# THE MASONIC HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF NEW SOUTH WALES

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## BRO. ALAN JAMES MATHER
### A Soldier and a Mason
### (1880 - 1917)

Masonic legend contains the story of the murder of the architect of King Solomon's Temple at Jerusalem and the subsequent hasty burial of his body 'most indecently interred' is the phrase used in the story.

When the architect's body was found it was exhumed and re-buried with appropriate pomp and ceremony.

The same thing has happened to many a soldier killed in the field of battle.

Malcolm Brown writing in *Timelines* in *The Sydney Morning Herald* issued on Friday, 2nd July 2010 told the story of Private Alan Mather :

In 1917, Alan Mather was killed in action in Belgium but his body was lost in the confusion of battle. He was one of 6178 Australians who served in the Ypres campaign and his name was added to the Menin Gate among those with no known grave. It is only now, with the help of DNA matching that his story can be completed.

A question might arise why Alan Mather joined the Kurrajong March, a call for volunteers in Inverell, in northern New South Wales, in January 1916 to fight in the Great War. He was in his mid-30s and could have left the fighting to men 15 years or more younger. But such was the spirit of the times that he responded. There were 114 at the first muster, and they set off, in the style of the Cooee March a year earlier, to gather more volunteers. They marched to Delungra, then took the train, stopping at Warialda and Moree and, their numbers having swelled, stopped at an Army camp at Narrabri.

Most of the volunteers enlisted in the 33rd Battalion AIF, "New England's Own," which was forming that month on the Armidale showground. That battalion's first, and only, commanding officer was Bro. Lieutenant Colonel Leslie Morshead. Mather signed up on January 12th, 1916.

The original Mather in the New England district was Thomas, who was born in Glasgow in 1845 and migrated in 1860 with his mother and two sisters, landing at Maitland. He travelled north by bullock dray and settled in Inverell in 1870, where he started a vineyard, acquired property and became the mayor. Alan James Mather, one of his six children, was born in Inverell in 1880 to Thomas and Mary Ann. He went to Hawkesbury Agricultural College to study viticulture and returned to the district to work on his father's vineyard, which won numerous prizes at agricultural shows in Australia and overseas. Alan Mather also took out a 99-year lease on a grazing property, "Flaggy", near Pindari, and divided his time between his sheep and his grapes. He served in Inverell Light Horse for three years.

In 1916, Mather's battalion became part of the 9th Brigade of the 3rd Australian Division. It left Sydney in September that year and arrived in Plymouth on October 29. The battalion was sent to France on December 20. When the British Dominion forces switched their focus to the Ypres sector of Belgium in mid-1917, 33 Battalion was engaged. The first major battle of this offensive, the Battle of Messines, began on June, 7, 1917, involving 216000 men from Australia, New Zealand and Britain. Mather was pitched immediately into the thick of the fighting. Somewhere in the battle, he took possession of a German *pickelhaube*, or spiked helmet, which he put in his haversack as a trophy.



Alan Mather ... divided his time between making wine and farming sheep before he enlisted in Inverell.

The next day, Mather was in a trench at St. Lyon, carrying his heavy knapsack, ammunition and grenades and wearing a slouch hat. A German shell burst hit the trench. Private A. H. Pitkin said later: "He was blown to pieces by a shell when in the trenches. I was right alongside of him when knocked." The company commander wrote that Alan Mather was "one of my best and most trusted men."

News of Mather's death went back to the family. His younger brother, Douglas, was jackarooing on a property near Collarenebri and came back to help the family. Douglas's son, also Alan, born in 1925, said he knew about Mather's death but his father did not talk about it much.

Another of Douglas's sons, John, born in 1929, said: "Uncle Alan was killed in the war. That is all we know.

In August 2008, archaeologists working on the Ploegsteert project in Belgium, an investigation of the battlefields of World War I, discovered a body most indecently interred underneath the site of what was apparently an enormous bomb blast. They found the remains of his rifle, ammunition, corps badges and the contents of his pockets and haversack. An identification disk was found but was too corroded to provide any useful information. Experts from Bradford University in England cleaned and conserved the objects, and experts from the Universities of Leuven, Cranfield and Oxford, studying the chemical composition of the bones, were able to narrow down the place of birth to a few locations in NSW. It was shown that he had lived a fairly active physical life, with heavy muscle attachments to his bones and wear on his spine.

The Australian Army commissioned DNA testing on surviving relatives. The younger Alan Mather was able to put the investigators on to an even closer relative, a cousin living in Armidale, Cath Mitchell, who was aged 96. The identification confirmed, the family started to feel closure.

The name of Private Alan Mather, Service Number 1983, will be removed from the Menin Gate and he is to be formally buried, with full military honours, at the Prowse Point Commonwealth War Graves Cemetery in Belgium.

Alan Mather, who never married, is survived by many cousins, nephews and nieces, and their children.

Thomas Mather, Alan's father, was a foundation candidate of Lodge Inverell No. 1652, English Constitution. He was made a mason on the Festival of St. John the Baptist, 24 June 1876 immediately following the consecration of the lodge.

Bro. Thomas Mather, prominent in Civic affairs was the licensee of Mather's Hotel where the meetings of the Lodge were held. He also became Mayor of Inverell.

In December 1879, just two years after his initiation, Bro. Thomas Mather was installed as Master of Lodge Inverell. In 1888, Lodge Inverell became No. 48 on the register of the United Grand Lodge of NSW.
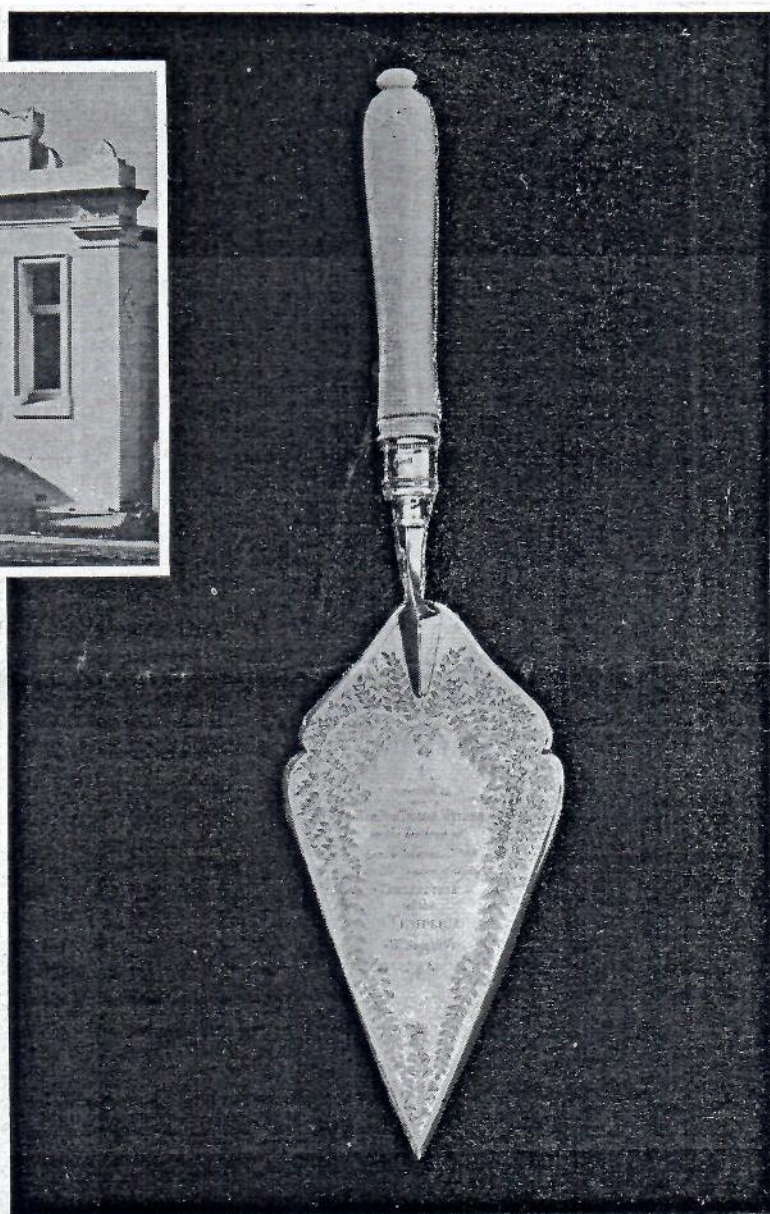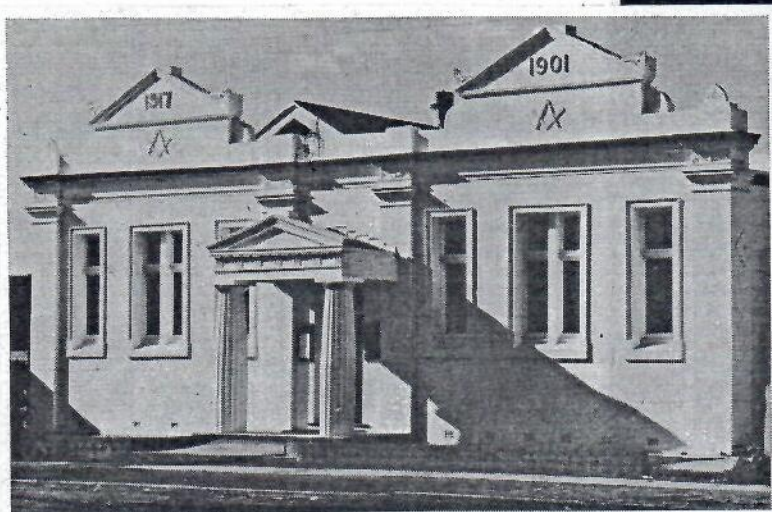
He was instrumental in presenting a block of land for the erection of a Masonic Hall and, on 25 September 1901, Wor. Bro. Mather set the foundation stone for the new building.

THIS CORNER STONE WAS LAID BY

WORSHIPFUL BROTHER MATHER

25TH SEPTEMBER 1901. 5901.

RELAID BY WOR. BRO. KAUTZ. P.M. 11-2-1937.

The trowel used in the ceremony was later donated to the lodge by Thomas's son Douglas.

By 1909, Wor. Bro. Thomas Mather was Chaplain of the Lodge.

On 5 August 1914, Thomas's son, Alan James Mather was made a mason in Lodge Inverell No. 48. He was passed Fellowcraft on 30 September 1914 and raised a Master Mason on 31 March 1915. He received Masonic membership No. 39753. His name is recorded on the Lodge's first World War Honour Roll unveiled on the occasion of the dedication of the lodgeroom on 24 October 1917.

Trowel used to lay Corner Stone of the Temple in 1901.