

The Warrnambool Standard

Walk through war history at Warrnambool cemetery

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History walk: Ray Welsford conducts a tour around the Warrnambool cemetery visiting the graves which include an inscription to soldiers who died in France.

Picture: Rob Gunstone

THE stories of soldiers who died on the battlefields of France in World War I are being retold during tours of Warrnambool cemetery.

While their bodies never made it home, their names have been inscribed on the headstones of family members buried in Warrnambool.

Sixteen grave stones in Warrnambool have inscriptions to soldiers killed and buried in France. Six of them have no known grave but their names are listed on the Menin Gate memorial in Europe.

Tour guide Ray Welsford has spent countless hours visiting every gravestone in the cemetery and researching the stories behind the inscriptions.

“We walked the cemetery looking for them,” he said.

“We read the inscription on every grave in the cemetery.

“There was no other way. There was no record of this material until we went looking for it.

“All together we found about 45 graves which meet this criteria.”

Mr Welsford researched the story behind the inscriptions by accessing the soldier’s service records in the national archives and identifying the parents and other family members.

“There’s a lot of background work gone in to building a story about who’s in the grave, who the young fellow was,” he said.

“These were pretty ordinary fellows who signed up and away they went.

Before they went these were labourers, they were tinsmiths, they were farmers, they were motor vehicle drivers. One guy was chauffeur and one was a night porter.

“They’re from all over the different battlefields in France. Some were killed at Polygon Wood, some were killed at Pozieres, some at Flers. Australians were involved in a whole range of different battles.”

The Warrnambool graves included in the cemetery tour date from the late 1800s through to the 1960s.

The memorial inscriptions are not just included on the headstones of the soldiers’ parents but some are also on the gravestones of their grandparents or siblings.

Last year’s cemetery tours visited the graves of Gallipoli soldiers, while next year’s tours will visit the remainder of the graves which have a memorial inscription to fallen soldiers whose bodies never made it home.

About 20 people joined the tours at the weekend and more tours are planned for Saturday at 2pm, Sunday at 6pm, Wednesday January 13 at 6pm and Tuesday January 26 at 2pm.

Mr Welsford said there was no need to book for the one-and-a-half hour tour, which departs from the rotunda. A donation of \$5 is appreciated.