

Sydney, 2007

History of Mortuary Railway Stations Rookwood Necropolis & Regent Street, Redfern.

Sydney, NSW

By Allison Lee

Rookwood Necropolis as it is now called was established in 1867 to house the increasing numbers of burials in the city of Sydney. Both of the main cemeteries in the more central areas of Sydney (one at the site of the present day **Town Hall** and the second at **Devonshire Street** near Central Station) had been filled, closed and eventually relocated by the mid 1800's. In Australia, as in Europe, there was an increasing trend to move burial sites outside of the cities both for practical hygienic and other more aesthetic purposes. So it was in Sydney, where a decision was made to purchase a huge area of land (250 acres) in 1862 and followed through with the establishment of the Necropolis at **Haslem's Creek** in 1867. The term Necropolis means "City of the Dead", and this cemetery was to become the biggest cemetery in the South Hemisphere (Ochert, 1998).

As this location was some distance from the centre of Sydney and from the main-line train station at **Haslem's Creek**, it was considered necessary to establish a railway station at the centre of the cemetery. This line would run as a spur line from the existing station at Haslem's creek and allow easier movement into and out of the cemetery. The railway line construction began in November 1864 and from January 1st 1865; trains began their run into the cemetery. It stopped at prearranged stations on the journey from central Sydney in order to pick up mourners and coffins (Ochert, 1998). Trains ran at 9.30am and 3pm. (Buckle, 1987)

Necropolis Receiving Station/Mortuary Station (Regent Street, Redfern)

In the centre of Sydney, a receiving station was planned for a site on Regent Street Redfern. This was also referred to by different names, including the Necropolis Receiving Station and the Mortuary Station. It was completed on the 22nd March 1869. This station was built in conjunction with the Receiving House at Rookwood Cemetery (see entry). Both of the stations were designed by colonial architect **James Barnet** using elements from the Venetian 13th century Gothic style. Principle sculptors, Thomas **Ducket** and **Henry Apperly** worked on the elaborate carvings that were a feature of the stations. These included angels, cherubs, and gargoyles. (Singleton, 1989) Although both buildings were designed to look like churches, both in structure and it in the symbol elements that adorned them, they were never used as places of worship (Buckle, 1987).

Although the Rookwood cemetery line closed in 1948, the station at Regent Street was still used for 'dog traffic', a platform for horses, dogs and poultry (Oakes, 2002). In February 1950 the platform was used as a parcels station (Wikipedia, 2007). The name was subsequently changed to Regent Street Station (Oakes, 2002).

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It was restored by the State Rail Authority in 1981. By this time it had also been classified by the National Trust and the Australian Heritage Commission and made part of Permanent Conservation by the Heritage Council of NSW. The cost of restoring the site was approximately \$600,000. It was reopened on the 21st of April 1985 by Neville Wran. In 1986, Peter Shield and John McNally set up the Magic Mortuary, a pancake restaurant that used railway carriages to house the diners. Patrons bought 'tickets' from the former ticket office and then presented them to an attendant to eat their meal. However, the restaurant did not enjoy a long period of success and all the restaurant cars were removed in February 1989 (Oakes, 2002)

Since then, the station has been used to launch special train services and public displays of trains and associated rail information (Oakes, 2002). The site has also been hired out for special events including dance parties (Wikipedia, 2007)

No.1 Mortuary Station Receiving House (Rookwood Necropolis)

There was a feeling that funeral processions could be more dignified (and easier) if more official stations were created to replace the ones made from the original corrugated iron and timber structures (Ochert, 1998) A scheme set up to separate funeral operations from the ordinary railway by the establishment of new platforms began in 1868 with the building of the Cemetery station inside the Necropolis. This station went through many name changes beginning with the **Haslem's Creek Cemetery Station**, then the **Haslem's Creek Receiving House**, to the **Mortuary Station, Necropolis**. This was followed by the **Mortuary Station No.1** on the 15th June 1908. It was also known as the **Mortuary General Cemetery station** (26th July 1897) and Cemetery Station No.1 (Friends of Rookwood, 1996) It was in use from the 1st January 1869 and closed on the 29th December, 1948 (State Rail Authority of New South Wales Archives Section, 1982).

The features of the sandstone **Receiving House Station** included wide platforms, a ticket office, 2 vestibules, retiring rooms and a carriage port (Buckle, 1987). This building was elaborately decorated in a similar style to the Regents Street railway station in Redfern. The sculptors Thomas **Ducket** and **Henry Apperly** work included angels, cherubs, gargoyles and various foliage carvings featuring flowers, pears, sycamores, apples and pomegranates (Buckle, 1987). Again, black and white floor tiles created by Cumberland pottery were laid in a tessellated pattern on the floors (Ochert, 1998). The building spanned the terminus of the railway line into the cemetery so it created a tunnel effect. It covered an area of 35 x 13 metres and was approximately 6 metres high, being carried on 12 columns. An arch at each end of the building was approximately 12 metres high and 13 metres wide at the base. (Singleton, 1989) The Northern Arch was decorated with two angels opposite each other on the inner side of the arches. One angel appeared to be holding a scroll (which may have been the Judgement book) and its eyes were closed. The other angel was set to look down the railway line and held a trumpet in its hands which probably symbolized the Resurrection (Singleton, 1989) The building was also fitted with a bell-cote for housing a bell that was used during the funeral services. The bell was tolled to

warn passengers of the impending departure time. It is said (but not verified) that the bell would ring as each train arrived. However, it has been confirmed that between 1910 and 1920 the bell was rung 30 minutes before the train was to depart to warn the passengers. (Singleton, 1989). It rang again, finally, when there was 5 minutes left to departure. (Ochert, 1998)

The station fell into disuse in 1939 and in 1952 it was put up for disposal by the Department of Railways NSW. The roof had been damaged by fire in 1950 (Friends of Rookwood, 1996 Vol 6). In December 1957 the **All Saints Church** (Ainslie, Canberra) purchased the stonework from the station for £100. Demolition of the site commenced in May 1958 and 728 tonnes of stone in 83 semi-trailer loads, were transported from the site to Canberra (Buckle, 1987). In the middle of 2000 work began to improve the station site (at Rookwood) and to restore the original pathways. Some of the restoration work included; exposing the gutters, uncovering the foundations of the platform, indicating the former locations of the structural columns and re-gravelling the pathways (Friends of Roodwood, 2002).

No.2 Mortuary Station (Rookwood Necropolis)

The station opened as Roman Catholic Platform on 31st December, 1901. The name was changed to Cemetery Station No. 2 on 15th June 1908 (Wikipedia, 2007). Electric signaling in 1918 allowed 3 trains to be running on the line at the same time and there was a loop at this station which meant that 4 trains could be in effect (Friends of Rookwood, 1996). The station was closed on 29th December, 1948 (Wikipedia, 2007). This station stood from 1908 to 1948 and ran to the Jewish part of the cemetery (Friends of Rookwood, 2002).

No. 3 Mortuary Station (Rookwood Necropolis)

The railway network within the cemetery expanded as the size increased until it reached approximately 5km in length. However, elaborate designs such as those at Regent Street and Mortuary Station #1 were not included in these new structures (Ochert, 1998). The station opened as **Mortuary Station** on 26th May, 1897. The name was changed to **Mortuary Terminus** on 26th July 1897, then to **Cemetery Station No. 3** on 15th June 1908. The station was closed on 29th December, 1948 (Wikipedia, 2007). This station had a semi-octagonal room built on to the original station which became part of the ladies waiting room (Buckle, 1987).

No. 4 Mortuary Station (Rookwood Necropolis)

The station opened on 15th June, 1908 and closed on 29th December, 1948 (State Rail Authority of New South Wales, 1982). This station ran to the Jewish part of the cemetery (Friends of Rookwood, 2002).

Coffin Transport

The trains that carried the mourners were known as 'unimproved Redferns' (Friends of Rookwood, 2002). There were two types of Hearse carriages used for the procession. One consisted of a four-wheeled van that carried up to 10 coffins on its upper and lower shelves. Each of these shelves was designed so it

could open onto the platform. There were also eight-wheeled vans that could hold 30 coffins. Both of these vehicles were attached the back of the train for transporting to the cemetery. At the terminus inside the cemetery the coffins were unloaded using 'wheeled hand-propelled litters' (Ochert, 1998). This refers to A flat supporting framework, such as a piece of canvas stretched between parallel shafts, for carrying a dead person; a stretcher (Free Dictionary, n.d.)

Funeral Rites

The price for the funeral procession using this service ranged according to income. Paupers were allowed to ride free and all other adults were charged at 1 / (equivalent of 10c) and coffins traveled for free (Friends of Rookwood, 1996) Funeral attendants who had planned a wake would load cases of beer and spirits onto the train at Regent Street. They would also typically include food such as meat pies, bread, cheese and often seafood such as oysters, lobsters and crabs. Often celebrations got under way before arrival to the cemetery (Ochert, 1998). The train would run mourners to the cemetery from Regent Street, but would also pick up passengers on the way (Oakes, 2002). The funeral procession would include sexton men (church attendants) who carried the appropriate paperwork and the Minister (or other Church official). They would often join the wake after the funeral was completed. Sometimes the waste from the wake (leftover food etc.) would be discarded into the grave, 'the late lamented would get a good idea of the extent of the valedictory commemoration' (Ochert, 1998, p.2). It has been noted that sometimes the litters used to carry the coffins were employed to transport drunken mourners on the journey back (Ochert, 1998)

Closure

The last trains that ran funeral processions all but ceased in the late 1930's. Following this they were only used for visitors on Sundays and Mother's Day (NSW Government Bulletin 1948 in Ochert, 1998). The service was briefly revived during World War II during petrol rationing. The last railway timetable was recorded in 1947 and read Sydney 2.17pm to Strathfield 2.33pm to Rookwood #1, 2.50pm (Friends of Rookwood, 1996)

On the 3rd of April, 1948 the service was officially terminated and the rails were pulled up. The spur was recorded as closed on the 29th December 1948 (Archives of NSW Railway Historical Society in Ochert, 1998).



Mortuary, Haslem's Creek, [1871] (south end) / [attributed to Charles Pickering]



Mortuary, Redfern, 1871 [attributed to the New South Wales Government Printing Office, probably by Charles Pickering]



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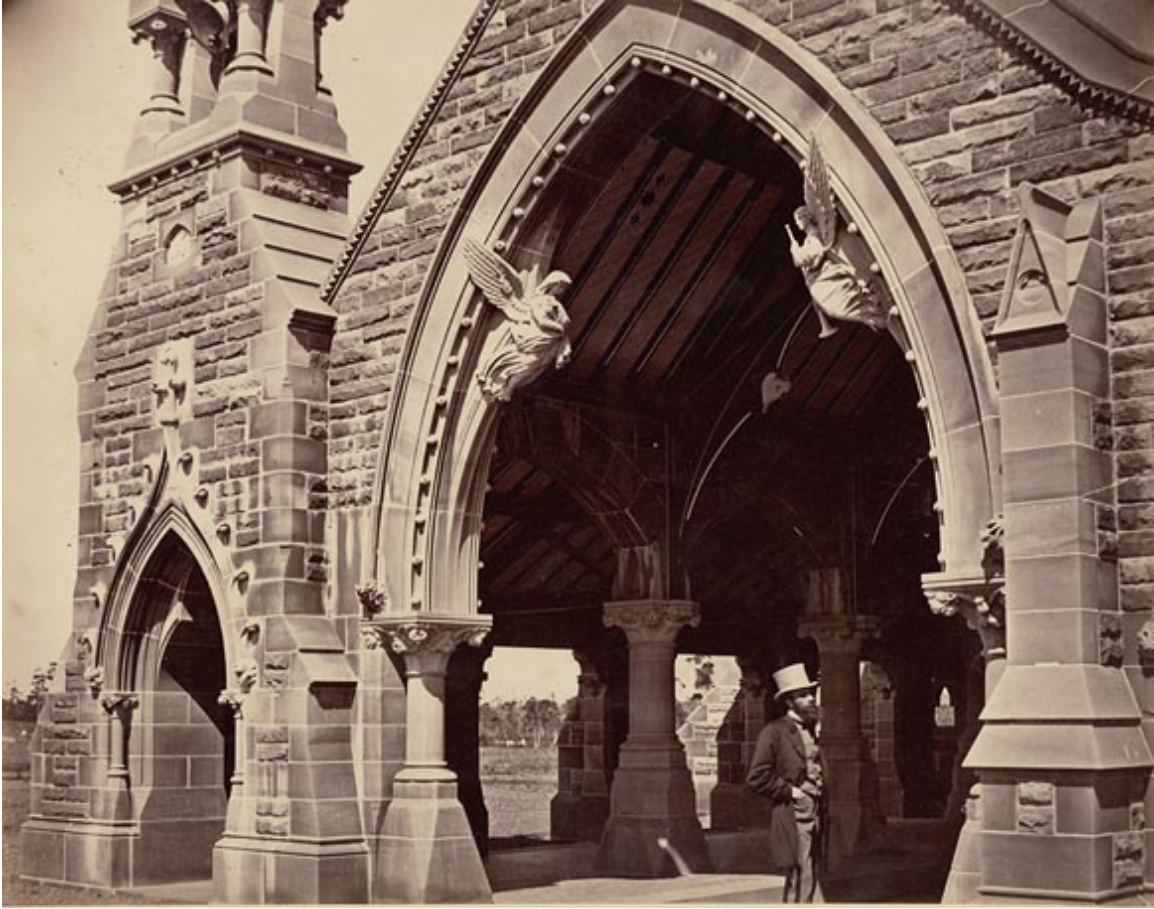
Mortuary, Redfern, 1871 (rear view) / [attributed to Charles Pickering]



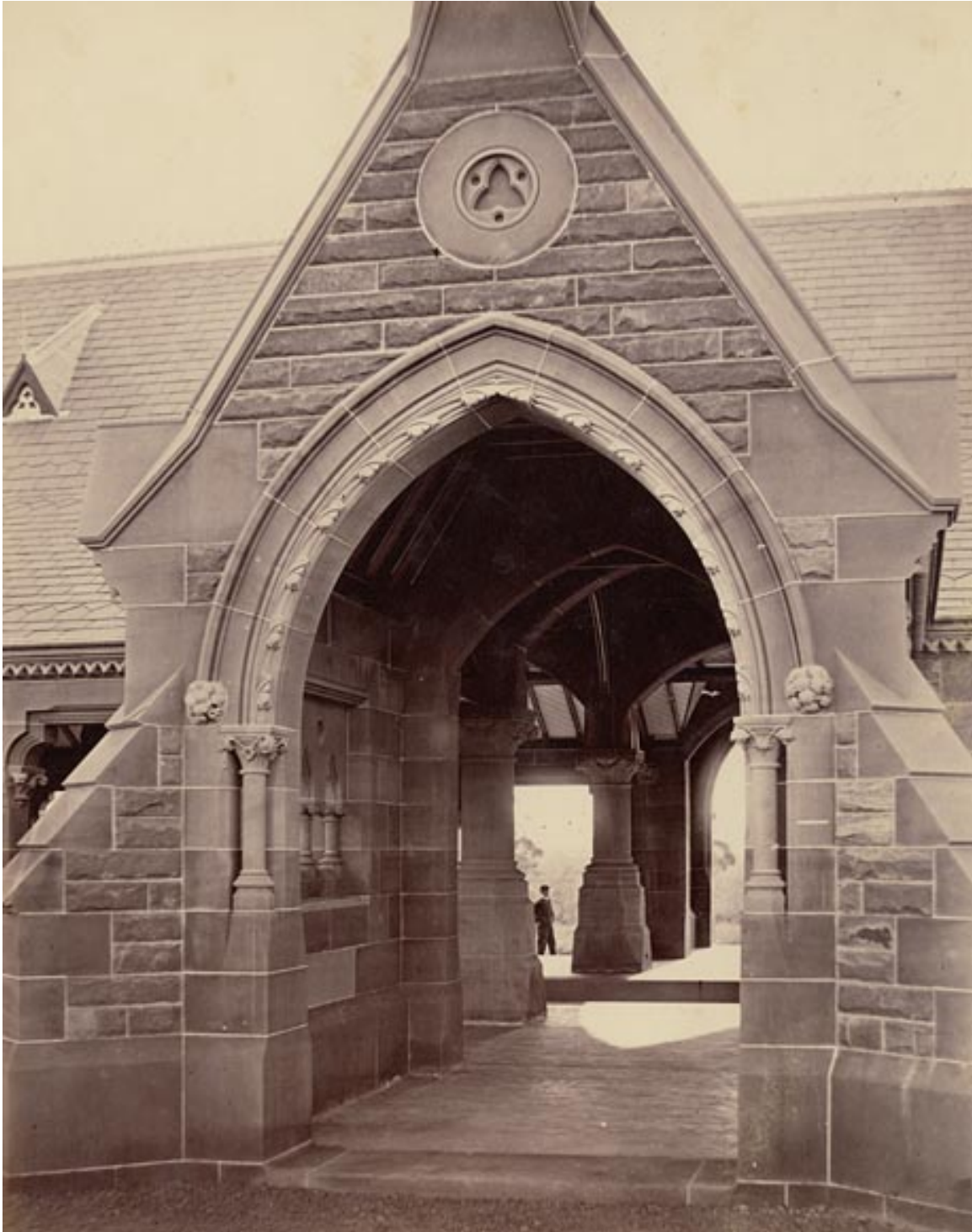
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View of Crematorium and surroundings, 1938



Remembrance Gardens surrounding the Crematorium, 1938



Florist and Tea Room, 1930

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Note: Used the following pages for information:

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- Stonemason's perspective on Rookwood Cemetery
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