

Burying Highgate

Founded in 1839, Highgate Cemetery has become a key fixture in one of London's most affluent suburbs. The Highgate community, located North of central London, has long been home to many of London's most prominent and wealthy peoples, and the cemetery is no different. "Housing" a wide variety of well-known authors, scientists, political activists, war veterans, and other noble figures, the cemetery has become a highly sought after resting place as well as a popular tourist attraction due to its combination of natural beauty and exclusivity. This paper will explore the origin of Highgate Cemetery, examine the cemetery's influence over the development of the greater Highgate area and its residents, and analyze how the cemetery fits into the contemporary conception of the Highgate neighborhood as a whole.

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Highgate is the quintessential definition of a rich white suburb. The neighborhood is filled with history and character, yet there is an undeniable air of superiority within Highgate's identity. As a resident Charlottean, I instantly drew parallels between Highgate and local neighborhoods such as Myers Park or East Davidson. Susan Trackman, the head archivist for the Highgate Literary and Scientific Institute, confirmed the legitimacy of my comparisons as she described the area as "very posh" and as a place where no resident cares about celebrity status because everyone is equally accomplished.¹

The quaint residential village sits upon a hill overlooking the city. The irony of the neighborhood's geographical relationship to London compared with the people of Highgate's general view of themselves, as being a literal class above, is striking. Furthermore, the neighborhood of Highgate and its residents not only attempt to showcase their prestigious heritage and status while they are alive but in death as well.

Highgate Cemetery is the most popular attraction within the neighborhood. Home to the graves of Karl Marx, Douglas Adams, George Micheal, and many more well-known public figures, the cemetery draws people to Highgate. While the cemetery is a concrete display of the neighborhood's past, it also compliments the neighborhood's contemporary narrative of suburban exceptionalism.

As I explored the cemetery on a typical rainy London afternoon, I was struck by the wide display of massive monuments. Rather than typical headstones or plaques, nearly every grave was denoted by a stone pillar or an elaborate statue. The natural elements along with the tremendous view of London also contributed to the unquestionable beauty and tranquility of the

¹ Susan Trackman, in-person interview by author, March 5, 2020.

space. Due to the hereditary nature of the neighborhood, as many residents have continually passed down their land, much of Highgate's history is private; however, the cemetery, for the small price of £5, offers a rare opportunity to examine the neighborhood's public past. Although curated, the cemetery is emblematic of how the Highgate community wishes to be perceived: as a place that is superior because of its exclusivity.

Historical Background

The Magnificent Seven

On May 26th, 1839, Highgate Cemetery was opened in dedication to St. James by the Lord Bishop of London, Charles James Blomfield.² Although the cemetery has transformed into a foundational landmark of the Highgate community, the cemetery was originally only a small part of a larger parliamentary plan to help combat a major public health crisis in central London.

In the early nineteenth century, London's population rapidly increased. In the span of a few decades, the number of total residents doubled to over two million people. This sudden influx of new Londoners contributed to higher poverty levels, poorer living conditions, increased spread of diseases, and a higher mortality rate. While the city of London was ill-equipped to handle the rise of alive new residents, they were equally unprepared, if not more so, on how to deal with the increasing number of dead Londoners. After the Second Cholera Pandemic of 1831, a disease that claimed thousands of lives in only a few short months, London's inadequate burial situation was undeniably exposed.³

² Bickersteth, Justin. "History - Highgate Cemetery." Highgate Cemetery, 2020 Friends of Highgate Cemetery Trust, highgatecemetery.org/about/history.

³ Bickersteth, Justin. "History - Highgate Cemetery." Highgate Cemetery, 2020 Friends of Highgate Cemetery Trust, highgatecemetery.org/about/history.

During this period, it was traditional for people to be buried at their local parish church; however, the high mortality rate of the early nineteenth century led to an insufficient amount of burial spaces.⁴ London's dead were being crammed into impromptu graveyards. With a lack of proper cemeteries, the dead were left wherever there was still space available. In the worst cases, undertakers, disguised as members of the clergy, would perform illegal burials. Bodies were wrapped in cheap rags and buried only a few feet deep, oftentimes amongst other human remains. It was common practice to throw quicklime over the corpse so that the body would decompose more quickly and the grave could be reused in only a matter of months. These burial places were filled with diseases and foul odors, and the popularization of the miasma theory, a medical theory that suggested that diseases could be contracted through "bad air", forced parliament to come up with a solution.⁵

In 1836, an Act of Parliament was passed "for establishing cemeteries for the Internment of the Dead, Northward, Southward, and Eastward of the Metropolis by a Company to be called The London Cemetery Company."⁶ Seven new private cemeteries, nicknamed the magnificent seven, were created across the countryside in Kensal Green, West Norwood, Abney Park, Brompton, Nunhead, Tower Hamlets, and Highgate. Stephen Geary, the founder of The London Cemetery Company, was the head architect and founder of Highgate to the North and Nunhead to the South. Geary appointed James Bunstone Bunning as the surveyor and David Ramsey as the landscape architect. Together, the three men worked alongside each other to construct several

⁴ Bickersteth, Justin. "History - Highgate Cemetery." Highgate Cemetery, 2020 Friends of Highgate Cemetery Trust, highgatecemetery.org/about/history.

⁵ Last, John M. "Miasma Theory," A Dictionary of Public Health, Westminster College, Pennsylvania: Oxford University Press, 2007.

⁶ Meller, Hugh, London Cemeteries: an illustrated Guide and Gazetteer, Aldershot, Hants, England: Scolar Press; Brookfield, Vt., USA: Ashgate Pub. Co, 1994, P. 153.

key components of the cemetery including the Egyptian Avenue and the Terrace Catacombs⁷. So while today the site serves as a tranquil section of the Highgate neighborhood, its dark origins date back to the simple need of finding a resting place for London's copious dead.

Location, Location, Location

In 1838, The London Cemetery Company chose Highgate for their new northern location due to its natural advantages and the relative availability of open land. Since the seventeenth century, the southern slopes of the famous Highgate hill served as the park and garden of Ashurst Manor, the home of Sir William Ashurst, the former Lord Mayor of London in 1693.⁸ In the early 1830s, the Manor was demolished and Lewis Vulliamy's St. Michael's church took its place. The church offered the perfect setting for the new cemetery and the company purchased seventeen acres of land for £3500.⁹

David Ramsey, the landscape architect, designed the cemetery into a well-planted hillside with winding gravel paths that lead to St. Michael's church. During the beginning stages of the project, architect Stephen Geary envisioned a cemetery that would "not only rival all other cemeteries in their public utility, but... will prove most interesting ornaments to the suburbs of the great metropolis, and be an honour to the country."¹⁰ Through invoking this theme of Highgate exceptionalism, Geary accomplished his goal as author William Justyne wrote in his 1865 *Guide to Highgate Cemetery* that "no cemetery near London can boast so many natural

⁷ See Appendix A for images of the Egyptian Avenue and the Terrace Catacombs.

⁸ Harris, J. "A Prospect of ye Seat of Sr. William Ashurst at High Gate in the county of Middlesex: 17th-18th century," Museum of London, accessed April 24, 2020. <https://www.museumoflondonprints.com/image/143453/j-harris-a-prospect-of-ye-seat-of-sr-william-ashurst-at-high-gate-in-the-county-of-middlesex-17th-18th-century>

⁹ Meller, Hugh, *London Cemeteries: an illustrated Guide and Gazetteer*, Aldershot, Hants, England: Scolar Press; Brookfield, Vt., USA: Ashgate Pub. Co, 1994, P. 153.

¹⁰ "Minutes of the London Cemetery Company," January 9, 1837, quoted in Meller, Hugh, *London Cemeteries: an illustrated Guide and Gazetteer*, Aldershot, Hants, England: Scolar Press; Brookfield, Vt., USA: Ashgate Pub. Co, 1994, P. 153.

beauties,” and that “there is a holy loveliness upon this place of death, as the kind angels hovered about it, and quickened fair Nature with their presence, in love for the good souls whose tenantless bodies repose there.”¹¹ Justyne continues in his guide to address the cemetery’s view of London: “There spread out like a broad map is the great metropolis of the world... depicted in the grey film of smoke that curtains the mighty city by day.”¹² Sitting 375 feet above sea level, the cemetery, as Justyne points out, offered an unparalleled view of the city, and, along with the incredible architecture and the natural beauty of the area, encouraged the wealthy to invest.

Expansion, Decline, & Restoration

The Highgate Cemetery was an immediate success. The cemetery became even more valuable after an 1852 Act of Parliament banned all burials in the city of London, providing a de facto monopoly for Highgate and the other six suburban cemeteries.¹³ The site served its purpose and was so profitable that the London Cemetery Company decided to expand the cemetery by another twenty acres on the other side of Swain’s Lane. This new section of the cemetery, denoted as the East Cemetery, opened in 1856.¹⁴ A tunnel was built underneath Swain’s Lane to connect the two portions of the cemetery. In 1889, Sir Sydney Waterlow gifted a 26-acre park that neighbors the eastern portion of the cemetery as a “garden for the gardenless”, only adding

¹¹ Justyne, William. *A Guide to Highgate Cemetery*, London, 1865, quoted in Meller, Hugh. *London Cemeteries: an illustrated Guide and Gazetteer*, Aldershot, Hants, England: Scolar Press; Brookfield, Vt., USA: Ashgate Pub. Co, 1994, P. 155.

¹² Justyne, William. *A Guide to Highgate Cemetery*, London, 1865, quoted in Meller, Hugh. *London Cemeteries: an illustrated Guide and Gazetteer*, Aldershot, Hants, England: Scolar Press; Brookfield, Vt., USA: Ashgate Pub. Co, 1994, P. 155.

¹³ Greene, Charles. *The Burial Acts: a Complete Compilation of the Acts of Parliament Which Have Passed the Legislature from 1852 to 1857 ... the Regulations of the Home Office with Regard to the Management of Burial Grounds, Etc.* The British Library, 1857.

¹⁴ See Appendix B for a map of the expanded cemetery.

to the area's allure.¹⁵ During the remainder of the nineteenth century, the cemetery continued to be both profitable and in high demand with an average of thirty burials per day.¹⁶

While the cemetery appeared to be in a stable condition, the beginning of the twentieth century and the outbreak of the Great War caused the cemetery to enter a state of decline. With resources becoming more scarce, many families opted for less extravagant funerals and memorials. Moreover, a majority of the forty gardeners and grounds crew workers for the cemetery were called up to join the war effort.¹⁷ Over the years, the cemetery failed to remain viable, and after several unsuccessful fundraising efforts, the London Cemetery Company declared bankruptcy in 1960 and the Highgate Cemetery closed its gates fifteen years later after running out of funds.

In 1975, the cemetery's brief shut down was ended by a wealthy group of residents and relatives of the dead who stepped up to form The Friends of Highgate Cemetery.¹⁸ The charity's mission was to "promote the conservation of the cemetery, its monuments and buildings, flora and fauna, for the benefit of the public as an environmental amenity." The cemetery was resurrected, repaired, and ultimately listed as a Grade 1 Park by English Heritage. Both sections of the cemetery are still operational and are visited by thousands of tourists every year.

The Cemetery's Influence over the Development of Highgate

The Local Perspective

¹⁵ "Waterlow Park," Lauderdale House 2018 Registered Charity, accessed April 23, 2020. <https://www.lauderdalehouse.org.uk/plan-your-visit/waterlow-park>.

¹⁶ Meller, Hugh. *London Cemeteries: an illustrated Guide and Gazetteer*, Aldershot, Hants, England: Scolar Press; Brookfield, Vt., USA: Ashgate Pub. Co, 1994. P. 156.

¹⁷ Bickersteth, Justin. "History - Highgate Cemetery." Highgate Cemetery, 2020 Friends of Highgate Cemetery Trust, highgatecemetery.org/about/history.

¹⁸ "The Friends - Highgate Cemetery," Highgate Cemetery, 2020 Friends of Highgate Cemetery Trust, accessed 23 April 2020. <https://highgatecemetery.org/about/the-friends>

Although the Highgate Cemetery was profitable from the beginning and has since become an integral feature of the Highgate community, not every citizen was originally on board with the implementation of the cemetery. Many residents feared that the cemetery would detract from the character of the neighborhood, yet they were quickly converted into supporters after recognizing that the site would be treated more like a private park:

The establishment of a cemetery at Highgate was strongly opposed by the inhabitants, but when its decorations with flowers and shrubs and trees and its quiet and seclusion were seen, applications were made for the keys, which conferred the privilege of walking in the cemetery at whatever time the purchaser pleased.¹⁹

The private nature of the cemetery made it desirable to the public. This type of relationship with a cemetery is uniquely Victorian and typical of nineteenth-century England. Once onboard, the people of Highgate embraced the cemetery. Trackman, the local archivist, confirmed that “it’s a very posh cemetery. People would go out on a Sunday and stroll around the cemetery for an outing, and if you’ve ever seen any of the old horror films of the 1950s and 60s... you will see catacombs and they were filmed in Highgate Cemetery.”²⁰ The cemetery influenced the recreational habits of the citizens of Highgate, and also how they, seemingly unknowingly, consumed their neighborhood’s past in their daily routines.

Tourism

The cemetery’s primary and most tangible influence on the development of the Highgate community comes via tourism. Once again, archivist Trackman provides the local perspective for

¹⁹ Chadwick, Sir Edwin, *A Supplementary Report to Her Majesty’s Secretary of State for the Home Department from the Poor Law Commissioners on the Results of a Special Inquiry into the Practice of Interment in Towns*, London 1843, p. 144.

²⁰ Susan Trackman, in-person interview by author, March 5, 2020.

describing the popularity of the site. In her interview, she admitted that “more people stop me in the street and ask ‘how can I get to the cemetery?’ My husband has written asking why can’t we have fingerposts up here. We’ve asked umpteen times and no one has put a fingerpost up.”²¹

Despite the lack of directional aid, thousands of travelers from across the world visit Highgate Cemetery every year. The total of the money made off of tours, in addition to the hefty burial fee of £18,325, combine to account for a sizable portion of Highgate’s local economy.²² Therefore the cemetery not only protects the image of Highgate’s past, but it also helps provide the means to ensure that the neighborhood can sustain a similar future.

The Cemetery’s Legacy

A Who’s Who of the Dead

Elizabeth Jackson of Little Windmill Street, Soho, who died at the age of 36, was the first person buried at Highgate.²³ In the first year, Jackson would be joined by 204 other burials, nearly all of which were Londoners whose average age was under 35. Although the cemetery began as an inclusive resting place for a wide variety of social classes, soon the rising popularity of the site, along with the corresponding rising burial prices, caused the cemetery to become more exclusive. Over the next several generations, Jackson and the other original inhabitants would be overshadowed by some of the world’s most influential and prosperous figures as Highgate Cemetery transformed from a burial site to a status symbol.

Since the early years of Highgate Cemetery, the site had less to do with religion and more with an expression of social wealth. The cemetery did not discriminate based on religion, as

²¹ Susan Trackman, in-person interview by author, March 5, 2020.

²² Jones, Rupert, “Pricey Goodbye? The Cheapest and Most Expensive Places to Die Revealed,” *The Guardian*, accessed April 26, 2020.

²³ “Who’s here - Highgate Cemetery,” Highgate Cemetery, 2020 Friends of Highgate Cemetery Trust, accessed 23 April 2020. <https://highgatecemetery.org/visit/who>

there is an area marked off for “dissenters,” but rather on class.²⁴ In the 1850s, families spent upwards of £94 on a spot within the terrace catacombs, an estimated equivalent of £12,737 in today’s economy.²⁵ Even if a person wished to buy a single common grave, it would still cost as little as £2.10s, an estimated equivalent of £285 today. These prices represent an impossible investment for the average Londoner, yet for the rich, it was a final opportunity to cement their status amongst London’s most prestigious citizens. For some, it is not enough to merely get into the cemetery but to show off their wealth in true Victorian style. In 1876, Julius Beer, a London millionaire and owner of *The Observer*, invested over £5,800 in the construction of a mausoleum in honor of his late eight-year-old daughter.²⁶ While the mausoleum is a magnificent tribute to his daughter, the massive cost of the burial exemplifies the common desire among London’s rich to prove their love or status in the graveyard.

The Beer Mausoleum is not the only notable burial site within Highgate Cemetery. There is a section of war graves dedicated to the fallen soldiers of WWI and WWII.²⁷ There is a Fireman’s corner, which contains a monument erected by the widows and orphans of members of the London Fire Brigade in 1934. There are also several remarkable monuments and headstones, but none quite as eye-catching as the grave of Karl Marx.²⁸ Marx is part of a larger socialist’s and leftist’s corner of the cemetery, an interesting section when considering that capitalism has been a driving force in the exclusion of members of the lower class from the

²⁴ Skriver, Leya. “Highgate Cemetery - Visit to a Living Beauty,” accessed April 26, 2020. <https://lagottocattleya.wordpress.com/2013/07/12/highgate-cemetery/>

²⁵ “UK Inflation Calculator,” CPI Inflation Calculator, accessed April 27, 2020. <https://www.in2013dollars.com/uk/inflation/1876?amount=5800>

²⁶ Curl, James Stevens, *The Victorian Celebration of Death*, Sutton Publishing Ltd, March 25, 2001 ; See Appendix C for images of the Beer Mausoleum.

²⁷ “Cemetery Details: Highgate Cemetery,” Commonwealth War Graves Commission, accessed April 27 2020.

²⁸ See Appendix D for images of Marx’s grave.

cemetery. Marx's grave is also noteworthy because Marx is not from London. The German philosopher spent his final years in London, but he has no strong connection to Highgate. Marx is not the only foreigner buried in Highgate, as many people from around the world paid a hefty price to be included in Highgate. The inclusion of outsiders with little to no connection with London demonstrates that the cemetery had evolved from its original purpose of serving London's poor to an exclusionary club of wealthy elitists battling to cement their legacy.

The Future of Highgate Cemetery

Highgate Cemetery is in a current state of uncertainty. While both sections of the cemetery are operational, the burial sites have become overcrowded and the cemetery is faced with the same problem it was first constructed to solve. With little room to place new graves, the cemetery has petitioned for parliament to allow for grave renewal.²⁹ This process involves either the removal or replacement of older remains to create space for new burials. The Highgate Cemetery website has dedicated an entire page towards explaining the process and states that "grave owner interests will be paramount" and that "heritage will be safeguarded."³⁰ If their request is rejected, then the site will continue to offer tours and transition into a museum.

The theme of exclusivity envelops the history of Highgate. The notion that the average Londoner cannot afford to live in Highgate, either financially or due to a lack of hereditary connections, gives the area a sense of supremacy. Furthermore, as the cemetery demonstrates, outsiders can infiltrate the neighborhood, but only by adhering to the unwritten neighborhood requirements of amassing wealth or fame. Even amongst the members within the privileged

²⁹ "Highgate Cemetery Asks to Bury Bodies on Top of each Other." The Daily Telegraph, accessed April 27, 2020.

³⁰ "Keeping Highgate Cemetery Alive - Highgate Cemetery," Highgate Cemetery, 2020 Friends of Highgate Cemetery Trust, accessed April 27, 2020. <https://highgatecemetery.org/renewal>

Highgate club, there is a culture of one-upmanship as residents feel they must continually prove their legitimacy as members. The similarities between Highgate's culture and the history of the cemetery proves that the public history of the neighborhood has been carefully shaped to construct a collective memory of Highgate that revolves around two central themes: exclusivity and superiority.

Appendix A

Egyptian Avenue



Terrace Catacombs



Appendix B - Map of Highgate Cemetery



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| <p>East Cemetery:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Leslie Hutchinson 2. Anna Mahler 3. Douglas Adams 4. Patrick Caulfield 5. Jeremy Beadle 6. Malcolm McLaren 7. Karl Marx 8. George Frigg 9. George Eliot | <p>West Cemetery:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 10. George Michael 11. Alexander Litvinenko 12. Michael Faraday 13. Christina Rossetti 14. Thomas Sayers |
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Appendix C - Beer Mausoleum



Appendix D - Karl Marx's Grave



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