

Cemeteries and Cyphers

Symbols found on headstones can tell us a lot about the people they commemorate. Decoding this unusual language enables us to understand more about their lives. Here are some examples of symbols and what they represent.

1. Compass and Square symbol

This is the universal symbol of the Freemasons, and indicates that the person commemorated was a Freemason. The compass and square were used in the time of construction of the cathedrals in Europe, though the exact meaning of these symbols is known only to Freemasons.



St James Anglican Churchyard

2. Roses joined together

A rose symbolises love, hope and beauty. Two roses joined together signify a strong bond, as on a couple's stone. In this case it is a grave of a husband and wife.



St James Anglican Churchyard

3. Draped Urn

The urn is taken from classical Greek imagery and represents those used to carry the remains of the dead. The fabric depicted as part of the headstone symbolises the veil between the living and the dead and the thin boundary that separates them.

4. Rustic Gravestones

Gravestones like these were purposefully designed to resemble trees and were part of a movement to make cemeteries look like parks. Often the tree stone pattern was altered. In some instances branches were added or broken off each time a family member was buried, with each piece individualised with different decorations.



St James Anglican Churchyard



St James Anglican Churchyard



St James Anglican Churchyard

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5. Scroll

Scrolls symbolise a person's life: the past rolled up, the present (moment of death) on display, and the future in the afterlife yet to be revealed. Scrolls also signify honour and a memorial, often representing the Bible and other sacred and ancient texts.

6. Fern

These have come to symbolise a person's humility and sincerity. Since the First World War, the war graves of New Zealand soldiers have also carried a fern.

7. Anchor

Anchors symbolise hope and steadfastness and are often found on sailors' gravestones to represent their connection to the sea.



St James Anglican Churchyard

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Te Waimate Cemetery

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8. The Unfinished Book

This headstone commemorates the life of a boy who died when he was eight. The book of his life was unfinished – represented symbolically here – as he had only lived a short time.

9. Broken Rose or Stem

The hanging bud is used most commonly on headstones of children who died an untimely or premature death. The broken bud or stem represents the flower that did not bloom into full blossom; the life cut short before it reached adulthood.



St James Anglican Churchyard

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St James Anglican Churchyard

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St James Anglican Churchyard

10. The Cross

The symbol of the Christian faith.

11. Lamp

This lamp is a memorial to a boy who is buried within the Te Waimate cemetery. The boy died in childhood and the lamp signifies the memory of the child, which still lives and burns bright for the family.

12. Mourning Child

This is the headstone of the boy commemorated by the Lychgate lamp. The child on the headstone is in mourning, signifying loss.

13. Mourning Angel

A mourning angel also signifies the death of a young person.

14. Hands

This is symbolic of holy matrimony. The person who died first holds the other's hand, guiding the spouse to Heaven. In this case, the husband died first.



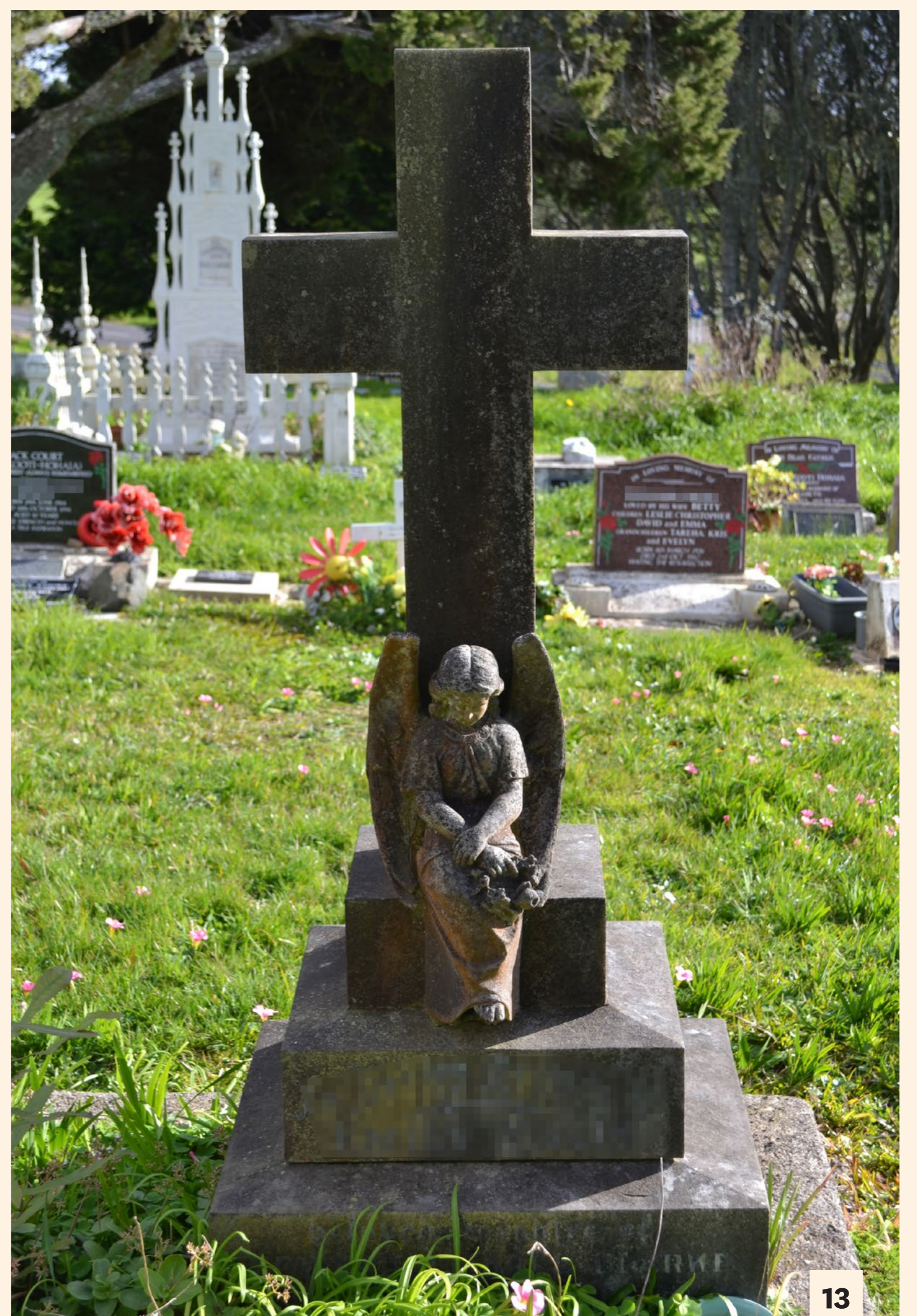
Te Waimate Cemetery



Te Waimate Cemetery

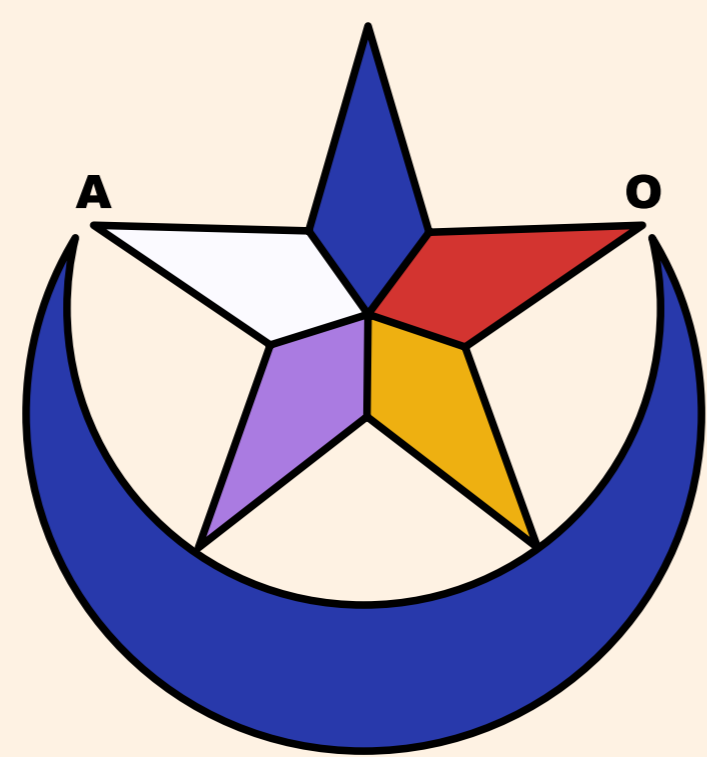


Te Waimate Cemetery



Te Waimate Cemetery





Rātana Symbol

The main tohu (symbol) of the Rātana Church is a five-pointed star and crescent moon – the whetū mārama which means both the ‘star and moon’ and ‘shining star’. The Rātana symbol is often found on the headstones of adherents to the Rātana Church.

The golden or blue crescent moon symbolises enlightenment and can face different parts of the coloured star.

Blue segment of the star: Represents Te Matua (the Father)

White segment: Represents Te Tama (the Son)

Red segment: Represents Te Wairua Tapu (the Holy Spirit)

Purple segment: Represents ngā Anahera Pono (the faithful angels)

Gold/yellow segment: Represents Te Māngai (the Mouthpiece of Jehovah, Ture Wairua), though this is sometimes replaced with pink representing Piri Wiri Tua (The Campaigner of Political Matters, Ture Tangata).

Te whetū mārama represents the kingdom of light or māramatanga standing firm against the forces of darkness (mākutu).

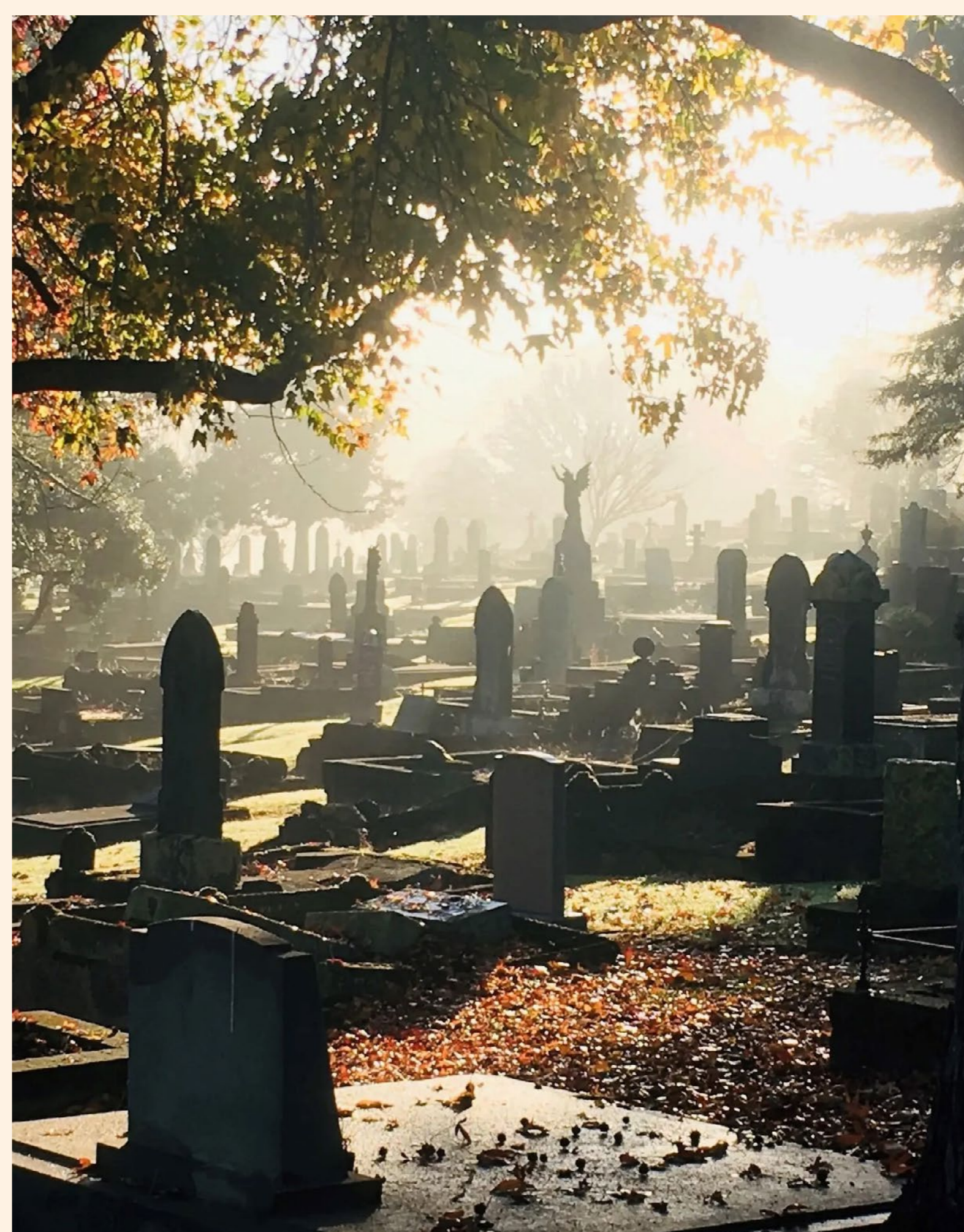
The changing face of cemeteries

Cemeteries are like open-air museums with their headstones serving as a record of our culture and social history. They are an irreplaceable historical resource and an important record of the social history of the area and community. They also reflect changes in society.

Early Cemeteries

The St James Anglican Churchyard Cemetery is Kerikeri’s first and New Zealand’s oldest continuously operating cemetery with a number of graves pre-dating the Treaty of Waitangi. The Waimate North cemetery is of a similar vintage. Other early cemeteries in Northland include those of Christ Church at Kororāreka Russell and the cemetery at Māngungu Mission at Horeke.

Many of the pictures in this display are taken from graves in the St James Anglican Churchyard and the Waimate North cemetery. Both cemeteries pre-date the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi making them some of the oldest and earliest consecrated cemeteries in the country.



Purewa Cemetery, Auckland

Victorian Cemeteries

In Victorian times the design and scale of headstones – and even the location of a person’s grave – reflected their social and economic status in life. Walk through cemeteries from that era and it’s clear that some headstones are more elaborate than others. Sometimes it almost feels as if the headstones are vying with each other for your attention.

In cemeteries from this time you’ll see that religious denominations are clearly separated. Often you’ll find a sector for Catholics, Anglicans, Methodists, Jews and other faith communities.

What you won’t find in cemeteries from this era are places for the ashes of the deceased. New Zealand’s first cremation didn’t take place until 1909.



North Shore Memorial Park





Cemeteries Today

Between 70 and 80 percent of deaths in New Zealand are currently cremated. Over the years cemeteries have changed to reflect this.

With increasing numbers of people opting for cremation, the design and layout of cemeteries has changed. There is a higher emphasis on consistency in terms of size and design of plaques and memorials for example – cremation has enabled that to happen.

Practical factors like upkeep are also incorporated

into cemetery designs with much of the maintenance today carried out with lawnmowers and other machinery.

Today's cemeteries often have a 'municipal' feel to them – a far cry from 19th Century burial grounds which were not nearly as structured and closely managed. They are still cultural and historical landscapes in their own right, however, and future generations will no doubt find them as interesting as we do.

Looking after the plot – some dos and don'ts of looking after graves

Although local councils are responsible for general upkeep of public cemeteries, descendants of the deceased are responsible for the maintenance and upkeep of their family members' graves.

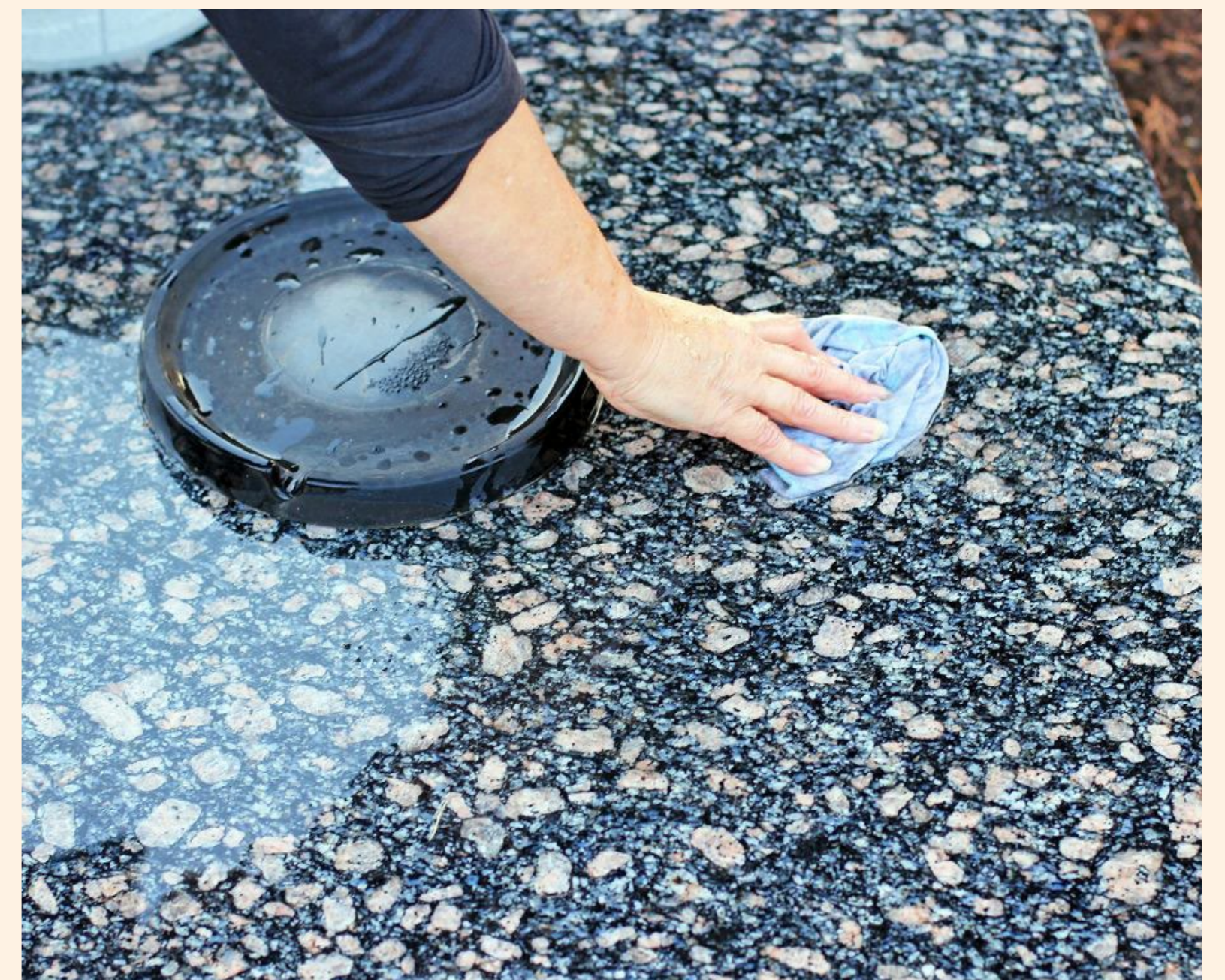
Dr Helen Leggatt recently completed a PhD on the social history of modern cremation in New Zealand at the University of Canterbury and has a specialist interest in the heritage of cemeteries.

A self-confessed taphophile (someone with an interest in cemeteries, gravestones and the art and history that goes with them), she has come up with some dos and don'ts for people wanting to maintain cemeteries:

Do not attempt to restore, repair or thoroughly clean a gravestone to which you have no connection and no permission to clean.

Do not interfere with plants purposefully placed or planted on the grave site.

Do not take grave rubbings – this can damage brittle stone (particularly limestone and sandstone).



Do not use a wire brush on any part of a gravestone. It will damage the surface and the scratch marks it causes can encourage growth of moss and lichen.

Do not use any solution other than plain water to clean a gravestone, unless receiving professional conservation advice. Different types of stone react differently to cleaning or moss/lichen removing solutions and damaged stone can absorb and discolour if wrongly treated.

Do use a soft clean cloth or soft bristle brush such as a paintbrush with water to removed muck. Use a light touch and be patient.

Do trim long grasses or remove fallen leaves and debris obscuring a gravestone.

Remember these are the resting places of people's loved one so please be respectful at all times.

