

Manager to Conservationist

City of London Cemetery & Crematorium Conservation Management Plan: A Review of its Practical Application 2 Years On

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In 2002, the City of London commissioned a short scoping study on the conservation of the City of London Cemetery and Crematorium. This was a summary document that identified the sensitivity of the site, the usefulness of such a document, and a brief for a Conservation Management Plan (CMP). The City accepted the report and commissioned the full plan in 2003, obtaining a Project Planning Grant of £50,000 from the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) towards the £104,000 cost of its preparation. The final draft of the plan was completed at the end of 2004. Nearly two years on, it seems timely to review whether the Plan has been useful to the City, and in what way. One thing it has not done, has been to unlock capital grant-aid from the HLF.

The work was carried out by a multi-disciplinary team led by The Parks Agency, and including conservation architects, Richard Griffiths Architects, and conservation-engineering consultancy, Alan Baxter Associates who addressed traffic-management issues. Further specialist input was made by Dr Julie Rugg of the Cemetery Research Group on cemetery management, and Leonie Kellaher of London Metropolitan University who carried out a study of user-perspectives.¹ English Heritage, English Nature, the London Borough of Newham and the Institute of Cemetery and Crematorium Management made up a steering group which met four times during the study. This major piece of work was project-managed by Steve Daley from the City's Surveyor's Department.

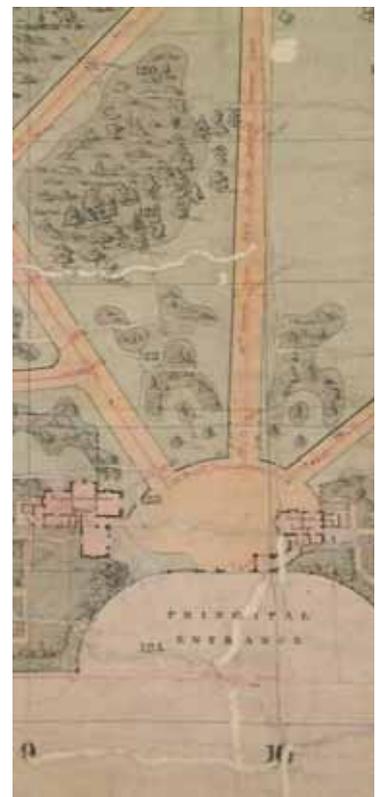


*Entrance as analysed
for circulation in the
Conservation Management Plan*

From the start, the City was clear that, given a 200-acre site, the Plan should be landscape-led. While the Plan had to be comprehensive in addressing all values – architectural, ecological, cultural – the City rightly identified the space, rather than its components, as the principal asset.

For the City, the exercise stemmed from a recognition that ad hoc decisions about new burials and other development could, with the best will in the world, be gradually eroding the special character of the Cemetery. It was emphatically *not* about turning the clock back or “restoring” the Cemetery, which is of great strategic importance for new burials. But under the relentless pressure of day-to-day decision-making, it was felt that a ready-reference guide to constraints and opportunities was essential.

There is plenty of advice on conservation plans and management plans for historic parks and gardens from English Heritage, CABE Space and the HLF. But all existing advice tends to focus on the fabric of historic built structures, especially monuments, or on a historic landscape as an open space – its amenity and ecological value. For a cemetery, which above all is a working place in which the needs of the bereaved are paramount, it is necessary to reconcile these considerations with understanding of the operational needs and the wider cultural importance as a place for the bereaved.



*The entrance to the Cemetery
from the 1856 plan*

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(Footnote) ¹ See also Doris Francis, Leonie Kellaher, Georgina Neophytou, *The Secret Cemetery*, Oxford: Berg, 2005.

City of London Cemetery is a big site, 200 acres and a grade II* registered historic landscape with eight listed buildings, but the basic exercise would apply to any cemetery: that is, to understand the site's different character areas and structures, the way they have come to have the character they now have, and their different operational functions. It is not in a Conservation Area, and does



not have any Tree Preservation Orders, but on the other hand it is in the Green Belt, it is designated Metropolitan Open Land, and is included in the UDP as a grade I site of Borough-wide importance for nature conservation, and in part as an archaeology priority zone. Above all though a place with which many people feel deep ties and complex relationships.



New feature: the floral tribute area in Catacomb Valley

We began with a process which normally produces a Conservation Plan. It is in four stages and comprises;

- Understanding the site
- Assessment of significance
- Identifying vulnerabilities and issues
- Formulating policies for conservation.

We then took those policies forward into management prescriptions for the short, medium and long term.

Understanding began with the physical nature of the site and its structures; their historical development, their condition, their operational role. We divided the site up into a number of different character zones according to the site's evolution – the Victorian core, with its mature specimen trees, Gothic buildings and older memorials; the lawn graves, with their early lawn-grave landscape and the less rigid contemporary layout; the Memorial Gardens, and then newer areas such as the woodland burial area or the baby graves enclosure.

Understanding the memorials involved identifying the general characteristics, ranging from the big Victorian memorials, through the remaining public grave tablets, the war graves and the early lawn grave memorials, to the modern lawn graves and other memorials. An important element was to understand their role in the landscape and as a group, not just individually.

Understanding also meant understanding the site's management in terms of resources and operational needs, and its use across the whole spectrum – by the bereaved, by schools, by casual or regular visitors, even by bird-watchers. A particularly valuable exercise was an in-depth study of visitor attitudes and opinions.

Understanding was not just a matter of the present landscape. It had to mean understanding how it developed historically, and what was or was not of historical significance. The archives were studied, revealing not only that there was an elaborate eighteenth-century garden under the site, but also the significance of the early lawn graves, and the design of the Memorial Gardens by one of the leading post-war garden designers. This also revealed the architectural interest of the 1970s crematorium, hitherto un-recognised.

And in order to be comprehensive, understanding also looked at ecological survey data, tree-survey data, patterns of circulation within the Cemetery, access routes and the Cemetery's catchment area, local plan designations, maintenance schedules and the Cemetery Business or Service Plan.

Understanding was then summarised in text and especially in maps and plans – for example of the pattern of trees of different ages and designed views, and the gradual extension of the Cemetery boundaries. Maps also were used to present non-historical information such as catchment, transport links, and circulation.



The modern crematorium on the avenue leading to Catacomb Valley

The second stage – assessment of significance – was slightly problematic. The historical significance of the buildings was mapped in detail – with newer extensions for example less significant than original fabric. But any attempt to map the relative significance of the different parts of the landscape as a whole will run into the paradox



that what is oldest is often viewed by the bereaved as the least significant, in terms of sensitivity, and that it is the newer areas, where graves are still being dug or the bereaved are still visiting, that appears most sensitive. Thus, to map the Cemetery as a whole in terms simply of historic significance would be to affront the values of the bereaved, and the basis of the CMP is to understand significance holistically not just historically. Thus, while the Victorian core is of high significance historically, and the new lawn graves by the same criterion of low significance, from another perspective the reverse is true – it is the new lawn graves that users feel are most charged with feeling while the Victorian area, with its limited burials, seems more neutral and approachable.



Modern lawn graves

Having identified significance, the CMP proceeded to identify vulnerabilities, issues and opportunities. These represented a wide range and included for example, building maintenance or the lack of it; operational needs encroaching on the special character of buildings and the landscape; the use of fast-growing conifers in the Victorian areas where old specimen trees create a distinctive landscape; the blocking of designed views; the erosion of strong boundaries and the intrusion of development outside the Cemetery; traffic; the development of new types of memorials in the older landscape; the limited range of users; the use of a large area for recycling; under-used older buildings, and the limited ecological benefits of the present highly intensive maintenance regime.

Policies were then proposed and agreed with the City. Offering the best possible service to the bereaved remains the over-riding policy objective. But within that, they cover a wide range of topics e.g. maintenance and management regimes, procedure on changes, and making the CMP the touchstone for decision-making.

The policies are broad-brush. The final part of the exercise was to draft management and maintenance proposals at a more detailed level. These were arranged in the form of a Gazetteer, which addressed individual buildings and some 50 different zones in the Cemetery landscape. They were also arranged in terms of short, medium and long-term priority. The proposals are not measured or costed but provide a sufficient level of detail to be transferred relatively easily into each annual programme of capital projects and annual maintenance tasks. The landscape conservation element was represented almost entirely by improvements to the maintenance programme, with a number of relatively small individual tasks – such as felling of Leylandii hedges, rejuvenating shrubberies, or tree planting. In addition, it was represented by a halt to certain types of new burial provision which were assessed as inappropriate to their location.

Independent of the CMP, the City had set up a Heritage Advisory Panel to assess the condition and interest of monuments below which unused burial space had been identified from the records. On the basis of individual inspections, memorials were identified either for conservation in situ, repair and relocation, or clearance. The City had already established an area of new lawn graves, in which materials were strictly limited, although this was identified as inappropriately located in the older part of the Cemetery.

The CMP for the Cemetery is a particularly elaborate exercise for a particularly large site but in principle the exercise is one that is of value to every historic cemetery. A CMP is not about history or turning back the clock. It's a multi-layered stock-taking exercise and an objective assessment of what you've got, what's special in the widest sense and how to maintain and enhance that specialness. In other words it is nothing more than good housekeeping.



Area of 'Classic graves'; modern memorials in the old landscape

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The possibility of securing Heritage Lottery Funding towards major capital investment in the site was management’s main driving motive behind the CMP. This motive was quickly superseded once the greater and long term benefits of a CMP became evident. A major force behind this change in perspective was the realisation that the Cemetery is a significance historic and cultural landscape: a park where people are buried; a place designed to meet the needs of the bereaved whilst benefiting the greater society.



New café in the lodge



*Old memorial opened up;
result of Rhododendron clearance
and re-seeding*

The CMP is quietly transforming the way in which the site is managed with a growing emphasis on conserving what we have. The Cemetery is primarily a burial and cremation facility where the needs of the bereaved are paramount: the CMP is proving to be complementary to these priorities.

As the CMP neared completion, and in response to the new historical information produced by the CMP exercise, English Heritage upgraded the Cemetery on the English Heritage Register of Historic Parks & Gardens from Grade II to Grade II* thereby giving greater recognition of the site’s significance in the national context.

The CMP’s practical benefits have been impressive, with the creation of annual work plans. Relatively minor soft landscape works have had a dramatic impact upon the landscape with the restoration of impressive long views and the lighter airy appearance originally intended.

Internal surveys of the buildings were identified as a priority and these have revealed an urgent need for restorative work to conserve the fabric of the principle structures including the church and chapel.

The temptation to squeeze graves in here and there has been eliminated by the CMP. An overview of the site and the importance of strategically planning burial provision that respects the landscape will benefit the bereaved: the historic character of the cemetery that attracts them in the first place will not be undermined. This has involved re-thinking the types and styles of graves provided around the Cemetery.

The full value of the Cemetery’s value has been demonstrated by the CMP for the benefit of members as well as officers. This overview and understanding of the site’s significance, its maintenance demands and potential means that more informed decisions are now being made about future funding and political priorities. Previously more vulnerable to annual budgetary pressure than other open spaces and historic landscapes managed by the City, the Cemetery’s role and significance are now firmly established.

The CMP has also helped inform long-term management of the tree-stock in the Cemetery, and a tree-management strategy will be drawn up shortly on the basis of the CMP policies. The development of the Cemetery’s potential as an educational resource has also been boosted by the enormous amount of historical and environmental information, as well as the analysis of user-perceptions, collected as part of the CMP.

It is worth emphasising that the commissioning of the CMP has benefited staff, whose awareness of issues relating to the special character of the Cemetery has been raised both during the study, in which many were active participants, and in the on-going application of the final document to management and maintenance decisions.



*New memorial to the Lord Shiva;
well-sited in the old landscape*

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Letting the grass grow for wildlife in selected areas, with the essential public information

It should be stressed that, contrary to common expectations, the CMP has not been found to hinder management and maintenance innovations. While conservation policies do create constraints, in practice these have sharpened management thinking rather than frustrated it. The policies were formulated in close liaison with staff and each one was considered from an operational as well as a conservation point of view. As a result, the CMP has, in effect, turned managers into conservationists.

Finally, while everyone knows that the City of London Cemetery is in many ways exceptional, the exercise of reviewing what is special about a cemetery and how to maintain that remains good commercial sense. In this respect, a Conservation Management Plan is a tool which should be developed for every old cemetery, regardless of its size or its resources.

David Lambert, MA, IHBC is an acknowledged expert on the conservation of historic parks and gardens, and has lectured and published widely on the subject. He has been influential in the development of heritage policy and is also a leading authority on researching the history of parks and gardens. For 10 years David was Conservation Officer for the Garden History Society, the statutory consultee for planning applications affecting historic parks and gardens and has been special adviser to three House of Commons select committee inquiries: town and country parks (1999), cemeteries (2000) and PPG17 (2002). A member of the parks panel of the Heritage Lottery Fund from its inception until 2002, he was instrumental in setting up Heritage Link in 2001 and is currently a member of the parks and gardens advisory panels of English Heritage and the National Trust and a member of the Institute of Historic Building Conservation.



David will be expanding on this article at the ICCM Corporate Seminar (Cranfield University May 10th & 11th, 2007)

A BRAMM New Way of Doing Things!

Latest News from BRAMM - The British Register of Accredited Memorial Masons

Jenny Gregson and the executive board of BRAMM have taken the decision to streamline the methods of registration and communication for both masons and burial authorities. Improvements to the BRAMM website are now under way so that by early 2007:



- All masons' registrations for accreditation, fixer licences and renewals under the Scheme will be conducted on line.
- Burial authorities will be able to join the Scheme via an on line application.
- Burial authorities will be able to check mason's credentials on line.
- Members of the public will be able to obtain a list of BRAMM approved masons based anywhere in the UK.

Access to the records will become available via a link from the Bereavement Services Portal using operators' existing passwords, so that a search may be conducted on a specified mason, with an instant view of each qualification, licence period, health and safety policy, and current insurance policies. Reliance on telephone enquiries and the post will thereby be much reduced. Jenny commented, "This new computerised system will save BRAMM and our clients a huge amount of time and expense, and facilitate the national standards we seek to achieve for masons, cemetery managers and memorial owners alike."

All authorities signed up to the BRAMM scheme will be notified when the system goes live. Meanwhile any queries or feedback may be made to Ian Athersmith at ASSETtrac Ltd on 01403 860062, or ian@assettrac.co.uk