

TOWER HAMLETS CEMETERY

SOUTHERN GROVE, LONDON E3

Historical and Conservation Report

by

Roger Bowdler

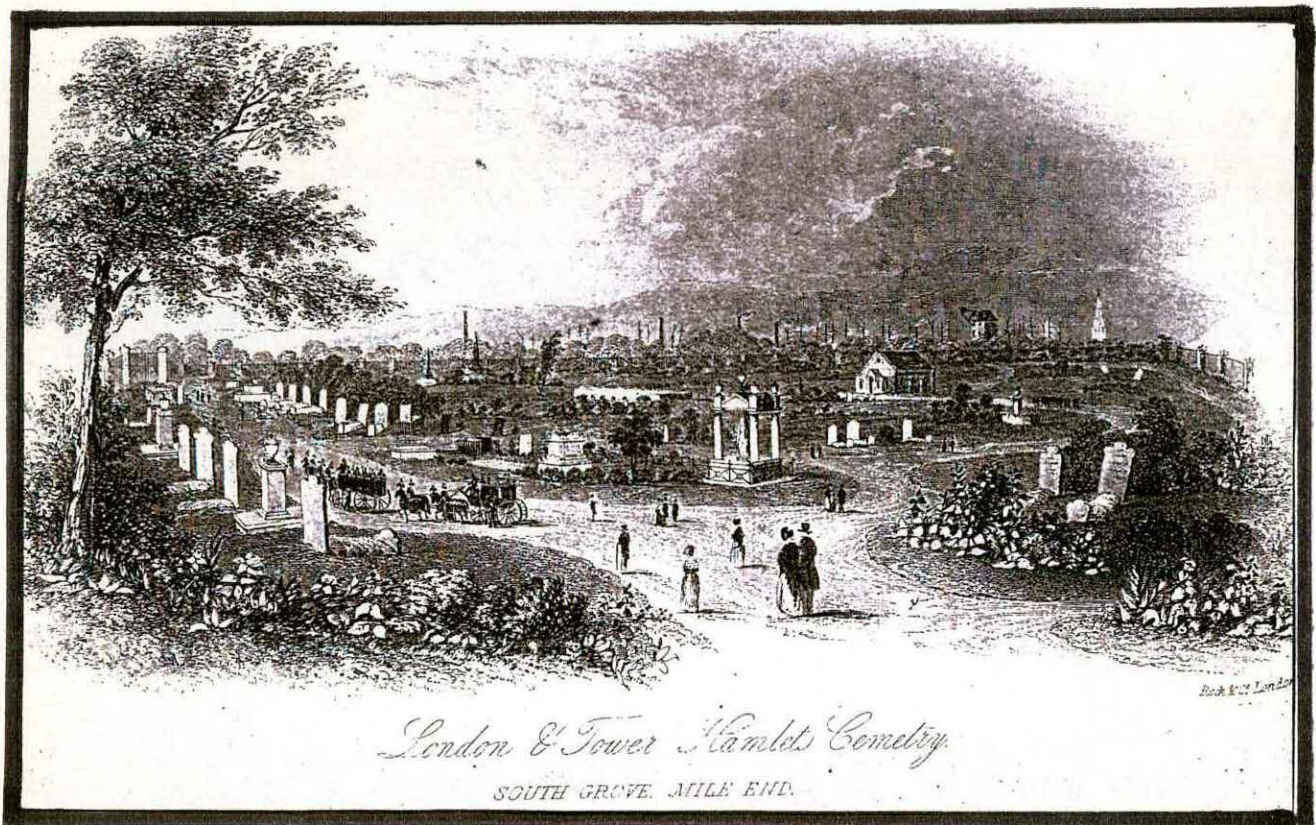
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TOWER HAMLETS CEMETERY
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London Borough of Tower Hamlets



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Roger Bowdler
English Heritage

May 1999

TOWER HAMLETS CEMETERY, SOUTHERN GROVE, LB TOWER HAMLETS

One of the celebrated group of seven private London cemeteries opened in the early years of Victoria's reign, Tower Hamlets Cemetery has long been a subject of concern. The preparation of a management plan, combined with the Buildings at Risk initiative, has provided the opportunity for an historical assessment to be made of the cemetery's monuments and for an outline history to be drawn up.

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1 Context: London's Early Cemeteries

The rapid growth of London's population, combined with the over-full condition of urban burial grounds and a growing concern at the unseemly nature of such graveyards, resulted in a wave of private cemeteries being opened in and around the capital. Commercial enterprise responded to a need which had hitherto been the province of religious authorities, a clear indicator of the secularising tendencies of Late Georgian and Early Victorian London. The private, joint-stock, cemetery companies established new burial grounds in the following order:

- 1832 Kensal Green
- 1837 West Norwood
- 1839 Highgate
- 1840 Abney Park
- 1840 Brompton
- 1840 Nunhead
- 1841 Tower Hamlets.

There then followed a lull in opening cemeteries until the mass closure of inner-city burial grounds in the early 1850s led to a spate of municipal burial grounds being opened by local authorities. Tower Hamlets Cemetery thus stands at the close of the first wave of cemetery construction.

2 The Early Years of Tower Hamlets Cemetery

An 1841 Act of Parliament established the City of London and Tower Hamlets Cemetery, and enabled it to raise £20,000 through shares; West Norwood Cemetery was backed by £75,000 so it is clear that the new cemetery for East London was a lesser affair from the outset. Behind the new company were a group of prominent East End men of business: the first chairman was John Hammick, proprietor of the Ratcliff Gas Light Company, and another leading figure was the shipping magnate John Pirie, who was Lord Mayor of the City of London in the year of foundation, and created a baronet in 1842. East London was still the residence of a sizeable middle class population at the time of the cemetery's opening, and the company hoped to exploit this ready market. In the event, the inexorable shift westwards of London's mercantile classes deprived the cemetery of its more prosperous clientele, and the burials were overwhelmingly those of the lower-middle and working classes. Part of the cemetery was set aside for pauper burials from the outset, but from its earliest days much of its business was serving the poorer end of the social scale: in 1841-2, about 60% of all burials were common interments, and by 1851 this figure had increased to around 80%. This was to affect the whole character of the cemetery.

The ground selected for the site was open pasture, belonging to the executors of Thomas Foster and to one Eleanor Knapp. It lay to the south of the Stepney to Bromley-by-Bow footpath, and to the north of the large rope works belonging to Soanes and Son. Mile End Road had long been one of the principal arterial roads leading from the City Eastwards, and the ground between it and Commercial Road was developed largely in the 1820s onwards. Drainage, vital for any cemetery, was achieved through the sinking of a 210 ft deep artesian well.

3 Original Buildings and Layout

The ground was laid out in time for its consecration in September 1841, and the earliest burials took place immediately thereafter. Not until 1849 were the chapels, designed by Thomas Wyatt and David Brandon, completed: along with attached cloisters intended for the display of memorial tablets, each had a network of subterranean catacombs for the reception of lead coffins (other catacombs are to be found at Kensal Green (three complexes), West Norwood, Nunhead and Brompton). The chapels were illustrated in the March 24th edition of the *Illustrated London News*. This stated that the chapels were

greatly admired for their purity of style and propriety of arrangement. That erected in the consecrated ground is in the early Decorated period, with a belfry at one angle, in which are some nicely ornamented windows; and at the sides are attached cloisters for the reception of mural tablets, so constructed as to afford an effectual screen from the weather. The chapel appropriated to the use of Dissenters is of octagonal form, and in the Byzantine style of architecture. Beneath both chapels are dry and extensive catacombs, arranged so as to accommodate single coffins or form family vaults.

The catacombs have been filled in and there is no sign of their existence above ground. The use of the Byzantine style for the Dissenters' chapel is of considerable interest: Wyatt and Brandon's best-known building, SS Mary and Nicholas, Wilton, Wiltshire of 1843, one of the outstanding churches of the period, was in a similar idiom.

Wyatt and Brandon were also responsible for laying out the grounds and for the ancillary buildings and boundary walls, the only structures to be listed at present. The 1841 layout plans in the London Metropolitan Archives indicate the siting of paths, but give no clue as to the original planting plans. The layout of the cemetery was organised around serpentine paths: John Claudius Loudon, the great theorist of cemetery planning, remarked in his *Encyclopaedia of Gardening* (1843) that it was 'laid out and planted with ornamental trees and shrubs, and... with a view to pictorial effect'. The one early view of the cemetery that exists, a promotional engraving of c.1850 (see cover), shows the cemetery planted with low-level shrubs; hardly any mature trees are shown, a reminder that this ground had hitherto been open fields, given over to pasture.

Tower Hamlets Cemetery did not enjoy the advantage of a rising hilltop slope, unlike most of the other early cemeteries: consequently, it was unable to offer the enjoyment of distant prospects as one of its allures. Moreover, the increasingly industrial nature of the East End reduced further the suburban allure of the cemetery's position: the prevailing south-westerly winds blew London's smoke in this direction, and the commercial bustle of the area made the cemetery an increasingly isolated open verdant space. This is still very much the case today.

4 Development of the Cemetery

In terms of lavish memorials, virtually all the imposing tombs were erected within the first twenty years of its existence. The paths were laid down and the shrubs grew larger; otherwise, the only change was the growing number of tombs springing up along the paths. The most sought-after area was evidently the north-west, close to the principal entrance off Southern Grove. Next in status was the equivalent circle in the north-east corner. Then, as was universal in cemeteries, came the areas alongside the principal paths: especially at intersections. The paths and drainage underwent substantial overhaul in 1884.

The opening of the City of London Cemetery in 1856, on the edge of Epping Forest, had an adverse effect on the cemetery, which had started out as the City of London and Tower Hamlets Cemetery. The wealthy clientele of the City was now encouraged to use the lavishly laid out new burial ground rather than this small cemetery on the fringes of the commercial East End, with the result that the main class of customers took another few steps down the social ladder.

Several celebrated funerals took place here. In 1857 a French exile from Napoleon III named Rougee was buried here, accompanied by 10,000 mourners: at the end of the grave side delivery, up went the mass cry of 'Vive la Republique democratique et sociale'. Thirty years later, in December 1887, the victim of Bloody Sunday, Alfred Linnell, was laid to rest. Linnell had been killed in a police charge at the Socialist rally in Trafalgar Square at which William Morris had been speaking: Morris composed a death song expressly for Linnell's funeral, which became the occasion for a major Socialist rally and possibly the largest gathering of Radicals in the capital since the Chartist meeting on Kennington Common in 1848. The *Times* and *East London Advertiser* both wrote disapprovingly of the way a funeral had become a secular and politicised affair, the latter describing numerous 'disgraceful scenes' which it had witnessed.

Other regrettable scenes had been observed by anxious local residents, who observed how the cemetery company was packing bodies into restricted space, while carrying out a minimum of maintenance. A Bow Cemetery Grievance Committee was set up in 1882 which lobbied to have the cemetery closed down on grounds of impropriety: up to eighty bodies were alleged to have been interred in a single grave, and remains were later removed from the ground -to where is unknown- in order for it to be used once or twice again. Legislation was finally passed, limiting the number of individual burials within a single grave shaft to eight adults, or fourteen children.

By 1889, some 247,000 persons had been buried in this cemetery, making it one of the most densely-thronged of any London cemetery¹. Mrs Basil Holmes's *The London Burial Grounds* of 1896, the first London-wide survey of burial grounds ever undertaken, described the cemetery thus: it was 'still in use and open daily, a regular ocean of tombstones, many of which are lying about, apparently uncared for and unclaimed; in fact most of the graves, except those at the edges of the walks look utterly neglected, and parts of the ground are very untidy'. Maintenance of ornamental gardens and tidying thousands of tombstones was a costly business. Tower Hamlets suffered from the innate flaw in the finances of private cemetery companies: in return for an initial fee, they undertook to maintain memorials in perpetuity, as well as keep up the grounds in decent order. The 1896 description revealed that the cemetery company was increasingly unable to pay for its responsibilities. It had not managed to sell enough lucrative vaults, and the small fees from common burials did not generate sufficient surplus amounts to pay for upkeep of the cemetery as a whole.

5 Recent History 1900-1960

The cemetery suffered some damage during the Blitz, but it was neglect -caused by the ailing finances of the cemetery company- which had the greatest impact on the grounds. Regular complaints appeared in the local papers, generally describing its condition as 'deplorable'. The most significant addition to the cemetery's monuments was the simple memorial panel dedicated to the civilian victims of enemy bombing: the *East End News* of 11th November 1948 reported that the mass graves along the eastern edge of the cemetery were in the process of being marked, and a garden laid out. The Anglican chapel had suffered badly during the war and was left roofless, but was restored and rededicated in 1953 by the Bishop of Stepney. The other buildings -in particular the Egyptian-style mortuary- were in a grievous condition and were invitations to vandalism, which became increasingly severe. Burials, however, continued to take place regularly.

6 The Closure and Conservation of the Cemetery 1960-

The cemetery company's finances staggered on until November 1965, when they finally expired. Vandalism and dumping of rubbish had become grave, and the cemetery was widely regarded as a sore in the centre of Stepney. The cemetery was closed for burials in September 1966, by which time the newly-formed Greater London Council had acquired it. Aware of the

¹One 1998 estimate put the total number of persons buried here at 350,000, making Tower Hamlets one of London's most crowded cemeteries.

East End's need for open space, the GLC initially intended to convert the cemetery into a public park. As a first step, it demolished the cemetery buildings², restored the boundary walls (those along the south perimeter, in particular, were in a parlous state), and initiated several conversion plans: the latest of these was prepared in 1975. The repairs to the walls were carried out in a way that would not find approval today. An area in the southern part of the cemetery was indeed cleared of graves as a prelude to wholesale clearance.

Growing awareness of the special character of the cemetery among local residents led to a vigorous and ultimately successful campaign to retain the tombs, trees and landscaping, and avert a *tabula rasa* approach to the site. The first serious study of the cemetery was published in *East End Papers* in 1969, and interest in the place has steadily increased.

On the expiry of the GLC in 1986, the cemetery passed to the London Borough of Tower Hamlets, which has administered it ever since. It was designated a Conservation Area in 1987, and in 1989 passed to the Poplar Neighbourhood's control. In 1993 it attained the status of a 'cemetery park', and the Soanes Centre, an ecological-environmental study centre funded by the Science and Technology Regional Organisation, was opened in purpose-built premises close to the entrance lodge, with a staff of two. Funding was withdrawn in 1996. Tower Hamlets engaged the London Ecology Unit to prepare a management plan, and this was duly prepared in August 1993. The ecological diversity to be found within the cemetery is now recognised as exceptional. However, none of the monuments has been considered for listing thus far, and no maintenance has been carried out on any of them.

7 Monuments of Note

Tower Hamlets, in terms of its tombs, is probably the least spectacular of any of the early private London cemeteries. Comparisons with Kensal Green, West Norwood or Highgate are not helpful or fair: Tower Hamlets was always a plainer, less *bourgeois* affair than these. Better comparisons are to be made with Nunhead and Abney Park, each of which has a far smaller total of listed tombs than the other, grander cemeteries of the group. Of course, much historical interest can be drawn from tombs of unspectacular appearance: but experience shows that a plain monument has to be possessed of really very great historical interest if it is to attain listed status. The tombs mentioned below are those of particular visual interest: others, of local historical interest, are already mentioned in *Every Stone Tells a Story*, the history trail prepared by Rosemary Taylor.

There are, nonetheless, a number of tombs of note among those listed below which warrant listing here. Research in this field is advancing constantly, and the full context of Victorian funerary monuments in London is now emerging, enabling assessments as to importance to be arrived at.

The monuments are described in topographical order, starting by the entrance in the north-west corner.

²Various dates are given for the demolition of the structures: some sources give the late 1960s, other say 1972.

1) Ellen Wiskin d.1866

Portland stone. A tall tapering pedestal with pediment and acroteria on a two-stage base, surmounted with a draped urn. Elaborate cast-iron railings with crossed arrows and flambeau finials, set on York stone base. Part of the group of prominent memorials close to the entrance.

2) John Smith d.1846

Portland stone. Standing figure of mourning woman, holding scroll, leaning on an urn-topped circular pedestal; placed on a square pedestal with inset corners, standing on a base of York stone. One of the few Neo-classical monuments in the cemetery with figure sculpture.

3) Anonymous Tomb c.1850

Portland stone. Square block with arched recess on each side below scrolled volutes, each containing a relief of a grieving woman beside a sarcophagus, or a draped sarcophagus. Upper square section has a shallow pediment to each face with antefixes, and is surmounted with a draped urn. An unusually rich instance of Neo-classical outdoor memorials, and unusual in design. Part of the group of outstanding memorials close to the entrance.

4) Ellen Llewellyn d.1854

Tall three-stage Portland stone monument. Plain square base, with crossed torches on the north side; plain middle section; upper section with a pediment (containing reliefs of wreaths, hourglasses, and a tail-biting snake) and acroteria to each face, and a slender tear vase to each corner; surmounted with a draped urn. An elaborate Neo-classical monument, part of the group of outstanding memorials close to the entrance.

5) Samuel Weddell d.1845

Portland stone. Tapering sarcophagus with acroteria and shallow pedimented cover. East end sports a bronze panel with the following inscription: 'Extract from the Will of Samuel Weddell Esq.. In order that the said vault and tomb may be constantly kept in repair I leave to the company called the City of London and Tower Hamlets Cemetery the sum of one hundred pounds free from legacy duty as a fund for this purpose and I particularly request that the directors for the time being will invest this sum in any way that they may think proper and apply the same and the interest of dividend thereof in providing for the expense occasioned by such repairs'. Such inscriptions are highly unusual and shed interesting light on the maintenance provisions for tomb upkeep which were made by far-sighted clients.

6) Sarah Morris and George Morris d.1843

Portland stone. Tapering sarcophagus on four console feet, standing on a two-stage base resting on a rectangular tomb chest with inset panels, over a stepped base. Relief of a lily with a cut flower on the eastern end of the sarcophagus. Cast iron railings with flaming urn finials, set into a York stone base. Part of the group of outstanding memorials close to the main entrance.

7) War Memorial

A recent erection in grey and black granite, consisting of a screen with a pyramidal central section, pierced with a cross, bearing 16 bronze panels with names of service personnel killed

in the two World Wars. A crescent-shaped area in front is paved with setts. Among the listed names are those of several Chinese Merchant Seamen, killed in the Blitz in September 1940. The memorial is said to stand on the site of the original artesian well. This replaced an earlier memorial located in the centre of the cemetery, just below the main lateral path.

8) Brothers of the Charterhouse Graves 1870s-1890s

Several rows of head- and footstones, 17 in all, erected over the vaults dug for inmates of Sutton's Hospital in the Charterhouse. Each stone (of Portland) has a stepped gable profile and sports an inset cross at the head. There are generally five names per stone. The Hospital subsequently moved out of London, to Essex: hence the burials ceased.

9) Joseph Westwood d.1883

Portland stone monument in form of a crocketed spire, carried on four open arches with angle buttresses, standing on a square base with angle buttresses and arched inscription panels. The finials are of metal. An allegorical statue of a female formerly stood within the canopy. Tiled surface to lowest base. Low, two-tier cast iron railings with bulbous finials survive in part. Westwood headed a shipbuilding and engineering firm. Quite the most imposing monument in the cemetery, prominently located at one of the principal cross-roads.

10) John Baker d.1852

Portland headstone with relief of an angel plucking a flower, set against sunrays and clouds. Baker died as a boy; this relief, strongly influenced by Thorvaldsen's celebrated relief of Night, is among the best in the cemetery and is a late instance of good quality tombstone carving.

11) Sarah Briggs d.1856

Portland headstone with relief of weeping woman beside an urn-topped pedestal within a glade. A late example of a Neo-classical gravestone, showing the continuing popularity of such stones in East London.

12) Perkin Family Tomb 1865

A pink granite obelisk on pedestal, erected to George Fowler Perkin (d.1865), a local dye manufacturer. His son William was an outstanding Victorian chemist, responsible for inventing the earliest synthetic dye. He is buried elsewhere.

13) Charles Francis d.1859

A tall obelisk on pylon-shaped pedestal of pink Peterhead (Aberdeen) granite, on a three-step base standing upon a large covering slab of York stone, inscribed 'My flesh also shall rest in hope'; the base consists of heavy rusticated blocks of pale yellow (?Bath) limestone, with a cast iron entrance to the vault with cross-shaped ventilation opening. Francis was a Whitechapel corn factor. One of the more imposing monuments remaining.

14) George Huxley Bear d.1855

Tall Portland stone with pediment and fielded inscription panel. Tall base with relief of growing corn, and verse from John xii, 24: 'except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone; but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit'. Bear (born Behr) was German-

Jewish immigrant who prospered as a tobacco and sugar merchant. Unusual resurrection symbolism, and another of the larger memorials here.

15) Elizabeth Gill d.1869

Headstone of York stone. Oval relief of a cut flower set between volutes. Upper part devoted to a relief of a storm-tossed ship with the inscription 'such is life'. Also commemorates the wives of a Limehouse sea captain. One of the better headstones in the cemetery.

16) Poplar Civilian War Memorial

Curved red brick screen with inset inscribed marble panel, standing in front of a low concrete trough. Erected c1948 on the site of several mass graves, containing some of the 747 civilians killed during the Blitz in Poplar alone (many others are buried here within private graves). The memorial gardens were laid out around this screen and consisted of six squares of turf. The area is presently in a very bad state.

8 Suggestions for Future Management

The Nature/Tomb Sculpture Balance

Designated a Site of Metropolitan Importance for Nature, the cemetery is largely given over to unchecked natural growth and has become a green resource of great importance in the area. This should definitely remain the case, and it would be difficult to sustain the argument that widespread tree and plant clearance should proceed here. Nunhead Cemetery is London's most successful example of a 'nature-led' historic cemetery, and there are no doubt many lessons to be learned from it that might be profitably applied here. By and large, the balance between tombs and vegetation seems about right. This, of course, changes according to the season: one of the attractions of any outdoor space.

Limited Restoration

There is, however, an argument for preserving a small part of the cemetery in something approaching its original manicured appearance: the contrast with the overgrown remainder would be telling, and it would serve to indicate the original intention and use of the cemetery. One solution would be to keep the north-west corner, close to the lodge, under strict control and thereby place the finest group of monuments in a sympathetic setting by regularly cutting the lawn. Furthermore, by having an area under managed control close to the principal entrance, at least the impression of management would be impressed upon visitors. The 1993 management plan did suggest a higher degree of maintenance in this area (called the 'Lodge Graves'), which ought to be followed.

The Entrance Lodge and Surrounding Area

The lodge -not an important building in any case- is currently in poor condition and attracts much clutter and detritus. This creates a highly unfortunate opening impression and suggests that local authority supervision is being flouted. An important first step would be to clear up the lodge forecourt and banish all vehicles. The War Memorial deserves a better environment, for one thing, but generally the entrance area is in need of rethinking. The Soanes Centre is a further blemish and its impact should be softened through planting and landscaping.

Educational Possibilities

Cemeteries are increasingly recognised as first-class historical resources, and the crop of historical information found on the many monuments needs to be harvested and presented in a useable, classroom-friendly manner. Particular areas of study might include occupations, foreign connections, places of residence, architectural forms and materials (there are numerous fine Welsh slate headstones, for instance). Efforts are already in hand to gather the genealogical information provided by headstones. No doubt more could be done in this area, with outside support, to build on the valuable work of the East London History Society which has already prepared its research findings for use by schools. Educational use of cemeteries encourages a sense of ownership which leads, in turn, to reduced vandalism. It also helps to create the sense that the cemetery is a place that can be visited safely by all comers. At present, there is a slightly menacing atmosphere in parts of the cemetery: only increased visitors, and a heightened sense of the presence of officialdom, will reverse this.

Tomb Trails

Even though the cemetery is not overly endowed with outstanding tombs, there are still numerous monuments of interest which deserve attention: no doubt many remain to be discovered, or are known to those who know the cemetery best. There are, for instance, an above-average number of headstones with relief carvings of note (something of an East End 19th century speciality) which repay closer inspection. A trail devoted to their study would be worthwhile. An explanatory panel close to the entrance would inform visitors of the salient facts and key persons buried here.

Conservation Assessment of Key Monuments

A conservation assessment of the tombs mentioned above, carried out by person experienced in this area, would be prudent: most are generally in reasonable condition, with the exception of the Poplar Civilian War Memorial, which is in serious need of a clean and the setting of which cries out for attention.

Roger Bowdler

Historical Analysis and Research Team, English Heritage

19th May 1999

SOURCES

Tower Hamlets local history library, Bancroft Road: cuttings

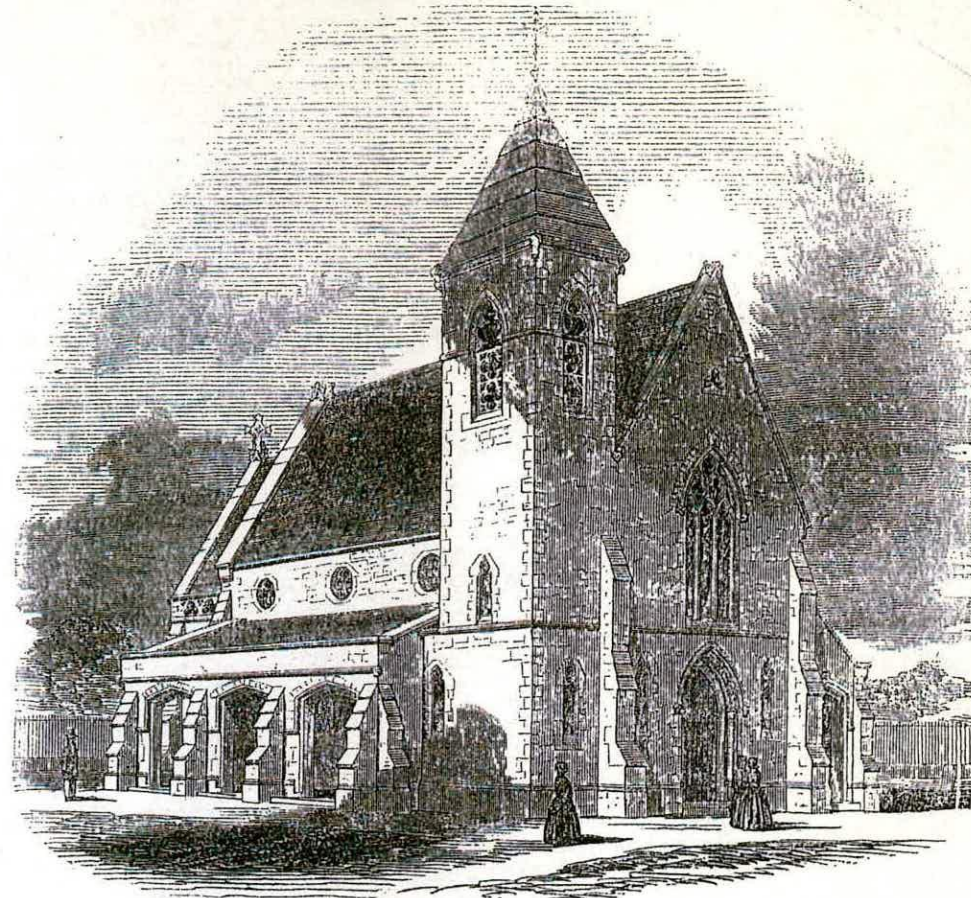
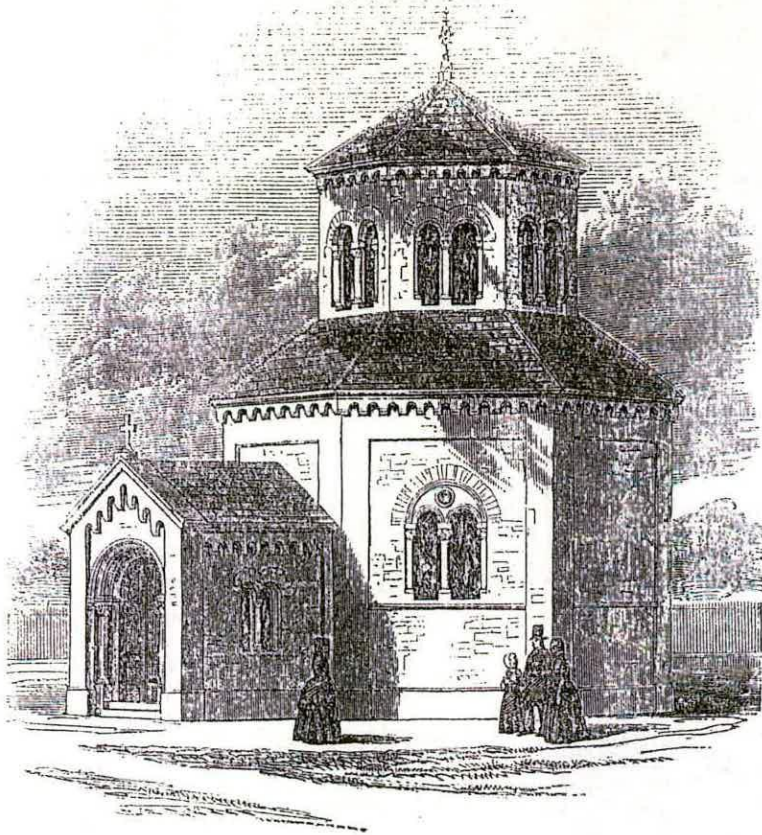
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Rosemary Taylor, *Every Stone Tells a Story. A Short History and History Trail of Tower Hamlets Cemetery Park* (1996).



NEW CHAPELS IN THE TOWER HAMLETS CEMETERY.

NEW CHAPELS IN THE TOWER HAMLETS CEMETERY.

At this period, when public attention is so universally directed to the sanitary condition of the metropolis, and when the suppression of intramural interments who once formed its busy occupants, so preferable in every respect to the already over-crowded churchyard burial-ground.

This cemetery was incorporated by act of Parliament in the year 1841, and a considerable portion of the ground has since been consecrated by the Lord Bishop of London. It comprises an area of upwards of thirty acres, most eligibly situated, being close to the high road leading to Bow.

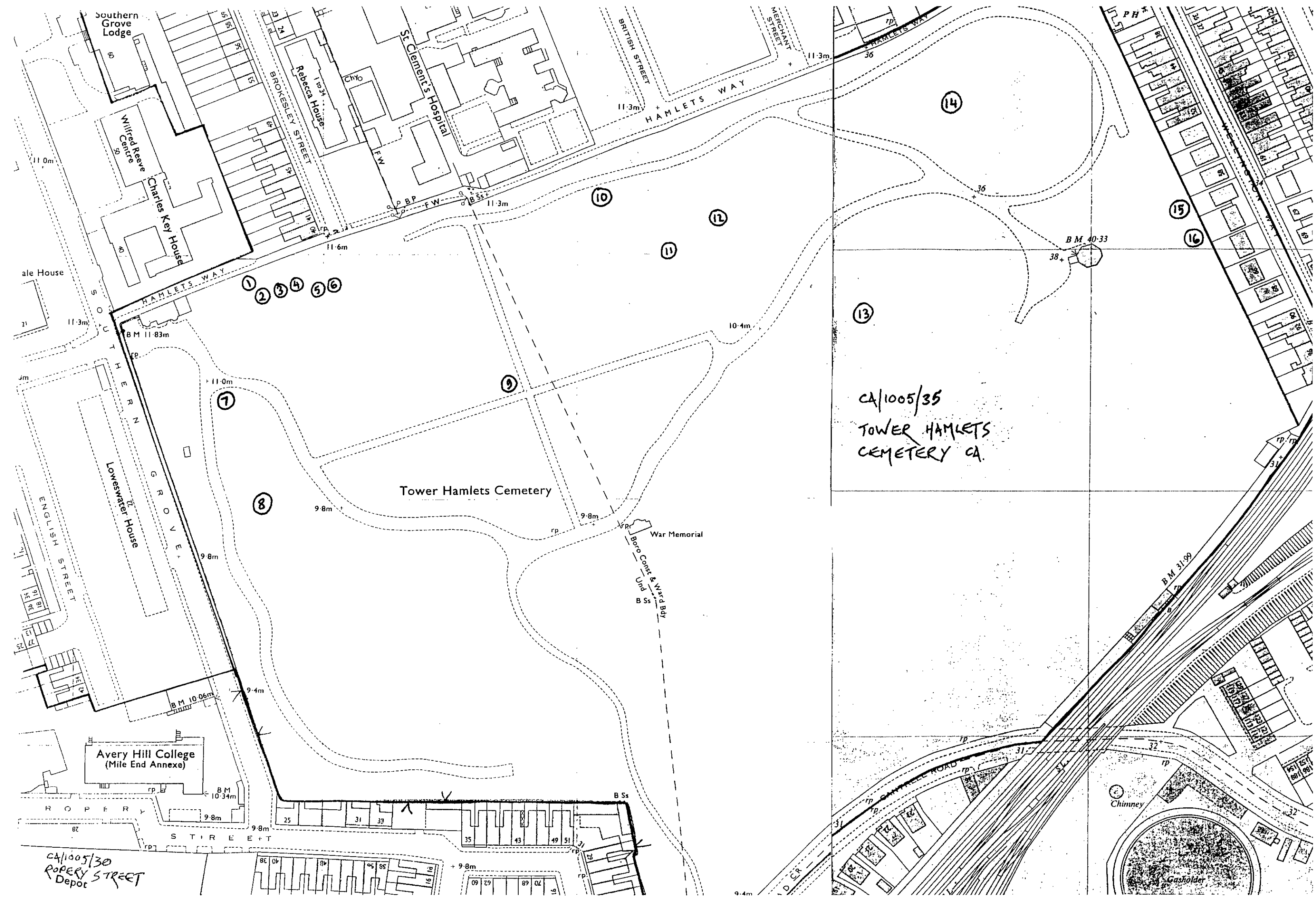
The chapels, which form the subject of our illustration, have just been completed from the designs of Messrs. Wyatt and Brandon, and are greatly admired for their purity of style and propriety of arrangement. That erected in the consecrated ground is in the early Decorated period, with a belfry at one angle, in which are some nicely ornamented windows; and at the sides are attached cloisters for the reception of mural tablets, so constructed as to afford an effectual screen from the weather. The chapel appropriated to the use of Dissenters is of octagonal form, and in the Byzantine style of architecture. Beneath both chapels are dry and extensive catacombs, arranged so as to accommodate single coffins or to form family vaults.

The grounds have been judiciously and effectively laid out by the same artists, and inclosed by high walls and ornamental iron railings; and the drainage, which is effected by means of an artesian well, to a depth of 210 feet, and tributary drains running through the land in various directions, is, we understand most successful—a depth of twenty-six feet having in many instances been obtained without moisture.

THE ILLUSTRATED LONDON NEWS.

MARCH 24, 1849.

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TOWER HAMLETS
CEMETERY CA.

Tower Hamlets Cemetery

Avery Hill College
(Mile End Annexe)

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ROPERY STREET
Depot

