

The rejuvenation of history in Brixton's main cemetery

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Brenda van der Molen.

On one Sunday morning volunteers, led by Friends of Johannesburg Cemeteries (FOJC), were found cleaning headstones at Brixton Cemetery.

This was in preparation for a tour that the organisation will host in February, which will focus on symbolism on the headstones. "So we wanted to make sure that interesting symbolisms on the headstones can be easily seen, hence why we are cleaning them today," said FOJC convener Sarah Welham.

Though they had started their cleaning on specific headstones, once those were done, they moved on to cleaning various other headstones. There was a relatively small group of volunteers on the day, which meant they could not venture on further into the cemetery as it is important to work in large groups.

Even with their limited numbers, these volunteers made sure each headstone they were tasked with cleaning was lovingly rejuvenated as though it were their family who laid buried there for centuries. In some cases it was. After Tamzen Dreyer's cousin started work on their family tree they found out that her great-great-grandmother was at the cemetery. So now, the quest to find her headstone begins with great anticipation and she cannot wait to find out where she lays.

FOJC has been working on cemeteries in the city since about 2018 and Brixton Cemetery is important to them because they view it as a history book of the city. "You find people buried here who were there from

the beginning, who built up Johannesburg. Randlords, miners as well as ordinary businessmen who worked in supermarkets and corner cafés. They are all buried here so this is a huge part of the history," said Welham.

The organisation has big need for donations as they need to buy equipment for their work in the cemeteries. Along with this, community members are more than welcome to join them on one of the clean-ups.

Though Welham did express that she would love to see Johannesburg City Parks and Zoo attend to such things as overgrown weeds and the likes, she recognised that the upkeep of the headstones was on the families. "The problem is that most of these families have since left Joburg and South Africa so they cannot look after them. So in a way we are standing in for these families and looking after their graves."



Ricky Rodrigues with Danie Jansen van Rensburg. Photos: Neo Phashe



Nicky Bacon.



Dean Dreyer scrubs a headstone.



Deborah Racliffe.



Jimmy Casey at Brixton Cemetery where his uncle has been buried for the past 84 years. Photo: Neo Phashe

The Irishman whose history is buried in Brixton

Back in 1902 an Irishman would find his way to South Africa.

Then, 37 years later, on March 29, 1939 the same Irishman would meet his death and be buried at Brixton Cemetery.

In the 84 years since his death, one would have been well within their right to assume that his life and history would be buried along with him for even more decades to come.

That assumption could have been fair to make had he not had a nephew like Jimmy Casey (70), who, with passion in his heart to find out about his family's history, journeyed to South Africa to find out more about the uncle he never knew.

He had heard many stories about his uncle, though. Stories such as him making a fortune in the goldmines of South Africa. "I heard he made money all right, but I think he was involved in buying and selling shares," he said.

Adamant to know the truth about his uncle and the stories he was led to believe, Casey would seek out the assistance of Friends of Johannesburg Cemeteries', Sarah Welham. On the day the *Northcliff Melville Times* met Casey, he was part of a group of volunteers led by the organisation, that cleaned headstones and tidied graves.

Through Welham's help, he would not only learn that his uncle was buried at Brixton Cemetery but also that he had a last will and testament which he will soon have a copy of.

Up until four years ago, Casey had little interest to find out about his family lineage, and it was not until he started doing his research that he found all to be so fascinating. "The things you find out about your family back all of those hundreds of years ago is so unbelievable. The only thing I am sorry about is that a lot of my first cousins have passed away, and had I done this maybe 20 years earlier I would have met them in different parts of the world, and this is one regret I have."

Records on his uncle suggest that Casey could still have more relatives to find here in South Africa, the possibility of which really excites him.

He will spend six more weeks in our country, a country that he now knows he will always have ties too. In this time he will be a tourist, visiting places like the Kruger National Park and other sites too.

Before he travels across the many parts of the country, he will erect a new tombstone for his uncle, a gesture he cannot wait to see come to fruition before he leaves to return to Ireland.

Gail, a force of nature found in our city's cemeteries

The cemetery, a place where one can find loved ones laid to rest, and the surprising presence of those such as Gail Wilson, a sketch artist who travels to various cemeteries sketching features she finds interesting.

Spotted unassumingly sitting among the headstones of Brixton Cemetery, it was not only her striking pink hair that caught one's attention, but the intrigue behind what she was doing that compelled one to stop and find out.

Gail shared how she had accompanied fellow volunteers of Friends of Johannesburg Cemeteries who had gathered there to rejuvenate headstones with a wash and tidying up gravesites. Finding that she lacked the energy required to be of this sort of service, the artist opted to contribute in her own unique way.

Sketching at cemeteries makes her feel very relaxed and she wished more people would visit

them. "It's so chilled, quiet and peaceful and it is inspiring," she said.

Though she has always loved art she hasn't always solely invested her time in it. "I worked in corporate for many years but since I retired, I have started to sketch again."

She has sat with sketch pad in her lap at cemeteries such as Braamfontein and Westpark. Asked which of these cemeteries she has found more special, she said Braamfontein. This was the place her mother would leave her and her siblings to play with their bicycles for a few hours as they did not have a garden growing up in Hilbrow.

Gail also just recently discovered that her great-great-grandfather is buried at Braamfontein. "All this time my family and I had thought he passed from a mining accident in Kimberly and was buried there."

Of those she has spent time at, she found Westpark Cemetery to

be very lively. "It is almost like going to a busy mall on a Saturday, even though it is a place of sadness, there is always a brass band playing at someone's funeral and you also see candy-floss and ice-cream sellers riding their bicycles and even a few people who picnic there."

Wilson hoped that people would look past the sadness of cemeteries and see the wealth of history it stored. "These places are so rich with history. I wish people visited these spaces more often – just to come in and use it as a park as it is so abandoned."



Gail Wilson with her sketch book as she sits among the headstones found at Brixton Cemetery. Photo: Neo Phashe