

A walk back in time uncovers new stories



Karen Tyers is leading this year's Warrnambool cemetery tours and retracing the stories of those who are buried there.

COMMUNITY

BY KATRINA LOVELL

Warrnambool

FROM the ancestors of famed ballet dancer and actor Sir Robert Helpmann to the deaths of young children, this year's Warrnambool cemetery tours have unearthed some tragic tales.

When Karen Tyers started her research she very quickly got sidetracked by the stories behind the memorial headstones.

From the simple to elaborate, Mrs Tyers chose the 12 graves on this year's Warrnambool Family History Group's tours because the scrolls, wreaths and doves attracted her attention.

Other headstones were chosen because they featured either just a first or last name.

The grave of a six-year-old boy which just had the name Harold written on the headstone was the first to catch her eye.

Harold Dean passed away on June 1, 1898, and was one of four children in the cemetery which didn't have surnames.

"Three of them died from diphtheria, typhoid or scarlet fever. So I go into the prevalence of those diseases in Warrnambool on the tour," she said. "I was amazed at what I actually found out."

Trying to find the last name of "little Harold", who

died of diphtheria, led her to discover his first cousin had been murdered in a crime that famously remains unsolved to this day.

"Harold's father was Alfred Dean and he was a school inspector. He had been moved around Victoria and had been in Warrnambool six to seven years," she said.

"When I was in school I can remember when the inspectors would come and stand at the end of the school room and listen to how the teacher taught.

"Just going through Trove I found a reference to Alfred in 1930. His niece had been brutally murdered in Elwood." The murder of school teacher Molly Dean - who

was brutally bashed just doors away from her home - was an example of how you can get completely sidetracked doing the research, Mrs Tyers said.

A dove on the top of the gravestone of Benjamin Francis Helpman was what first caught Mrs Tyers' eye. "He's the great grandfather of Sir Robert Helpmann," she said.

Mrs Tyers said that at first she thought it was a different family to Sir Robert because the surnames were spelt differently but she discovered the extra "n" was added to the name to give it a more theatrical appearance.

Benjamin Helpman died in 1874 after a short illness

but had arrived in Warrnambool from Western Australia.

His wife's sister had married Stephen Henty, who Mr Helpman had gone into partnership with.

They had bought a small steamer which was involved in a collision at sea in 1857. "The wreck had a devastating affect on him and he never commanded a ship again," Mrs Tyers said. He took on the role as harbourmaster in 1861 in Warrnambool.

The tours run on Saturday January 7 at 2pm, Sunday January 8 at 6pm, Wednesday January 11 at 10am and Sunday January 22 at 2pm. Meet at the rotunda.

Donation of \$5 appreciated.