

CHARLTON CEMETERY - Part One

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Earlier this year I was asked to provide a talk and tour of Charlton Cemetery. Due to Covid-19 these have had to be postponed. What follows is the first part of this now combined talk and tour.

History and development of cemeteries in England.

By the late 18th century the vast increase in population many churchyards had become full, unsanitary and presented health hazards. It was acknowledged that a change in burial customs was inevitable and was much needed. There was also a demand for non-religious burials. There were no rules or regulations as to how burials took place. This meant that corpses were often buried just two feet, or less, from the surface and not always marked. New cemeteries were opened but there were no set plans or standardised funding. Many were run by private companies.

The first cholera epidemic in 1831 killed 52,000 people. Following a second one in 1848 the government was forced to act. On the 31st August 1848 the first Public Health Act received Royal assent. This act laid the foundations for all subsequent public health measures and was the beginning of the legislative process that would establish public cemeteries throughout Britain. The Act created the General Board of Health with powers to appoint officials and inspectors.

The first Metropolitan Burial Act came in in 1852 followed by a series of further Acts that were consolidated in 1857 with the Burial Act. The Parish appointed Burial Boards were responsible for management and fees.

The first legal cremation was in 1885 and the first municipal crematorium opened in Hull in 1901.

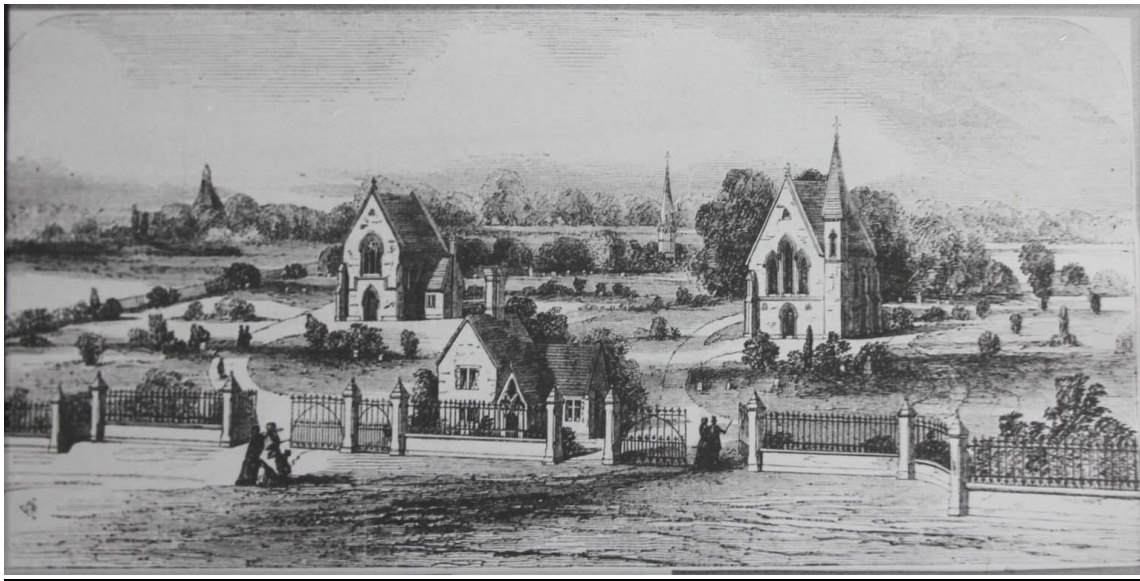
Another problem in cemeteries in the 18th and 19th centuries was grave robbers. Before the Anatomy Act in 1832 the only way for medical establishments to obtain bodies for research was from those prisoners who had been condemned to death. With the increase in the number of medical schools and developments in surgery there was an increasing need for more bodies.

Grave robbing increased.

This was very lucrative profession. A fresh body could bring in £7. Stealing a body was a misdemeanour at common law not a felony therefore punishable only by a fine or imprisonment. Stealing the clothes or the jewellery was a felony which punishable by deportation or death.

The anatomy act made it possible to donate your body for research. This along with the new controls over the cemeteries led to the end of grave robbing.

Charlton Cemetery



Charlton cemetery was founded in 1855 by the newly formed Greenwich Burial Board. It is on land that was part of the Maryon Wilson estate attached to Charlton House. An Act of Parliament gave authority for the board to place an advert in local and national newspapers. This stated that they needed to find 10-20 acres of land for use as a burial ground.

A direct approach was also made to local land owners. Sir Thomas Wilson offered just over 5 acres of waste land for £2,600. The cost of laying out the cemetery and building the lodge and chapels cost a further £5,400. Charlton House estate extended to Woolwich common. The land on offer for the cemetery was far from the house and not used. There was also a track, where Cemetery Lane is today, so access was already available.

Charlton was the first cemetery in what we now know as the Royal Borough of Greenwich, with the parishes of Greenwich and Woolwich opening in 1856, Plumsted in 1890 and Eltham much later in 1935.

In January 1857 The London Illustrated News reported that 'it was one of the first cemeteries purchased under the new formed board, but at a considerable cost, on account of its superiority advantages as regards to nearness to the parish, access and fine soil' Its Victorian layout of serpentine paths is little changed. Original walls and iron railing survive. In 1893 a further 3 acres was purchased for £3,000. This was consecrated in November that year but part of the new land was kept un-consecrated.

The cemetery has original stone-capped walls topped with railings and a tile-hung lodge, the original lodge was demolished. Planting was sparse and apart from some holm oaks, it lacks large trees but good recent planting includes monkey puzzle and larch.

It was usual for cemeteries to originally have two chapels but we are very lucky that here at Charlton they have both survived. Both chapels are built in Kentish rag stone with Bath stone dressing. The Episcopal Chapel is in Early English style of church architecture with a bell cote. A stained glass window was added in 1865. The Gothic Decorated Style non-conformist chapel is no longer in use.

A granite drinking fountain with circular bowl was re-located in the cemetery in 1979. It was presented by the Metropolitan Drinking Fountain and Cattle Trough Association in 1901 and was originally at the junction of Charlton Way and Duke Humphrey Road.

Due to its location within the Borough and the high price charged for non-parishioners Charlton Cemetery attracted the wealthy. Referred to as a 'Gentleman's Cemetery'. This resulted in many large and impressive monuments. Plots near to paths cost more than those further in. You would want to be in prime position, even in death.

The first burial, on 1st August 1855, was however that of a youth who had died as the result of being kicked by a horse in Kidbrooke.

Charlton Cemetery is our local cemetery but is also truly a historic London cemetery.

There are numerous military graves featuring all ranks from admirals, who served with Nelson, through to WW2 heroes and heroines. The War Cross faces the entrance. The cemetery contains the graves of 59 Commonwealth burials of the 1914-1918 war. There is also a special memorial located near to the entrance that bears the names of two sailors and two soldiers whose graves are not marked by headstones. There are a further 55 Commonwealth burials of the 1939-1945 war throughout the cemetery.

These burials, with ages ranging between 18 and 58 are from all services and include a nurse and a member of the home guard.

Among the thousands of graves are the rich and poor, the young and old, individuals and whole families. There are small head stones and ornate memorials All deserve a mention. Over the next parts of this postponed summer 'talk and walk' I will introduce you to a few that I have found interesting and noteworthy.