

# RESEARCH GUIDE

## Cemetery Records

### Research Guide 5: Cemetery Records

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#### Introduction

Before the mid-19th century most burials in London took place in churchyards and from the mid-16th century were recorded in parish registers. Some hospitals and other institutions had their own burial grounds. From the time of the Black Death special burial grounds outside the City walls were provided for people who died from the periodic epidemics of plague which afflicted London. Land to the north of the Artillery Ground known as Bunhill Fields was set aside in 1665 as a plague burial ground, but was not used for this purpose. It then became a burial ground for nonconformists. After 1690 many nonconformist meeting houses and chapels were established in London some of which had their own burial grounds.

By the late 18th century the London churchyards were becoming overcrowded. New cemeteries were established as private speculations generally offering slightly lower charges for burials than the churchyards. Some of these burial grounds were originally connected to chapels adjoining them, but were subsequently bought by private individuals. By 1835 there were at least fourteen such burial grounds in London including Spa Fields, Clerkenwell, opposite London Metropolitan Archives (LMA) where about 80,000 people were buried. An enquiry in 1843 discovered that about 40 burials were taking place each day. The bodies were exhumed at night and burned in a bone house to make space for more burials. Similar conditions existed at Globe Fields Burial Ground, Mile End.

As an alternative to the existing insanitary and insalubrious burial grounds between 1832 and 1841 Parliament authorised the establishment of seven large commercial cemeteries in the vicinity of London. These were Kensal Green, West Norwood, Highgate, Nunhead, Abney Park, Brompton and the City of London and Tower Hamlets Cemeteries.

During the 1850s the overcrowded churchyards and burial grounds of inner London were closed by a series of Acts of Parliament. Many burial registers for parish churches in inner London cease by 1855 or 1856. Those which continue usually only contain a few entries relating to burials in existing graves or special interments in the church.

The 1852 Metropolitan Burials Act enabled local burial boards elected by parish vestries to provide

places of burial. Some parishes established municipal cemeteries often outside London. The parishes of Islington, St Pancras, and St Marylebone all opened cemeteries at Finchley between 1854 and 1855. Other parishes did not have their own burial grounds, but made agreements with one of the cemetery companies for the burial of their parishioners. The Great Northern Cemetery Company leased two and a half acres of their cemetery to the parish of St George the Martyr, Queen Square, Holborn in 1855. The vast Brookwood Cemetery near Woking was opened in 1854 by the London Necropolis Company with a direct rail link to its own station near Waterloo. The cemetery company entered into contracts with many local authorities in London for the burial of their poor while the parishes of St Anne, Soho and St Margaret and St John, Westminster bought areas within Brookwood Cemetery.

### **Main cemetery records held at LMA**

LMA holds the records of the following cemeteries:

- Bunhill Fields (CLC/271)
- New Bunhill Fields, Islington (B/NBF)
- The City of London Cemetery, Little Ilford (CLA/052)
- The City of London and Tower Hamlets Cemetery (CTHC)

### **Bunhill Fields (CLC/271)**

In the mid 17th century the City of London decided to make a new burial ground north of the Artillery Ground in the Manor of Finsbury for the burial of plague victims. A field known as Bunhill was enclosed by a brick wall and gates in 1665-1666, but appears not to have been used for that purpose. It was then leased to John Tyndall who maintained it as a private burial ground which became much used by nonconformists in preference to burial in churchyards according to the rites of the Church of England. Many eminent nonconformists were buried here including John Bunyan, Daniel Defoe, Susannah Wesley, and William Blake. Other land to the north was added to the original burial ground.

Bunhill Fields was closed to further burials in 1854. By an Act of Parliament of 1867 the City of London Corporation undertook the preservation and maintenance of the burial ground as a public open space. The City of London improved the site laying out paths, undertaking tree planting and carrying out work to the tombs including re-cutting and recording inscriptions. In the 1960s a sensitively designed public garden by one of the foremost landscape architects of the period, Peter Shepherd, was added to the site. The southern area remained dominated by the memorials, fenced off from public access by metal railings, while to the north a new open lawn enclosed by shrub planting was created to complement the memorial landscape. The burial ground now contains 2,333 monuments, mostly simple headstones (of which there are 1,920) arranged in a grid formation. However monuments have been moved and the chances of locating a particular grave now are very low.

### **Records**

The burial registers for Bunhill Fields, covering 1713-1854, are held at [The National Archives](#). The registers can be searched online on [Ancestry](#) and [BMDRegisters](#).

The following records previously held by Guildhall Library are now available at LMA:

Interment books 1789-1854 (CLC/271/MS01092/1-18) are arranged in date order of interment and give names, ages and dates of burial of deceased, places from which bodies were brought and undertakers' names and addresses. They also give the plot location of the grave.

There is a list, arranged by site of grave, of those persons whose gravestone inscription survived in 1869 (CLC/271/MS00897/1-7 with index to surnames in CLC/271/MS00897/8). A plan of the burial ground in 1869 showing sites of inscription visible at that time is also available (CLC/271/MS00897/9).

The interment order books (CLC/271/MS01092/1-18), and the list and index of gravestone inscriptions (CLC/271/MS00897/1-8) are available on microfilm. A microfiche index to the interment order books is available from staff at the Information Desk.

A set of copies of location and section plans of Bunhill Fields prepared in June 1973 by the City Architect (CLC/271/MS38987) are in the map drawers in the Information Area.

Plans and administrative records relating to Bunhill Fields form part of the archives of the City of London Corporation held by LMA.

### **New Bunhill Fields, Islington (B/NBF)**

Upper Street Independent Chapel, built in 1788, had attached to it a small graveyard which in 1817 was extended by the Reverend Evan Jones; since the ground was used for nonconformist burials it became known as New or Little Bunhill Fields, Church Street, Islington. By the early 1850s the burial ground was maintained by a private company. It was closed after the passing of the 1852 Burial Act. By 1895 the site had been divided, part being used as a yard by the General Post Office and part as builders' yards. The site was redeveloped in 1996-1997 when the burials were removed to Islington Cemetery, Trent Park.

### **Records**

Burial registers of New Bunhill Fields, Islington 1831-1853 (B/NBF/001-005 microfilms X099/297, X103/074). Burial fee registers 1824-1853 (B/NBF/006-007).

### **The City of London Cemetery, Little Ilford (CLA/052)**

Under the terms of the Metropolitan Burials Act of 1852, the Commissioners of Sewers of the City of London were appointed the Burial Board for parishes in the City and its liberties. On the advice of the Chief Medical Officer, the Board ruled that interments should cease within the City. To answer the problem of burials for the City of London, the Corporation purchased 90 acres of farm land at Little Ilford in 1854. The farm was demolished and a large fishpond drained (this now forms the site of the Catacomb Valley). The cemetery was designed by Colonel William Haywood as Engineer and Surveyor to the Commissioners of Sewers and landscaped by Robert Davidson. The first burial at the City of London Cemetery took place in June 1856. However, the ground was not consecrated until November 1857. A crematorium was opened in October 1904 and the first cremation took place in March 1905. It was the second crematorium in London and was designed by D J Ross, Engineer to Commissioners of Sewers and later City Engineer, 1894 - 1905. A new crematorium was built in 1971. In 1937 a garden of rest was constructed followed by a series of memorial gardens. There were also plans to build a railway siding and special station linked to Eastern Counties Railway but these came to nothing. The cemetery, which is the largest municipal cemetery in Europe, contains reinterments from demolished City churches.

### **Records - Burial registers**

LMA has two duplicate burial registers for 1856 -1859 (CLA/052/BC/01/001-002) as well as transcripts of the burial registers of the City of London Cemetery, Little Ilford, Essex, 1856 -1915, which are available for consultation on microfilm (DL/A/E/MS10445/1-61). The burial registers are not indexed.

The original burial registers 1856 to date remain at the City of London Cemetery. Burial registers dated from 24 June 1856 to 7 October 1955 have been digitised and made available online at [www.col-burialregisters.uk](http://www.col-burialregisters.uk). For records after October 1955, you will need to contact the City of London Corporation's Bereavement Services Team: [cemetery@cityoflondon.gov.uk](mailto:cemetery@cityoflondon.gov.uk)

### **Other records of burials and cremations**

Registers of Private (Purchased) Graves 1856 -1949 (each volume is indexed) (CLA/052/BC/02/001-023). Some people purchased graves as they were needed, and in these cases, the date of burial corresponds fairly closely with the date of purchase of the grave. However, other people purchased a grave decades before they died, so the date of burial is not always enough to enable the registers to be searched. It is often useful to refer to the burial registers first, to obtain the grave number and grant number, which can then be used to locate the relevant Register of Private (Purchased) Graves. These registers record who purchased each grave and when, who was interred in it (name, age and date of burial, for each person buried in that particular grave), and the numbers of the grave, grave grant square, plot and burial register entry.

Registers of Monuments 1870 - 1948 (CLA/052/BC/03/001-012), which are arranged in grave number order, and give the name of the purchaser of the grave, together with very brief details of memorial stones. They do not note any monumental inscriptions.

Cremation Registers 1905 -1943 (CLA/052/BC/04/001-004). Later registers remain at the Cemetery.

Registers of Niches and of Grants of Niches in the Columbarium 1930 - 1948 for cremation urns interred at the Columbarium at the Cemetery (CLA/052/BC/05/001).

### **Administrative records**

The Commissioners of Sewers managed the cemetery from the date the site was purchased in 1854 until their abolition in 1898. After this it was directly managed by the City of London Corporation. The Sanitary Committee, renamed the Public Health Committee in 1934, was responsible for the cemetery. The Port and City of London Health Committee replaced the Public Health Committee in 1957 and is now the Port Health and Environmental Services Committee. Minutes, reports and correspondence of all these committees relating to the running of the City of London Cemetery are held by LMA. Arrangements made for civilian war deaths during the Second World War can be found in Public Health Committee Files Nos. 24 and 26 (COL/CC/PBC/03/24 & 26).

We also hold financial records relating to the cemetery, cremation and minister's fees 1856 - 1997 including an inventory of the plant, fixtures, fittings, office furniture, stores and vehicles at the cemetery 1960 and cemetery ledgers, 1856 - 1931 as well as general administrative records such as contracts, regulations and reports relating to the establishment of the cemetery, 1853 - 1873 and crematorium 1899 - 1905. Histories, leaflets, guides with tables of charges 1858 - 1936 have also been deposited at LMA.

The extensive series of plans includes the site at Little Ilford 1853 - 1856; contract plans for the cemetery; catacombs and chapels 1854 - 1876; later plans of extensions to the cemetery and alterations to the chapel; crematorium 1903 - 1905 and new crematorium, 1967 and lodges, houses, mausoleums, memorial and memorial gardens. A portfolio of Haywood's earliest designs and ideas

for cemetery buildings, mostly undated but believed to be 1853 to 1854 is also available. We have photographs of the cemetery from c1929 to 1997 showing the grounds, monuments and the interior of chapels.

### **The City of London and Tower Hamlets Cemetery (CTHC)**

The City of London and Tower Hamlets Cemetery Company, one of the earliest such companies in London, was enabled by an Act of 1841 (4 and 5 Vict c.63) to acquire land for the burial of the dead in the parishes of St Dunstan, Stepney, and St Leonard, Bromley-by-Bow. The cemetery opened in Southern Grove, Mile End, later that year. It was very popular, particularly with people from the East End, but in the twentieth century, and more so after 1945, the cemetery suffered from problems of over-crowding and neglect.

In 1966 it was purchased by the Greater London Council under the GLC (General Powers) Act of that year. The intention was to create an 'open space' to which the public had access and so the ground was closed for burials in 1966 and the relevant parts of the cemetery freed from the effects of consecration. Some clearing and conversion was undertaken but the work was slow and hampered by financial stringencies. In 1986 the London Borough of Tower Hamlets became responsible for the Cemetery Park.

Members of the public may visit the Cemetery Park to search for graves. If you need help locating a grave, please contact the Heritage Volunteers at The Friends of Tower Hamlets Cemetery Park by email ([heritage@fothcp.org](mailto:heritage@fothcp.org)) or phone (020 8983 1277) before your visit. For more information, please see The Friends of Tower Hamlets Cemetery Park's website: [www.fothcp.org/find-a-grave](http://www.fothcp.org/find-a-grave).

### **Burials**

The cemetery was laid out in a series of squares of equal size (except where the boundaries of the cemetery rendered the square smaller). Each square contained a number of graves or burial plots. Squares might contain both private and public graves (see below). The squares are not marked on the ground in the cemetery but the list of cemetery records in LMA contains several maps showing the order of the squares. The records include plans of each square showing the location of the private graves (see below). The numbers of the graves rarely run sequentially, that is in numerical order: adjacent numbers, for example 343 and 344, are unlikely to be next to each other and may not even be in the same square.

All burials took place in either consecrated or unconsecrated ground. Those buried in consecrated ground would have been members of the Church of England. Those buried in unconsecrated ground would have been Christians of other denominations, those of other faiths and those of none.

Burials were also either in public graves or in private graves. Private graves were those bought from the company by individuals who were thus able to say who should be buried in them (usually themselves and close members of their family). The size and depth of the plot determined the number of people buried in the grave. Public graves were for those who could or would not buy a plot and in them were buried those whom the company chose.

### **Records**

The records of the City of London and Tower Hamlets Cemetery Company have been deposited in LMA. The paper copy of the list can be found amongst the records of the Greater London Council, which from 1966 to 1986 was responsible for the cemetery, include administrative records relating to the cemetery during that period. Documents relating to the consecration of portions of the

cemetery are held among the records of the Diocese of London. For information about the running of the cemetery since 1986 searchers should contact Tower Hamlets Local History Library and Archives: <http://www.ideastore.co.uk/local-history>

Records held at LMA may be summarised as follows:

- Burial registers (consecrated ground) 1841-1966
- Burial registers (unconsecrated ground) 1841-1959
- Day books (consecrated and unconsecrated ground) 1854-1901
- Fee books 1902-1924
- Fee books ('general registers') 1944-1966
- Registers of private graves 1841-1966
- Registers of public graves 1900-1965
- Index to purchasers of private graves 1841-1941
- Register of private grave transfers 1938-1966
- Correspondence about private graves 19th-20th centuries
- Accounts 1922-1966
- Plans 1840s-[1986]
- Deeds and legal papers 1841-1942
- Administrative records before 1966-1986.

## Using the Records

First find the entry in the burial register. If you believe the person you seek to have been Church of England begin with the burials in consecrated ground; if not, begin with burials in unconsecrated ground. If the entry is not found in the expected register (allowing up to 21 days after the date of death), always check the other series.

Most of the burial registers are like Anglican burial registers of this date. They give the name of the deceased, abode, age, when and by whom buried.

You may want to find out who else was buried in that plot or to locate the plot on the ground. A grave can only be found on the ground if it was a private one. Only private graves contain solely members of the same family. In either case you will need to find the grave number. Grave numbers, and square numbers where relevant (see below), are almost always found in the following series for the following dates:

Consecrated ground:

- burial registers: 1841-1850, 1951-1966
- day books: 1854-1901
- fee books: 1902-1966
- general registers

Unconsecrated ground:

- burial registers: 1841-1850, 1901-1959
- day books: 1854-1869, 1871-1901
- fee books: 1902-1966
- general registers

As a general rule numbers of private graves are given as a simple number (1-13,077) with a square (often 'sq') number: numbers of public graves consist of a number with a letter.

When you have the private grave number, to find who else was buried in that grave and when, you can consult the registers of private graves which are arranged by grave number. If you wish to locate the plot on the ground, you will need to note the square number, find the grave on the square plans noting how it lies in relation to paths, boundary walls, other plots and identifying features, and check the plans of the lay-out of the cemetery to find where the square is in relation to other squares and again identifying features in the cemetery.

If, however, you find that the person you seek was in a public grave, then little more information is available. To find out who else was buried there would entail a search through all the registers or day and fee books looking for the grave number, except for the periods 1900-1965 and 1944-1965 when the registers of public graves and the general registers list those buried by grave number. To locate the plot on the ground is thought to be impossible as square numbers are seldom given and no plans of squares showing public graves are known to exist.

You may believe that a person or family in whom you are interested owned a private grave but you do not know who is buried in it. In that case consult the index of purchasers of private graves 1841-1941. Bear in mind that the grave may have been purchased some years before the first burial in it took place. On the other hand, a grave purchased at someone's death may appear to have been purchased at a later date since purchases were not registered by the company until its next meeting.

The only other indexes surviving are to the 'general registers' (fee books) 1944-1966 which are arranged in date order but each of which has an index to those buried in private graves.

An index to the burial registers 1841-1853 has been compiled by J Hanson and M Stevens and published on microfiche as City of London/Tower Hamlets Cemetery Burial Index 1841-1853 (Three Trees Microfiche Series, 1999). A copy is available at LMA (P60.531 HAN).

No contemporary register of monumental inscriptions exists and even those series such as day books and fee books which may note payments for kerb - or head-stones do not give details of any inscriptions. It is believed that registers detailing the condition of graves and including legible inscriptions compiled by the GLC from 1974 are in the possession of the London Borough of Tower Hamlets.

There are files of correspondence about the purchase and transfer of private graves in the records of the company and also among the records of the London Residuary Body (LRB/PS/T/89-90). Please search our catalogue for references to owners of graves in the lists of the London Residuary Body files.

#### **Other cemetery records at LMA**

We also hold the following records:

All Souls Cemetery, Kensal Green: Bishops' Transcripts, 1833-1872 (DL/T/041/001-040) - Available on Ancestry

All Souls Cemetery, Kensal Green: Burial Registers, 1847-1850 (B/GC/010-011)

Highgate Cemetery: Bishops' Transcripts, 1839-1871 (DL/T/063/001-028) - Available on Ancestry

Nunhead Cemetery: Bishops' Transcripts, 1842-1871 (DW/T/0515-0539) - Available on Ancestry

Norwood Cemetery: Bishops' Transcripts, 1838-1918 (DW/T/0899-0969) - Available on Ancestry

Spanish and Portuguese Jews Congregation, Velho (Old) and Novo (New) Cemeteries: Burial Registers, 1657-1935 (LMA/4521/A/02/04/001-006) - Available only by written permission of the depositor

Victoria Park Cemetery (later known as Meath Gardens): lists of names and dates of death taken from tombstones, 1893 (O/190/001) - Copy available in the map drawers at LMA

Victoria Park Cemetery (later known as Meath Gardens): plan showing the position of graves in 1891 (O/190/002) - Copy available in the map drawers at LMA

Whitechapel Quaker Burial Ground: interment order book, 1777-1781 (CLC/196/MS22364) - Please use microfilm

Survey of burial grounds undertaken by Mrs Basil Holmes on behalf of the Parks Committee of the London County Council, 1895: return (LCC/PUB/01/017/0260) and maps (LCC/CL/PK/03/001-056)

### **Indexes and Transcripts in the LMA Library**

All Souls Catholic Cemetery, Kensal Green: transcripts of burial registers, 1845-1858 published on microfiche by the London and North Middlesex Family History Society (P25.5 LON).

City of London Golden Lane Burial Ground: index to the burial registers 1833-1853 compiled by John Hanson and Monnica Stevens

St Mary's Catholic Cemetery, Kensal Green: transcripts of burial registers, 1858-1876 published on microfiche by the London and North Middlesex Family History Society (P25.5 LON).

Spanish and Portuguese Jews Congregation - Novo (New) Cemetery: transcripts of burial registers, 1733-1918, transcribed and edited by Miriam Rodrigues-Pereira and Chloe Loewe with assistance from Raphael Loewe and David Nunes Vaz (60.58 SPA).

### **Records held elsewhere**

Further information about the location of burial records for particular cemeteries in London can be found in 'Greater London Cemeteries and Crematoria', originally compiled by Patricia S Wolfson and revised by Cliff Webb (Society of Genealogists, 1982, Reprinted 2005). A copy of this publication is kept behind the staff desk in the Information Area at London Metropolitan Archives.

Many of the burial registers held at The National Archives have been digitised and made available on [Ancestry](#) and [BMDRegisters](#). This includes the burial registers of Bethnal Green Protestant Dissenters Burying Ground, Gibraltar Row (1793 -1826), City of London or Golden Lane Burial Ground (1833 -1853), St Thomas Square Cemetery, Hackney (1837-1876), South London Burial Ground, East Street, Walworth (1819 -1837), Spa Fields (1778-1849), Victoria Park Cemetery (1853 -1876) and Bunhill Fields (1713-1854)

Many burial and cremation records for the London area can now be searched and viewed (for a fee) on [Deceased Online](#). This includes burials at Kensal Cemetery (from 1833), Manor Park Cemetery, Forest Gate (from 1874) and Brompton Cemetery, as well as military burials at Greenwich Royal Hospital (1844-1964) and the Royal Garrison Church of St George, Woolwich (1937-1964).