

Barrie Union Cemetery

The Barrie Union Cemetery is special to all of us here at Stone Orchard, for this is where our story began, back in the early 90's. But Stone Orchard's role at Barrie Union is one of the latest pieces in the long history of this beautifully maintained cemetery.

The story of Barrie Union begins in 1875, when several local citizens met to discuss the foundation of a cemetery to serve the growing village of Barrie, Ontario. It took four years, but in 1879, the cemetery finally began operations, located well outside the boundaries of the little town on the shore of Lake Simcoe. The founders selected the property, probably convinced it would always remain a quiet, country setting for permanent rest. They could not have foreseen that not too long into the cemetery's history, it would be bordered on three sides by busy streets, and on the fourth by homes.



Barrie has been repeatedly ranked as Canada's fastest-growing city, with a population expanding from 40,000 in 1985 to over 100,000 in 2001. Barrie Union has changed with the times as well, under the current management of Bill Armstrong, Superintendent, who lives on the grounds. It began with a cemetery planned on traditional farming community guidelines - family plots of 5 graves each were the norm. Now, single grave sites are common, and columbaria - unheard of in 1879 - provide dignified and restful areas for modern interments.

One of the anomalies of Barrie Union's history, is the above-ground crypt of Samuel Richardson, who died almost 40 years before the cemetery was opened! Records suggest that the remains of Samuel, his wife Prudence, three of their children, were re-interred here in 1882, and at least four more individuals were added to the site over the years.

As the largest cemetery in the area, Barrie Union is a repository of local history, and a living testament to the values of the past. A leisurely stroll through Barrie Union, in the company of Bob Anderson, highlighted dozens of features and sites of local interest from years past, as well as monuments of regional and national interest. Bob is well equipped to fascinate the visitor, having spent more than 20 years cataloguing and recording local history.

The largest, and most imposing monument in Barrie Union, is that of the Hon. Sir James Robert Gowan KCMG, Senator of Canada. Sir James was also the first judge of Simcoe District, appointed in 1843, and the long-standing lawyer and close friend of Sir John A. MacDonal. A large cache of personal and professional correspondence from Sir John A. was discovered a few years ago, in the family home of Sir James' descendants. Visible behind Sir James' monument, is the Gowan-Ardagh Mausoleum. Ardagh was the family of Sir James' wife, and their family name is commemorated throughout Barrie.



Not too far away, is the monument of Robert Simpson, first Mayor of Barrie, interred in 1891. Simpson is only the first of several of Barrie's mayors interred here. Also of great local interest are the family monuments of the Maclarens. Here rests Alexander Fitzmaurice Maclaren (1912-1989) who left the family home to the city of Barrie as an Art Gallery. The Gallery has already outgrown the original house, and has moved to the recently expanded Carnegie Library building, and the house is leased to a local service club.

The Wright-Craig monument marks the resting place of William Henry Wright, (1876-1951). Wright was one of the original owners of the Globe newspaper (later to merge with the Mail) and was also one of the partners in Hargraves Gold Mines. Wright established the Citizen of the Year award in Barrie, awarded annually by City Council.



Of lesser national significance, but of permanent interest to all who visit and marvel at the level of care provided in Barrie Union, is the Whiting Monument. Lorne Whiting was a long-serving Superintendent of Barrie Union Cemetery. Not too far behind his monument can be seen that of another of the Cemetery Superintendents. These are only two of at least four of the previous superintendents interred in the cemetery upon which they lavished such care. Bill Armstrong, the current superintendent, and his wife Linda, have already

selected and installed their own monument, commemorating their lives and interests in the cemetery.

A 'side-bar' to history leads us to the grave of the Lay family of Barrie. Here we find the name Janet Lindsey King. Janet was the sister of William Lyon Mackenzie King, Prime Minister of Canada. Several Barrie residents can remember the secret arrivals and departures of the Prime Minister's private railway car, on frequent visits to his sister and her family.

The variety of landscape and layout contained within Barrie Union far exceed what might usually be expected in a cemetery of this size. A magnificent colonnade of cedars has risen where small matching hedges were once planted along a roadway. An entire area protected by huge mature maples and oaks shelters the section set aside for Oddfellows members. A stone bench provides sheltered rest on a hillside, overlooking a spacious semi-circular in-ground cremation section. Open spaces varying from gently sloping hills to meadow-like areas, provide a selection of sites for interments.

These open areas contrast sharply with a few older Mausoleum structures which in turn contrast sharply with the cemetery's original Columbarium walls and the spacious modern layout of the latest Columbarium gardens, created over the last few years in an area reclaimed from an abandoned entranceway.

Unusual in form are the Airmen's crosses found here, marking the resting places of some of the first pilots being trained in the newly formed Royal Canadian Air Force school, at nearby Base Borden, during and just after the First World War.



One of the smallest, and to us personally, most touching is the little section set aside by the cemetery for children who have died while in custody of the Children's Aid Society. Here, sheltered by a huge towering maple, and marked with individual flat stones, lie many young children, some known only by their first names. Many unknown, but forever cared for as family. At least one group of local young people recently spent time in this area, discussing and contemplating the lives and misfortunes of children like themselves, who lie there.

Areas of Special Care abound throughout Barrie Union - each individually designed and planted with personal touches provided by the cemetery.

Always of interest to us during our cemetery visits are the White Metal markers - usually produced here in Ontario, and marketed throughout Canada. Barrie Union contains several of

these markers, and two in particular of note. One is the Gilpin marker, standing next to a stone marker installed by the same family many years later. The stone was chosen because of the belief that metal markers would not be durable. Now, over a hundred years later, the metal marker remains as clearly readable as the day it was installed, while the newer stone marker next to it, and indeed it's own stone foundation, have deteriorated severely.



Nearby is the only metal marker we have ever seen that has required restoration. Mr. Armstrong supervised restoration and repair of this marker by several local craftsmen just recently. The reasons for its unusual deterioration are unknown, but faulty mixture of the original metal alloys is suspected. Today the monument stands as proudly as when erected, a testimony to the care and attention taken in Barrie Union Cemetery.

Barrie Union works extensively with the living, as well as the deceased, and surely there is one other person in the cemetery of special note. Mr. Ernie Harris is the father of Linda Armstrong, and is still a familiar figure, working full time in the cemetery, at the age of 81.

It would be interesting to know if this is a record for employees across the country!

Barrie Union has become a second home to Stone Orchard over the years. We visit regularly, and share patrol duties on Hallowe'en! Our fondest hope would be that this short description has brought home to readers the sense of care and wonder that first brought us into the cemetery profession.