

'People don't want to believe' what goes on at cemetery

By Davina Jackson

Tom Brown is eager to dispel some popular theories about life in a cemetery.

And as sexton of the largest graveyard in the Southern Hemisphere he probably knows more about the secrets of Walkumete Cemetery than any other living person.

"I've always thought somebody should write a story about this place," he says. "Hundreds of things happen here that nobody knows about."

"I often sit at the top of one of the hills and just watch what goes on — I see courting couples, people riding motorcycles over graves, people swapping flowers from one grave to another and all sorts of things. There's no way I can keep track of it all."

It's not unusual for him to have to get out of bed to chase motorcyclists away from the cemetery and he claims the incidence of vandalism there is particularly high. He tries to hide none of these factors from the public.

"We have nothing to hide," he says, "and I believe in the truth. I always try to tell the truth about what goes on here, but people don't want to believe it."

Mr Brown defends the cemetery's policy on upkeep at the graves there.

"The ones that kick up the most fuss about the graves being tidy are the ones who only visit about once every eight or nine years," he says.

"People buy a plot of land and they think we should maintain it. We only maintain the footpaths for them to get to the graves or we maintain the grass around the plot if they



MR BROWN
Walkumete sexton

pay a maintenance fee.

He rejected demands that cemetery staff should keep graves free of weeds.

"Many people plant climbing plants on their plots and we don't know if people want plants there or not. If we cut down something we shouldn't they could sue the council for interfering with their land."

Difficult

Paspalum is particularly difficult to control, as every home gardener realizes, he says.

"You could cut paspalum tonight and two days later it has all grown back again. In such a big area (468 acres) you can't keep it like your lawn at home."

Though he can merely defend some stories, he manages to completely disprove others. Theories about cremating several people together are just not true, he says.

"You hear all sorts of stories about piling coffins up and burning them all together. This is a story that every Tom, Dick and Harry seems to believe, but each furnace is only capable of handling one coffin at a time. If people want to keep the ashes we grind them up separately and put them in carefully labelled boxes."

Contrary to some allegations staff do not scavenge in

ashes for coffin handles and screws to sell for scrap metal. Every day they bury surplus ashes and metal in pits.

"We only give people a token amount of ashes — if we were to give them the whole lot they would need sacks to carry it."

Mr Brown claims his staff do not see or touch the dead at any time.

"That's the undertaker's job — they are dressed and prepared by him and we only hire the chapel to the funeral directors," he says.

Walkumete is open every day for 24 hours except on Christmas Day. During the night, a city answering service takes orders for burials and cremations.

Relatives can choose from a wide selection of plots, either in berm (hill) areas or lawn (flat) areas. Most popular is land in high places, apparently because graves are supposed to be drier there.

This is another cause for concern to some people who become upset when Mr Brown refuses to deny that water seeps through soil into graves after rain.

"Because some people have a fear of water they want me

to tell them that the graves don't get wet, but if they think about it they would realize that they do. We can't go round the whole cemetery and cover every grave."

Deceased of different religions can be separated, though there are no restrictions on where people want to be buried. Public, secular plots are also available.

"This is a pretty unique cemetery," he points out. "We do what the people want as far as we can."

Mr Brown is well-qualified to make such a statement — he is responsible for mistakes and he tries to avoid them. Nevertheless, complaints are regularly directed to his office.

Blamed

"As sexton I get blamed for everything, but I feel I'm as good at the job as anyone else

would be. You are picked by a panel and you have to present your qualifications to them — you've got to have had a certain degree of education to be chosen."

He counts the number of other jobs he has had on his fingers and explains that each required responsibility.

"I've even been responsible for people's lives. During

the war I worked with explosives and after the war I was a quarry master which is a pretty dangerous job."

Despite his confidence in the way the cemetery is organized he will not patronize it when he dies.

"I will be buried in a small family graveyard at Leigh," he declares.