

The Sexton's Cottage

Located on the downhill slope inside the entrance to the Northern Cemetery adjacent to the entrance gates and piers is a small domestic cottage in Gothic style constructed of brick and rough cast with a gabled slate roof.

Erected circa 1872 to house the sexton, it was first thought to have been designed by Robert Lawson. However, plans of the cottage signed by Samuel Haywood Mirams, dated November 1872, as witness for building contractors, Roach and Martin have been located in Council's archives. Mirams was employed as City Surveyor between 1866 and 1901 (later he was Secretary to the Dunedin Drainage and Sewerage Board) and was responsible for a number of significant improvements in Dunedin, including early drainage of the town, the widening of Princes Street, and plans for a carriage way (now Queens Drive through the Town Belt). Mirams may have been influenced by architect engineer Charles Swyer, with whom he worked in Melbourne prior to them both arriving in Dunedin. Swyer is remembered for Cargill's Monument, in Dunedin, which he designed as a replica of the memorial to Sir Walter Scott, designed by George Kemp, in Edinburgh.

The original cottage was known as 'The Lodge' and consisted of 4 rooms: a public waiting room, kitchen and sitting room and a bedroom, connected by a single central passage. In 1876 an additional bedroom adjoining the original bedroom and sitting room was built by Robert Martin, builders. The cottage was further extended in 1910 with the addition of a third bedroom on the site of the original kitchen and a larger kitchen and attached scullery and bathroom were added to the northern corner, the work authorized by the City's building surveyor, G W Gough. For 54 years, the cottage was used as a residence for the sexton.

In June 1936, a Council minute¹ recorded that the sexton's cottage had been unoccupied for some time and given that there had been no complaints from undertakers, it was not considered necessary to repair it or erect a new one.

A number of recommendations followed, namely:

"1. That we continue to pay the Sexton, J Allan 25/- a week house allowance in the meantime, this to be reviewed when working hours and other conditions are being considered.

2. That the conveniences be shifted, the ladies' into the brick building and the men's to behind it. One of the windows in the room in which the ladies' convenience is to be placed could be converted into a door to give an entrance from the west side. The cost of extending the drain, shifting the conveniences and opening up the door would be about £12.

3. That the old brick building (i.e. the old cottage) could be used as a tool shed, office and waiting room.

¹ Minute Paper Town Clerk's Correspondence Files, June 9 DCC Archives 1936/5172

4. That all the old sheds and fences be removed, the ground levelled and laid out as first class sections. There is room for 24 sections which when sold should bring in £144.
5. That the telephone be shifted to the office at the nursery (in the Botanic Garden) where messages could be taken at any time and sent over to the sexton”.

The following month a specification was issued for the laying of a drain (62 feet in length) to connect to the new convenience at the rear of the old dwelling to the septic tank. Following the closure of the cemetery in 1975, the cottage fell into disrepair. Windows were broken, chimneys, fireplaces and floor boards smashed, walls covered with graffiti at the hands of vandals; and broken roof slates allowed water to penetrate inside. In 1986 Council applied to the New Zealand Historic Places Trust for financial assistance to repair the cottage, citing its poor condition and general deterioration along with recent vandalism. For the complete restoration and refurbishment required (including re-roofing, spouting, chimney, porch ways, complete interior plumbing and electrics), the cost was estimated to be \$127,230.

In an attempt to deter vandals, Council expressed a desire to keep the cottage occupied and to use the building as a “tourist depot for information about the cemetery”². In 1991, Council’s Community and Services Development Committee worked with the New Zealand Historic Places Trust, and the Otago Settlers’ Museum to upgrade the building as Bracken’s Cottage in honour of Thomas Bracken, poet and the author of New Zealand’s National Anthem. The Otago Polytechnic offered the use of its building restoration students as a project to coincide with its 125th Jubilee and a three year plan (estimated to cost \$113,030.00) was developed. In 1992 the slate roof was repaired at a cost of \$11,000 with slates recycled from a recently demolished building at the gasworks. The Baltic pine floors were sanded and polished, new wiring and heating installed, the walls plastered and painted, new doors and windows with metal grilles installed. Period cast iron fireplaces and timber surrounds were installed, along with a modern kitchen and bathroom and the trellis over the entrance porch was replaced. The new work was almost destroyed by vandals soon afterwards. For a time the cottage was tenanted in an effort to deter vandalism but disputes over tenancy agreements led to the cottage becoming vacant once again.

In 1994, the cottage was registered on the New Zealand Historic Places Trust register as a Category 2 item (classification D). A spokesperson for Council said:

“as we start showing a bit of determination, people will respect and get behind the project. The community would be encouraged because the Council could not do it alone.”³

² Otago Daily Times, 4 July 1991

³ Otago Daily Times 1 June 1994

However, continuing problems from rising and falling damp, poor sub-floor ventilation and mould growth prompted further examination of the condition of the Sexton's Cottage in 1997. Although its use as rental accommodation was not considered an option, suggestions were put to Council that the cottage could be used as an interpretation centre for the Northern Cemetery or it could be rented out as an artist's studio. In 2004, after minor works to improve the appearance of the Sexton's Cottage, the Southern Heritage Trust of New Zealand was given the opportunity to use the cottage for interpretation and family history research in the Northern Cemetery.



Figure 1 The Sexton's Cottage, Northern Cemetery. PVC down pipes and unsympathetic mesh screen over window detract from aesthetic qualities of this heritage-listed building. (Photo: C Betteridge, April 2004)