

A presentation by Brendan Day, Chief Registrar of Births and Deaths, Sandwell M.B.C., at the launch of the Pauper Memorial Exhibition, 7th April 2006

From the earliest days of Christianity in the United Kingdom the burial of the dead was the preserve of the church authorities.

For generation after generation villagers would be buried in local Parish Churchyards. Very few had permanent memorials, headstones were the preserve of the upper classes and for the vast majority the only marker would be a simple wooden cross or grave mound.

The decay of the wooden cross would indicate to the sexton the destruction of the body beneath and when this simple memorial had completely gone the grave could be reused again.

In many respects this was, by our modern standards, a truly green and elegant system for disposing of the dead. It enabled the same piece of land to be used over and over again, for countless generations.

For example the churchyard of St Martin-in-the-Fields in London covered an area of 200 square feet yet, an area which today would hold 10 graves accommodating a maximum of 30 burials. In the early 1840's it was estimated that this area contained the remains of between sixty and seventy thousand persons.

The Churchyard system, however, relied upon a constant, unchanging, manageable number of burials arising from an unchanging population within the parish. A situation that was unable to withstand the population explosion that accompanied the urbanisation of the industrial revolution.

As the populations of the great Victorian towns and cities grew so did the number of people dieing. The only place to bury them was the local churchyard. These soon became full, and posed a significant health risk to mourners, gravediggers and people living nearby. Thousands of bodies were buried in shallow graves and sometimes beneath the floorboards of chapels. In the summer the smell of purification was said to be unbearable, and children would play with what they called Coffin bugs, that crawled out between the floorboards from the vaults below.

Wherever there is a demand for a commodity or service private speculators step in, and in an attempt to meet this demand Cemetery Companies started forming by Act of Parliament and opening burial grounds. Including the one in Jeffcock Road Wolverhampton. In order to gain the maximum revenue they sold the exclusive rights to graves, so that only the person buying could decide who would be buried there. These were sold in "perpetuity" in other words forever. Unlike the churchyards that had come before where graves could be used for generation after generation the new private graves once buried in would only be disturbed on the day of resurrection when the dead would rise up and see Christ return in majesty to Jerusalem. For this reason all the graves faced east.

A pressure group, the National Society for the Abolition of Burial in Towns, was established and in 1857 the Cemeteries Clauses Act was passed providing general powers to establish commercial cemeteries. Insufficient new cemeteries were opened under the act and so in 1852 the first of many Burial Acts were passed to enable Cemeteries to be formed by local Burial Boards and ultimately councils.

The development of extravagant funerals had started before the reign of Queen Victoria, it would reach new heights during her reign and not long after her death following the 1914-18 war it would go into decline.

But in 1858 the determination to secure a 'decent' burial for family members was an integral part of Victorian Society. Even if it resulted in hardship for the surviving family members a private grave in the brand new well maintained municipal cemetery had to be obtained for the deceased. There he or she could lie, resting beneath their memorial for all time, awaiting the trumpet call of the resurrection.

The thought of failing to achieve this and being buried in a paupers grave along with other people, not even from the same family was the ultimate disgrace.

So it was that at 1pm on Friday the 19th November 1858 Mr Bullins, a Chemist from West Bromwich High Street, was able to

bury his 6 week old son William in Grave No1, a sumptuous vault, in the unconsecrated section of the brand new Heath Lane Cemetery here in West Bromwich. This was the very first burial in a facility still in use today. The family of the deceased could be content that their loved had received a resting place that met all the norms of Victorian decency.

A month later at 3pm on Monday the 24th January 1858 a very different spectacle took place, a spectacle that would be repeated countless times during the decades to come. A double funeral, that of John Charles, aged 18 years and James Hill aged 55 years. Both these men had died in the workhouse, so there was to be no brick vault for them. Instead both were buried in Public Graves, John in Grave No 3, at a depth of 8' and James in Grave no 9 at 14' and both with other people.

In fact after the burial of James on the 24th January the grave would remain open, the coffin covered with a thin layer of soil until the 24th April 1858 during which time James would be joined by three other colleagues from the Workhouse.

During that first year of operation there would be 33 burials from the workhouse, 39 the year after many more in the following decades.

In Victorian life they suffered the stigma of being sent to the Workhouse, in death they would suffer the indignity of being buried in pauper's graves upon which no memorial was permitted to be placed.

These countless graves have gone marked, some for over a century. But thanks to the inspiration of John Pearce, the hard work of the Paupers Memorial Committee and support of Companies such as the memorial masons Strong's this wrong will now be put right.