Cemetery Symbolism

Part 1

Structural Symbols

A photo-story/fact sheet resource set that introduces students to some of the structures we see in heritage cemeteries and the meanings they held for Victorians that are often hidden from us today.
Broken Column

- Broken columns were deliberately made structures that indicate a life unfinished when cut short by death at an early age.

- They are easy symbols to interpret because they were frequently used when the deceased or the family breadwinner had died at a young age or had met an accident.

- Broken columns can often be found decorated with a wreath of flowers symbolising the untimely death of a woman.
Obelisk

- Obelisks are four sided tapered columns
- Capped with a pyramidal shape
- Crafted from a single piece of stone.

- The shape originated in ancient Egypt
- Pairs were placed in front of temples of the Sun God Ra.
- They were symbols of everlasting life, fertility and regeneration.

- Obelisks also represent status and position of the deceased as they stand out in our cemetery landscape.
- They are commonly found and were most popular during the 1890s.
- They are usually made of granite but can also be found in limestone.
Latin Cross/Calvary Cross

- The Latin cross has a longer upright than cross bar.
- It is the shape of cross on which Christ was crucified.
- For this reason it is used to symbolise the death of Christ.
- The Latin Cross is one of the most common symbols to be found in our cemeteries.
- Often a Latin Cross is mounted on three steps. These steps represent the Christian virtues of Faith, Hope and Charity. This cross is also called the Calvary Cross.
This is the Eastern Orthodox Cross or Russian Cross. This cross has two horizontal arms and a third angled cross bar below the main crossbar.

These three crosses commemorate the White Russians buried in Invercargill’s Eastern Cemetery and are unusual in New Zealand.
Celtic Cross

- The Celtic cross has a single cross bar with a circle or solid wheel at the intersection of the bar and upright.

- A Celtic cross is usually very tall. Some are plain while others are ornately decorated with Victorian symbolism or carved with Celtic interweaving designs.

- Celtic crosses pre-date Christianity by several hundred years. It is a symbol usually found on the graves where the deceased originally came from Scotland or Ireland.
Coped Stones

- Alter tombs are flat inscribed slabs of stone supported on raised brick or cement walls, or sometimes on solid blocks of brick or stone.

- These tombstones were fashionable before 1900 and are unusual after that time. They are often difficult to maintain as they can easily break with soil subsidence.
STELE

- Stelae are a very traditional shape of cemetery memorial having been used as funerary markers in the time of ancient Egypt.

- Stelae can be found in many shapes and sizes from rectangular with domed, arched, pointed or curved tops and are of an even thickness.

- Stelae were generally erected upright.

- There is normally only one side of a stele that bears the inscription about the deceased.

- The shape allows for considerable scope for a variety of decoration.