

Introduction

This is the latest in a series of newsletters from the Directors of the General Cemetery Company (GCC) intended for all those with an interest in Kensal Green Cemetery.

Over the last few years work has been going on at the Cemetery which may result in changes to the way that the site is operated, to secure the long-term future of the Cemetery. This work is a response to the huge concentration of Listed buildings and monuments present at Kensal Green and a growing recognition that the GCC in its current form does not have the resources to fully repair or conserve them.

The Directors of the GCC are keen to keep the community updated on any changes that may occur in the future as well as providing a rolling programme of updates on progress. In this edition we are also very pleased to include a short piece by Dr Julian Litten FSA, who is regarded as England's foremost funerary historian and founder of the Friends of Kensal Green Cemetery.

A Sustainable Future

In the April newsletter we summarized the background to why the GCC was exploring alternative operating models to secure the long-term future of the Cemetery. We followed that up with a consultation in June on the proposal to submit a Private Bill and secure a new Act of Parliament that will pave the way for a more sustainable future.

With a new Act we will have the ability to transfer the ownership of the site to a newly formed charity and for that charity to take on the challenge of securing investment into the heritage of the site. At present due to the limitations placed on the GCC by the original 1833 Act, there are many sources of grants and funding which could help maintain our unique heritage that we are unable to access but which the newly formed charity could.

In parallel, the intention is for the GCC to become a trading subsidiary of the charity and continue to undertake burials and cremations. In this model any profit generated would go directly towards supporting the charitable objectives of the charity.

We are pleased to report that a draft of the Private Bill has now been prepared and is due to be submitted to Parliament at the end of November. Subject to the outcome of a 'Wharncliffe Meeting' which will seek Shareholder's approval, the Bill will then progress through the parliamentary process.

If you would like to review the Bill, please visit the GCC's website or contact us and we can email you a copy. Feedback is being invited with a deadline of the end of October 2024.

Anglican Chapel urgent repairs

With the support of a limited grant from Historic England earlier this year emergency roofing repairs were carried out on the two colonnades that flank the Anglican Chapel at the centre of the site. The purpose of these works was to stop the huge issues that the building faces with water ingress which in recent years has led to a rapid deterioration in its condition. As part of the same project we were able to improve drainage around the building helping to collect rainwater and move it away from the Grade I Listed Chapel as quickly as possible. These works are now complete and these important parts of the building have been stabilized. As a result, we are very pleased to have been able to remove the security fencing allowing people to once again walk around the building and experience the centre-piece of the entire site.



**Funded by
UK Government**

A case of déjà vu?

During the research and consultation we have been doing over the last year or so we stumbled upon a piece in the 1989 book, *Mortal Remains: The History and Present State of the Victorian and Edwardian Cemetery*, by Chris Brooks.

A fascinating passage in the book describes how, in February 1988, the GCC sought to help establish the Friends of Kensal Green Cemetery and explore proposals for the long-term preservation and management of the site including the conservation and repair of the Anglican Chapel. In April of that year Dr Julian Litten went on to convene a meeting with Historic England (English Heritage at that time), the Council for the Care of Churches, the National Trust, RHS, Courtauld Institute, the Victorian Society and SAVE to participate in discussions.

Intrigued by the similarities between this endeavour in the late 1980s and the current proposals noted earlier, we contacted Dr Litten to ask him about his recollections from that time. He recounts:

Of the former private cemeteries of Nunhead, Highgate, West Norwood, Abney Park, Brompton and Tower Hamlets, only Highgate remains as a private cemetery, through its acquisition by the Friends of Highgate Cemetery Trust in 1975, the others having been subsumed into local authority care. Even so, Highgate cannot be compared to the grandeur of Kensal Green. To begin with, it is half the size of Kensal Green, and its buildings and monuments are of lesser importance.

In the late 1980s, during discussions with Michael Nodes (the then chairman of the GCC) concerning the establishment of a Friends of Kensal Green Cemetery, the late Christopher Brooks and I asked him what the Company's intentions were once the cemetery was deemed full. He replied that, to his knowledge, there were no plans and wondered if the Friends might want to be its guardian. We

thought that to be somewhat too complex, arguing that the better guardian would be the GCC itself, albeit in a revised format. In that way the cemetery would remain its property – which Brooks and I were anxious to see, not wanting its maintenance to be subsumed by a local authority - so as to maintain the unique situation of Kensal Green being the only one of the Magnificent Seven remaining in private hands.

Michael Nodes was dubious if a trading company could also be considered as a 'management body'. Both Brooks and I were of the opinion that was, to some extent, already the case, in that the GCC was still trading yet, at the same time, were already aware that they were the guardians of the most important cemetery landscape in the UK, thereby being both a commercial entity and also a management body. We suggested that the matter of the aesthetics of the landscape and the conservation of the monuments therein could fall on the shoulders of the Friends of Kensal Green Cemetery, whose officers could act in an advisory capacity to the Board of the GCC, which Michael considered to be a reasonable divide.

As with all cemeteries, Kensal Green is a place for the living, not the dead, for the dead have no opinion as to where they are buried. Only when they were alive was it important to them. As a result of that 'importance' Kensal Green attracted a multitude of famous people because, unlike most of the other private cemetery companies, it offered secure plots, plots 'in perpetuity'. Consequently, they knew that in death they would be 'secure'. It is true to say that Kensal Green holds more 'possible candidates' for Westminster Abbey than all of the other cemeteries in Great Britain put together. As we said to Michael Nodes, Kensal Green not only had a great past but it also has the makings of a great 'present' and an even greater 'future'. And I am as convinced of that now as I was when I spoke to Michael Nodes all those years ago.

Dr Julian Litten FSA

*Founder and Vice-President of the Friends of Kensal Green Cemetery
September 2024*

So, whilst the model being proposed now has the benefit of Counsel's advice and feasibility work funded by the National Lottery Heritage Fund, it is fascinating to see that predecessors at the GCC and elsewhere grappled with the very same issues over 30 years ago!



What is the General Cemetery Company?

For those readers for whom this is the first newsletter they have seen, The General Cemetery Company is a private company that was established in 1833 by an Act of Parliament to establish and then operate the Kensal Green Cemetery in west London.

Like other cemeteries such as Highgate and Brompton, Kensal Green was established by its own specific Act of Parliament. However, unlike the others, Kensal Green is the only remaining example from that original cohort of private London cemeteries that is still owned and operated by its original founding company. This fact creates significant challenges for the GCC which in many respects have led to the situation it faces today outlined above and in previous newsletters.

Today the GCC owns and operates the cemetery and West London Crematorium which is located on the same site. The company comprises a small staff team and a number of Directors. The main day to day

business of the GCC is to meet with families of the recently deceased and work with Funeral Directors to carry out burials and cremations. The company is proud of its heritage and is proud to serve a large and highly diverse community across west London.

Why is the Cemetery so important?

Kensal Green Cemetery is hugely significant in terms of its history and architecture. The site itself is a Grade I registered landscape; it contains the Grade I listed Anglican Chapel, the Dissenters' Chapel and entrance arch both Listed at Grade II* and the North Terrace Colonnade and perimeter walls which are Listed at Grade II. In addition the Cemetery contains 157 listed monuments, most of which are Grade II but ten of which are individually listed at Grade II*. This is one of the most remarkable concentrations of listed buildings and monuments anywhere in England.

In addition to the importance of its architecture and design, the cemetery is also the final resting place of a range of notable figures which gives it an additional layer of cultural significance. Particularly famous people buried at Kensal Green include the legendary engineer Isambard Kingdom Brunel, the mathematician Charles Babbage, and the novelists Wilkie Collins, Anthony Trollope and William Makepeace Thackeray.

Contact

If you would like to receive future newsletters or opt out of future newsletters, please e-mail the GCC office using the following address: peter.humphries@kensalgreencemetery.com