

New Buckenham Cemetery November 2021

Cemetery Records

Burial Records

1. Traditionally burial records have been held in large paper ledgers. Since New Buckenham Cemetery was opened in 1891 there have been two of these ledgers in use. Volume II is now nearly full and Volume I, which includes burials up to 1950 is stored at the County Archives. However, before that was done, the content of that first volume was committed to a spreadsheet held on the Council's computer system. Whilst the current volume of paper Burial records continues in use, its contents have also been stored in the same spreadsheet, which is updated whenever there is a new entry in the register.
2. Until 1986 there was a legal requirement to maintain paper records of burials. The Local Authorities' Cemeteries (Amendment) Order 1986 changed this to allow for records to be held on a computer. However, for a small local authority burial ground it has been more practical until quite recently to carry on with the paper-based system, until we reached the point where access to and use of a computer for managing the Council's records became the norm.
3. We therefore have a mixture of computerised and hard copy records, but it is now both legally and technically possible to dispense with the paper ledger altogether. All of the Council's computer records are now held on the Clerk's laptop and the Council's Microsoft OneDrive – a cloud based storage system which is part of the Council's Microsoft Office 365 subscription. The Spreadsheet version of the Burials register has now been combined with the other computerised records into a single Microsoft XL workbook, enabling the burial records to be easily cross referenced with the Exclusive Right of Burial records, and the schematic plans of the cemetery plots.

Exclusive Right of Burial records (ERB)

4. When a body is buried in the Cemetery there is a fee payable for the burial. However this fee only entitles the family of the deceased to bury one body in the grave plot, and place a wooden marker on the grave. To bury another body (if the original grave was dug deep enough) or to erect a stone memorial on the grave requires the payment of an additional fee to grant them the Exclusive Right of Burial in that plot. That exclusive right extends to a maximum of 99 years.
5. The ERB records are held on a separate spreadsheet, which has now been brought together with the burial records, to which they can be cross-referenced.
6. Usually, an ERB is purchased at the time of burial, and the family have a stone memorial erected six months to a year after the burial. However, it is also possible to purchase a ERB in advance. There are 17 such reserved plots in the Cemetery, although four of them were reserved in the 1920s, and one in 1955 and have, as far as we know, never been used. The other eleven plots have been reserved since 1990.
7. (For the avoidance of doubt, throughout this report, when the term "reserved" is used it means a plot that is currently vacant, but for which someone has purchased in advance an exclusive right of burial (ERB). A "vacant" plot is a numbered plot on the plan which is currently empty and for which no ERB has been purchased.)
8. The practical purposes of the ERB register are twofold:

- a. Establishing whether the erection of a memorial or a second burial (or interment of ashes) can be carried out at the grave, and if so whether the appropriate fee has already been paid.
- b. Providing a record of reserved plots which have not yet been brought into use, to distinguish them from the few remaining vacant plots.

Maps of the Cemetery

- 9. The final set of spreadsheet records is two schematic plans of the Old and New parts of the cemetery, showing the plots in relation to each other and the boundaries and paths in the cemetery. Locating individual graves is not always easy as it relies on being able to find some legible gravestones in order to orientate, but the plan does seem to be accurate. These were drawn up by a previous clerk and have been imported into the master Excel workbook, so that the number on the plot can be cross referenced with the burial records and the ERB records.

New Burials

Plot availability

- 10. We have had a total of 13 burials over the last five years (2017-21) which compares with 17 over the previous 11 years. This does, however include interment of ashes in existing graves (5) and coffin burials in reopened graves (3), leaving 5 new coffin burials – averaging one a year.
- 11. A cursory glance at the records would suggest we have a few years in hand. However, space for new burials is getting low. In theory there are 31 vacant plots. However, these comprise:
 - a. 17 in the Old Ground. These are mixed in with older graves and it would be difficult to determine whether these graves can be used without proper investigation, including: measuring to ensure the plot is wide enough; and “rodding” by a professional grave digger to establish whether the grave has already been used.
 - b. 14 in the New Ground, but including:
 - i. 5 mixed in with the earliest graves in the new section of the Cemetery (which started to be used in 1935), giving us the same problems as with the Old Ground vacant plots
 - ii. 3 which (with the advice of a grave digger) have been marked “do not use” as they are too narrow and/or possibly already occupied.
 - iii. Two at the end nearest the allotments which are marked “do not use”, as the two adjacent reserved plots are in the vehicular access point next to the allotments where the gravediggers need to get their mechanical diggers to graves at that end of the cemetery. It may be necessary to move these two reserved plots, unless we decide to close the vehicular entrance.
 - iv. Two which are between other plots and therefore may not be wide enough.
 - v. Two which are under a large tree and may not provide sufficient depth of soil to allow for a 6ft grave.
- 12. I therefore cannot with absolute confidence say that we have a vacant plot available for a new burial if I, or my successor, receive a request for one from a funeral director.

Grave Digging and the disappearing plots

- 13. The issues with many of the 14 “vacant” plots in the New Ground have only come to light recently. The last new burial earlier this year had to be rapidly relocated when the gravedigger pointed out that the plot I had allocated was probably already occupied

(notwithstanding our records) and that the one next to it was therefore also too narrow. I have therefore put a health warning on all of the vacant plots.

14. A major source of this problem is differing gravedigging practices. Grave digging now is done with small mechanical excavators rather than picks and shovels. Apparently some grave diggers have too large a bucket on the end of the digger, (rather than selecting a smaller bucket appropriate to the size of hole), and end up digging too wide a grave for the coffin. This has the effect over time of moving each new grave away from its neighbour with the result that further along the row, there is insufficient space for a grave marked on the plan which should in theory fit, but in practice won't.
15. The other note of caution I would sound is that some of the records from the last 20 years are patchy. I understand a previous clerk several years ago left some rather minimal records from his tenure. My predecessor has clearly done a thorough job of trying to fill in the gaps from that period in the hard copy burials register based on the incomplete information available to her. They lack burial dates in many cases, and we cannot, therefore, exclude the possibility that some of the vacant plots have already been used, but the burial has not been recorded, or has been recorded in the wrong place.

Legal Issues - Council Powers

16. The Parish Council has the power to provide a public Cemetery. It does not have a **duty** to do so. When the Cemetery is full the Council **could** acquire additional land for burials. It **could** just close the Cemetery to new burials, except in a previously reserved plot. It **could** adopt a halfway house of offering only the interment of ashes in small, urn sized plots in a designated part of the cemetery.

Next Steps

17. The point at which the Council must make that decision may actually be sooner than I previously thought. We do now have a robust set of cemetery records, a copy of which I have sent to Councillors. However these records alone cannot determine whether and where the vacant plots are.
18. For this we would need a professional survey of the vacant and reserved plots to establish:
 - a. Whether the Reserved plots are suitable in the position they have been allocated on the plan, including "rodding" to establish they are indeed empty. When this is established, they need to be clearly marked on the ground for future reference.
 - b. Whether the remaining vacant plots are suitable in the positions they have been allocated on the plan, again including rodding where appropriate. These should also be marked on the ground.
19. In the meantime, I would **recommend** as follows:
 - a. A moratorium on burials in new plots in the cemetery. The Clerk should be instructed to refuse any requests for new burials except for:
 - i. Burials in reopened graves
 - ii. Interment of ashes in an existing grave.
 - b. A moratorium on the reservation of grave plots.

Trevor Wenman

Clerk to the Council

2nd November 2021