



As you enter through the gates of Dunedin's Northern Cemetery, there in front of you is the most magnificent red granite obelisk belonging to the Roberts family. It is maintained under contract in perpetuity by the Dunedin City.

John Roberts was a merchant and pastoralist who became one of Otago's wealthiest and most influential men. He was born in Selkirk, the son of a woollen manufacturer. He arrived in Melbourne in 1864 to learn the wool trade, and in Dunedin in 1868 to manage a fellmongery. Within a month of his arrival, a new partnership was formed – Murray, Roberts & Co. – to operate the fellmongery, buy and sell wool, and to purchase pastoral property.

By 1878 the firm had established branches in Wellington, Napier, and Gisborne – by 1900 it was New Zealand's second largest wool exporter. In 1910 the firm was reconstituted as a limited liability company with Roberts as its chairman and managing director.

Roberts also purchased for the partnership several pastoral properties – Lauder, Gladbrook, and Patearoa – and on his own behalf, through the firm, and through various partnerships, interests in many properties – over 200,000 acres (80,000 hectares) – in Otago, Southland, and Hawke's Bay. Roberts also promoted many Dunedin companies – including the Mosgiel Woollen Company and the New Zealand Refrigerating Company – and served as a director on many others. Appointed to the University Council in 1885, he was Vice-Chancellor from 1912-21.

He served on a number of local authorities, and on the 1900 commission on federation with Australia. He was made CMG in 1891 and KCMG in 1920. His wife, Louisa Jane, was a daughter of the surveyor Charles Kettle. Roberts was a devoted member of Knox Church, Louisa of St Pauls – and so their nine children were baptised alternately Presbyterian and Anglican. When Roberts died in 1934, their home – Littlebourne – was bequeathed to Dunedin City.