BETTER HERITAGE INFORMATION
SUMMARY OF STATE HERITAGE PLACE

COMMENTARY ON THE LISTING

Description and notes with respect to a place entered in the South Australian Heritage Register in accordance with either the *South Australian Heritage Act 1978* or the *Heritage Places Act 1993*.

The information contained in this document is provided in accordance with s14(6) of the *Heritage Places Act 1993*.

NAME:	Cemetery – Robe	**PLACE NO.:** 12645
KNOWN AS:	Robe Cemetery	
ADDRESS:	Bunganditj Country	
	Burr Street, Robe SA 5276 (off 10-14 O'Halloran St, Robe SA 5276)	
	CT 45/10 H441800 S590 Hundred of Waterhouse	

CONFIRMED IN THE SOUTH AUSTRALIAN HERITAGE REGISTER:

08 November 1984

STATEMENT OF HERITAGE SIGNIFICANCE

Cemetery - Robe captures the emergence and consolidation of Robe and the development of cemeteries in South Australia, demonstrating how cemeteries could simultaneously adapt to local needs and draw from broader cultural and political developments. Importantly, its non-denominational layout and lack of church presence reflects the Colony's foundational commitment to religious freedom. Additionally, the graves of pastoralists, immigrants, and shipwreck victims at Cemetery - Robe encapsulate the early phase of South Australia's development, particularly its expansion into the South East and the intertwined role of pastoralism and maritime trade.

RELEVANT/INDICATIVE CRITERIA (under section 16 of the *Heritage Places Act 1993*)

(a) it demonstrates important aspects of the evolution or pattern of the State's history

Robe was founded by the colonial government as a seaport town in 1846 to serve pastoral expansion in the South East and became a key South Australian port throughout the 1850s and 1860s, directly connecting the South East with intercolonial and international markets. It was also where thousands of migrants entered the colony, including British, Irish, and Chinese people.
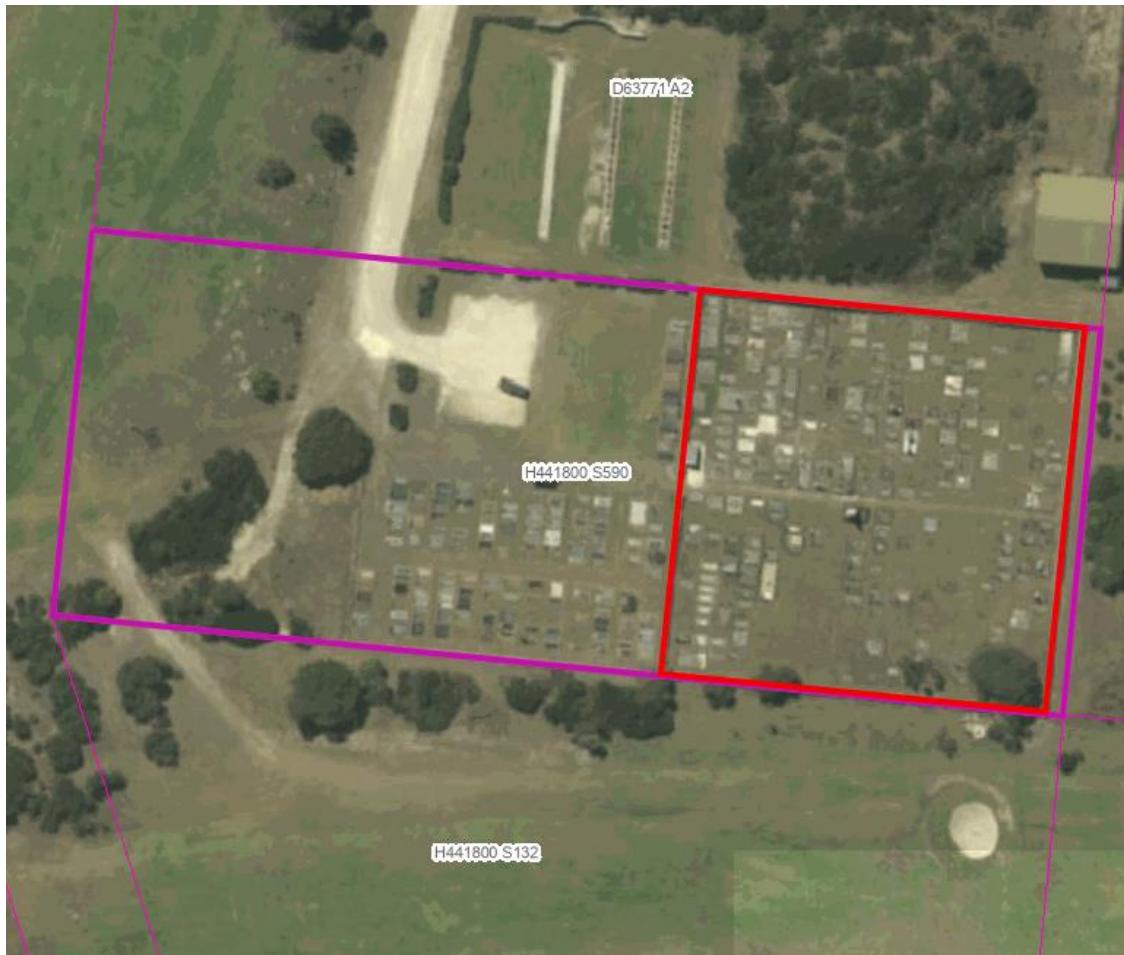
Cemetery - Robe demonstrates the growth and consolidation of the township, as well as the development of cemeteries in South Australia. It originated as a gravesite towards the rear of the town as early as 1849. Like other regional cemeteries, it developed initially in an ad hoc manner, increasing in formality, over time as evidenced by the erection of ornate headstones and statuary, the construction of a perimeter wall, and an official land grant. These changes were inspired both by local needs and broader cultural and political developments, most notably the *Act to Regulate Cemeteries* (1862). Importantly, the absence of a church-presence and lack of denominational segregation at the cemetery reflects both its ad hoc development and South Australia's foundational commitment to religious freedom.

Further, Cemetery - Robe includes the graves of various figures associated with the early history of Robe in the nineteenth century. These figures include pastoral settlers, immigrants, and victims of maritime disasters. Their presence at Cemetery - Robe reflects Robe's place within the evolution of South Australia as a colonial settlement, especially its expansion and the conjoined role that pastoralism and maritime trade played within that process.

SITE PLAN

Robe Cemetery

Burr Street Robe

PLACE NO.: 12645

Cemetery - Robe SHP 12645, CT 45/10, S590 Hundred of Waterhouse

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LEGEND

Parcel boundaries (Indicates extent of Listing)
Outline of Elements of Significance for State Heritage Place

Confirmed in the South Australian Heritage Register on 08 November 1984
The South Australian Heritage Council endorsed the content of this BHI - SSHP on 6 July 2023.

PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION

'Cemetery - Robe' refers to the historical section of the larger Robe District Cemetery.

Cemetery - Robe is square in shape and is surrounded by a 1.5 metre perimeter wall made of limestone and lake stone. A small stone building now known as 'The Sexton's Hut' is incorporated into the wall and is located by the entrance to the cemetery. The cemetery is arranged as a basic grid and the gravesites are aligned in horizontal rows. The cemetery is not divided by religion or denomination.

The cemetery contains both unmarked and marked graves. The marked graves are typically bordered by small stone walls, some have iron fencing. The headstones vary in style and range from simple stone plaques and traditional upright headstones, many with rounded tops, to relatively large and ornate monuments, the most conspicuous being the memorial to the Crowe family located toward the centre of the site.

The condition of the graves and headstones vary in condition. Grass covers the paths and spaces between gravesites. Unintended vegetation has also grown at the site, both on and around some of the gravesites.

Elements of Significance:

Elements of heritage significance include (but are not necessarily limited to):

- Gravesites including iron fencing, headstones, and monuments,
- The 1.5-metre-high stone wall surrounding the historic cemetery,
- 'The Sexton's Hut', a small, enclosed stone building attached to the wall by the entrance.

Elements not considered to contribute to significance of place include (but are not necessarily limited to):

- Signage describing the historical details of the site.

HISTORY OF THE PLACE

Guichen Bay in the South East of South Australia forms part of the traditional lands of the Bungandidj people, whom have been present in the larger area for at least 30,000 years.[1] Europeans first charted the coastline of the region in 1802 during the Baudin and Flinders expeditions and sealers established a presence at Guichen Bay in 1831.[2]

European exploration of the South East took place from 1839 and settlement began as early as 1840.[3] Much of the South East was initially settled by pastoralists and by 1847 approximately half of the region was held under pastoral licence. As primary production expanded the Colonial Government began to provide a series of Government Towns as service and staging centres. The provision of ports to ship goods

to market was also viewed as essential.[4] Robe was established in 1846 to provide a port for the burgeoning wool clip then being obtained from the South East. It was officially declared as a port by the Government in 1847.[5]

Situated towards the south of Guichen Bay, Robe (or Robetown, as it was originally known) went on to become the first major town of the South East.[6] Over the next two decades, Robe developed as an international port that serviced the local pastoral industry and import and export markets. It also facilitated the arrival of thousands of immigrants, including British and Irish people, as well as Chinese prospectors during the Victorian gold rush.[7]

Reflecting the growth of Robe, officials quickly recognised the need for a burial ground. Unlike Adelaide, Government surveyors do not appear to have included a specific plan for a cemetery when laying out Robe in 1846. However, a glebe was provided for a future church when Robe's surveyors allocated 'good grassy land' towards the rear of the township for this purpose.[8] In 1849, around three years after Robe was founded, Gerald Butler, the Government Resident at Robe, was instructed to assign an acre of land for burials.[9] A site at the glebe was selected towards this end. Although a church had not been established on the glebe, it may well have been chosen due to the traditional connection between churches and graveyards.

While not entirely isolated from the town, the burial ground was nonetheless situated towards the rear of the glebe and about two-hundred metres away from O'Halloran Street. The decision to create distance between the site and the town's inhabitants likely reflects contemporary attitudes about the supposed health risks associated with burying human remains. Like many in Britain and Europe, colonists generally believed that decomposing bodies polluted their surrounding environments, particularly the soil and groundwater, and could in turn spread disease.[10] Thus, it is quite possible that such health concerns inspired Butler to select the land at the glebe.

The earliest graves were utilitarian. In its first five years, about twenty-seven burials took place at the site, including that of an unidentified First Nations child.[11] These burials do not appear to have either been marked or recorded. Even the exact locations of those known to have been buried during this period, such as Mary Kelham, are unknown.[12] The earliest marked grave was erected for William Vansittart in 1854.[13] This gap suggests that although residents realised that they required a place to bury the deceased, they did not plan the site as a formal cemetery, and it instead initially developed on an ad hoc basis according to need. This approach would be consistent with the development of regional cemeteries generally, a process historian Robert Nicol has described as 'haphazard'.[14]

The cemetery increased in formality as the township consolidated. Vansittart's grave, for instance, marked the onset of not only marked graves but also the erection of detailed headstones of various styles, as well as ornate monuments and statuary, such

as the large tribute to the Crowe family situated toward the centre of the cemetery.[15] Furthermore, in 1858 George Shivas and George Hailes were contracted to build a stone wall to enclose and define the extent of the cemetery. The wall was constructed mostly by Levi Cooper, a local mason. A stone building was incorporated into the wall by the entrance, now referred to as 'The Sexton's Hut', indicating it was likely the groundskeeper's shed.[16] Also reflecting the formalisation of the cemetery site, the land title was officially granted to Charles Brewer and George Omerod in 1863 (CT 45/10). Brewer and Omerod held the title until 1878, when it was transferred to the District Council of Robe following Omerod's death.[17]

These changes owed as much to broader cultural and political developments as they did to the growth of Robe. Throughout the British empire, public attitudes towards the deceased and to cemeteries began to change in the 1800s. Accordingly, governments also started to introduce tighter regulations. These changes were motivated by both a greater reverence for the deceased and to address sanitation issues.[18] The construction of fences or walls, for example, took place not only to 'delineate the cemetery area' but also to prevent grazing animals from disturbing or disrespecting the dead.[19]

Moreover, government regulations were introduced to control burial practices and ensure that they adhered to minimum standards in the interest of public health, including restrictions on where and how human remains could be buried.[20] Towards this end, the Colonial Government passed the *Act for the Regulation of Cemeteries* in 1862.[21] Among its various provisions, the Act required all cemeteries to be formally listed, have an official curator appointed by a local authority, and be enclosed by a fence.[22] As evidenced by the construction of the perimeter wall in 1858, the cemetery at Robe pre-empted some of these measures, but it is almost certain that the land grant in 1863 would have been motivated by the implementation of the Act.

Further, the land transfer that occurred in 1878 was consistent with the Government's subsequent push to place cemeteries and burials under local management, a process that intensified in the 1870s.[23] Altogether, the cemetery at Robe evolved due to a combination of local decisions and broader cultural and political trends.

This fusion of influences is further reflected in the cemetery's lack of denominational control. Unlike traditional English cemeteries which were owned and operated by a particular church and segregated according to denomination, many early cemeteries in South Australia were established as non-denominational. This owed in part to the Colony's foundational commitment to religious independence and freedom, and the Colonial Government's preference for public cemeteries. Although the latter aroused controversy and while it did not prevent the creation of private denominational cemeteries, or even segregation within some public cemeteries, notably at the West Terrace Cemetery,[24] the Government made clear that it generally did not favour the traditional English model. The Cemetery at Robe was not attached

to a church and was not segregated per denomination, despite being located at the glebe, land that was assigned for religious purposes. [25] Regardless of whether this aspect of the cemetery was a conscious choice or a historical accident, the cemetery did not adhere to the English model.

The non-denominational aspect is just one way the cemetery reflects the diversity of Robe. Many locals have been buried at the cemetery since its inception, especially since the late 1850s. These locals include early pastoralists, people associated with prominent South Australian and international figures, and victims of maritime disasters. Included amongst those are the headstones of members of the Stockdale, Dunn, Hayes, and Crowe settler pastoralist families;[26] Mary Tolmer, the first wife of Alexander Tolmer, a key figure in securing the South Australian economy during the Victorian goldrush;[27] descendants of John Wheeley Lea, the co-founder of Lea and Perrins Worcestershire Sauce;[28] and the grave of an 'unknown drowned female' likely from the 1849 wrecking of the *Thompsons*.[29]

The cemetery was used as a place to bury the victims of shipwrecks that occurred at or near Guichen Bay. Over time, the cemetery has come to be appreciated for its capacity to convey Robe's history as a major South Australian seaport town, as well as the dangers of seafaring in the nineteenth century. For instance, a 1925 article in the *Mail* exploring the 'romance of early Robe' refers to the 'old walled cemetery at Robe', whereby the 'graves of people drowned in the wrecks' can be observed, as well as a headstone for a lifeboat operator.[30] Beyond those killed at sea, the cemetery also includes the graves of seafarers and others associated with portside operations.[31]

Beginning in the early 1870s, Robe's heyday as a major intercolonial and international port began to decline. While due to many factors, the rise of competition from other port towns, such as Kingston, and the emergence of railways in the region are notable.[32] Although Robe's population also declined, the town persisted and the cemetery remained in operation, largely without incident. Notable events occurred when the land was transferred to the District Council in 1878 and when a large earthquake in the area caused minor damage in 1897.[33]

Throughout the years, the cemetery expanded outside of the walled section to become a much larger complex. The walled section became known as the historic cemetery, or the old cemetery and the site was listed as a State Heritage Place in 1984. The District Council of Robe officially closed it to new burials in 2005, with the exception of five plots purchased prior to the closure. As of May 2023, only one of five burials has taken place.[34] In addition to being a place of remembrance and mourning for locals, the cemetery now primarily functions as a historic site and tourist attraction.[35]

CHRONOLOGY

Year	Event
1837	Colonel William Light includes a public cemetery in his plan for Adelaide. The West Terrace Cemetery (formerly Adelaide Public Cemetery) opens soon after.
1846	Counties of Grey and Robe are proclaimed and opened to claim under pastoral license.
1847	The Colonial Government officially declares Robe as a port.
1849	**Cemetery site is selected.**
1854	First marked grave: William Vansittart.
1858	**Stone Wall is constructed to enclose the cemetery by George Shivas, George Hailes, and Levi Cooper.**
1862	**Government passes the *Act for the Regulation of Cemeteries*.**
1863	**Land officially granted to Charles Brewer Esquire and George Omerod for use as a cemetery.**
1873	Government passes the Health Act. Among its various provisions, the Act makes local governments responsible for maintaining basic public health standards and procedures. It also establishes a Central Board of Health which had the power to order prompt internments.
1878	**Land transferred to District Council of Robe following death of George Omerod.**
1897	Earthquake causes minor damage to cemetery.
1984	**Listed as a State Heritage Place.**
	The Heritage Conservation Branch confirms with the District Council of Robe that burials can continue at Cemetery – Robe (SHP 12645) as they constitute day-to-day operations and are unlikely to alter its general character and appearance.
2005	**Cemetery – Robe (SHP 12645) closed for burials with the exception of five plots sold prior to the closure.**

REFERENCES

Books, Chapters, and Reports

Bermingham, Kathleen. *Gateway to the South East*: *A Story of Robetown and the Guichen Bay District*. Millicent: The South Eastern Times Ltd., 1961.

Dallwitz, John, and Marsden, Susan. *Robe Historical Interpretation Study: Stage 1 in the Establishment of the Robe Historical Interpretation Centre*. Adelaide: Department of Environment and Planning, 1983.

Harful, Liz. *Almost an Island: The Story of Robe*, reprinted edition. 2013; Mile End: Wakefield Press, 2015.

Marsden, Susan. *A Glimpse of Golden Days*. Robe: District Council of Robe, 1985.

Patitsas, Kathleen. Register of State Heritage Items Item Evaluation Sheet, Ref No. 6823-12645.

Robe District Cemetery Management Plan. Robe: District Council of Robe, 2018.

Journal Articles

Curl, James. 'The Architecture and Planning of the Nineteenth-Century Cemetery'. *Garden History* 3:2 (1975): 13-41.

Muller, Stephen. 'Colonial Experiences of Death, Burial and Memorialisation in West Terrace Cemetery, Adelaide: Applying a Phenomenological Approach to Cultural Landscapes in Historical Archaeology'. *Australasian Historical Archaeology* 33 (2015): 15-26.

Newspapers

'An Earthquake Shock', *Advertiser*, 11 May 1897, 5.

A.S.C, 'One of South Australia's Oldest Cemeteries: Relic of Robe's Early Days', *Adelaide Chronicle*, 29 August 1940, 35.

'The Earthquake: Shocks Still Continue at Kingston; Great Damage Done Along the Coast', *Narracoorte Herald*, 14 May 1897, 3.

'Romance of Early Robe: Ruins of Once Important Port', *Mail* (Adelaide), 6 June 1925, 17.

Kate Hill, 'The Tombstone Tourists: Stories of the Dead Given New Life at Robe's Historic Cemetery', *ABC News*, 31 August 2017.

Websites

'Robe Cemetery'. *District Council of Robe*, date N.A. URL: http://ww.robe.sa.gov.au/explore/history/robecemetery. Accessed 18 April 2023.

Legislation

An Act for the Regulation of Cemeteries, No. 19 Vic, 1862.

BHI Summary of State Heritage Place: 12645   9 of 15
Confirmed in the South Australian Heritage Register on 08 November 1984
The South Australian Heritage Council endorsed the content of this BHI - SSHP on 6 July 2023.

SITE DETAILS

Robe Cemetery

PLACE NO.: 12645

Burr Street, Robe SA 5276

DESCRIPTION OF PLACE:	Cemetery laid out as a grid and enclosed by a stone wall with integrated building. The graves are organised in horizontal rows and feature, low stone walls or iron fences, headstones, statuary and monuments.
DATE OF CONSTRUCTION:	c.1849
REGISTER STATUS:	Confirmed 08 November 1984
CURRENT USE:	Historical site and tourist spot.
	2005 – present
	Cemetery
	1849 - present
BUILDER:	George Shivas, George Hailes and Levi Cooper.
	1858
LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREA:	District Council of Robe

LOCATION:

Street No.:	N.A.
Street Name:	Burr Street
Town/Suburb:	Robe
Post Code:	5276

LAND DESCRIPTION:

Title Reference:	CT 45/10 H441800 S590
Hundred:	Waterhouse

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PHOTOS/IMAGES

Robe Cemetery

PLACE NO.: 12645

Burr Street, Robe SA 5276

Landscape painting of Robe Cemetery by Robert Ingpen.

Source: Robert Ingpen, *Robe: A Portrait of the Past*, 1971.

Image illustrating the gravesites, variety of headstones, iron fencing, low stone walls, external boundary wall and 'The Sexton's Hut', early twenty-first century.

Source: www.nationaltrust.org.au/robe-heritage-foundation/

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Robe Cemetery   **PLACE NO.: 12645**

Burr Street, Robe SA 5276

Historic photograph shows a wooden fence at the entrance gate, which is no longer present, early twentieth century.

Source: www.nationaltrust.org.au/robe-heritage-foundation/

The entrance to Cemetery - Robe. Note the large monument to the Crowe family (middle), the entrance sign identifying the 'Historic' section of the Cemetery, and the lack of wooden gates.
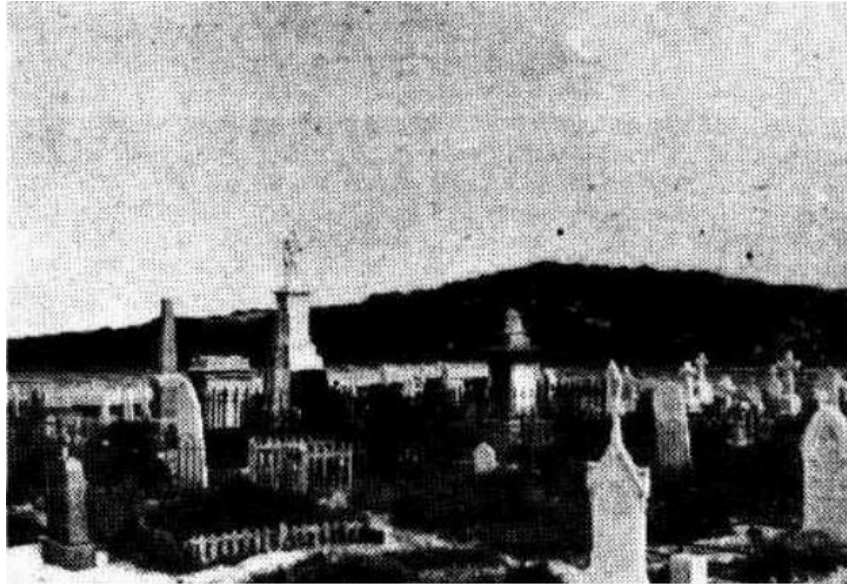
Source: DEW Files 16 October 2003

BHI Summary of State Heritage Place: 12645   12 of 15
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PHOTOS/IMAGES

Robe Cemetery   **PLACE NO.: 12645**

Burr Street, Robe SA 5276

The Robe Cemetery. The grass-choked mound in the left foreground is a grave nearly 80 years old.

Robe Cemetery featured in a 1940 Adelaide Chronicle article exploring 'One of South Australia's Oldest Cemeteries'.

Source: www.trove.nla.gov.au

Contrasting gravesites and headstones at the cemetery.

Source: DEW Files 16 October 2003

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[1] Liz Harfull, *Almost an Island: The Story of Robe*, reprinted edition (2013; Mile End: Wakefield press, 2015), 12-14; Susan Marsden, *A Glimpse of Golden Days* (Robe: District Council of Robe, 1985), 10-12.

[2] Harfull, *Almost an Island*, 11; Marsden, *A Glimpse of Golden Days,* 12.

[3] Harfull, *Almost an Island*, 14-16; Marsden, *A Glimpse of Golden Days,* 14.

[4] Roger André, 'Wool', SA History Hub, History Trust of South Australia, 19 March 2014. https://sahistoryhub.history.sa.gov.au/subjects/wool; Michael Williams, *The Making of the South Australian Landscape: A Study in the Historical Geography of Australia* (London; New York: Academic Press, 1974), 339-341.

[5] Kathleen Bermingham, *Gateway to the South East: A Story of Robetown and the Guichen Bay District* (Millicent: The South Eastern Times Ltd., 1961), 99.

[6] John Dallwitz and Susan Marsden, *Robe Historical Interpretation Study: Stage 1 in the Establishment of the Robe Historical Interpretation Centre* (Adelaide: Department of Environment and Planning, 1983), 4-10.

[7] Dallwitz and Marsden, *Robe Historical Interpretation*, 10-16.

[8] Bermingham, *Gateway to the South East,* 201.

[9] Kathleen Patitsas, Register of State Heritage Items Item Evaluation Sheet, Ref No. 6823-12645, 2; Dallwitz and Marsden, *Robe Historical Interpretation*, 35 and 157 of the PDF (the official page number is not available for the latter; instead, the document page number has been used).

[10] Robert Nicol, *Cemeteries of South Australia: A Heritage Survey* (Adelaide: Department of Environment and Planning, 1988), 23-26.

[11] *Robe District Cemetery Management Plan* (Robe: District Council of Robe, 2017), 8-9.

[12] "Robe Cemetery", District Council of Robe. https://www.robe.sa.gov.au/explore/history/robecemetery

[13] The District Council of Robe identifies that the first 'known' grave was built for William Vansittart in 1854. The Robe District Cemetery Management Plan identifies the first 'detailed' burial occurred in 1856. "Robe Cemetery", District Council of Robe; *Cemetery Management Plan*, 8.

[14] Nicol, *Cemeteries of South Australia*, 12 and 16-17.

[15] *Cemetery Management Plan*, 8; "Robe Cemetery", District Council of Robe.

[16] 'Robe Cemetery', District Council of Robe; *Cemetery Management Plan*, 8-9.

[17] *Cemetery Management Plan*, 8.

[18] Nicol, *Cemeteries of South Australia*, 13-15 and 23-26.

[19] Nicol, *Cemeteries of South Australia*, 188.

[20] Nicol, *Cemeteries of South Australia*, 26-29.

[21] *An Act for the Regulation of Cemeteries*, No. 19 Vic, 1862.

[22] Nicol, *Cemeteries of South Australia*, 28.

[23] Nicol, *Cemeteries of South Australia*, 30-31.

[24] Nicol, *Cemeteries of South Australia*, 16-21.

[25] *Western Section of Payneham Cemetery*, 4; James Curl, 'The Architecture and Planning of the Nineteenth-Century Cemetery', *Garden History* 3:2 (1975): 15-17.

[26] *Cemetery Management Plan,* 8.

[27] 'Robe Cemetery', District Council of Robe. https://www.robe.sa.gov.au/explore/history/robecemetery; and *Robe District Cemetery Management Plan* (Robe: District Council of Robe, 2017), 39. For more on Alexander Tolmer, see John Dallwitz and Susan Marsden, *Robe Historical Interpretation Study* (Adelaide: District Council of Robe and Department of Environment and Planning, 1983), 10.

[28] 'Robe Cemetery', District Council of Robe.

[29] Kate Hill, 'The Tombstone Tourists: Stories of the Dead Given New Life at Robe's Historic Cemetery', *ABC News*, 31 August 2017.

[30] 'Romance of Early Robe: Ruins of Once Important Port', *Mail* (Adelaide), 6 June 1925, 17.

[31] Patitsas, Register of State Heritage Items, 3.

[32] Dallwitz and Marsden, *Robe Historical Interpretation*, 19-21.

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[33] 'The Earthquake: Shocks Still Continue at Kingston; Great Damage Done Along the Coast', *Narracoorte Herald*, 14 May 1897, 3.

[34] There is a discrepancy within secondary sources over the year burials ceased at the historic section. Robe District Council's web entry for the Cemetery states that burials ceased in 1970 whereas the Management Plan states they ceased in 2005. 'Robe Cemetery', District Council of Robe; *Cemetery Management Plan*, 9. The Council has verbally advised that new burials were officially discontinued in 2005.

[35] For example, see Kate Hill. 'The Tombstone Tourists'.

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