

Cowgate Cemetery

A LIVING CHURCHYARD

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Background

Nestling at the foot of Dover's Western Heights and hidden from the town behind Albany Place lies Cowgate Cemetery, formerly known as St. Mary's New Burial Ground. It was consecrated by the Archbishop of Canterbury in 1835 and was an extension to the parish churchyard now covered by York Street. Donated to the church by William Mowll with the layout designed by Stephen Geary who also designed Highgate Cemetery, London the 2.3 acres include a terrace of family vaults belonging to many prominent Dover families. These are along the back wall of the cemetery and have been recently

repaired and renovated by Dover District Council. One of the central vaults is the Mowll family vault.

The gravestones provide a rich resource of family and social history in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and Cowgate contains the headstones of many famous local figures. Probably the most prominent monument in Cowgate is the obelisk erected by the Cinque Ports Volunteer Artillery to mark the grave of Sergeant John Monger who was killed along with Lieutenant Thompson when a gun burst at Archcliffe Fort in 1860. Other stones commemorate victims of Goodwin Sands shipwrecks, people who have



Cowgate Cemetery - a site for memorial and wildlife



drowned in the harbour or died aboard ships returning from overseas and the agent of the Belgium Government who was hit by a train at the Harbour station.

Cowgate Cemetery provides an important historical record of Dover's past and the many characters who have shaped the past two centuries. However the importance of the cemetery extends beyond being just an historical source and place of memorial. Cowgate is a living churchyard supporting a diverse community of wildlife including many species of national importance.

The White Cliffs Countryside Project and Cowgate Cemetery

The White Cliffs Countryside Project (WCCP) has been involved in working in Cowgate since the project was launched in 1989. Cowgate cemetery is peripheral to the Western Heights Local Nature Reserve and contains many

plant species indicative of chalk grassland habitat, including marjoram, black knapweed, wild carrot, cinquefoil, bird's-foot-trefoil and common spotted and pyramidal orchids. These species are nationally rare although they are increasing in number around Dover since the WCCP began managing sites like the Western Heights and Whinless Down.

The site is also rich in other wildlife including many butterfly species such as the striking Holly Blue which can be seen flitting around the bay and holly trees which were planted in the 1950's to hide the cemetery from the town. Red Admiral, Peacock and Painted Lady are 'garden' species which are regularly seen in the cemetery along with the brown and beige spotted Speckled Wood. Cowgate is also rich in bird life, with spring arrivals such as chiffchaff and willow warbler being frequent visitors.

12 Flocks of long tailed tits with their distinctive shape and 'pinging' calls can be observed mixing with blue and great tits flitting between the ash trees searching for insects. Pheasants have nested two years running in the cemetery. The trees and vaults at the rear are home to several species of bat including some that are nationally rare and the headstones provide cover for reptiles and amphibians.

In 1990 WCCP discovered a small population of garden dormouse living in the wall where the chapel and sexton's house once stood. These are a Mediterranean species which extends as far north in Europe as Cap Gris Nez. They have not been known in Britain since Roman times when they were eaten as a delicacy. Skulls from the species have been found during archaeological digs on Roman sites in York. How they came to be in Cowgate is a mystery but perhaps they came over on the ferry like our other tourists!

When the WCCP first became involved in Cowgate four management objectives were identified. These were:

1. To maintain a managed appearance to the cemetery (particularly around the entrance)
2. To enhance and improve the wildlife status of the site.
3. To respect the importance of the site as a cemetery.
4. To improve the cemetery as a recreational and amenity resource.

We have tried to work to these objectives over the past ten years and manage the cemetery as a place for memorial and for wildlife.

The grassland is treated during the summer months (the period of maximum growth) by cutting and then raking off the cuttings. This mimics the effects of the grazing on the slopes of the Western Heights, reducing the nutrients entering the topsoil and favouring the rare chalk plant species, which thrive in low nutrient

conditions. This also benefits people, as the rank vegetation around the stones and paths are cleared and the cemetery is made more accessible.

All the work carried out in Cowgate is by volunteers. This is because the project does not have the resources to employ contractors to work on the site and staff commitments on the other sites we care for around Dover do not allow us time to work in the cemetery. WCCP officers organise one work day a month there with our volunteers working on the site. During the summer this involves grass cutting and path clearing, whilst the winter work is aimed at opening the area up by removing or controlling the scrub and trees. We have recently cleared much of the area around Sgt. Mongers' memorial which was becoming covered by scrub and will continue clearing that area this winter. We are now being supported in our work in Cowgate by a group of volunteers from Dover College who are working two hours a week after school.

The WCCP are trying to secure funding to produce and install an interpretation panel for the entrance to the cemetery to explain the rich social, cultural and natural history of Cowgate and to ask people to respect the site.

Unfortunately, even with the commitment from our volunteers and Dover College, we still need more help to maintain and improve the area. It would be wonderful to establish a regular group of volunteers who could work with WCCP to care for the Cemetery.

It is a wonderful site and deserves our help in joining together to care for it. Anybody who is interested in helping or wants more details about the WCCP can contact Paul Hadaway or Melanie Wrigley at the WCCP on 01304 241806 or come along on our next volunteer days on Tuesday 12th December or Friday 26th January 2001, meeting at Albany Place car park at 10.10am.