

Amazing story of a short life hides in a churchyard

Tucked away in a small Sandgate churchyard, stands a monument to an early social justice campaigner and MP and his sister Grace, who helped break new ground in education for girls.

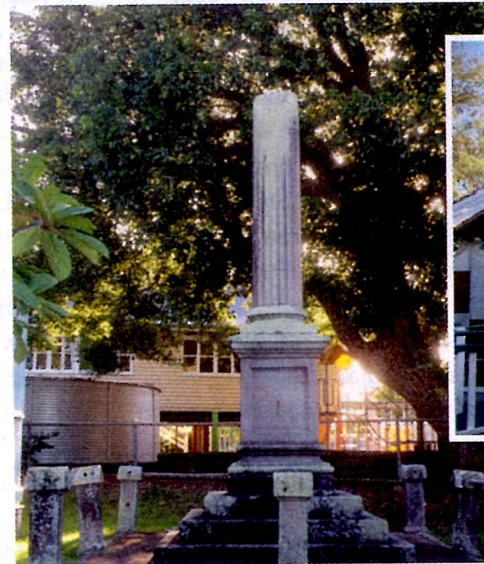
Unless you were looking for it, you would never find the 140-year-old monument in the grounds of St Margaret's Anglican Church in Rainbow St but it has quite a story to tell.

It begins in Ireland, with the birth of Robert Travers Atkin in County Cork in 1841.

Although he died aged just 31, he had established himself in Queensland history as a journalist and parliamentarian.

Atkin advocated against discrimination and was an active campaigner for egalitarianism, land reform, and fairness in electoral boundary redistribution. He fought for new sugar and cotton growing industries, the extension of the state's railway network and enfranchisement of goldminers.

According to Atkin, the Polynesian Labourers Act was a



The Atkin monument (left) is hidden in the churchyard at St Margaret's Sandgate (above).

legalised system of kidnapping.

Atkin was educated in France where his family moved after this father died and then took a commission in the Shropshire militia. Just before his 23rd birthday, he married Welshwoman Mary Ruck and they set sail for Australia.

They spent the first 18 months near Rockhampton but poor health forced him back to Brisbane where he planned to become a barrister. Instead he became editor of *The Guardian*.

When it was taken over by *The Courier* Atkin, in partnership with W.C. Belbridge, started the *Queensland Express* in 1868 advocating "the rights of the people without distinction of sect or creed". Although it was well-written and informative it closed in 1871.

Atkin then established *The Colonist* which he conducted until his death.

Meanwhile, in 1868, he had won the poll for the seat of

Clermont in the Legislative Assembly. This was challenged because he wasn't enrolled.

He quit the following year before the Committee of Inquiry had delivered its findings but was returned for the seat of East Moreton in 1870.

A liberal who championed progressive causes, Atkin never forgot his Irish roots and although he was a protestant he co-founded the Hibernian Society to help remove prejudice against the Irish Catholic community.

He lived for some time at Hamilton with his sister Grace who ran a school for young ladies, before settling in Sandgate. Atkin was a colleague of premier Charles Lilley, who established the Brisbane Girls Grammar School where Grace was the first assistant teacher.

Atkin died from pneumonia on May 25, 1872. He was buried at Sandgate, most likely on the site where the Hibernian Society later erected the monument to their vice-president. His sister was buried

beside him when she died in 1876 aged 32.

The monument notes "his days were few but his labours and attainments bore the stamp of a wise maturity".

Atkin's eldest son James Richard (Dick) became Baron Atkin and a judge on the King's Bench. In 1937, the Sandgate church rector noted that Atkin's grave was in desperate need of restoration and wrote to him about the state of his father's grave. Funds were provided for its restoration.

The Sandgate and District Historical Society has now joined a new restoration project, part of a group convened by Queensland Supreme Court Justice Peter Applegarth "to refurbish the monument and its surrounds so the local community and visitors have access to reflect on the social, cultural and political heritage it commemorates".

A plan has been drawn up to repair the monument, construct an information wall and seating, and landscape the area.