

## **HA13: Cemeteries and Churchyards**

### **Definition**

Churchyards are burial grounds encompassed within the walled boundary of a church. During the latter half of the eighteenth century some churches, especially in central London, established extramural burial grounds due to the shortage of space within their churchyards. Many of these 'church gardens' have since been turned into public gardens. Where information exists these sites are included within the churchyard element of this audit.

Cemeteries are burial grounds outside the confines of a church. These include private burial grounds (mostly constructed during the Victorian era) and more recently established local authority burial grounds.

### **London's Cemeteries and Churchyards Resource**

Churchyards and burial grounds fulfilled most burial needs in the central part of the city up until the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. As these sites became over-burdened, larger public cemeteries on the edge of the urban area were proposed. Seven major sites were identified during the early part of the last century and the first of the so-called 'Magnificent Seven' Victorian cemeteries - Kensal Green Cemetery - was opened in 1832. The other six are West Norwood, Highgate, Nunhead, Abney Park, Brompton and Tower Hamlets.

Many other cemeteries were established during the Victorian era and the early part of this century. Burial space in London is again in short supply and new cemeteries are being proposed or established. However, few new cemeteries are likely to be established in London in the future because of the limited availability of suitable land.

Cemeteries in London cover approximately 1300 hectares, just under 1% of Greater London's land cover. Cemeteries are predominately situated in outer London boroughs with the largest areas of cemetery land being in Newham (153 ha) and Barnet (142 ha). In comparison, Hackney (13 ha) and Kensington & Chelsea (16 ha) have relatively small amounts of cemetery land (see Table 1). In Newham, which has the largest area of cemetery space and Kensington & Chelsea, which has one of the smallest areas of cemetery space, cemeteries provide over one third of the available public open space (LPAC/Halcrow Fox, 1997). The Map represents the extent of the resource in London.

Until further research is carried out it is not possible fully to ascertain Greater London's churchyard resource (see 'Rationale and Limitations of Approach'). However, from the little data that is available, it is clear that churchyards represent a relatively minor resource in terms of the land which they encompass, but they are a significant potential resource with respect to their distribution. Their distribution throughout London contrasts with the cemeteries that are confined largely to outer London boroughs. Churchyards that have been identified by the London Ecology Unit for their nature conservation importance, cover approximately 88 ha (see Table 2). This does not represent the full potential resource – many other churchyards have been managed in a way that has limited their nature conservation value.

**Table 1: Cemetery and Designated Churchyard Data by Borough**

<b>Borough</b>	<b>Area of Cemetery (ha) and number of sites (in brackets)</b>	<b>Area of Churchyards identified as sites of nature conservation importance (ha) and number of sites (in brackets)</b>
Barking & Dagenham	22 (3)	6.8 (2)
Barnet	142 u* (8)	-
Bexley	20 (4)	2.8 (2)
Brent	34* (7)	1 (1)
Bromley	28 (7)	-
Camden	30 (2)	4.6 (4)
City of Westminster	-	7.34 (9)
Croydon	25 (2)	-
Ealing	53 (7)	1.2 (2)
Enfield	63 u* (10)	-
Greenwich	53 (7)	1.5 (1)
Hackney	13 (1)	-
Hammersmith & Fulham	55 (4)	-
Haringey	24 (2)	-
Harrow	19 (7)	-
Havering	39 (5)	-
Hillingdon	23 c* (7)	2.7 (2)
Hounslow	41 (9)	-
Islington	-	4.9 (4)
Kensington & Chelsea	16 (1)	1 (3)
Kingston Upon Thames	13 (2)	-
Lambeth	17 (1)	0.7 (2)
Lewisham	51 (5)	0.8 (1)
Merton	79 (7)	5.6 (3)
Newham	153 (8)	4.4 (2)
Redbridge	13 (4)	0.6 (1)
Richmond Upon Thames	71 (10)	1.3 (2)
Southwark	51 (3)	1.1 (2)
Sutton	16 (3)	4.7 (4)
Tower Hamlets	13 (1)	2.7 (2)
Waltham Forest	39 u* (4)	1.5 (2)
Wandsworth	78 (6)	2.8 (6)
<b>London Total</b>	<b>1,294 ha</b>	<b>60ha</b>

Source: LPAC/Halcrow Fox, 1997

NB: Sub totals may not add up to totals due to rounding. \* = Missing information

u = figure given is likely to be an under-estimate, C = CIPFA Cemeteries Statistics 1994/5 Actuals.

**Table 2: Chuchyards with existing nature conservation value identified by LEU as Sites of Importance for Nature Conservation**

Borough	Name of Site	Grid Reference	Area (ha)
Barking & Dagenham	Barking Abbey Ruins & St Margarets Ch	441 839	5.9
	St Peters & St Paul's	550 844	0.9
Bexley	St Mary's Ch	499 734	0.8
	Crayford Parish Ch	511 752	2
Brent	Old St Andrews ChY	207 869	1
Camden	Hampstead Parish Ch	263 856	0.7
	St Andrew's Gdn	308 824	0.6
	St George's Gdns	305 825	1.1
	St John's Gdn	293 827	1.2
City of Westminster	St Stephen Gdn/Pk	252 814	0.13
	St James' Gdn	293 805	0.17
	St Anne's Ch Gdn	296 809	0.20
	St Marylebone Gdn/ChY	283 820	0.37
	St Augustines (grounds)	255 831	0.73
	St Mary's ChY	266 817	0.50
	Westminster Cloisters Gdn	300 794	1.21
	St Mary's Gdn	226 818	1.67
Ealing	Holy Cross	145 831	1
	St Mary's	177 797	0.2
Greenwich	St John the Baptist ChY	426 746	1.5
Hillingdon	Harfield Ch	055 896	1.7
	St Mary's Wood End	097 813	1
Islington	St Mary's Ch Gdns	317 836	1.5
	Bunhill Fields Burial Ground	327 822	1.5
	St John's Gdns	316 819	0.2
	St Mary Magdalene Gdn	312 849	1.7
Kensington & Chelsea	Moravian Burial Ground	267 776	0.4
	Royal Hospital Old Bural Grounds	280 782	0.4
	Western Cemetery	267 782	0.2
Lambeth	St Leonard's	299 717	0.4
	St Paul's	292 761	0.3
Lewisham	St Mary's	379 748	0.8
Merton	St Mary's	250 693	1.8
	St Mary's	245 715	0.9

Borough	Name of Site	Grid Reference	Area (ha)
	St Peter and St Paul	270 687	2.9
Newham	All Saints Ch	394 839	0.6
	East Ham Nature Reserve- St Mary Magdalene	429 823	3.8
Redbridge	St Mary's Ch	449.867	0.6
Richmond	St James	140 713	0.9
	St Mary's and St Albion	165 712	0.4
	St Mary's Gdns	351 798	0.4
	St Mary Magdalene ChY	333 794	0.7
Southwark	St Mary's	292 654	2
Sutton	All Saints	279 645	5
	All Saints	258 652	0.8
	St Nicholas	257 642	0.3
Tower Hamlets	St George	348 808	0.7
	St Dunstons	359 814	2
Waltham Forest	St Mary's	378 892	1
	St Mary the Virgin	377 868	0.5
Wandsworth	Putney Old Burial Ground	361 750	0.3
	St Michael's Church Field	247 739	0.8
	St Nicholas ChY	279 712	0.7
	St Anne's Church Grounds	660 744	0.3
	St Barnabas Ch Grds	253 730	0.3
	All Saints	231 757	0.4
<b>London Total</b>			<b>88 ha</b>

NB: Due to rounding, sub totals from Table 1 may not add up to totals in Table 2

## Nature Conservation Importance

Cemeteries and churchyards make a significant contribution to the provision of urban green space in London, sometimes providing a sanctuary for wildlife in urban areas devoid of greenspace. Although many have restricted access they still provide a useful resource for the local community, particularly within inner London Boroughs.

A wide variety of habitats can be found in Greater London's cemeteries. This is demonstrated by St Pancras and Islington Cemetery in Barnet, which supports areas of neutral grassland, wetland, scrub and secondary woodland. Due to the antiquity of many churchyards and cemeteries they can support habitats which are relics of former countryside and may, therefore, support a range of rare or uncommon plant species. The only known London site for green-winged orchid *Orchis morio*, for example, is Morden Cemetery in Merton. Other more commonly occurring plants, which are indicative of the countryside within which many of these cemeteries were formerly located, include cuckoo-flower *Cardamine pratense*, harebell *Campanula rotundifolia* and crested dog's-tail *Cynosorus cristatus*.

The older cemeteries, in common with mature suburban gardens, often support animal species that are essentially species of open woodland or woodland edge. These include spotted flycatcher, song thrush, tawny owl and stag beetle. Holly blue, gatekeeper and speckled wood butterflies often occur, as well as most of the commoner species that occur in our parks and gardens.

Apart from a few unusually large sites, churchyards tend to have a more limited diversity of habitats – mature trees and small areas of grassland (occasionally quite species rich) being the main features of interest. Yew *Taxus baccata* and ivy *Hedera helix* are frequent components of the churchyard flora. In addition, churchyard walls, monuments and gravestones may support unusual plant communities with species such as hart’s-tongue fern *Phyllitis scolopendrium*, wall rue *Asplenium ruta-muralis*, pellitory-of-the-wall *Parietaria judaica* and various lichens and other lower plants. The church buildings themselves may also be of special nature conservation interest if they contain bat roosts.

Isolated cemeteries and churchyards can provide sheltered habitat in spring and autumn for migrant birds, providing an important link in the network of open space that provides these species with temporary refugia. Within central London, churchyards are often among the few areas of greenspace where the local community is able to have some contact with the natural world.

### **Some cemeteries and churchyards of nature conservation value in Greater London**

Highgate Cemetery, Camden

St Mary’s Churchyard, Sutton

Kensal Green Cemetery, Hammersmith & Fulham

Abney Park Cemetery, Hackney

Tower Hamlets Cemetery, Tower Hamlets

Harefield Churchyard, Hillingdon

## **Threats and Opportunities**

### **Threats**

While churchyard/cemetery status confers protection from certain forms of development, loss of existing habitat may occur as a result of increasing pressure for burial space. Twenty one of the thirty eight cemeteries with recognised nature conservation value in London have been identified as sites for potential re-use (Bailey 1998). The notable nature conservation value of these sites is often due to their antiquity and the current laws preventing the disturbance of human remains. Re-use could result in the loss of the tree and scrub cover that has developed over many of these older cemetery sites.

The responsibility for management of many cemetery sites has been given to various local authority departments who are often ill-equipped to advise on ecological management, or are reluctant to accept nature conservation value. In an attempt to avoid affronting the perceived sensitivities of relatives of the interred, most land management in operational cemeteries is aimed at maintaining a well-ordered, ‘tidy’ appearance which limits the opportunities for biodiversity conservation and enhancement.

### **Opportunities**

In London, there is considerable potential for increasing the nature conservation value of many of the extensive cemetery sites. Simple measures such as a reduction in mowing frequency where the sward is species-rich, or tree and shrub planting where existing habitat is of low value would do much to increase their ecological value. Placing bird and bat boxes in sites with trees would provide a very public indication of support for biodiversity conservation. The growing interest in ‘green burials’ may also create an opportunity to incorporate enhancement or creation of wildlife habitat within existing or newly created cemeteries.

By recognising the existing and potential value of cemeteries and churchyards these sites can provide an educational resource which encompasses biodiversity, history and other disciplines. For example,

the relic flora of the site, in addition to dates on headstones, can provide evidence as to the history of the site. Lichens on walls and monuments can be related to air quality.

Although perceived as a threat to existing habitats within cemeteries, re-use could provide an opportunity to create new habitats or restore open habitats which have been lost to scrub or secondary woodland. Indeed a London Planning Advisory Committee report, '*Burial Space Needs in London*', specifically refers to the need to conserve biodiversity within any re-use strategy. Sites such Tower Hamlets, Abney Park and Highgate Cemeteries demonstrate the potential for incorporating biodiversity objectives into the management of cemeteries and churchyards.

## **Data Sources**

Bailey, R. (1998). *Re-Use of Graves Threatens London's Valuable Wildlife Sites*. MSc Project, University College London.

The Confederation of Burial Services and The Institute of Burial and Cremation Administration, Inc.

Halcrow Fox (1997). *Burial Space Needs in London*. LPAC.

London Ecology Unit Handbooks nos.: 5, 7, 9-13,15-21, 24-28.

London Ecology Unit Schedules: Bexley, City of Westminster, Enfield, Kensington & Chelsea, Southwark and Wandsworth.

Mellor, H. (1981). *London Cemeteries*. Avebury.

## **Rationale and Limitations of Approach.**

Data on the distribution and extent of cemeteries came from the London Advisory Planning Committee's (LPAC) Report 'Burial Space Needs In London' (1997). The report contains the most comprehensive audit of London's cemeteries to date, although not all cemeteries responded to the survey. A full audit of churchyards was not possible as the data is not yet available. The figures provided in this 'preliminary' audit represent the churchyard resource with the Sites of Importance for Nature Conservation identified by the London Ecology Unit (LEU). This is not a definitive representation of Greater London's churchyard resource.

The list includes churchyards of nature conservation importance for most boroughs (those with LEU handbooks/schedules). The data for these sites was collected from a database at the Unit and checked against each borough handbook and schedule. No churchyards are listed for boroughs that are not members of the London Ecology Committee: City of London, Havering, Bromley and Hackney.

Although lists of churches with churchyards are available for approximately half of London there are no available data on the size of these churchyards. There are six Church of England Diocese which cover the Greater London area: London, Rochester, Southwark, Guildford, Chelmsford and St Albans (Table 2). Available lists provide the names of churches without giving their exact locations. The Diocesan handbooks could be used to identify each church and would need to be purchased at a cost of £3-5. The Dioceses of Chelmsford and Southwark do not have a list of churches with churchyards. The Diocesan handbook could be used to contact each parish individually.

Roman Catholic churches in Greater London fall under two Archdiocese (Westminster, Southwark) and a smaller Diocese (Brentford). The structure of the Methodist church in London is based on the boundaries of Greater London with four divisions forming the four quarters of the city; NW, NE and so on. No preliminary research has been carried out for other denominations. However, in context of ecclesiastical land use history these will, perhaps, represent a small resource proportion of the Church of England, Roman Catholic, and Methodist churchyard resource.