

# PAPERS READ AT THE 47th LAMAS LOCAL HISTORY CONFERENCE HELD AT THE MUSEUM OF LONDON IN NOVEMBER 2012: 'A CAPITAL WAY TO GO: DEATH IN LONDON THROUGH THE AGES'

## THE HISTORY OF MORTALITY IN LONDON, 1550–1850

*Peter Razzell*

Traditionally, London has been seen as an over-crowded, squalid city, full of manure and sewerage, and ravaged by infection and disease. It has been characterised as a 'mortality sink', with mortality so severe as to require constant in-migration to replace population lost through an excessively high death rate. In this lecture I challenge this picture, and present evidence to show that London's mortality history was much more varied and complex than this traditional image.

The major problem with research on the history of mortality is the reliability of evidence. William Ogle, the late 19th-century Registrar-General, estimated that at least 44% of all burials were missing in the London Bills of Mortality in the 18th century. Research on a number of sources indicates that between a fifth and a third of all deaths were missing from burial registers, with a similar proportion of missing births. One of the best ways of measuring the reliability of parish registers is the 'same-name method', whereby the name of a dead child was given to a subsequent sibling. The reliability of parish registers can then be checked by

seeing whether the first same-name child is registered or not. This is illustrated by the family of Samuel and Sarah Fowler, where there were three first same-name children, only two of which were registered in the burial register. This represents an omission rate of one third, allowing the establishment of a correction ratio for under-registered deaths.

Research was carried out on 18 London parishes using same-name correction ratios. Families were reconstructed by tracing the baptisms and burials occurring in individual families, and the data were based on Boyd's *Inhabitants of London*. The results of this research indicate that infant mortality rose sharply amongst all families in the periods 1539–99 and 1700–49. This occurred amongst the total sample and in elite wealthy families, with mortality approximately tripling. By the first half of the 18th century nearly 60% of children died under the age of five, which is what gave London its reputation as a mortality sink. However, only about 32% of such young children had died in the 16th century, and mortality fell after the middle of the 18th century to about 25% by 1800–49. These lower figures were approximately similar to what occurred nationally in England, suggesting that London in the 16th and early 19th century was not an especially unhealthy and mortal place.

Adult mortality was very high in London during the period 1600–1749, with nearly a half of fathers of men and women marrying under the age of 21 dead by the date of the marriage. This mortality fell after the middle of the 18th century, reducing to about 29% by 1840–49. Adult mortality fell earlier and more rapidly in rural areas. There appears to have been little difference in this type of mortality amongst the rich and poor. This is reflected in the absence of significant mortality differences between wealthy West End and poor East End parishes in the period 1838–44, when Registrar-General's data became available.

This surprising absence of a correlation between poverty and mortality requires additional research for further clarification. However, it is likely that the 'hazards of wealth' — an excessive consumption of rich foods and strong alcohol, and the absence of physical activity — are partly responsible for the relatively high mortality amongst the wealthy. Also responsible for the high adult mortality among the rich was the medical treatment they received from physicians — bleeding with contaminated lancets, excessive purging and other practices derived from

humoral theory, including a prohibition of bathing in hot water. Travel, wet-nursing, and infection transmitted by servants and others also probably contributed to the relative lack of a social class gradient in disease and mortality in London during the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries.

We can only speculate on the reasons for the sharp increase in infant and child mortality in the 17th and early 18th centuries. It is probable that the fatality of certain diseases increased as a result of the importation of more virulent strains of infection with the growth of world trade. For example, smallpox killed less than 5% of children attacked in London during the late 16th century, whereas by the late 19th century it killed about 45%. Undoubtedly, London's squalid environment was partly responsible for the high mortality in the 18th century, but mortality is the result of an interaction of disease and environment, and even where the environment is very unhygienic, in the absence of disease mortality will be low. This can be illustrated with recent experience in Haiti, where in spite of a highly impoverished environment, there was an absence of cholera, which only became prevalent when the



Fig 1. *'Drunk and Alive, the man was thine. But dead and drunk why he is mine'*

disease was introduced by Nepalese soldiers working for the United Nations. Likewise, the bubonic plague entered England in the 14th century and disappeared from the country in the 17th, in spite of no significant change in environmental conditions.

There were probably a number of factors in the reduction of infant and child mortality in London after the middle of the 18th century: inoculation and vaccination against smallpox, the use of colostrum in breast-feeding, improved childrearing — for example the abandonment of swaddling, better hygiene, including the introduction of washable cottons, and the general improvement of the environment associated with the introduction of the Improvement Acts.

The reasons for the reduction of adult mortality in the 18th century are very unclear. As it appears to have occurred amongst all socio-economic groups and in all areas of the country, it probably was the result of a reduction in the virulence of adult diseases. The less radical and slower reduction in London may have been the result of its squalid environment, which only improved significantly after the middle of the 18th century.

In conclusion, although London was a very unhealthy city in certain periods, in the late 16th and early 19th centuries its mortality levels were very similar to those of the country as a whole. Its reputation as a mortality sink is therefore only partly deserved, and it required the importation of virulent strains of infection for it to become the fatal place it was in the middle of the 18th century. The disappearance of these diseases was probably partly the result of medical and other interventions, but the random flow of exogenous disease virulence was also central to London's mortality history.

### THE WRITTEN EVIDENCE FOR MEMORY AND COMMEMORATION IN MEDIEVAL LONDON

*Christian Steer*

The commemoration of the dead is an important act of remembrance and a celebration of life, as well as a reflection upon death. This manifests itself in funerary monuments which, over the centuries, have adopted many

different forms of memorialisation, such as temporary wooden markers and memorial stones over churchyard graves, and a rich variety of ledger stones, sculptures, tomb chests, incised slabs and monumental brasses which celebrate the lives of the dead in many of our parish churches and cathedrals.<sup>1</sup> This short summary will look at the evidence for memory and commemoration in London from the 12th century to c.1540. In this period the City contained over 100 parish churches, 40 or so religious houses, such as friaries and monasteries, and the old Gothic cathedral of St Paul's. All were repositories for the dead.

Much of this commemorative heritage was lost through natural wear and tear and accidental damage, church rebuilding and development, together with deliberate acts of destruction. The latter was particularly apparent during the Reformation when many of London's religious houses, such as the White Friars in Fleet Street, were closed and converted into secular buildings. Elsewhere, changes in the parish structure led to City churches, such as St Nicholas Shambles, being closed and amalgamated to form new communities, and as a result of this, their commemorative landscape was swept away. Other parish churches suffered the loss of their fixtures and features as the 'stripping of the altars' gained momentum. The Edwardian inventory accounts of 1552/53 reveal the sale of vestments, altar cloths, chalices and 'latten', including the brass plates, from gravestones. At All Hallows London Wall, for example, 30 pounds of metal, taken from the gravestones, was sold to Christopher Stubbs for 7s 6d (Walters 1939, 118). Efforts to protect the memory of the dead were made by the Elizabethan government in 1560 when a proclamation was issued forbidding the 'breaking or defacing any parcel of any monument, or tomb, or grave, or other inscription and memory of any person deceased' (Hughes & Larkin 1964–9, ii, 146). For a while this seems to have worked. But later, during the Civil War, there was further loss and in London there is evidence that inscriptions were censored and the offending texts removed: the brass for the mercer Christopher Rawson (d 1518) and his two wives at All Hallows Barking by the Tower shows where the request to 'pray

for the soul' has been scratched out together with the exhortation 'on whose soul may God have mercy'. From the vestry records for this church we know that in 1643 a man called Shurlan was paid 16s to erase these texts (Owen Evans 1965, 186–91). But the greatest loss of all was the Great Fire of 1666 which destroyed two thirds of the City of London and wiped out almost every surviving monument. For those churches in the east of the City which had escaped the fire, later redevelopment and urbanisation projects in the 19th century led to further loss. The destruction of St Katherine's Hospital in 1825 was particularly damaging (Besant 1892–9, i, 53–5). War and acts of terrorism in the 20th century have led to further losses. Today there are only 37 pre-1540 monuments which survive in City churches.<sup>2</sup>

Yet while the material evidence is poor, the written record is rich. In the early 16th century, the Heralds became interested in London's tombs. Two early lists of monuments survive in the College of Arms which date to about 1500.<sup>3</sup> Later the 'Book of Funerals', compiled during the 1520s by Sir Thomas Wriothesley (d 1534), Garter King of Arms, illustrates a number of sculptured monuments and brasses from medieval London.<sup>4</sup> Two further heraldic visitations undertaken by Thomas Hawley (d 1557), Carlisle Herald of Arms, in 1530 and Thomas Benolt (d 1534), Clarencieux King of Arms, in 1534 describe further monuments (Wagner 1939, 139–46). But these accounts only contain a record of what was of particular interest to the Heralds: they are, therefore, incomplete accounts and only snapshots of a much richer collection. A fuller picture emerges from the burial list of the Grey Friars in Newgate Street. This was written in the 1520s and its author was almost certainly a Franciscan friar. This account records 682 monuments and in many cases (but not all) describes the type of monuments which had been commissioned for the dead. The tombs for Queen Isabella (d 1358) and Walter Blount, first Lord Mountjoy (d 1474), for example, show that they were commemorated by sculptured effigies (Steer 2010, 117–42). But the most common forms of commemoration recorded in this London friary were flat stones set into the floor of the convent. There were 384 references to this type of monument which

can reasonably be taken to mean incised slabs and monumental brasses: the Grey Friars of London was packed with them. The popularity of brasses in medieval London is shown elsewhere: at the Austin Friars there were 40 surviving indents recorded in 1923. These were destroyed during the Blitz but an account of them was published by the Monumental Brass Society in 1949 (Greenhill 1949, 330–41).

John Stow (d 1605) was interested in London's commemoration of the dead and he included lists of tombs and burials in his *Survey of London* first published in 1598. But like the Heralds, Stow was selective. This is partly because he copied out the Heralds' lists — many churches were long destroyed and Stow could not see their tombs for himself. But he also had a natural preference for the 'worthies of London' and was, sometimes, spiteful about those who had (in his opinion) desecrated the graves of the dead. He was well known in Elizabethan London for his strong-minded views. The lawyer, John Mannigham, wrote about this in his diaries of 1602–3 and noted that Stow 'omittes manie neue monuments: because those men hath bin the defacers of the monuments of others, and soe [he] thinks them worthy to be deprived of that memory whereof they have injuriously robbed others' (Bruce 1868, 103). Later editors of Stow's *Survey of London*, Anthony Munday (d 1633) and John Strype (d 1737), endeavoured to expand Stow's account. This antiquarian interest in medieval London was felt elsewhere by the poet John Weever (d 1632) who, in 1631, published *Ancient Funeral Monuments* in which he also attempted to include many tombs which had been omitted by others (Weever 1631). But as a writer of epigrams, Weever was attracted to the more unusual inscriptions which he came across and for London his account contains many unique compositions rather than the standard 'Hic iacet'.<sup>5</sup> There is one further compilation which is of importance, *The History of St Paul's Cathedral* by Sir William Dugdale (d 1686) which was published in 1658. This account illustrates a number of monuments and brasses from the cathedral, many of which are based on early drawings made by his draughtsman, William Sedgwick, in 1641. The originals survive in the 'Book of Draughts', BL MS Additional 71474



and were later used by Wencelaus Hollar (d 1677) whose engravings accompany Dugdale's text (Whittemore 2003, 23–52; Roberts 2002, 73–103). Some of Hollar's illustrations are obviously 'touched up' but they nonetheless provide an important window into the magnificent collection of funerary monuments and brasses remaining in St Paul's on the eve of the fire (Freeth 2011, 281–4).

Destruction and indifference in the last five hundred years have ensured most medieval Londoners 'have perished as though they had never been'. But it is important to remember that the landscape of medieval London was once richly textured with the memorials of those who had died.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Meara & Kindersley (2013) remind us of the importance of these monuments as a remembrance of the dead.

<sup>2</sup> For the most complete list of these, see Bradley & Pevsner 1997.

<sup>3</sup> College of Arms MSS, CGY 647 and A17.

<sup>4</sup> BL Additional MS 45131.

<sup>5</sup> For example, the rather unusual inscription for the draper Richard Payne (d 1463) and his wife Elizabeth in the parish church of St Nicholas Acon (Weever 1631, 412).

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### RICH MAN, POOR MAN, BEGGAR MAN, THIEF

*Jelena Bekvalac*

'The pauper burial ground of St Bride's, London, is a bare morass, in use as a cemetery since the time of Charles II, and filled with heaps of bones', Friedrich Engels, 1842 (Miles 2010)

The conditions of cemeteries and burial grounds in London by the mid-19th century were atrocious with ever increasing usage and pressure on limited space. The changing face of London and population influxes placed stresses on the living and the dead. Research on two contrasting skeletal assemblages from the parish of St Bride's (Fig 2) — crypt burials from within St Bride's church, Fleet Street and burials excavated from St Bride's Lower Churchyard — enabled a fascinating insight into people's lives from one parish covering a period from the late 17th to mid-19th century; notably their different socio-economic backgrounds were evidenced by their type of burial.

The development of London is constant and the excavations in 1991–2 by Museum of London Archaeology Service (MoLAS) at 72–85 Farringdon Street revealed stacked burials (identified as having been buried in wooden coffins since degraded) in an area that had once formed part of the Lower Churchyard of St Bride's. When Richard Sackville the third Earl of Dorset became offended by the condition of the burial area on the south side of St Bride's, he gave land as a new place of burial, which became the Lower Churchyard. The new burial area was consecrated in 1610 by Dr Abbott, Bishop of London, and as in the hierarchy of society,



*Fig 2. Famous spire of St Bride's*

so in death, the cost of burials and ultimately the burial locations were directly linked to social and economic status (Miles 2010). The Lower Churchyard was associated with the poorest of the parish, with connections to Bridewell Workhouse and Fleet Prison. Over the years houses were built around the burial ground and proceedings from the vestry minutes record a growing number of complaints to the church, noting the putrid smells due to the decay of the dead and poor maintenance.

Damage, caused when the roof of St Bride's was hit by incendiary devices on the night of 29 December 1940, allowed the first archaeological excavation of a City of London church under the direction of Professor W Grimes. The excavations revealed crypt spaces created by Wren in his rebuild and used for interments for a relatively short period of time from c.1676 to 1853. Paying handsomely to be placed in lead coffins

in the crypt were men of prominence and their families, including the author Samuel Richardson and Samuel Holden, a Governor of the Bank of England. In the 1850s a series of parliamentary acts were passed relating to burials, one act prevented burials within the City and all crypts were sealed.

The St Bride's crypt individuals form a skeletal assemblage of great significance and particularly so because of the associated biographical information from the coffin plates. This rich source of data is an invaluable link to the individual enabling research of other documentary sources including birth and marriage records, wills, death certificates and parish records. Cause of death in the parish records included child birth, highlighting the perils of being pregnant and giving birth, cancer, apoplexy, consumption, decline and gout. Decline had the highest total number of deaths and probably denotes tuberculosis.

The recorded analysis for all individuals in St Bride's crypt and Lower Churchyard was entered onto the Wellcome Osteological Research Database (WORD) accessible through the Centre for Human Bioarchaeology website, <http://www.museumoflondon.org.uk/Collections-Research/LAARC/Centre-for-Human-Bioarchaeology/>. The standardised recording of the skeletal remains enabled the osteological data to be queried and aided the contextual interpretations with respect to the two assemblages.

From the crypts there were 227 individuals with coffin plates and 544 from the Lower Churchyard. The demographic profile for the crypt individuals was 213 adults and 14 sub-adults (<18yrs); 122 males and 105 females. With the low number of sub-adults there is a bias but overall the ages of the individuals were of older adults. Over 50% of them were over 50 years of age, many in their 80s and two ladies in their 90s. The older ages suggest that the higher social status of these individuals may have acted as a buffer to some of the impacts of the widespread diseases and challenging conditions of the time. In contrast the Lower Churchyard demography was 194 males, 125 females, 50 adults (the criteria not being present for a sex estimate) and 175 sub-adults. The average age at death was 36–45 years with 32% of the individuals not surviving to adulthood, and of the sub-

adults 85% died before the age of 5 years, highlighting the risk of infant mortality.

Pathological patterns observed in the two assemblages also reflected the differing social and economic status of the individuals. Associated with higher status are gout and Diffuse Idiopathic Skeletal Hyperostosis (DISH), both more prevalent in the crypt assemblage. Rickets (14.9%) and scurvy (6.9%), more often linked with poor social status, were more prevalent in the Lower Churchyard. The crypt assemblage revealed pathological changes related more with age; the degenerative joint disease osteoarthritis affected over 18% of the individuals. The environment and streets of London could be hazardous in many ways. Low grade non-specific infections were the most frequently observed in the crypt individuals (42.7%) and Lower Churchyard (28% males and 26% females), most often observed in the tibiae (lower leg bone), a common place to see such infections – the skin is thin, easily knocked and more prone to being grazed or cut allowing for the entry of germs. The specific infection tuberculosis, known to have indiscriminately killed vast numbers of the population, was not equally reflected in the bones, with only 2.7% in total observed with bone changes. A consequence of the rapidity of the disease can result in their being no visible indicators on the bone; thus, the absence of bone changes does not mean that it was not present.

Access to medical and dental treatment relied upon your circumstances in society. Fractures affecting the crypt individuals were predominantly upper limb, well healed and aligned, suggesting treatment was available. One male, as a consequence of blunt force trauma to his head, had the surgical procedure of trepanation. The affected cut area had smooth, remodelled edges indicating that the procedure had been successful and healed. There were multiple traumas observed in all parts of the skeleton in the Lower Churchyard, revealing a pattern and for some in type (interpersonal) reflective of the harder social environment. Most affected were males, frequently observed with healed fractures (34%), but there was greater variation in healing and alignment.

Dental health is very important and can detrimentally affect a person's well-being.

With the advent of sugar dental decay rates and loss of teeth increased; such a pattern was seen in both assemblages. An enthralling find were skilfully made solid gold upper plates (with human teeth) from three ladies in the crypt that fitted their palates perfectly. Dental work of this calibre would be expensive and only available to the rich. Adversely, the poor might resort to selling their teeth for such plates or have their dead bodies stolen and teeth sold; their social status made the people in the Lower Churchyard vulnerable in life and death.

The varied lives and indelible social impacts of these people from St Bride's parish are vividly expressed in their skeletal remains and the wealth of documentary sources. It is a privilege to be able to construct a picture of them as individuals living in their time.

'St Bride's has watched — and often participated — as English history has been made.' (Morgan 1973)

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### THE GRUESOME HISTORY OF BODYSNATCHING

Robert Stephenson

The unholy trade in human bodies for the purpose of dissection became rampant in the burial grounds of London because it was one of the foremost medical centres in the British Isles. Bodysnatching gained momentum from the middle of the 18th century as anatomy schools started to proliferate and was at its height during the first three decades of the 19th century. However this activity came to an abrupt end in 1832 with the passing of *An Act to Regulate Anatomy Schools*, which allowed surgeons to have the unclaimed bodies from workhouses, prisons and hospitals. Body theft for medical purposes did occur abroad, but bodysnatching, on the mammoth scale experienced here, was a distinctively British phenomenon.

The extraordinary thing was that while all the private and hospital anatomy schools were entirely legitimate, they had no legal means of obtaining sufficient bodies to function properly. As a result most of their subjects were lifted surreptitiously from burial grounds at the dead of night. The unscrupulous individuals prepared to desecrate fresh graves could earn twenty times the wage of an unskilled labourer, so it is not surprising that the problem escalated. In an era before chemical preservation or refrigeration bodies did not keep fresh for long and needed to be constantly replenished. This unpleasant reality restricted dissection to the cooler part of the year and the season usually ran from October to May.

The blame for this sorry situation can be laid at the feet of successive governments who were aware of the circumstances yet allowed it to prevail simply because it aided medical science. Sadly, this acquiescence ignored the heartache inflicted on the populace by the violation of countless numbers of graves, mainly those of the poor.

A key factor in the perpetuation of this menace derived from an anomalous quirk in British law, which deemed that a dead body did not constitute property. This meant that a dead body could not be owned by anyone and therefore could not be stolen. In fact the taking of a human body was not even regarded as a crime until 1788 when the Court of King's Bench made it a misdemeanour, a very minor offence, while many people thought it was one of the most heinous of crimes. Bodysnatchers were aware of these legal distinctions and left the grave clothes behind to avoid the possibility of being charged with the greater offence of felony. This was a crazy state of affairs, particularly in an age when stealing the bodies of certain animals was a capital offence.

The Murder Act, passed in 1752, decreed that the bodies of all executed murderers should be either hung in chains or dissected. The Surgeons' Company was entitled to all the bodies of executed murderers sentenced to dissection in London and Middlesex. Their hall stood on Old Bailey, adjacent to Newgate Prison, which meant they were well situated for receiving these cadavers after 1783 when executions were transferred from Tyburn to outside the prison. The surgeons

moved to Lincoln's Inn Fields to become the reconstituted Royal College of Surgeons in 1800 but nevertheless found it expedient to lease premises in this locality for the reception of bodies until 1832. Unfortunately, the number of bodies generated by this Act was inadequate.

As public awareness and condemnation increased, some parishes built watch-houses overlooking churchyards so that new graves could be guarded at night for the first two weeks, after which time the body would be useless to the anatomists. There is an extant example at St Sepulchre-without-Newgate dating to 1792. It was imperative to take precautions at St Sepulchre's because of its close proximity to both St Bartholomew's Hospital, a major purchaser of dead bodies, and the Fortune of War on Giltspur Street, a favourite hostelry of the bodysnatchers.

In the early 19th century the situation went from bad to worse and tempers started running high. Most of the burial ground officials were corrupt and this was the case at the private graveyard at Holywell Mount in Shoreditch, which was owned by two elderly women who lived next door. The man looking after this ground for them, a disreputable chap called Whackett, was publicly denounced by two disgruntled bodysnatchers and this resulted in a large band of locals descending on the graveyard and digging up the coffins, which were all found to be empty. Thus enraged, the mob broke the windows of the owners' house and was in the process of burying Whackett alive when the police arrived.

It was ugly scenes like this that prompted an undertaker named Edward Lillie Bridgman to design an impregnable iron coffin with a lid that irretrievably locked into position using spring catches. Bridgman patented his invention in April 1818 and soon went into production at what his advertisements grandly referred to as the 'Royal Patent Coffin Company's Manufactory, Goswell-Street-Road' (*sic*). His coffins were sold by weight and were not vastly expensive, with a six-foot one costing about £5 10s. However, he immediately hit a problem as sextons and vicars did not want his iron coffins in their vaults or burial grounds, fearing they would take up space almost indefinitely, as iron lasts much longer than wood. The



long-term sustainability of their pocket-sized churchyards depended on the reuse of plots after a period of time, and the prospect of their burial space inexorably diminishing year by year was not something that they wanted to contemplate, especially as burial fees constituted a large part of their income.

Faced with mounting opposition to his creation, Bridgman was delighted when a Mr Gilbert, a parishioner of St Andrew's Holborn, showed his eagerness in making a test case after his late wife, reposing within her Bridgman coffin, had been refused burial by his church. Mr Gilbert understandably considered that he had a right to bury his spouse in the parish burial ground and that it was his prerogative to place her in a desecration-proof coffin if he chose. He therefore took the case to the Consistory Court and after a long deliberation they directed that the minister should bury the coffin. Both men were jubilant, but luck was against them because the minister suddenly died and as the ruling specifically applied to him they were back to square one. By this time Mrs Gilbert had been in her coffin for three months and the pair were now faced with another long wait before the Consistory Court could issue a second ruling. Bridgman therefore took matters into his own hands and sent letters to the minister, sexton and churchwardens informing them that he intended to bury Mrs Gilbert the following day. The reply was that they would be in readiness to do so but not if the body was in iron. The place of interment was to be St Andrew's supplementary burial ground in Gray's Inn Road, (which became a park in 1885). As the cortege approached the gates on 10 June 1819 the sexton stepped forward and asked Bridgman what material the coffin was made of and on being told he had the gates slammed in their faces. In the hope that the minister might relent and bury the coffin in the churchyard, the funeral procession, accompanied by a sympathetic and rapidly expanding crowd, made its way to St Andrew's church. The minister was not there when they arrived and so the coffin was placed on top of a chest tomb. Bridgman then produced a model of his coffin and from the top of another tomb began haranguing the huge crowd. This continued until 9pm when

Bridgman was marched off to the Compter by eight constables. Eventually, after another protracted wait, the Consistory Court ruled in November that the coffin should be buried in the parish burial ground, and consequently Mrs Gilbert was finally laid to rest eight months after she died. Visitors to St Bride's church off Fleet Street have the opportunity to see an irreplaceable survival from the age of the resurrectionists, for in the crypt is the sole example of the Bridgman coffin on public display (Fig 3).



Fig 3. The Bridgman coffin at St Bride's

### FROM HERE TO ETERNITY: VICTORIAN DEVELOPMENTS IN THE DISPOSAL OF THE DEAD

*John Clarke*

The existing burial grounds of London were too few, too small, and congested with the dead of generations. The main burial grounds were the ancient churchyards where there was little sanctity or privacy in the burials taking place. The Established Church did little to alleviate these practices, since its clergymen earned fees from burials. In *Bleak House* (ch 16), Dickens condemned these areas as so-called 'consecrated ground'. At the entrance to 'Tom-all-Alone's', Lady Dedlock enquires, 'Is this place of abomination consecrated ground?' Other appalling burial places existed. Enon Chapel, off the Strand, was built as a speculation in 1823. The upper part was used for public worship whilst the

lower part, measuring 60ft by 29ft by 6ft deep, somehow accommodated an estimated 12,000 bodies.

The first wave of burial reform was the creation of a number of private cemeteries. The first of these was opened by the General Cemetery Company at Kensal Green in 1833. It is widely regarded as the most distinguished of London's cemeteries. Its Act of Incorporation (July 1832) became a model for other cemetery companies. It was followed by other private cemeteries which, in the period 1833–1845, created new burial space. They were, in chronological order:

The South Metropolitan Cemetery (West Norwood Cemetery), opened in 1836; Highgate Cemetery, opened in 1839 by the London Cemetery Company; Abney Park Cemetery, opened in 1840, the foremost Dissenters' burial ground; Brompton Cemetery, opened in 1840 by the West London & Westminster Cemetery Company; Nunhead Cemetery, opened in 1840 by the London Cemetery Company (as at Highgate); Tower Hamlets Cemetery, opened in 1841; and Victoria Park Cemetery, which opened in 1845 and closed in the 1890s.

The second phase of burial reform was caused by the 'Cholera Panic' of 1848–9. A Government scheme was promoted by the Metropolitan Interments Act (1850). It allowed the General Board of Health (GBH) to nationalise burials across London. A 'Metropolitan Burial District' (MBD) was established, within which all burials would be managed by the GBH. The GBH was allowed to close all the existing burial grounds within the MBD and force all burials into two 'National' cemeteries. The 'National Cemeteries' would be the 'Great Western Metropolitan Cemetery', a greatly enlarged Kensal Green Cemetery; and the proposed 'Great Eastern Metropolitan Cemetery', a new cemetery on the banks of the Thames between Erith and Abbey Wood. But the GBH had problems raising funds from private lenders, and the Treasury proved unwilling to guarantee the funds required to buy all the private cemetery companies. It suggested their piecemeal purchase. The GBH therefore tried first to acquire both Brompton and Nunhead cemeteries. Only the shareholders of Brompton Cemetery forced a sale, and this is why Brompton

remains operated by a Government Agency.

Meanwhile the London Necropolis Company was promoted. Under this scheme a vast city of the dead would be created in the Surrey countryside, at Brookwood, near Woking. It was beyond the MBD and was another factor in the demise of the 1850 Act. The London Necropolis was intended to be at least 1,500 acres in extent, and designed to be large enough to contain all of London's dead for ever. It was promoted by an Act of Parliament (June 1852). The cemetery did not open until November 1854, at an initial 500 acres. At this time the London Necropolis was not only London's largest cemetery, it was the biggest cemetery in the world. A distinguishing feature of the funeral arrangements was the use of the railway, with stations in the cemetery as well as in London. The Necropolis Company anticipated at least 10,000 burials a year (or about 20% of London's dead), but the cemetery was never the success it was intended to be, despite having the capacity to contain all of London's dead at this time, and despite its Act providing that each body must be buried in an individual grave space. Unfortunately for the Necropolis Company, in 1852 the Government decided on new legislation.

The rise of the Burial Board cemetery was a direct outcome of the failure of the Metropolitan Interments Act. Burial Boards were established under the 'Act to Amend the Laws Concerning the Burial of the Dead in the Metropolis' (1852). Vestry Boards were given powers to manage the burial of their own dead. This could be done in two ways: the Boards could enter contracts with cemetery companies for the burial of their dead; alternatively the Boards could take direct responsibility for the burial of the dead by opening their own cemeteries. Most Burial Boards chose this course, with the St Pancras Vestry losing little time in acquiring land for its cemetery, which opened in 1854. It was the first publicly owned cemetery in London. So successful were the Metropolitan Burial Boards that the legislation was extended to England and Wales (1853), then Scotland (1855), and finally to Ireland (1856). This legislation formed the basis of local authority control of burial provision.

The most revolutionary change to burial practice was cremation. Its origins may

be traced to Sir Henry Thompson (1820–1904). Having witnessed an experimental cremation in Italy (in 1872), he went on to found the Cremation Society in 1874. The Society acquired a site for their crematorium at Woking in Surrey. Its crematorium was of stark simplicity. Unfortunately, due to opposition from local inhabitants, the Society was unable to use the crematorium for the disposal of human remains since the Home Secretary refused permission.

A test case arose from the actions of the eccentric Dr William Price. In 1884, at the age of 83, he sired a son whom he named Jesus Christ Price. Jesus died in infancy. Price decided to cremate his son's body in a field near his home in South Wales. Outraged villagers intervened and the case was brought to trial at Cardiff Assizes. Judge Stephens delivered a judgement that cremation was not an offence provided no nuisance was caused to others. In the following March (1885), the body of Mrs Jeanette Pickersgill became the first person to be cremated at Woking.

Although the Victorians gave us the option to cremate, it had little effect on the disposal of the dead during the Victorian period. In 1900 there were 444 cremations in Britain, representing just 0.07% of the total deaths at this time. The cremation movement was elitist and intellectual. Cremation was expensive in comparison with a traditional burial, and there were hardly any crematoria. Therefore cremation could not offer any real solution to the disposal of the dead until these factors changed.

Cremation also resulted in the development of more sanitary burials, or what we would now call 'green' or 'environmentally friendly' burials. Sir Francis Seymour Haden (1818–1910) suggested that bodies should be buried in perishable coffins in cemeteries with suitable soil. These coffins would quickly disintegrate in the ground, allowing the natural dissolution of the body into its constituent elements. Haden's ideas were promoted by the Church of England Burial Reform Association which coupled this development with its drive to simplify funerals by cutting out the unnecessary paraphernalia associated with a Victorian funeral.

## THE LAST WORD

*Brent Elliott*

Obituaries have a much shorter history than epitaphs, because they cannot exist until there are periodical publications in which they can appear; so attempts to date the first obituary depend as much on the definition of a newspaper as of an obituary. It is generally agreed that the earliest English obituary was for Maurice of Nassau, Prince of Orange, in *The Continuation of our Weekly Newes*, 23 April 1625 (OS), and that the first periodical to carry obituaries consistently over a substantial period was the *Gentleman's Magazine* (1778–1826). Harriet Martineau's obituaries for the *Daily News*, over the years 1852–1875, were the first to be published in book form (*Biographical Sketches*).

The greatest group of obituary pages to appear in any English-language periodical was the set of three obituary supplements published in *The Times* for 16, 19 and 23 November 1979 — 24 pages, with 186 obituaries in total, starting with Lord Moutbatten and Airey Neave — catching up after the paper had been closed for nearly a year because of industrial action.

The tone of English obituaries changed in the late 20th century. Hugh Massingberd at the *Daily Telegraph* tried to make them both more humorous and more honest or critical about the deceased. 1986 was the watershed year, in which *The Times* and *The Independent* began to rival the *Telegraph* with a policy of saying all. Meanwhile in America a trend had developed toward the democratisation of obituaries, giving the local and lowly an equal prominence with the famous. This policy was associated most famously with Jim Nicholson, obituarist for the *Philadelphia Daily News* from 1982 to 2001, who defended it by saying: 'Ask yourself, who would you miss more if they went on a six-week vacation, the President of the United States or your trash collector? ... The mayor or the person who delivers your mail? No contest.'

Epitaphs are both a form of inscription and a literary genre, and most recent anthologies mix the two together. Both printed anthologies and online sources frequently include unverified and even fictional epitaphs as a result of copying from their predecessors rather than from





*Fig 4. Loss of lead lettering on churchyard monuments*

the stones themselves. Older anthologies of epitaphs confined themselves to church monument inscriptions, and while these are now necessary publications, in many cases the accuracy of transcription can no longer be checked because of the disappearance of the originals. Fire, bombing, re-ordering, churchyard clearance (see the many monuments in the City of London Cemetery for the mass re-interment of bodies from City churchyards, beginning in 1866 when the churchyard of St Andrew Holborn was truncated to make way for the Holborn Viaduct), and simple erosion have removed many epitaphs, and continue to do so: poor quality stone, loss of lead lettering (Fig 4), *etc* are removing many 19th- and early 20th-century epitaphs from cemeteries. If anyone should set out now to publish records of epitaphs from burial grounds, the best procedure is to publish photographs of the inscriptions, and add transcriptions only as

an aid to legibility: this is the only way to ensure that no new errors will be introduced into the texts in the course of publication.

The tradition of Latin epitaphs, while experiencing a resurgence in the mid- to late 18th century (Samuel Johnson wrote Oliver Goldsmith's epitaph in Latin, saying that 'he would never consent to disgrace the walls of Westminster Abbey with an English inscription'), was in decline by the beginning of the 19th century. Requests to pray for the dead had been replaced by assurances of the quality of the life of the deceased, in line with Addison's recommendation that 'there is nothing more glorious than to keep up an Uniformity in [one's] Actions, and to preserve the Beauty of [one's] Character to the last'. An example is Lord Broughton's epitaph in Kensal Green Cemetery: 'after a public career of success and honour found unbroken happiness in domestic repose.'

Among recent trends in epitaphs, an



American trend toward deliberately comic epitaphs (especially among comedians and comic actors) was beginning to reach England, as in the case of Stanley Unwin, whose gravestone bore the lines 'Re-unitey in the heavenly-bode / Deep joy!'. Conversely, the trend, begun in Poets' Corner at Westminster Abbey with the memorial stone to T S Eliot in 1967, toward having an inspirational quotation from an author's works, had crossed the Atlantic in the other direction and now characterised the graves of many American writers — beginning with the reburial of F Scott Fitzgerald in Rockville Union Cemetery, Maryland, in 1975, when the closing sentence of *The Great Gatsby* was inscribed on the stone. But all such flamboyant gestures were now discouraged by the Church of England; the *Churchyards Handbook* attempted to discourage nicknames, terms of endearment, and clichés. The *Handbook* itself concluded that 'Nothing could be more unfortunate than wrangling over matters of taste, at the very graveside, when the purpose of the enterprise is consolation. If mourners insist on clichés,

they must have them'. But practice was variable, and some dioceses banned terms of endearment altogether, or restricted them to one term of endearment in an epitaph. The 1980s saw several exhumations from Anglican churchyards by families who transferred their relatives to municipal cemeteries in order to have their preferred epitaphs.

As for the future of epitaphs, there has been much publicity for interactive monuments, where a pre-recorded message from the deceased could be played to graveside visitors; but the already familiar difficulties of migrating documents into new formats as technology develops would probably prevent this idea from becoming a widespread custom. In New York in the late 1980s a new genre of aerosol epitaph, usually at the scene of a death, developed; most such sprayed memorials were for gang members, and tended to be defaced by rival gangs, but there were examples of such memorials outside the gangland culture, and it would not be surprising if this trend were to reach England in the near future.

