



The Funerary and Military Heritage of
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The Funerary and Military Heritage of Queensburgh: A Socio - Historical Analysis of Cemeteries and Commemoration in the Malvern - Hillary Corridor

The historical landscape of Queensburgh, a prominent residential and industrial region situated west of Durban's central business district, is defined by a complex interplay of colonial expansion, military sacrifice, and the evolution of private and public burial traditions. To understand the cemeteries of Queensburgh is to examine the broader history of the Natal Colony and the subsequent South African state, as these sites serve as repositories for the narratives of 19th-century pioneers, World War II casualties from across the globe, and modern soldiers of the Border War era. The area comprises several interconnected suburbs — Malvern, Escombe, Northdene, and Hillary—each contributing unique funerary markers that reflect the social and political shifts of their respective eras.¹

The Genesis of Queensburgh: Settlement and Amalgamation

The spatial identity of Queensburgh was formally solidified in the mid -20th century, but its roots lie in the late 19th -century movement of Durban residents seeking a reprieve from the coastal humidity and heat. These settlers established a series of inland townships that functioned as a blend of residential estates and agricultural holdings.¹ The elevation of the area, rising away from the humid port, made it an attractive destination for those who could afford the transit.

In 1924, the townships of Malvern, Escombe, Northdene, and Moseley were amalgamated to form the town of Malvern. This administrative unit persisted until 1952, when it was renamed Queensburgh in honor of the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II.¹ The names of these constituent suburbs provide a genealogical map of the region's development, often tying back to the primary families who established the first farms and, subsequently, the first



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private burial grounds.

Suburb	Etymological Origin	Historical Significance
Malvern	Malvern Hills, England	Likely named by settlers nostalgic for the English countryside; formerly part of the Bellair farm tract. ²
Escombe	Sir Harry Escombe	Named after the Premier of the Natal Colony in 1897; previously known as Bowkers or Soap Box Siding. ¹
Northdene	The North Family	Commemorates George and Annie North, who farmed the area from 1860. ¹
Hillary	The Hillary Family	Named after pioneers George and John Hillary and their descendants who arrived in 1850. ¹
Queensburgh	Queen Elizabeth II	Renamed in 1952 to mark the Royal Coronation; serves as the umbrella municipality for the corridor. ¹

The funerary history of this corridor begins with private family graveyards, which were a necessity for early pioneers living on large farms far from established municipal services. As the area transitioned from a rural agricultural zone to an urban residential hub, these private sites were either preserved as historical enclaves or superseded by larger public cemeteries, such as the Hillary Public Cemetery and the Queensburgh Main Cemetery. ¹



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The Hillary Family: Pioneers and Private Remembrance

The suburb of Hillary serves as a primary focal point for the early settler history of the Queensburgh area. The family's presence in the region began with the arrival of George Hillary, who emigrated from England in 1850.¹ George Hillary's journey to the Natal Colony was part of the broader Byrne Settler scheme, which brought thousands of British immigrants to the region in the mid-19th century under the promise of land grants and a new life in the subtropics.

George Hillary, born around 1825, was an apprentice ironmonger in Hampshire before departing Gravesend on January 9, 1850, aboard the *Edward*, a 680-ton barque.¹ The voyage, lasting four months, concluded at Port Natal on May 10, 1850. The logistical challenges of arrival—involving rowing boats to bypass the sandbar and being carried ashore by Zulu men—marked the beginning of a challenging pioneer life.¹ George was initially taken by ox wagon to "Bellair" farm, which eventually became the Malvern area.¹

The transition from "Bellair" to the family estate "Rockstead" near Stella Road highlights the gradual taming of the landscape.¹ George Hillary passed away on May 6, 1900, at the age of 74, with his cause of death recorded as Abscess Erysipelas.¹ His burial in the Hillary Family Graveyard on Coronation Road established a site of ancestral significance that predates the larger municipal cemeteries in the area.¹

The Hillary Family Graveyard on Coronation Road remains a poignant, albeit threatened, vestige of 19th-century funerary practice. This site contains the remains of several key family members and associated individuals whose lives were intertwined with the development of the suburb. John Hillary, George's brother, who farmed the nearby "Sand Hill" estate, was also buried here in 1913 after a long life of agricultural contribution.⁴ The graveyard also includes burials of extended family members, such as Thomas Ernest Haynes, who died in 1943 at Malvern.⁷ Recent reports indicate that this private graveyard has suffered from desecration, reflecting the broader challenges of preserving small, isolated heritage sites within rapidly developing urban environments.⁸

The Hillary Public and War Cemetery: A Global Crossroads

While the private Hillary family plot represents the domestic history of the area, the Hillary



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Public Cemetery (often referred to as the Hillary War Cemetery) serves as a site of profound international significance. It is a microcosm of the global reach of World War II, containing burials of men from across the African continent and Europe. ⁹

The Hillary Public Cemetery contains 122 identified Commonwealth burials from the Second World War.⁹ A distinctive feature of this cemetery is the high concentration of graves belonging to members of the Native Military Corps (NMC) and the Cape Corps (KK). ¹¹These units were composed primarily of black and "Coloured" South Africans who served in labor, transport, and support roles. During the conflict, the Port of Durban became a significant military hospital center, treating patients from the East African and Abyssinian campaigns, as well as those wounded in the Mediterranean theater. ⁹

The headstones in this section follow the standard Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC) pattern, featuring the Springbok head and the motto "Unity is Strength / Eendrag Maak Mag".⁹ However, the names inscribed point to a history of service that was frequently marginalized in post-war narratives. The diversity of origins among the interred is striking, with many soldiers hailing from West Africa and other Allied territories. ⁹

Name	Regiment/Unit	Date of Death	Cause/Context
Josias Lebisani	Native Military Corps	Nov 26, 1942	Active Service/Sickness ¹¹
Jantjie Mabasa	Native Military Corps	June 5, 1944	Active Service ¹¹
Ben N. Mafilika	Native Military Corps	June 1, 1943	Active Service ¹¹
Piet Makhanye	Native Military Corps	Jan 9, 1943	Active Service ¹¹



Johannes P. Malandula	Native Military Corps	May 22, 1942	Active Service ¹¹
Samuel Mampe	Native Military Corps	Nov 9, 1941	Active Service ¹¹
Mtohakela Mapumulo	Native Military Corps	Nov 4, 1941	Active Service ¹¹
Daniel Maratha	Native Military Corps	Feb 28, 1944	Active Service ¹¹

These men died from a variety of causes, including sickness contracted at the front, accidents at the Durban port, or trauma sustained during training. Some fatalities were the result of more mundane but tragic incidents, such as vehicle accidents or shootings.⁹ The presence of "Foreign Unit" burials, including members of the Gold Coast Regiment and the African Pioneer Corps, underscores Durban's role as a vital link in the Allied supply chain and a resting place for those who died aboard military hospital ships passing through the port.⁹

Indo - Chinese Vichy French Contingent

One of the most unique and least understood aspects of the Hillary Cemetery is the presence of 16 French war graves.¹⁰ These graves belong to Indo - Chinese soldiers who served under the Vichy French regime and died between 1941 and 1942 while stationed at Camp Clairwood in nearby Pietermaritzburg or hospitalized in the Durban area.¹⁴

The existence of a monument specifically dedicated to these "Indo - Chinese Vichy French Soldiers" within a South African municipal cemetery is a rarity.¹⁴ It highlights the complex geopolitical alliances of World War II, where colonial troops from Southeast Asia found their final resting place in the coastal hills of Natal. The names recorded on the memorial plaques include Akpan Emmanuel, Kunta Dagarti, and Mahama Dagomba, though the specific military circumstances of their presence in South Africa remain a subject of niche historical inquiry.¹⁴

This section also includes a chapel erected in 1948 by Mrs. J.B. Daniel, whose husband was buried in the cemetery in 1943, though the building has reportedly fallen into a state of neglect in recent decades.⁹



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Maritime Tragedies and Italian Prisoners of War

Hillary Cemetery was also the original site of a mass grave for Italian Prisoners of War (POWs) who perished in one of the most significant maritime disasters off the South African coast. ¹⁰

On November 28, 1942, the *SS Nova Scotia*, a transport ship carrying nearly 800 Italian POWs from Egypt to Durban, was torpedoed by the German U-boat *U-177* off the coast of St. Lucia. ⁹

The commander of the *U-177*, Senior Lieutenant Robert Gysae, initially identified the vessel as a passenger ship but only realized the nature of its cargo after the sinking. Over 600 people died, many of them Italian prisoners. The bodies that washed ashore or were recovered were initially buried in communal graves at the Hillary Cemetery. ¹⁰ In a later effort to consolidate Italian military remains, these casualties were exhumed from Hillary and reinterred at the "Mater Divinae Gratiae" Church in Pietermaritzburg, alongside other Italian POWs who died in the province. ¹⁰ Today, only a few individual Italian graves remain at Hillary, yet the site's history is inextricably linked to this wartime tragedy. ¹⁰

Queensburgh Main Cemetery: Continuity and Modernity

The Queensburgh Main Cemetery, located in the Malvern urban area, serves as the primary municipal burial ground for the contemporary community. Unlike the historically segmented Hillary Cemetery, the Main Cemetery reflects the demographic and social continuity of the 20th and 21st centuries. ⁵

With approximately 2,696 recorded names as of 2012, the Queensburgh Main Cemetery is a significant administrative undertaking for the eThekweni Municipality. ⁵ The cemetery is characterized by its organized structure, with records categorized alphabetically by surname. ⁵ It includes a Wall of Remembrance to accommodate cremated remains, reflecting the shift away from traditional interments due to space constraints. ⁵

One unique feature of the Main Cemetery is a dedicated area for the Augustinian Sisters of the Mercy of Jesus, highlighting the role of religious orders in the local community. ⁵ The site also contains a section for unknown and illegible graves, acknowledging the loss of records or the weathering of headstones over time. ⁵ Recent assessments of KwaZulu-Natal cemeteries indicate that the Queensburgh Main Cemetery reached a critical point in its lifespan around 2006, with municipal officials constantly monitoring available spaces for reburials or new



plots.¹⁸

Military Figures and the Border War Era

While Hillary Cemetery is dominated by World War II narratives, the Queensburgh Main Cemetery contains significant burials from the South African Border War (1966 –1989) and other late -20th -century conflicts. These graves often belong to highly trained specialists, including members of the Reconnaissance Commandos ("Recces") and Parachute Battalions.

Noteworthy Military Interments and Battle Heroes

The South Africa War Graves Project identifies several "battle heroes" and servicemen buried at Queensburgh who died during active service or in related incidents.¹⁹ The burial of Antonie Badenhorst is particularly significant. As a member of the elite 1 Reconnaissance Commando, his death during Operation Kropduif at Eheke in 1977 represents the high -stakes nature of the conflict in southern Angola and northern South West Africa (now Namibia).²⁰

Name	Rank/Unit	Date of Death	Context of Service
Antonie Badenhorst	Corporal, 1 Recce Regiment	Oct 28, 1977	Killed in Action during Operation Kropduif at Eheke. ²⁰
Steven Eric Lelong	Sapper, 1 Parachute Battalion	Feb 22, 1988	Combat Engineering Unit; died in a friendly fire incident. ²¹
Raymond Arthur Serfontein	South African Air Force	Dec 18, 1981	Active Service. ²³
Peter Norman	Airman, SAAF	May 18, 1986	Died in service at



Franken	Gymnasium		Gingindlovu. ¹⁹
Raymond Frederick Hildebrandt	Special Forces, HQ Unit	Jan 6, 1984	Special Operations context. ¹⁹
Gavin Mark Caswell	South African Police (Port Natal)	Sept 15, 1989	Paramilitary policing role. ¹⁹
Alexander Izak Bezuidenhout	South African Police	July 16, 1970	Early Border War era. ¹⁹
Kevin James Morrow	Regiment Port Natal	May 31, 1984	Regional defense unit. ¹⁹

The presence of South African Police (SAP) members, such as Gavin Mark Caswell and Edward Fenton Dutton, further illustrates the "total onslaught" era, where police units were frequently deployed in paramilitary roles both domestically and on the borders.¹⁹ These graves are often visited by veterans' groups, maintaining a link between the contemporary community and the complex military history of the region.

The MOTH Movement and Flame Lily Park: Living Remembrance

A unique feature of the Queensburgh landscape that distinguishes it from other Durban suburbs is its deep connection to the Memorable Order of Tin Hats (MOTH). The organization's headquarters and one of its most prominent retirement and memorial complexes, Flame Lily Park, are situated in Malvern.²⁵

Founded in 1927 by Charles Evenden, the MOTH order was established to provide a space for war veterans to maintain the bonds formed in the trenches while adhering to three core ideals: True Comradeship, Mutual Help, and Sound Memory.²⁶ The order's badge—a bullet-riddled helmet—symbolizes the "ghostly form of a veteran" and the desire to never be forgotten.²⁶



Flame Lily Park, located at 565 Stella Road, represents a successful adaptive reuse of land. Before its acquisition by the MOTH in 1977, the site was home to a convent of nuns and a group called "The Lebanon," which provided refuge for children of all race groups.²⁷ The transition to a veteran -focused facility involved significant community effort, with working parties of MOTH members spending weekends and public holidays converting existing buildings into flats.²⁷

Flame Lily Park functions as a site of remembrance through several unique markers:

- **The War Memorial:** A central plaque dedicated to those who answered the "Sunset Call".¹⁷
- **Monument to C Squadron 22 SAS Regiment and Malayan Scouts:** A specific tribute to specialized units involved in post -WWII colonial conflicts, such as the Malayan Emergency.²⁵
- **Back Wall Memorial Plaques:** Individual tributes to MOTH members that allow for a "living history" within the retirement village.²⁵
- **Grave of Rev. Mother Mary (d. 1944):** A remnant of the site's previous life as a religious institution, preserved within the modern park.²⁵

The first tenant on the site was Len Brown, a prominent South African cricketer and footballer, whose presence added a layer of sporting celebrity to the village's early years.²⁷ The village continues to serve as a hub for MOTH activities, bridging the gap between historical commemoration and contemporary veteran support.

Northdene and the North Family: Ecological Burial

In the suburb of Northdene, the legacy of the North family is preserved in a singular, isolated grave site within the North Park Nature Reserve.²⁸ George and Annie North arrived in 1860 and established a successful business in Durban while farming in the Northdene area.³⁰

The Norths were significant benefactors to the province, donating the 42 -hectare North Park area to the Natal Parks Board. This reserve, situated along the Mhlathuzana River, contains a single grave site belonging to the North family.²⁸ This "ecological burial" represents a unique intersection of private funerary rights and modern environmental conservation. While the family's grand homes —such as "Bonavista," built in 1904 —have recently been destroyed by fire or neglect, the grave within the reserve remains a permanent anchor of their historical presence.²⁸



Colonial Figures and their Monumental Presence

Beyond the physical boundaries of cemeteries, the memory of figures associated with the Queensburgh area is maintained through statues, street names, and memorial monuments.

Colonel James Henry Bowker (1825 –1900)

Colonel J.H. Bowker was one of the most colorful characters to reside in Malvern. A veteran of several frontier wars and a world -renowned naturalist and archaeologist, Bowker built a house called "The Cedars" in 1892.³ He turned his garden into a wildlife sanctuary, a precursor to the modern nature reserves in the area. ³ Bowker died in 1900 and is commemorated by a monument on the corner of Pentrelew and Stella Roads. ³¹ His burial record lists him at Escombe, and his legacy persists through Bowker Road and the former Bowker's Siding. ³

Sir Harry Escombe (1838 –1899)

Though Sir Harry Escombe is buried in the main Durban cemetery, his impact on the Queensburgh area is profound. ³⁴ As the namesake of the Escombe suburb, he represents the high-Victorian political era of the Natal Colony. ³⁵ Escombe was a key figure in developing Durban's harbor and was a proponent of Natal's self -government. ³⁴ His commemoration in Queensburgh through nomenclature is a testament to the political weight he carried during the period when these townships were first being established. ³⁵

Summary of Burial Statistics and Heritage Status

The cemeteries and memorial sites of Queensburgh vary significantly in their current status and identified casualties, reflecting the evolution of the area from a pioneer outpost to an urban center.

Site Name	Primary Era	Status	Identified Casualties/Names	Coordinates/ Location
Hillary Family	1870–1943	Private/Desecr	~15	Coronation Road ¹



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Graveyard		ated		
Hillary Public Cemetery	1940–Present	Municipal/Active	140 War Dead	-29.89193, 30.92476 ⁹
Queensburgh Main Cemetery	1952–Present	Municipal/Limited	2,696	-29 53.293, 30 54.484 ⁵
North Park Grave	1860s	Private/Protected	1	Anderson Road ²⁸
Flame Lily Park Memorials	1977–Present	MOTH/Private	Variable	565 Stella Road ²⁵
St George's (Northdene)	1897–Present	Church/Historic	Complete Album	Northdene ¹⁷

Regional Context and Connectivity

The funerary landscape of Queensburgh does not exist in isolation. It is part of a broader network of military and civilian cemeteries in the Durban area that served the needs of a colony at the crossroads of the British Empire.

Connections to Stellawood and Ordnance Road

While Queensburgh contains significant war dead, the largest military concentration in Durban is found at Stellawood Cemetery, which houses over 700 war graves.⁹ Many of the burials at Stellawood are attributed to air training accidents, training incidents, or bodies washed up from torpedoed merchantmen.⁹ This provides a useful contrast to Hillary Cemetery, which served as a primary site for labor units and those who died in hospitals or aboard ships passing through the port.⁹

Furthermore, the Old Ordnance Road Military Cemetery (Wyatt Road) contains World War I



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graves, particularly from the East African Campaign.⁹ Durban's role as a major military hospital center during both World Wars necessitated the establishment and expansion of these burial grounds, with Queensburgh providing a secondary but essential site for those who succumbed to wounds or disease away from the main port facilities.⁹

Preservation and the Role of eGGSA

The documentation of these cemeteries has been a monumental task undertaken by organizations like eGGSA (the electronic branch of the Genealogical Society of South Africa). Through the efforts of volunteers like Matthys van Niekerk, Eleanor Garvie, and Ken Garvie, photographic records of these headstones have been preserved for future generations.¹⁷ These digital archives are particularly important given the physical deterioration and desecration noted at sites like the Hillary Family Graveyard.⁸

The "History & Memorial Project" currently seeks to expand these records by collecting stories, pictures, and biographies from community members to ensure that the legacy of families like the Hillarys and the Norths is not forgotten.¹ This collaborative effort reflects a growing awareness of the need to protect Queensburgh's unique funerary heritage from the twin threats of urban development and social neglect.

Conclusion: The Cultural Significance of Queensburgh's Graves

The cemeteries of Queensburgh are not merely static resting places but dynamic cultural landscapes that record the history of South Africa from the arrival of the Byrne Settlers to the modern era. The Hillary War Cemetery, with its unique mix of Native Military Corps, Vichy French soldiers, and Italian POW history, stands as a reminder of the suburb's entanglement with the defining global events of the 20th century.

The survival of private plots, such as the North family grave and the Hillary family site, underscores the deeply personal nature of early settlement, where the land itself was both a source of life and a final home. Meanwhile, the MOTH presence at Flame Lily Park introduces a unique "living memorial" aspect to the community, where the ideals of comradeship and remembrance are practiced daily. As the Queensburgh corridor continues to evolve, these sites remain essential anchors of historical identity, offering a silent but profound testament to the diverse individuals who shaped the region's past.



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