

THE CORPORATION OF LONDON CEMETERY AND CREMATORIUM

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Every time there is a death there is a problem – what to do with the body? Until the late 19th century when cremation began to be generally accepted, disposal invariably meant burial. While people lived in small, low-density communities there was plenty of space for burials in churchyards in addition to burials within the church walls, but once cities developed in size there were difficulties.

If we go back to the Great Plague of 1665, the number of burials that year was 60,000. Samuel Pepys was most concerned at the 326 burials in the churchyard of his parish church of St Olave Hart Street between July and December 1665. He hoped that lime would be spread all over the churchyard to reduce the risk of infection and he was relieved when snow hid the newly disturbed earth!

In the next year, 1666, there was the Great Fire of London. Of the 97 churches in the City 35 were destroyed and not rebuilt, thus reducing burial space.

The position deteriorated as the years passed and in 1853 there was an inspection of the churchyard at St Andrew's Holborn, where human bones were found protruding from the earth, together with decaying wood. The soil was saturated with decaying organic matter, and the ground level had risen several feet as a result of the thousands of burials, some coffins being only 3 or 4 feet down. The Secretary of State ordered closure, but burials continued at a rate of more than 20 each week, and there was even a school in the middle of the churchyard!

By this time the population of the City had risen to 125,000 and there were over 3,000 deaths each year. The City's problem was not unique. Paris had already dealt with city burials with the opening of the Pere Lachaise Cemetery, of 8 acres, in 1804, followed by London's Kensal Green, with some 56 acres, in 1832, with Norwood and Highgate following soon after.

Clearly there was a problem in the City and it had to be addressed. What would the City do about it? The responsibility for dealing with matters such as burials in the City lay with the Commissioners of Sewers. For many years they had used the powers contained in various Acts of Parliament to try and tackle the problems in the City churchyards. In 1853 William Haywood, Surveyor to the Commissioners and the Medical Officer of Health, Dr Lethaby, each reported that burials in crowded cities should be abolished. The next stage was to set up a cemetery.

A site should be chosen on gravelly soil (to assist decomposition) some miles beyond the built up area, because London could be expected to continue to expand. If growth of 2% a year continued this could result in the population of the whole metropolis doubling by 1889 to nearly 5 million. By 1853 the built-up area had extended around nearly all the other major cemeteries.

If burials continued at about 3,200 a year, space was needed for 64,000 burials over a 20 year cycle. It was estimated that a total of 100 acres would be needed for burials, resident staff homes, visitors' services and so on. There should be planting to divide burial areas and make the whole cemetery attractive environmentally.

In the event, however, Common Council agreed to purchase about 200 acres of land from Lord Wellesley at Little Ilford. The larger area would help parishes east of the City which were also short of burial space. The site was the old manor of Aldersbrook and the total cost was £30,271.

The manor grounds had already been improved by the addition of a lake and a hermitage. In 1786 the manor house had been pulled down and replaced by a farmhouse with the land being turned over to farming. With the manor came certain commoners' rights over Wanstead Flats and Epping Forest land and this in its turn led to the preservation of Epping Forest. The site was bounded on three sides by Wanstead Park and open country and on the fourth side by the Eastern Counties Railway, near today's Manor Park station.

William Haywood was responsible for designing the layout of the cemetery and some of the more important buildings. Starting in 1854 there were contracts let for enclosing the first 98 acres, and the main outlet drains, and in the following December there were contracts for the Episcopal and Dissenters' chapels, the entrance archways, the porter's lodge, superintendent's house, drainage system and preparatory work on the roads. The contracts for the Catacomb (on the site of the drained lake) and the roads were finalised in April 1855. Planning started in the autumn. In addition the mortuary chambers and waiting rooms had to be planned, together with the railway sidings, arrival platform and entrance, and also, possibly stables, as well as hearse sheds, and gardeners', masons' and carpenters' sheds. To help the poor, a railway station with special trains and inexpensive tickets was planned, but in the event did not materialise.

The construction work was completed on schedule but there were ecclesiastical complications. The consecration of the burial areas could not proceed without a financial arrangement with the clergy and vestries of the 108 parishes of the City on their claims under the Metropolitan Burials Act 1852. The Bishop would not perform the consecration until the matter was resolved. As a result of this impasse (worthy of Anthony Trollope!), when the first burials took place in June 1856 they were on unconsecrated land. When the dispute was finally resolved, the consecration ceremony took place on 16 November 1857, with the first Church of England burial three days later.

The Remembrancer was asked to draw up a short Parliamentary Bill, claiming that amalgamating the rights of 108 parishes was quite different from combining two or three benefices as envisaged by the existing Act. However this did not progress and the Secretary of State ruled that the Burial Board could not fix the fees to be received by those incumbents who wanted fees even if they did not attend at the Cemetery! The Archdeacon sided with the clergy and stated that " 'intra-mural burial' in England is not injurious to public health".

The Cemetery immediately proved popular. By 1866 the annual total of burials had reached 7,604, of which well over half must have come from outside the City. However the original assumption that the burial rate resulting from deaths in the City would continue to run at 3,200 a year was overtaken by the declines in the City population and in mortality rates. The cemetery now serves a large part of north and east London.

By the end of the 19th century, burials at the Cemetery had fallen to something over 4,000 each year. Today the total is about 1,000, in addition to some 4,000 cremations. Overall 500 new grave spaces are needed each year. Since the cemetery opened there have been over half a million burials and the number of cremations approaches half that number.

Originally, graves were either “traditional” (and purchased), or “pauper”. In 1954, following experience with war cemeteries, a new category of “lawn” graves was introduced, with headstones only. These have proved very popular, the headstone being less costly than a full traditional grave, and maintenance being simplified. Many areas of pauper graves have now been cleared for reuse.

Towards the end of the 19th century interest developed in cremations as an efficient way of disposing of dead bodies needing little land. The Corporation explored the possibility and some members went to Woking to see the cremation of a horse!

In 1902 an Act was passed allowing Burial Boards to provide and maintain crematoria, and the City’s Burial Board immediately proceeded with the construction of a crematorium at the Cemetery. The foundation stone was laid by the Chairman of the Sanitary Committee on 14 October 1903 and the Crematorium furnace was tested thoroughly, before the opening a year later and the first cremation took place in March 1905. It took time for cremation to be accepted, and there were only 69 cremations over the period 1905-1908. This was the first municipal Crematorium in London, although the private Crematorium at Golders Green preceded it.

We all remember that Karl Marx was buried in Highgate Cemetery. The City of London Cemetery does not, on the whole, accommodate such well-known people. It is, however, the last resting place of Mrs Everest, Winston Churchill’s beloved nanny, two policemen killed in the Sidney Street siege of 1910 and Dame Anna Neagle.

Along the Central Avenue of the Cemetery, and nearby, a number of large monuments mark where bodies were re-interred from City churchyards which were cleared in the late nineteenth century. The inscription on the memorial relating to St Antholin’s church explains (and I quote): “The changes in the population in the City parishes during two centuries, rendering it impossible to provide congregations to worship in the church, it was taken down AD 1875 under the Act of Parliament for uniting City benefices and removing churches where not needed.”

A series of Acts up to 1855 finally ended burials in City churchyards. By the time of the 1875 Ordnance Survey Map many, such as those at St Helen’s Bishopsgate and St Botolph’s Aldgate, were used as public gardens. The garden of Postman’s Park, at nearly half an acre, is the largest, and brought together the obsolete graveyards of St Botolph without Aldersgate, Christ Church Greyfriars and St Leonard Foster.

The largest monument relates to St Andrew’s, Holborn and St Sepulchre’s, Holborn. The construction of Holborn Viaduct necessitated the demolition of St Andrew’s Rectory and the Parish Court House. By 1876 there were 2,736 coffins and 774 cases of some 10,000 human remains to be re-interred at the Cemetery. This had to be carried out to the satisfaction of the Bishop of London. The cost to the Corporation was £12,547.16.10.

A few years ago there was a need to clear the crypt of St Andrew's Holborn. Over a period of 8 months exhumation specialists and archaeologists from the Museum of London were involved in removing coffins from the crypt, which were transferred to the Cemetery, where they were re-interred near the St Andrew's Memorial. It was expected that up to 900 coffins would be found, but the final total was 3,007 and these were re-interred in the Cemetery.

Some of the coffins date from the fourteenth century, and they include the more important members of St Andrew's congregation. Among them were Sir Edward Coke, Attorney General to Elizabeth I, and his somewhat notorious wife Lady Elizabeth Hatton; also Henry Sacheverell, a Rector who had, in 1709, had been put on trial in Westminster Hall for seditious preaching.

With 200 acres, it is by far the largest cemetery in London and one of the largest of the municipal cemeteries in Europe. It serves more than one and a half million people living in the City, seven London boroughs and Epping Forest District.

The lawns, garden and woodland areas are maintained to a high standard. The species used in the tree planting are sufficiently interesting for there to be a number of designated "tree trails" around the Cemetery, and indeed local people look on it as a valued recreational area. The Cemetery functions as a nature reserve, a haven for wildlife, and a bird migration route. Over the past 25 years a wildlife group has recorded some 190 species of fungus.

Graves can be of various types: unmarked in woodland, in lawns with headstones only, in "traditional" graves, and in vaults. Gravestones are being reclaimed under carefully controlled conditions. Coffins can also be placed in cells in the Catacomb, and identified by memorial tablets.

Some ashes are placed in the 32 acres of memorial gardens established on the site of earlier public graves. The first Columbarium for ashes was created in the 1930s and it proved so popular that a second one was created in the 1990s together with a new Chapel, which houses Books of Remembrance.

The high standard of landscaping and maintenance of the Cemetery is such that it was named "Cemetery of the Year" in 2001. In the same year it also became the first cemetery to receive the prestigious Green Flag Award for its value as an open space and it has won this award each year since.

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