

The European Cemetery, Kotagiri

The European Cemetery at Kotagiri comprises 1.75 acres, and approximately 200 graves (recorded elsewhere) in a most beautiful setting surrounded largely by tea plantations, with a sweeping view of mountains and valley. At the entrance from the main road, a plaque announces that it is The European Cemetery dating from 1822. A long drive, which is obviously in daily use by the trucks collecting the tea from the neighbouring tea estate, can be easily negotiated by a vehicle.

The Cemetery is overseen by the Cemetery Committee from the English language using St Luke's Church and the Union Church. The Union Church pastor, Rev. Emmanuel, is the Secretary and the Rev. Philip Mulley is Advisor to the Committee. Matthew John from the Keystone Foundation, Kotagiri, is another committee member. B. Tommy Samuel, from the congregation at the Union Church actually implements the work which the Cemetery Committee decide upon. In practice this is clearing the weeds and brambles off the site annually, with two labourers, costing about 20,000 rupees. Tommy Samuel has to spend the whole day with them, as they are too superstitious to remain in the cemetery alone.

In addition, with the funding donated by BACSA, Tommy Samuel has supervised the work of building a new wall around the entire area of the cemetery. This raise the level of the wall by a couple of feet, and replaces areas which have totally crumbled. The wall is largely covered with built in broken glass to prevent incursions, and the entrance gate is chained and locked. Apparently some of the damage within the cemetery had previously been done by invading Gaur (the Indian bison) which also cause problems elsewhere.

Tommy Samuel gave us a tour of the cemetery, and its history. His mother was adopted by an American Christian missionary (who operated on both her eyes when she was a small child and blind) and the family, bit by bit converted. The British residents of Kotagiri had always taken care of the cemetery, apparently, earlier on, with British Council funding. This had worked well until the last British clergyman, the Reverend Merryweather, died in the 1973, aged 93. Informal care was subsequently organised and financed by the Chairman of the Cemetery, Mary Johnstone, after that aided by two missionaries, Grace Cole and Ruth Rose. The latter died in 2000, aged 86 and 2012, aged 97 respectively and Mary Johnstone died, aged 99, in 2013. After this the main actor, within the Cemetery Committee, has been Tommy Samuel, with support from the Committee and guidance, especially on historical aspects from Rev. Philip Mulley.

Tommy Samuel's contact details, for any future visit, are:- 13/40A, Windycap, Club Road, Kotagiri 643217, Nilgiris, Tamil Nadu, South India - +9442692967, tommysamuel1963@gmail.com.

Although the work on raising and repairing the wall is not beautiful, (it is done in breeze blocks) it has secured the cemetery. The challenge is the ongoing maintenance, as the Cemetery Committees are struggling to keep their own churches, worship and buildings, going (the Union Church only has a dozen families). The graves are all in fairly good order, and simple restoration, (concreting cracks) has been achieved. Would BACSA consider a gift of a strimmer to tackle more easily and cheaply the annual growth of weeds and brambles? Outside the walls of the Cemetery there is land which is in the name of the Cemetery (it is owned by the Government) the total of all the Cemetery land is apparently 5 acres, land has been encroached upon by the Assembly of God, who have put up a wall and gate. The cemetery committee have written to protest. The Cemetery Committee are considering writing to families, who have visited the graves for whom they have contacts, asking for some financial support for physical repairs and maintenance of graves.

All Saints Church Cemetery, Coonor

This small churchyard, alongside All Saints Church, is kept in a good state, cleared and with the graves in reasonable repair. Although they are elderly, there are many amongst the 300 congregation who are Anglo-Indian and appear to have some interest in its maintenance.

Tiger Hill, Coonor

The Rev Philip Mulley arranged for his ordinand, Samuel, to take us to Tiger Hill, as the key is kept at All Saints Church. It would have been very difficult for us to find it on our own. There is a secure, well chained and bolted gate, under the gatehouse into the peaceful cemetery site. There was no evidence of misbehaviour, about which the Church must previously have complained as we soon found ourselves joined by a policeman, checking out what we were up to. Looking down from the gatehouse, the left hand side of the cemetery was thickly covered in dead leaves, but the graves seemed in an acceptable state of repair. It is on the right hand side that work is needed as many headstones have been dislodged, cracked or completely broken. This includes the grieving lady in the centrepiece of the cemetery, who has fallen over. There was some suggestion that Gaur might be responsible for some of the damage. Repair would not be a very major task. The Rev Mulley has said that the BACSA money has been received and, on questioning about the replacing of the watchman, a condition of the grant, said that this was being considered, but it wasn't easy as people were superstitious about cemeteries.

The Garrison Cemetery, Wellington

Responsibility for the upkeep of the Garrison Cemetery at Wellington is divided into two. The right hand part, looking down from the entrance gate, is under the care of the Catholic Church. We observed a service and could see that the congregation was numerous, but did not affluent. This may account for the fact that this section of the Cemetery is not well cared for and new graves have supplanted old ones, with which they are not at all in keeping. We met the Presbyterian of the Garrison Church, the Reverend Suvisesha Rathinam, (who is in the Coimbatore Diocese) who oversees the left hand half of the Cemetery. He explained that there are now very few Christians in the Indian Army and the proportion of those who are Anglican has dramatically declined. As a result, in a church which can seat 600, there are now 12 regular church goers. From their weekly collection (of about £20 - £25) the Church itself had to be maintained and the Presbyterian's salary and expenses paid. Since neither of these could sufficiently be met, understandably there was no monetary surplus for the Cemetery maintenance, although they physically tried to keep the weeds from taking over, which, within one day of rain, they do. It was in relatively good condition, although the lower wall was sometimes breached by intruding gaur. A sign beside the Commonwealth War Graves Commission graves claims that they maintain their 50 graves (the majority of the deaths date from one incident in Delhi in 1918), but Rev Rathinam said that they have never received any funds. (Is it worth contacting CWGC on this score? Similarly, might any of the regiments recorded on plaques in the Church, be interested in supporting? They include the Lancashire Fusiliers, The Royal Ulsters, Sherwood Foresters, Gloucesters..)

Reverend Suvisesha Rathinam's contact email is: revsuvi@gmail.com (He said that he had been selected to represent the Diocese at a training week at Canterbury Cathedral this year, so hoped to be visiting the UK).

Ketty Church is mentioned in the records but both the Revds Mulley and Rathinam said that only Indians were buried there.

The Lovedale Cemetery

As this is within the grounds of the Laurence School in Lovedale, written permission is required to visit it. It is enclosed within a wall, and behind secure gates. The wall in one part has been breached by a fallen tree, and, although not badly overgrown, the cemetery graves did not look as if they had benefited from any attempts at maintenance (an earlier report claimed that Old Boys were doing fundraising for that purpose, but it may rather have been for wall repair). The other side of the wall is the school rubbish dump. Apparently the school community never go in the cemetery, but do their cross country run past it. It might be appropriate to write to the Headmistress, Mrs Sangita Chima, for her report on the condition and care of the cemetery, as it remains a private, fee-paying (boarding) school, although the governors are appointed (or confirmed in their appointment) by the government. Old pupils of the school include Arundhati Roy and Anand Mahindra.

St Stephen's Church Ooty,

I visited, without meeting the priest or the Cemetery Committee, which is lead by the priest at Holy Trinity, the Reverend B Jerome. Although the cemetery was fairly overgrown, the weeds could again be tackled and the graves were in reasonable condition. It seems that the situation was fairly similar to that recorded in Christopher Penn's report in 2010. During our visit the church exterior was being repainted (by workers hanging precariously down from the tower!) It is now no longer a gentle pale creamy primrose colour but icing cake yellow!

St Thomas' Church, Ooty

The much larger churchyard at St Thomas' is still being used for burials. Here again ferns and weeds and general undergrowth can rapidly take over, especially after the rain, but it had not totally obliterated the graves and it was possible to walk amongst them right up the steep hill behind the church.

The European Cemetery at Kotagiri, Tiger Hill, Kotagiri, the Wellington Garrison Cemetery, and the churchyards of St Stephen's and St Thomas' could all be assisted in their maintenance work with trimmers, to reduce the time and costs of the work. These cost approximately 23,000 rupees (about £240).

Phillida Purvis, February 2016