese graves and more recent events post the 1920s. This publication aims to fill the void, a forgotten but prominent time in the history of the Cemetery. It spans the thirty four year period from 1877 to 1911 in which William Millar served as second sexton of the Cemetery. It features the Cemetery in its heyday. It underscores the varied and arduous tasks undertaken by the local pioneering sextons and their efforts in helping shape the cemeteries of the Bendigo district.

The White Hills Cemetery is a historical repository connecting the present to the past. It has long been recognized for its associations with the Bendigo goldfields and its significance to the local Chinese and Jewish population. Now administered by Remembrance Parks Central Victoria (RPCV), it has dutifully served the community of White Hills and surrounds for over 160 years. As a heritage listed site, the White Hills Cemetery is a historic landmark. Its physical evidence has contributed much to the understanding of Bendigo and surrounds. Its continued conservation will ensure a legacy for future generations.

## ***Death, Changes and New Visions***

Brennan was appointed the first Superintendent and Sexton of the Cemetery in 1856 from the choice of two candidates.<sup>1</sup> As a respected member of the Hibernian Australasian Catholic Benefit Society (HACBS) and with an active interest in local politics, he was referred to as one of the leading Irishmen in the district.<sup>2</sup> He was very articulate and often wrote letters to *The Bendigo Advertiser* on topical issues. On a personal level his misfortunes were many. In his early years as sexton at 'Cemetery Hill', he and his young family lived in a slab house on the Cemetery grounds<sup>3</sup> with a tent pitched alongside. In February of 1858 the extent of sludge flowing down from puddling machines at Ironbark and Long Gullies was so great that the floor of the house was buried two feet under and the tent and garden ruined.<sup>4</sup> By April there was no sexton's house, the man and his children had been 'washed out of all covering' in heavy flooding<sup>5</sup> and the Trustees were forced to build a more permanent structure which became known as the Lodge.

Living at the Lodge was difficult. The cottage was a 'neat one-storied brick building of Gothic architecture',<sup>6</sup> with a slate roof but small and cramped for a family, with possibly three or four rooms only. By the time work began on the Lodge in April 1858, the sexton's residence at the Sandhurst Cemetery was already built. *The Bendigo Advertiser* notes that in December 1857, the Sandhurst Cemetery Lodge which was near completion was rubble in construction, rustic in style with a slate roof, square lattice windows and a porch entrance. Accordingly, the White Hills Cemetery Lodge was likely modelled on the Lodge at the Sandhurst Cemetery and not vice versa as reported in later local papers. Additions to the White Hills Cemetery Lodge were first mentioned in 1861<sup>7</sup> and an extra room added in 1867 during Brennan's term.

In the early days of White Hills, there was no running water for domestic use. The nearby Bendigo Creek would have had a plentiful supply of sludge and waste from the mines. Three wells of pure water were in use by 1854 and appear on a lithographed map by Meikle, one was in Bosquet Street and two were located in a reserve within a short distance of the Plumridge Street Bridge.<sup>8</sup> In 1857 the White Hills Municipal Councillors Simons and Cahill recommended the sinking of two more wells, one in Simons Street at the foot of New Street and the other in Scott Street adjacent to the Botanical Gardens.<sup>9</sup> The family may have travelled to one of these wells to obtain fresh water, taking full advantage of the Cemetery's water wagon. Alternatively, water might have been fetched from a small reservoir built in 1866 'in the side of the hill' in the Cemetery grounds. This reservoir's main purpose was not to supply drinking water but to minimize damage in the event of the Chinese setting fire to the grass.<sup>10</sup> Evidence remains of this tiny reservoir which was situated north-west of the Lodge.

From the outset, the Trustees had made it clear that the sexton would pay for his accommodation. In 1859 Brennan had been charged £20 per annum in rates for the privilege of living in the newly erected dwelling. In 1862 the cost had increased by £5. Few dwellings in the Whites Hills Hamlet were rated at this high level. The Lodge was an excellent addition to the permanent buildings in the district. After a short illness, Brennan's first wife Anne, died on 27th July 1865 in the Lodge at age 36 and was buried in the Catholic section C2. Two of his sons met an untimely death through accidents. One died from severe burns after his clothes caught fire while watching the burial rites of Chinese mourners in 1862 and the other was jolted from a cart in the Cemetery and run over by its wheel in 1874.<sup>11</sup> Three of Brennan's daughters died in infancy.

Left side headstone

In memory of  
GARRETT  
the beloved son of  
Garrett and Mary Ann BRENNAN  
died March 19, 1874  
Aged 5 years  
also  
their infant daughter  
CATHERINE  
died October 1, 1869  
Aged 3 hours  
Requiescat in Pace AMEN.



Right side weathered  
sandstone headstone

To the memory of  
Julia Theresa  
the beloved daughter of  
Garrett and Ann Brennan  
Aged 18 months

*Brennan family graves in C2 – Photo C Holsworth*

From 1864 Victorian cemeteries had been under the control of the Commissioner of Public Works and the Public Works Department. In 1873 the Commissioner of Crown Lands and Survey assumed these responsibilities and all matters relating to the appointment of Trustees of Cemeteries were transferred to this Department. The *'Regulations Relative to the Nomination and Appointment of Trustees of Cemeteries'* gazetted that year permitted each public cemetery no less than 3 and not exceeding 5 trustees in number.<sup>12</sup> Prior to this three or more trustees had been permitted by the Act established in 1854, and consolidated in the Cemeteries Statute 1864. Included in these new Regulations was the requirement for the names of elected trustees to be forwarded for publication in the Victorian Government Gazette.

In Brennan's time the approach to the Cemetery via the Plumridge Street bridge had been dangerous and risky. Sludge carried down by storm water had regularly engulfed the bridge rendering it impassable. In 1857 local ratepayers petitioned the Council for raised causeways on each side of the bridge as they feared the consequences of heavy rains. In 1859 the sludge channel was deepened and over it a new bridge was built on Plumridge Street but the constant rise of the sludge continued to threaten the crossing.<sup>13</sup> Flooding in 1870 damaged all the White Hills bridges including the Plumridge Street bridge which was washed clean away. This would have made contact with the White Hills hamlet almost impossible and restricted burials. The bridge was rebuilt but continued to suffer in heavy rains.

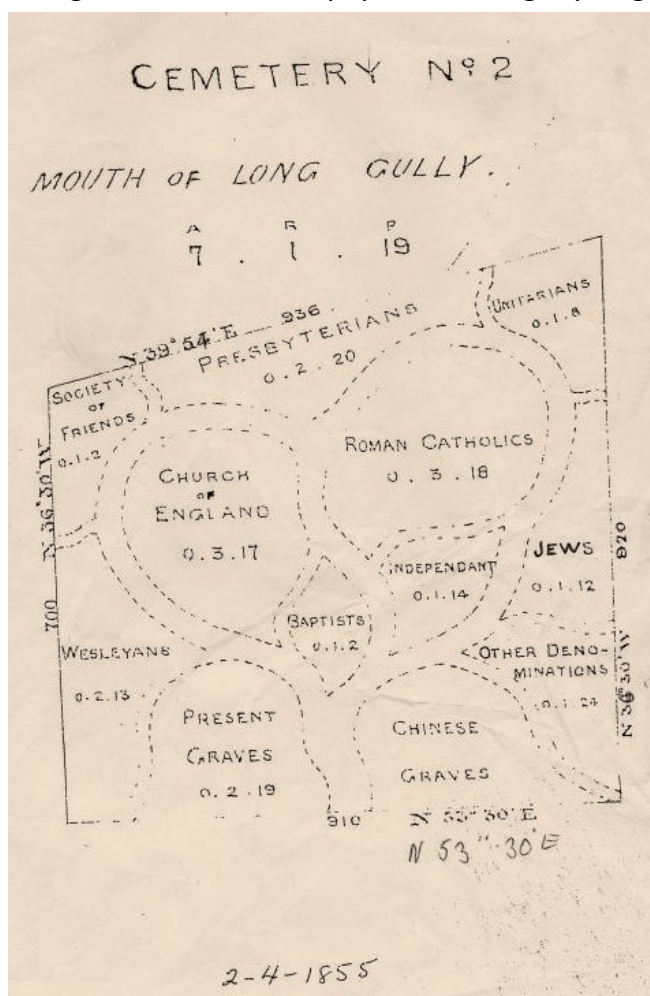
In the 1870s community focus shifted, to some extent, from the state of the White Hills Cemetery to the affairs of the Bendigo Cemetery. Complaints had been made about the excessive fees for burials at the Bendigo Cemetery<sup>14</sup> despite the trustees (the Bendigo City Councillors) adopting, back in 1857, a similar scale and charges<sup>15</sup> to those put in place by the first trustees of the White Hills Cemetery appointed by the Lieutenant Governor and Executive Council. Regardless, Bendigo ratepayers were not happy, and the trustees were forced to make a small reduction of the fees in March 1875.

On 11 April 1876, George Avery Fletcher, the Bendigo City Secretary and Town Clerk died and was buried in the Bendigo Cemetery. The cemeteries in the first instance had been laid out by him. Fletcher had been for some time the secretary to the trustees of both the White Hills and Bendigo Cemeteries. At his Bendigo City office, Fletcher received all payments for private grave plots. Titles to these graves had to be collected from his office in the Town Hall. In the lead up to his death he had been an ill man, unable to work for several months. Some of his duties had been performed by the Mayor, Councillor Clark. After Fletcher's death, an audit was carried out on the Bendigo Cemetery accounts as one had not been performed for two years. A deficit of more than £600 was



found in consequence of Fletcher misappropriating funds.<sup>16</sup> The ratepayers were rightly angry. Some city councillors admitted that it had been a gross neglect on their part not to have asked for the cemetery books and that they that had been too trusting of the late Town Clerk who had done so much good for the city.<sup>17</sup>

Fortunately, the White Hills Cemetery accounts were in order. Their Trustees as an independent body separate from the City Council, had conducted their own meetings, maintained their own minute books and kept abreast of the Cemetery's finances. It would have been difficult for Fletcher to misuse any of the payments received for titles to White Hills Cemetery grave plots without arousing suspicion. The temptation was less due to the smaller number of private grave plots sold. Monies received from the Hospital and Benevolent Society for pauper burials were paid directly by cheque into the Cemetery's account. In contrast, the Bendigo Cemetery's matters had been mixed up with Council affairs. Their trustees had no separate minute books and never held regular meetings. Often they were conducted in the middle of the Council's Finance Committee meetings.



An early map of the White Hills Cemetery - 1855

Public debate about the Town Clerk's role, his duties and vast salary were the topic of several letters to the Editor in *The Bendigo Advertiser*. One ratepayer felt that the position needed an outsider, one separate from the city's charmed circle and questioned whether a future town clerk should even be acting as secretary to a cemetery trust.<sup>18</sup> Another wondered why the Council had made the position of secretary to the cemetery a separate office with a separate salary instead of amalgamating the position with the other duties of a town clerk, thereby saving the ratepayer money.<sup>19</sup> Fletcher had received £575 as Town Clerk, £50 as Secretary to the Bendigo Cemetery and £75 as Secretary to the White Hills Cemetery. This was quite a salary for a town clerk but the Council had freely used Fletcher's other skills as a trained surveyor.

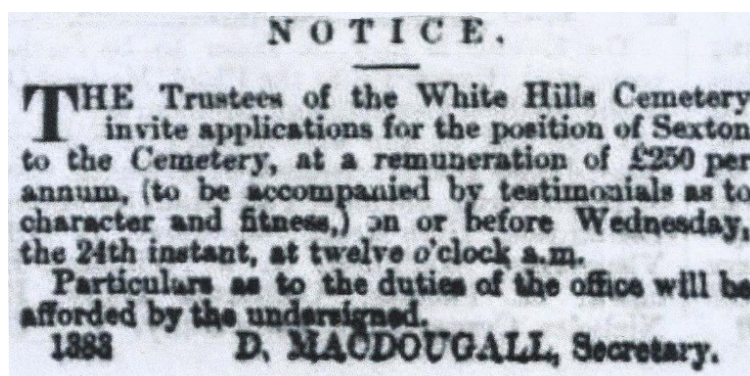
The capable magistrate and Scotsman Dugald MacDougall, a former city councillor and mayor, was elected the new Town Clerk, at a reduced salary of £450 per annum. He was also appointed Secretary of the Bendigo Cemetery at £50 per annum which came with the added duty of serving as Secretary to the White Hills Cemetery trustees.<sup>20</sup> MacDougall began dealing with all the Council matters that had been put on hold during Fletcher's illness. One of the important tasks he completed in the first few months of office was catching up on issuing a number of titles to the owners of private grave plots in the White Hills Cemetery.<sup>21</sup>

Professionally, Brennan was criticized at various times for insulting the public, using abusive language,<sup>22</sup> dressing inappropriately,<sup>23</sup> keeping goats, a ferocious dog, livestock,<sup>24</sup> a horse, haystacks and poultry on the cemetery grounds,<sup>25</sup> neglecting planting & improvements<sup>26</sup> and receiving a 'rather long salary'<sup>27</sup> of £300 per annum. Inadequate fencing was a problem in many

country cemeteries. Although the government had set aside cemetery reserves they had not funded any legally required fencing. Until the trustees had received money from interments there was little they could do except pile up rough scrub barriers. In late November 1861 Sexton Besnard of the Bendigo Cemetery put forward his plans for a 'Monument to Burke and Wills'. Many letter writers to the Bendigo Advertiser joined in the discussion including Brennan who wrote a wonderful letter promoting a far bigger hill site at his White Hills cemetery surrounded by native vegetation.

In all fairness to Brennan, as the first sexton, he had much to contend with in the Cemetery's early days. From the late 1850s into the 1860s, there was, within the community, growing suspicion about some Trustees' conduct, the Cemetery's management, accountability and the delay in much needed improvements. It was suggested that the Cemetery might be a '*losing concern*'<sup>28</sup> and its mismanagement '*a scandal*'.<sup>29</sup>

On the 8th January 1877 sexton Garrett Brennan died at the Lodge at the White Hills Cemetery. '*Senile debility*' of six months duration was the registered cause of death.<sup>30</sup> At age 59 he was buried in the family plot C2 in the Catholic Section of the Cemetery, his funeral attended by members of the HACBS and the Rev. Dr. Backhaus. His short obituary alluded to his many years as sexton and recalled that he had once taken a great interest in politics '*with the habit of rendering himself conspicuous at Legislative elections*'.<sup>31</sup>



*Position of the new sexton advertised in BA 20 Jan 1877.*

His burial marked the end of an era and the beginning of a new chapter in the history of the Cemetery. There is no tombstone in the family grave to mark the burial place for Brennan or his first wife Anne. The original group of five trustees comprising Dr William Augustine Roche, Dr Hugh Smith, William Burall, John Harney and William Matthews were long gone. Roche & Burall had resigned, the others died in office and were buried in the White Hills Cemetery. Large tombstones were erected in this early period to Trustees John Harney, Dr Hugh Smith, as well as to their lost first parliamentarian Robert Benson.



*In memory of  
ROBERT BENSON  
who departed this life  
June 11th 1860  
Aged 67 years.  
This memorial has  
been raised by the  
people of Bendigo  
September 1860*

*Robert Benson tombstone in section B2.  
A 2<sup>nd</sup> side has a long inscription about Benson.  
Made by Simeon Brothers, Stone Cutters of Rowan Street*

### **A new Sexton William Millar**

William Millar, nearing 42 years of age, succeeded Brennan as sexton. He was elected on 24 January 1877. Millar, had arrived in Melbourne in 1854 at age 19, and with a wife and infant son had joined the search for gold at Epsom and Tarnagulla. He had spent many years engaged at Buckley's Newbridge and Sandhurst flour mills, first as a baker then as engine driver and fitter.

A point of interest on his children's birth registrations is Millar's occupation as Engine driver at Buckley's Flour Mill. Millar appears to have resigned at the mill when new regulations for steam engine drivers were introduced in Victoria. In 1873 a Department of Mines was established at the