



WAVERLEY
CEMETERIES



'Honest John' Tait

MARCH
2026

- Cemetery searches detailing the location of a grave of those interred in Waverley Cemetery and South Head General Cemetery can be found on the website.
- Waverley Cemeteries offers a service of grave planting sites with Gazania (prostrate ground cover with silver foliage and yellow flowers, as can be seen in banner). Contact Waverley Cemeteries office if you are interested in this and other services, such as annual maintenance of allotments.
- Waverley Cemeteries office is at the corner of Trafalgar Street and St Thomas Street, BRONTE NSW 2024
- P: (02) 9083 8899
F: (02) 9665 4785
Email: cemetery@waverley.nsw.gov.au



John Tait (1813-1888), racehorse owner and trainer, was born on 5 November 1813 at Melrose near Edinburgh, son of Robert Tait, jeweller and engraver, and his wife Margaret, née Maitland. Trained as a jeweller he with his wife Janet, née Buchanan (d.1880), and daughter, reached Hobart Town in the *Hindo* on 2 November 1837 and opened a business. He soon moved to New South Wales and in June 1843 became the licensee of the Albion Inn, Hartley, and in 1847 took over the Black Bull Inn at Bathurst. Strong and wiry, his 'great skill as a boxer' enabled him to cope with his rougher patrons.

In 1847 Tait won the New South Wales St Leger at Homebush with Whalebone. He soon acquired a string of horses from such local breeders as Thomas Icelly and George Lee and engaged Noah Beale as trainer and James Ashworth as rider. In

1851-54 at Bathurst, Parramatta, Homebush and Penrith he won races with stakes totalling about £2500, including two more St Legers with Cossack and Surplice and three Queen's Plates with Cossack (twice) and Sportsman, carrying his first colours, a black jacket and red cap. In 1854 in a match race at Homebush Sportsman defeated John Eales's Cooram for £1000-a-side. Tait had probably moved to Sydney in 1853 and become licensee of the Commercial Hotel, Castlereagh Street.

In 1855 he sold his racehorses and visited England with Ashworth to choose breeding-stock. With Alfred Cheeke he imported Warwick, New Warrior and Magus, who sired Clove, winner of the first Australian Jockey Club Derby in 1865. He returned early in 1857 and was in partnership with Cheeke for several years in a stud farm at Mount Drutt and in racing some good horses. Tait adopted his



famous racing colours of yellow jacket and black cap and in the early 1860s he set up with stables at Byron Lodge, Randwick. In the mid-1860s he acquired the Overland Stores at Dubbo which he still owned in 1888.

Unlike his fellow sportsmen Tait 'went into racing as a business'; as his fortunes depended upon the winning of many races, he closely supervised the training of his horses, which always ran in top condition. His most famous horse was The Barb, 'the black demon', among whose 17 wins in 24 starts were the A.J.C. Derby and the Melbourne Cup in 1866 and the Sydney Cup in 1868 and 1869. In 1868 The Barb won the Metropolitan and defeated E. de Mestre's Tim Whiffler in the Queen's Plate but weighed in 2 lb. (.9 kg) light; Tait vainly offered

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£100 reward for proof of foul play. He owned two triple Derby winners: Fireworks, who won 12 of his 16 starts including the 1867 A.J.C. Derby and the Victoria Racing Club Derbys in both 1867 and 1868 (when the date for the race was changed to 1 January); and Florence who in 1870-71 won the A.J.C., V.R.C. and Queensland Turf Club Derbys and the V.R.C. Oaks Stakes. His other notable horses included three Melbourne Cup winners: Glencoe (1869) who also won the A.J.C. Derby, The Pearl (1871) and The Quack (1872). Goldsbrough won the Epsom-Metropolitan double for him in 1875 and Amendment won Tait's last big race, the 1877 Metropolitan. 'Caspian', writing in the *Australian Town and Country Journal* on 1 May 1880, estimated that between 1865 and 1880 Tait had won almost £30,000 in stakes without added money. Known as 'Honest John', he won repute for fair dealing with the press and protested only once—after the 1866 Sydney Cup when Pitsford crossed Falcon and 'hocked' him; Thompson, the offending jockey, was disqualified.

In bad health in 1880 Tait visited England and on 18 August in London he married a widow Christian Ann Swannell, née Garie, who had borne him six children. By 1883 he had moved to Toddington, The Boulevard, Petersham, where he was noted for his hospitality. A justice of the peace from 1879, he was a committee-man of the Animals Protection Society and a New South Wales commissioner for the 1887 Adelaide and 1888 Melbourne exhibitions. On 21 May 1888 he collapsed and died of heart disease; he was buried in Waverley cemetery without religious rites. Tait was survived by two sons and a daughter of his first wife, by his second wife and by two sons and two daughters of their children. His estate was valued for probate at £24,296.

Citation details

Martha Rutledge, 'Tait, John (1813–1888)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, <https://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/tait-john-4685/text7753>, published first in hardcopy 1976, accessed online 19 March 2026.

Take a tour

General History Tours A, B, C & D are held on 2nd, 3rd and 5th Saturdays and details are currently posted on Nextdoor. Contact FoWC for details and times.

friendsofwaverleycemetery@gmail.com

Aims of the Friends

To protect and conserve the integrity of Waverley Cemetery in the physical, philosophical and spiritual sense in close consultation with the cemetery management.

To provide opportunities for all to have constructive involvement in the achievement of the above aim.

To provide educational programmes concerning the occupants, needs and traditions of the cemetery and the nature of a fully operational cemetery.

To enjoy the constructive fellowship of all persons with a concern for Waverley and South Head Cemeteries.



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Friends of Waverley Cemeteries

The next General Meeting will be held on April 11th @ 9.00am at Waverley Cemetery.

Currently the Friends of Waverley Cemeteries require two or three people who are interested in leading tours on the 1st and 4th Saturdays of the month and the occasional weekday.

If you would like to become a Friend you are encouraged to contact the group through its email: friendsofwaverleycemetery@gmail.com

To visit the FoWC Face Book Page which is updated every few days, go to <https://www.facebook.com/FoWCBronteNSW2024>

Tony Billingsley President/Secretary

