

Midweek in Melbourne General Cemetery and not a soul stirs

## Necropolis now

It's a grave subject, but a tour of the Melbourne Cemetery is a living, breathing history lesson.

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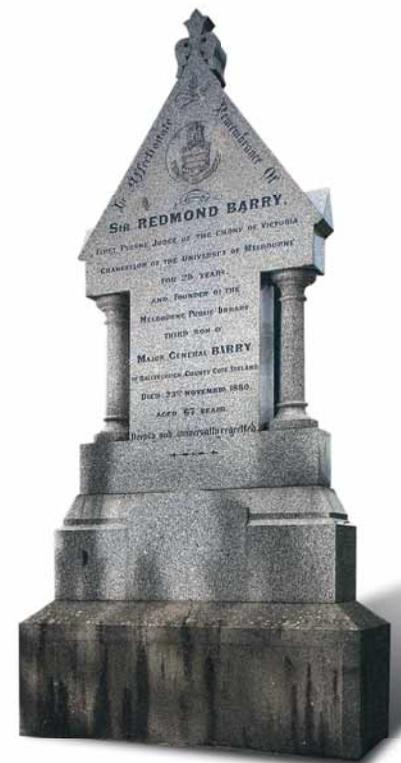
**M**Y FIRST OVERWHELMING observation: so much pricey real estate. Covering 43ha, Melbourne General Cemetery is about the size of a small suburb. Around 300,000 bodies rest peacefully underfoot and, paradoxically, hardly a soul stirs above. On a grey Wednesday afternoon, the graveyard is as quiet as it is creepy.

White Hat tour guide Bevan Leviston has been toddling in between Melbourne's tombstones for 15 years. The unsettling location is the perfect prop for the amateur historian and ex-academic, who's collected a bunch of yarns both fascinating and scandalous.

Take Sir Redmond Barry's final resting place. As the presiding judge in Ned Kelly's murder trial, Barry sentenced the bush-ranger to hang in 1880. His final words to

Kelly were, "May God have mercy on your soul." Kelly reportedly replied, "I will see you there when I go." Twelve days after Kelly was executed, Barry himself dropped dead, afterlife unknown. The judge also made room in the tomb for his mistress and their four children to follow. The headstone makes no mention of their presence. To paraphrase Samuel Johnson, no man is under oath when carving a tombstone.

Melbourne's first burial ground was located at the more central Flagstaff Gardens in the 1830s. A few years later it moved to the site of today's Queen Victoria Market. Of the estimated 10,000 bodies that were buried underneath the market, only 1000 have been exhumed – something to ponder while completing a weekly shop. The current Parkville site opened in 1853. ➤



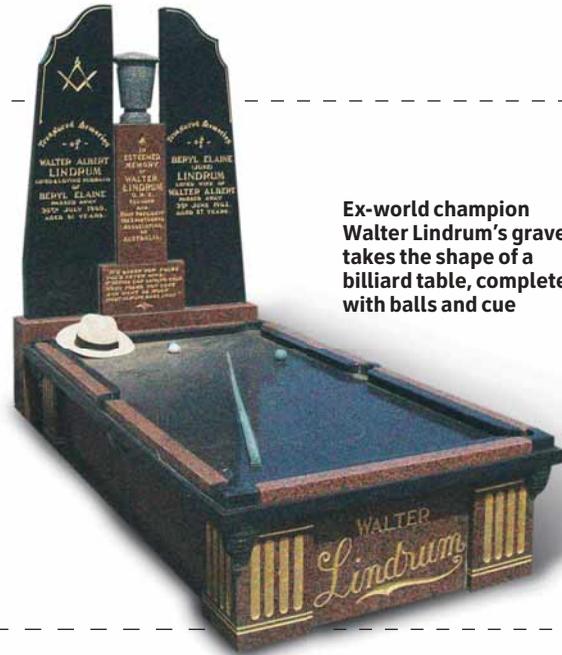
The tombstone of Sir Redmond Barry, presiding judge of the Ned Kelly murder trial

## // [Harold Holt's] grave is empty, his tombstone reads: 'He loved the sea'

Strolling dusty pathways now, Leviston's tales from the crypt give Melbourne a real sense of time and place. He talks of the gifted goldfields artist who drank himself to death (and a pauper's grave), a police commander stoned to death by a convict gang, and the Italian opera singer who dropped dead on stage to forever haunt the Princess Theatre – and the cemetery at dusk, apparently.

Some political names buried here include former PMs Scullin, Menzies, Gorton and Holt (the grave is empty, his tombstone reads: "He loved the sea"). Explorers Burke and Wills are honoured in the form of an imposing, almost contemporary, monument fashioned out of solid granite.

The tour winds up at the Elvis Presley memorial grotto. This incongruous display is interactive: two teddy bears have been placed beside a Superman figurine and a Virgin Mary statuette. The scene is encircled by a bunch of pink camellias – the only fresh flowers in sight. As Elvis was fond of saying, "thank you very much".



Ex-world champion Walter Lindrum's grave takes the shape of a billiard table, complete with balls and cue

**i** White Hat tours of Melbourne General Cemetery, Wednesday and Sunday 1-3 pm, College Crescent, Parkville. Bookings essential at [www.whitehat.com.au](http://www.whitehat.com.au) or (03) 9329 6055. Night tours are run by the National Trust several times a year. (03) 9656 9800.

**✈** For airfares call [Qantas on 13 13 13](http://Qantas on 13 13 13) or visit [qantas.com](http://qantas.com). For holiday packages to Melbourne call [Qantas Holidays on 13 14 15](http://Qantas Holidays on 13 14 15).