

The City of London and Tower Hamlets Cemetery

Introduction

The City of London and Tower Hamlets Cemetery Company, one of the earliest such companies in London, was enabled by an act of 1841 (4 and 5 Vict c.63) to acquire land for the burial of the dead in St Dunstan, Stepney, and St Leonard, Bromley-by-Bow. The cemetery opened in Southern Grove, Mile End, later that year. It was very popular, particularly with people from the East End, but in the twentieth century, and more so after 1945, the cemetery suffered from problems of over-crowding and neglect.

In 1966 it was purchased by the Greater London Council under the GLC (General Powers) Act of that year. The intention was to create an 'open space' to which the public had access and so the ground was closed for burials in 1966 and the relevant parts of the cemetery freed from the effects of consecration. Some clearing and conversion was undertaken but the work was slow and hampered by financial stringencies. In 1986 the London Borough of Tower Hamlets became responsible for the Cemetery Park.

Members of the public may visit the Cemetery Park to search for graves or simply to enjoy the park and the wildlife. The Cemetery Park is a local nature reserve and therefore is not a formal park and natural growth of trees and shrubs is encouraged as part of the overall management. Visitors may want to join one of the regular nature and history walks organised by the Friends of Tower Hamlets Cemetery Park, details can be found on www.towerhamletscemetery.org or by contacting the FTHCP c/o Stuart Rayment, 1 Lockhart Street, Mile End, London E3 4BL (020 8983 0504). The East London Family History Society c/o Doreen Kendall, 20 Puteaux House, Cranbrook Estate, London E2 ORF may be able to assist with

the location of specific graves providing a square number and grave number have been previously identified. When writing to them, please include an SAE. Members of the Society usually visit the Cemetery Park on the second Sunday of each month at 2pm (meeting point: Soanes Centre) when they may be able to help to locate graves.

The Soanes Centre, which is an environmental education centre administered by SETPOINT LONDON EAST, is located on the site (telephone 020 8252 6644). Members of staff based there are not usually able to assist with the location of graves.

The Cemetery

The cemetery was laid out in a series of squares of equal size (except where the boundaries of the cemetery rendered the square smaller). Each square contained a number of graves or burial plots. Squares might contain both private and public graves (see below). The squares are not marked on the ground in the cemetery but the list of cemetery records in London Metropolitan Archives contains several maps showing the order of the squares. The records include plans of each square showing the location of the private graves (see below). The numbers of the graves rarely run sequentially, that is in numerical order: adjacent numbers, for example 343 and 344, are unlikely to be next to each other and may not even be in the same square.

Burials

All burials took place in either consecrated or unconsecrated ground. Those buried in consecrated ground would have been members of the Church of England. Those buried in unconsecrated ground would have been Christians of other denominations, those of other faiths and those of none.

Burials were also either in public graves or in private graves. Private graves were those bought from the

company by individuals who were thus able to say who should be buried in them (usually themselves and close members of their family). The size and depth of the plot determined the number of people buried in the grave. Public graves were for those who could or would not buy a plot and in them were buried those whom the company chose.

Records

The records of the City of London and Tower Hamlets Cemetery Company have been deposited in the London Metropolitan Archives (CTHC). The records of the Greater London Council, which from 1966 to 1986 was responsible for the cemetery, include administrative records relating to the cemetery during that period. Documents relating to the consecration of portions of the cemetery are held among the records of the Diocese of London in the Manuscripts Section of the Guildhall Library, Aldermanbury, London EC2P 2EJ. For information about the running of the cemetery since 1986 searchers should apply in the first instance to The London Borough of Tower Hamlets, Mulberry Place, 5 Clove Crescent, London E14 2BG, 020 7364 5000.

Records held in London Metropolitan Archives may be summarised as follows:

- burial registers (consecrated ground) 1841-1966
- burial registers (unconsecrated ground) 1841-1959
- day books (consecrated and unconsecrated ground) 1854-1901
- fee books 1902-1924
- fee books ('general registers') 1944-1966
- registers of private graves 1841-1966
- registers of public graves 1900-1965
- index to purchasers of private graves 1841-1941
- register of private grave transfers 1938-1966
- correspondence about private graves 19th-20th centuries
- accounts 1922-1966
- plans 1840s-[1986]
- deeds and legal papers 1841-1942
- administrative records before 1966-1986.

Using the Records

First find the entry in the *burial register*. If you believe the person you seek to have been Church of England begin with the burials in consecrated ground; if not, begin with burials in unconsecrated ground. If the entry is not found in the expected register (allowing up to 21 days after the date of death), always check the other series.

Most of the burial registers are like Anglican burial registers of this date. They give the name of the deceased, abode, age, when and by whom buried.

You may want to find out who else was buried in that plot or to locate the plot on the ground. A grave can only be found on the ground if it was a private one. Only private graves contain solely members of the same family. In either case you will need to find the grave number. *Grave numbers*, and *square numbers* where relevant (see below), are almost always found in the following series for the following dates:

consecrated: ground	burial registers:	1841-1850, 1951-1966
	day books	1854-1901
	fee books/ general registers	1902-1966
unconsecrated: ground	burial registers	1841-1850, 1901-1959
	day books	1854-1869, 1871-1901
	fee books/ general registers	1902-1966

As a general rule numbers of private graves are given as a simple number (1-13,077) with a square (often 'sq') number: numbers of public graves consist of a number with a letter.

When you have the private grave number, to find who else was buried in that grave and when, you can consult the registers of private graves which are arranged by grave number. If you wish to locate the plot on the ground, you will need to note the square number, find the grave on the square plans noting how it lies in relation to paths, boundary walls, other plots and identifying features, and check the plans of the lay-out of the cemetery to find where the square is in relation to other squares and again identifying features in the cemetery.

If, however, you find that the person you seek was in a public grave, then little more information is available. To find out who else was buried there would entail a search through all the registers or day and fee books looking for the grave number, except for the periods 1900-1965 and 1944-1965 when the registers of public graves and the general registers list those buried by grave number. To locate the plot on the ground is thought to be impossible as square numbers are seldom given and no plans of squares showing public graves are known to exist.

You may believe that a person or family in whom you are interested owned a private grave but you do not know who is buried in it. In that case consult the *index of purchasers of private graves 1841-1941*. Bear in mind that the grave may have been purchased some years before the first burial in it took place. On the other hand, a grave purchased at someone's death may appear to have been purchased at a later date since purchases were not registered by the company until its next meeting.

The only other *indexes* surviving are to the 'general registers' (fee books) 1944-1966 which are arranged in date order but each of which has an index to those buried in private graves.

There is an index, prepared by staff, to those names of purchasers of private graves and others which appear in GLC administrative records but this is not open to public access and represents a fairly small proportion of those buried in the cemetery. Only as a last resort should enquirers ask staff about the possibility of using this source.

No contemporary register of *monumental inscriptions* exists and even those series such as day books and fee books which may note payments for kerb - or head-stones do not give details of any inscriptions. It is believed that registers detailing the condition of graves and including legible inscriptions compiled by the GLC from 1974 are in the possession of the London Borough of Tower Hamlets.

There are files of *correspondence* about the purchase and transfer of private graves in the records of the company and also among the records of the London Residuary Body (LRB/PS/T/89-90).

Reading list

London Metropolitan Archives holds the following works which include sections on the cemetery. Library references are given in brackets at the end of each entry.

BROOKS, Chris — *Mortal remains: the history and present state of the Victorian and Edwardian cemetery*. Wheaton in association with the Victorian Society, 1989 (25.5 BRO).

MELLER, Hugh — *London cemeteries: an illustrated guide and gazetteer*. Avebury, 1981 (25.5 MEL).

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