

Save Our Graves! How the campaign to safeguard a historic Swansea burial ground began

by Barbara Morris, Chairman of the Friends of Bethel Sketty Cemetery

Bethel Chapel Sketty lies in the west of Swansea in a fairly affluent area of Wales's second city. A listed building, it was constructed in 1870 on the site of an earlier chapel and held its services in Welsh until it closed around the start of the Covid pandemic. Attached to the chapel is a large four-acre cemetery containing some 4,000 graves dating back to around 1840, including those



*The taped-up cemetery gates
Photograph courtesy of the Friends of
Bethel Sketty Cemetery*

of historic Welsh figures such as Griffith John, a missionary to China who founded a hospital in Wuhan, and the last resting place of Private David Lewis, a survivor of Rorke's Drift in the Zulu War of 1879.

Our story started in August 2022 when I visited Bethel cemetery to look for the grave of my mother's sister. As my taxi pulled up outside, I was surprised to see a 'For Sale' sign and to hear that a meeting was scheduled of the Trustees with a group of potential buyers. I managed to speak with the minister and offered to give her my contact details, so that I could be kept abreast of developments. But this was refused, and on my enquiring about the plans for contacting the relatives of the deceased, she simply waved her hand across the cemetery and said, "How can we?"

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There is a fairly simple answer to “*How can we?*” I placed a small announcement in the local newspaper to alert those interested in the future of the cemetery, and more than 40 people turned up at our first meeting in a local pub, far beyond my expectations. We now have an email membership list and a Facebook group totalling 400+ followers.

I should state here that, as a group, we were not disputing the sale of the chapel, which the Trustees insist is no longer viable though some disagree, but the fact that they were and remain unwilling to share any information about what will happen to the cemetery after the sale. We



*The chapel and cemetery
Photograph courtesy of the Friends of Bethel*

were concerned to ensure it will be maintained properly, allowing continued access for visiting the graves of loved ones and ancestors, and also for future burials.

Initially we wrote to the Trustees, requesting a meeting to discuss the future of the cemetery, but they were, and remain, totally unwilling to engage with us in any way. As our Committee grew and our Friends group numbers

multiplied, we sent a flurry of letters: not only to individual Trustees but to The Union of Welsh Independents which loosely oversees such chapels, the War Graves Commission, our Member of the Welsh Senedd or Parliament and to The Charity Commission which has a duty to ensure Bethel is properly managed since it is a registered charity, and benefits from tax advantages as a result.

We have managed to obtain substantial press and media coverage to bolster our campaign in recent months, including from BBC Wales (in English and Welsh), ITV Wales, the online Welsh media and the local newspaper.

We were also very fortunate that we discovered and joined the **National Federation of Cemetery Friends**, and Colin Fenn, its vice chairman, has been tremendously helpful in so many ways, lending his enormous expertise to advise us and also submitting detailed complaints to the Charity Commission, calling on them to block the sale until adequate safeguards are in place. Following Colin's input, the potential buyers of the chapel and cemetery have also raised a number of major enquiries with the sellers.

In addition, the Charity Commission have announced that, finally, they are investigating "*whether the trustees are complying with their duties and responsibilities*" after the numerous complaints submitted by the Friends of Bethel and other relatives and also, now, by the **National Federation**. The Trustees stand accused of trying to sell off the listed chapel and its historic burial ground with a scandalous lack of adequate safeguards while refusing to consult or discuss the sale with relatives of the thousands of loved ones buried there.

We cannot thank Colin and the committee of the NFCF enough for the enormous support and time they have given us, and our fight continues...

To add your support please sign up to the Facebook page of the "The Friends of Bethel Sketty Cemetery" at www.facebook.com/groups/1287088055384929

**NFCF's NATIONAL CEMETERIES WEEK
3rd to 11th June
and
Caring for God's Acre Love Your Burial Ground Week
with Churches Count on Nature 2023**

See: cemeteryfriends.com

Churchyard carbon capture: St John Baptist, Cirencester

forwarded by Peter Vujakovic

During December 2022 and January 2023, the Friends of St John Baptist Churchyard were involved in an ecological survey organised by 'Caring for God's Acre' (CfGA), the national charity that promotes the conservation of heritage and ecology in burial grounds. CfGA, working with Dr Alan Radbourne at the UK Centre for Ecology & Hydrology, is seeking to assess the value of C of E churchyards as sites of carbon capture. Cirencester's Holy Trinity and St John Baptist were chosen to take part.



*Above left: John Tiffany (Chair of the Friends group 2019 to 2023) taking soil samples. Right: Copper beech, even in winter still the magnificent centrepiece of the churchyard
Photographs by Peter Vujakovic*

Those sites were to provide soil samples and vegetation data to help understand how churchyard carbon capture compares to national survey data. Two members of the Friends, with additional help from another parishioner, collected soil samples from both sites and undertook a tree survey, which included an estimate of percentage canopy cover for each site and detailed data on a representative sample of trees (including height, girth, and age data).

Both sites have some wonderful specimen trees, both natives and exotics. Holy Trinity has some magnificent Wellingtonia's (giant redwoods), while St John Baptist boasts a magnificent copper beech, as well as a beautiful flowering cherry (*Prunus* 'Kanzan') - Hugh Johnson, renown wine expert but also a writer on gardening and trees, claimed that "*The flowering cherry is not so much a tree as an event*" and noted that this specific cherry is the most popular 'village cherry' grown in Britain (from the Japanese term *sato-sakura*). According to Johnson "*its many-petalled flowers, and above all their piercingly pink colour combine to make a fatal appeal*"! Make sure you visit the churchyard this spring!!! Over twenty of the trees are now labelled with their common name.

Wildflower area at Beckett Street Cemetery

Lynda Kitching, Secretary of the Friends writes:

The photo shows the latest project undertaken by the Friends of Beckett Street Cemetery, Leeds. The grassed-over area shown is full of unmarked graves, and we decided we'd manage it for the benefit of wildlife, especially pollinators and birds. It's too big a space to strip completely of turf in one go, so we'll be doing that in stages, seeding areas and adding some native plants grown at the Council's nursery. We will mow a curved path through to invite visitors to get amongst the plants. The information board explains the project, and we've dedicated it to Sylvia Barnard, who founded the Friends in 1995, and the three members who worked by her side in those early days.



Wildlife area information board.

Photograph taken by Leeds City Council's Ranger, Nick Denman

Warriston Cemetery Friends: chance meeting leads to poignant photo 'going viral'

Caroline Gerard, Secretary of the Friends of Warriston Cemetery (FoWC), sent news on 11th March that an unusual photo was being published in the online *Edinburgh Live* daily bulletin. With the headline 'Moment Edinburgh man is overcome with emotion at finding relative's long-lost grave' the caption explained: 'The man, who wished to remain anonymous, grasped on to the headstone as he was overwhelmed at finally finding the special location with the help of cemetery volunteers.'



Photograph courtesy of Sheila Masson

Caroline has since described the background to this story and the coincidences that led to the taking of this poignant photo. Having previously spotted a gravestone of possible interest to FoWC member Sheila Masson, Caroline had arranged to meet her that morning and while they were looking at that stone they saw a visitor wandering uncertainly among graves nearby and offered their help. He showed them the map on his phone from Edinburgh's Bereavement Services identifying a relative's grave. Caroline continues: 'I could see he was searching in the wrong area so we took him to the correct one and advised him to start looking along a particular row. And then he found it quickly. It was a very happy chance encounter.'

The discovery moment was captured on camera by former photo-journalist (now a photographic archivist) Sheila who showed it to him and he agreed to it being posted on the Friends' Facebook and Twitter

outlets. The posts 'went viral' and *Edinburgh Live* was given permission to reproduce the photo but the visitor declined to be identified or to give an interview. The Friends now know that after having spent most of his adult life in another part of Scotland, he had recently moved to Edinburgh and, started searching his family history, found he had moved into the area his ancestors had lived in. He has since been persuaded (easily!) to become a volunteer.

There was also national publicity for Warriston Cemetery this year when the richness of its wildlife was recognised by the BBC Winterwatch team and it was featured in that series.

Friends of Tunbridge Wells Cemetery

forwarded by Sue White, Friends of Tunbridge Wells Cemetery, Kent



*The chapels at Tunbridge Wells Cemetery
Photograph by Sue White*

The Tunbridge Wells cemetery was opened in 1873 following the rapid rise in the population of the town. Space in the earlier cemetery opened just 24 years previously was beginning to run out. The new cemetery was laid out by the town surveyor in a grid style with segregated zones and separate chapels for Anglicans and Non-conformists. It also had a section for Roman Catholic burials unlike the earlier cemetery.

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Some notable 'residents' include Rachel Beer, the first female editor of The Sunday Times and The Observer who was born into the wealthy Sassoon family; Sir Edward Marshall Hall, a famous lawyer who was the model for Rumpole of the Bailey; Henry Peach Robinson, a renowned national and international photographer and the pioneer female aviator Pauline Gower.

Tunbridge Wells was a wealthy town and a substantial number of burials were of military families who had retired here – the wonderfully named Lt Col Hippisley Cunliffe Marsh for example. We also have the notorious Madam Caballero, a Regency courtesan who is reputed to have been involved with the 1st Duke of Wellington, and George William Featherstonhaugh who smuggled the King and Queen of France to England in 1848 to escape the Paris mob. However, most of the burials are made up of local tradesmen, schoolteachers, ministers and the ordinary families of the town, as well as those of the poor whose graves are unmarked.

The Memorial Inscriptions Group was set up in 2011 with a view to recording the earlier memorials. This has now been extended to include all the dates within each section. We are still a working cemetery and so far about 6,000 of the 40,000 burials have been recorded. The MIG group regularly produce booklets covering various subjects – the latest being the 'Worthies' of Tunbridge Wells as photographed in 1887 by Henry Peach Robinson for Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee. We also have produced books on the Photographers of Tunbridge Wells, The Missionaries to China who retired here, the Forgotten Poor, Symbolism of Gravestones, Trees in the Cemetery, and the Remembered of WWI and WWII.

Our website <https://www.friends-tw-cemetery.org> has lots of information and stories about the cemetery, its history and its residents.

Let us know

Please keep sending the newsletter editor your news stories and events (contact details are on the back page). You get publicity for your events, a place to trumpet your successes, and a chance to air your woes. We get the articles to fill and update our pages.

POTM, GOTM and now 'IM'

by Ros Clow, Friends of Newtown Road Cemetery, Newbury

Just as Lockdown was beginning the Friends of Newtown Road Cemetery's Nature Group started meeting to walk round our 4-acre cemetery once a month. One of the group, Joan Stacey, a retired District Nurse, suggested she prepared a Flower of the Month poster. Her text includes a photo, Latin name, medicinal uses from the past and present, and mentions in literature. This is put on our noticeboard and

emailed to Members. When the Flower of the Month was a tree, we changed the name to Plant of the Month (POTM).



*Yellow flag marking the Grave
of the Month
Photograph courtesy of Ros
Clow*

Not to be outdone, the History Group followed suit, writing a Grave of the Month (GOTM), someone who had died that month and who had a gravestone. We move a yellow flag to the grave to make it easier to spot. The document is also emailed to members.

Just recently, for March 2023, I had two volunteers provide GOTMs at the same time. Luckily for me (I hate to turn away volunteers) one, an eight-year-old girl, who died saving her sister's life, did not have a gravestone so we invented a

new category 'In Memoriam' (IM). Her name was Rhoda Sturgess. You can see the entry for Rhoda at:

<http://www.fncnewbury.org.uk/persondetails.asp?PersonID=12666>

This 'IM' was invented by accident, but fits in well with our aim, which is to remember EVERYONE buried in our cemetery, on our website, whether they were rich enough to have a gravestone or not. So far, we have entries for over 4,000 'residents' as we call them.

New Member

The Friends of St Mary's Churchyard, Chichester

The Sussex parish of Whyke, more evocatively known by its ancient name Rumboldswyke, was a separate entity until the spread of Chichester swallowed it up in the 19th century. The lovely little church of St Mary, built in the 11th century and Grade II* listed, was closed in the last century, but the Churchyard is still used for burials and deposition of ashes, as part of St George's parish. The Churchyard was twice enlarged as the population grew, first in 1888 and again in 1938; it contains some 3,300 burials.

The Friends group was launched in March of this year to work alongside the congregation of St George's in caring for the Churchyard. Our aim is to enhance both the heritage and the natural values of the Churchyard, and to raise awareness of



Photograph courtesy of John Fitch

them in the community. We are fortunate to have Ken Green, a well-known historian of Chichester, as a member and historical consultant. We have now digitised the burial records, as a first step towards creating a database about those buried here. We are also fortunate to have on our Committee Dr Sam Kelly, an experienced professional ecologist, licensed to work with bats and other protected species, who has prepared a detailed Wildlife Management Plan for the Churchyard.

Our plans include tours focussed on wildlife, and others focussed on local and family history. These tours aim to heighten appreciation of the value of the Churchyard, which in the past has been something of a hidden treasure.

Contact: Dr John Fitch, friendswhyke@email.com

Facebook:

https://www.facebook.com/groups/1438795806867235?locale=en_GB

Members News

A selection of news and events from Members newsletters and websites

Brookwood Cemetery Society, Woking

The broken headstone from the grave of Scottish artist Arthur Melville has been repaired and reset back in place. His grave lies outside of the main cemetery, so the Cemetery Society are intending to install signage explaining the grave and its occupant.

Flaybrick Memorial Gardens, Merseyside

A neglected area adjacent to the Roman Catholic chapel site estimated to contain the remains of several thousand people has been reclaimed. Volunteers laid hawthorns to create a hedge around the perimeter and grounds maintenance staff cleared away undergrowth. Further work has involved digging out bramble roots, removal of rubbish, laying weed suppression material and wood chippings over the area. Wildflower beds were made using logs, communal graves were tidied, and lavender planted. Two benches made by a volunteer have also been installed.

Loxley Cemetery, Sheffield

The Friends were the recipients of a Recognition Award from Bradfield Parish Council for their work in renovation of the cemetery.

Rectory Lane Cemetery, Berkhamsted

Two new trees planted (a wild service tree and a tulip tree) in the cemetery have been included in The Queen's Green Canopy initiative launched to mark the Platinum Jubilee of the late Queen Elizabeth II.

Salford Cemeteries Trust, Greater Manchester

Thirty trees (including hornbeam, birch, maple, and sweet gum) have been planted at Weaste Cemetery, as part of Greater Manchester's City of Trees project. Bereavement Services are intending to install bike stands at Agecroft and Peel Green Cemeteries, so visitors have a more environmentally friendly alternative when travelling to the sites.

Willesden Jewish Cemetery, North-West London

New entry gates have been installed with the support of Brent Council, the Ironmongers' Company and the United Synagogue which operates the cemetery.

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