

Social History on a Hillside

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The unrelenting task of recording and mapping gravestones at Cowgate Cemetery is nearing completion and a final report should be ready later in the year. In the meantime, the following article by Miss Elizabeth de Bourbel on the history of the cemetery may be of interest. It was written in the 1980s when she herself had started the Herculean task of recording gravestones. Thanks to her efforts and those of her helpers, some 462 headstones were recorded and matched with their official grave numbers, whilst the Society has now transcribed an additional 300 or more.

Lesley Gordon.

"Dover was growing in importance as a harbour in 1834 when Mr. William Mowll, of a family prominent in local civic affairs, donated 2¼ acres of pastureland on the edge of the town for a burial ground. St Mary's parish churchyard, on a site today traversed by York Street dual carriageway, would soon be inadequate to fulfill the ultimate requirement of an increasing population. The extension upon the lower slopes of Western Heights was therefore consecrated as St Mary's New Burial Ground and the first interment took place in April 1837.

Situated at the top of a short, steep lane, Cowgate Hill, a quarter-mile or so from the parish church, the New Burial Ground was completed with a mortuary chapel and a lodge for the sexton. The last occupant of the lodge before closure of the cemetery in the 1950s, William Petchey, had been born there, successor to his father and grandfather. The latter is recorded on his iron headstone as having buried over four thousand people (more than half the total entered in the Burial Register) between 1857 and 1881.

The site is rectangular, enclosed on three sides by a high gravestone wall. Its

upper boundary, the fourth side, consists of a row of vaults excavated in the chalk hillside. So steep is the terrain that the wall of the lower boundary presents a drop of some six feet to the lane, which runs along the rear of the Sarah Gorely Almshouses built in 1877. At the junction of this lane and Cowgate Hill, tall double gates adorn the entrance for hearses. A small gate at the other corner of the lower boundary wall afforded access for handcarts or biers pushed up a path from Snargate Street and the populous dockside district.

No plan or original design for the New Burial Ground exists. Division of the rectangle into lettered or numbered plots has become a matter of deduction. The row of vaults, now obscured by untidy vegetation, has features in common with the terraces or catacombs of London's famous Highgate Cemetery designed by the architect Stephen Geary (1797-1854). The pathway up the centre is aligned on the Mowll family vault. Near the intersection of this central and the main lateral pathway an obelisk serves to mark the nodal point of the layout.



The gates at the entrance to Cowgate Cemetery

The excavated vaults, with tiny 'front gardens', along the upper boundary were the last resting place of prominent Dover families. Aged 46 in 1839, Mr. Mowll was the first of his clan to be laid to rest in a vault where six generations are since commemorated. One freestanding tablet adjacent to the entrance carries the name of Howard West Kilvington Mowll (1890-1958); Archbishop of Sydney and Primate of Australia. Further along the terrace, two adjoining vaults entomb members of the Finnis family. When he died, aged 71 in 1889, Steriker Finnis was Deputy Lieutenant of Kent, a Justice of the Peace and chairman of the governing body of Dover College, where his professional stature is confirmed by a Latin memorial inscription in the chapel.

The vault of the Knocker family - three of whose members were Town

Clerks continuously between 1860 and 1935 - was built of 4,000 stock bricks in 1853; and a ground fee of ten guineas paid to St Mary's parish. No record otherwise exists as to the size of these vaults at the upper boundary or elsewhere in the New Burial Ground.

Graves dug in the numbered plots of the rectangle, separated by pathways, varied widely in depth and dimension. The memorials above them, their script sometimes in fine Georgian lettering, represent the handiwork of stonemasons who took pride in their craft, and the bereaved who commissioned such work in loving memory, thought to immortalise a name.

Immortality was not to be the reward for many who were borne to this hillside site for burial. A grassed-over corner, some twenty yards square, was reserved for casualties of the sea washed ashore without

identification, navvies killed by falls of chalk, paupers from the Dover Union, suicides and other unfortunates. The navvies had a role to play in local history. They worked on the construction of the London, Chatham and Dover Railway along the foot of the cliffs. A few have named graves; "... one of 13 men blown up at the cave near Abbott's Cliff... ", reads a small headstone.

Casualties of the sea were more numerous: Cinque Ports pilots, customs officers off revenue cruisers, a lifeboat man, foreign seamen and ill-fated voyagers like Mrs Elizabeth Marshall, washed ashore in 1843 from the shipwreck of an East Indiaman. Some succumbed to the hazards of travel. John-Claude Nattes, architect of Stowe and drawing-master to George III's daughters, died in 1839 at the

'City of London' Inn, a staging hostelry where travellers awaited, or recovered from, sea passage between Dover and the continent of Europe. Nearby, in Plot 4, a stretch above the chapel used for the earliest burials, lies Mrs Mary Sloper under a well-faceted headstone which includes the information that her husband was Rector of West Woodhay in Berkshire. She expired at Boulogne-sur-Mer in November 1841 and he shipped her body across for interment in this, the nearest spot of English, Protestant soil.

A baronet, Sir Luke Smithett; two 'hons' - Admiral Edmund Knox and his sister Jane, who resided in upper-crust Waterloo Terrace - and a little granddaughter "of the Earl of Albemarle" comprise the only mention of titles amidst more than 7,000 names in St Mary's New Burial



Caretaker's cottage without roof

Photo: Dover Express

Ground register. For students of Dovorian social history the pattern emerges of a middle-class community, mercantile and maritime, orientated. In 1871 Dover College was founded with a senior churchman as head - and pupils whose names could be expected to appear on memorials in the fashionable cemetery. The importance of the town owed nothing to the presence of important garrisons upon Western Heights and at Dover Castle. Few military men were interred in the New Burial Ground, although the obelisk at its nodal point commemorates a volunteer, Sergeant John Monger, killed by a bursting gun. A Press photograph of 1860 shows him being accorded full military honours.

In 1877 legislation was passed which required cemeteries to be sited on the outskirts of what are nowadays termed conurbations. Families in St Mary's parish continued to bury their own amidst neighbours and friends, but inevitably numbers dwindled. The register shows only 326 entries after 1900, 66 of these between the wars. The New Burial Ground was closed for interments save those in existing vaults or tombs, and became known henceforth as Cowgate Cemetery. St Mary's handed over responsibility to Dover Corporation, whose members decided that the professionally laid-out site should be left to revert to nature. Small trees and shrubs were planted to obscure its distinctive outlines on the hillside. In the quarter-century since then, ties between the quick and the dead have loosened. In this decade the only grave tended and be-flowered - at least until the

octogenarian sexton's own death - has been that of the Petchey family.

Lichens which shroud gravestones afford their inscriptions some protection from the elements; but only man can preserve the tombstones, altar tombs, Celtic or plain crosses, and tablets of a fairly uniform five feet in height from overgrowth by bindweed, ivy, mare's tail, nettles or brambles. Kerbs, coped stones and slabs lie all but concealed. The initials and year of death normally to be read upon footstones are out of sight in knee-high grass. Where the mortuary chapel stood until 1952, when it was demolished with the lodge, an entanglement of blackberry bushes is a repository for rubbish.

In the far upper corner, however, where a wartime bomb caused some small damage to Plot 1, nature keeps the vandals at arm's length and birds nest safely in impenetrable overgrowth. The graves hereabouts are sparse. In springtime, clumps of primrose cluster about the modest cross above the Andrews - mother and son? sister and brother? - Liberty Washington and Alfred Junius, carried off within four March days of 1865, aged respectively 23 years and 15 months. Strangers here, and by their names American: at least together forever, and unaffected by the neglect which presently desecrates Mr. William Mowll's handsome gift to Dovorian posterity".

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