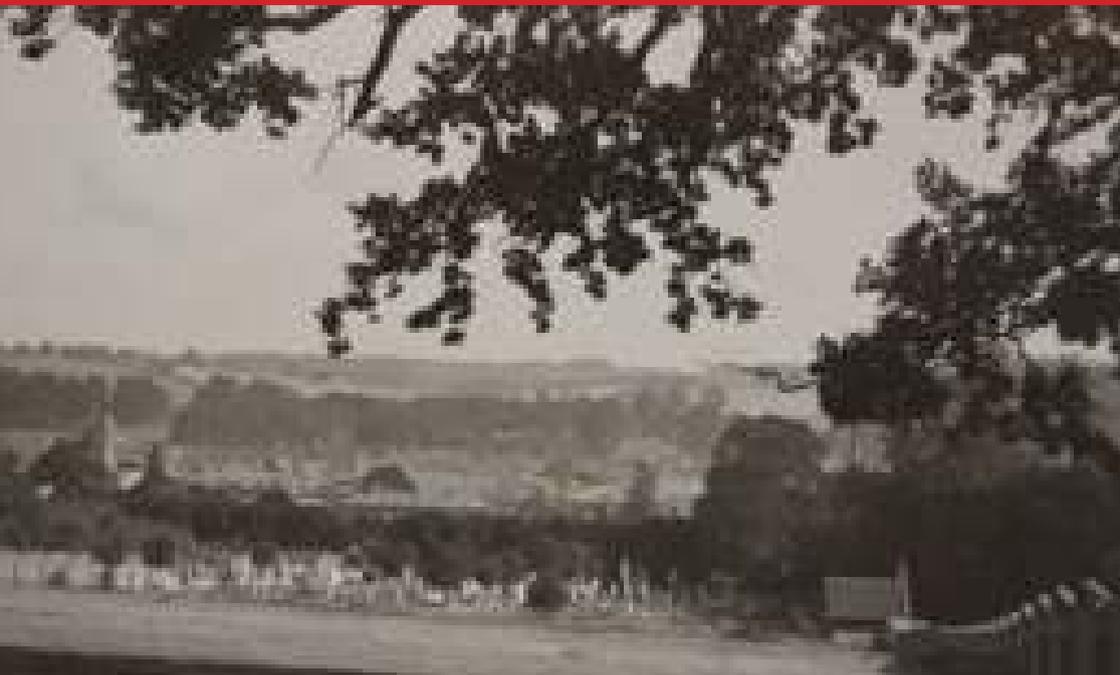




Discover History In Rectory Lane Cemetery

The Rectory Lane Cemetery Project



The Parish Churchyard

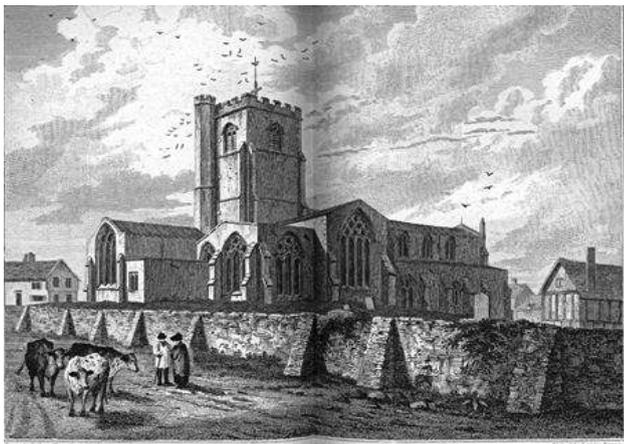
Traditionally, with the building of a parish church such as St Peter's, an area of land surrounding it was used as the parish graveyard. Between 1538 (when burial registers were first established) and 1855 there had been in excess of 7500 burials within this small area, accounting for the obvious rise in the ground between the Church and Berkhamsted School.

Other burial grounds in Berkhamsted absorbed some of the pressure on this burial ground at St Peter's. If you were a Quaker you would have been interred in the little garden around the Friends Meeting House (dated 1818) in the High Street. Congregationalists would have been buried in their cemetery in Chapel Street, and some gravestones, even a large tomb chest, survive there despite the loss of the Chapel. Baptists would have been laid to rest in their own burial ground which now forms the garden of the residence of Berkhamsted School's head.

By the 1850's, with the country's transition from an agricultural to an urban, industrial economy, the population of the country had swelled to such an extent there was real concern about the state of overcrowded churchyards. Burial Acts were initiated authorising their closure and the opening of detached municipal cemeteries.

The green space that surrounds St Peter's Church was closed as a burial ground by an Order in Council dated 19th October 1855. The few monuments dotted around the churchyard have long since disappeared or been reused as paving slabs.

*St Peter's graveyard
(early C19th)*



The 1842 Cemetery

On the north facing side of the south wall, the large commemorative plaque records that in anticipation of this closure, Charlotte Catharine Anne, Countess of Bridgewater gave a piece of land, of approximately an acre, to the parish, for a new burial ground in 1842.



The Cemetery site on 1839 Tithe Map (plot 454)

The land was on the opposite side of the road to the church between the Old Rectory and the present road called Three Close Lane. It became officially known as St Peter's Churchyard (Detached).

A former lane that used to run parallel with the High Street is fossilized in the yew-planted walkway in the Cemetery. There used to be a row of 12 Yews on each side – perhaps to represent the 12 Apostles. The lane connected Chesham Road with Highfield House which was demolished in the 1930's, and both access points have now been walled up.

Apart from this lane, it may well be that some of the trees in the SW corner of the 1842 Cemetery were also planted prior to its foundation as part of the grounds of the former Rectory. They may have been associated with the fact that Cowpers Well (wrongly marked on later OS maps) is located immediately on the west side of the present driveway leading up to the Old Rectory and just outside the boundary wall of the 1842 Cemetery.

It is not clear whether the Rectory Lane gate piers were erected here in 1842 or added later. They have obvious signs of re-use, having been rotated – their original location is unknown.

Based on the experience of the previous three hundred years this area was thought to be adequate.

The 1894 Extension

By 1894 however the area was almost full so a further section to the south of the 1842 graveyard was consecrated yielding another acre for burials. The gatepiers and sexton's hut on Three Close Lane were also built then.



A late C19th view of the Cemetery – a horse grazes where there are now graves, the wall to the 1842 cemetery is still in place, the long wall has been built with the Old Rectory in the trees beyond.

“ My earliest memories are of standing at my grandmother’s bedroom window and watching funerals go up Rectory Lane to the Cemetery. The poorest people had the handbiers, which they pushed themselves with the parson walking in front. Those a little better off had the horse hearse (the horse wearing black plumes on its head) with the mourners walking behind. Those better off still had horse carriages for the mourners. The really wealthy people had the hearse with four horses all draped in black with plumes on their heads, the top of the hearse covered with wreaths and several mutes walking along each side in black with tail coats and their top hats draped with black crepe. The mourners of course all wore heavy black clothes and widows wore widow’s weeds and mourning for many months after the funeral.” Richard Lindeman, born 1909, growing up in Pilkington Manor.

The 1920/1 Extension

By 1920/1, the large 1894 section itself was full when the third and final area at the Cemetery was consecrated. The extension simply entailed removing the railings that used to run across the cemetery between the sexton's hut and the upper set of double gates.

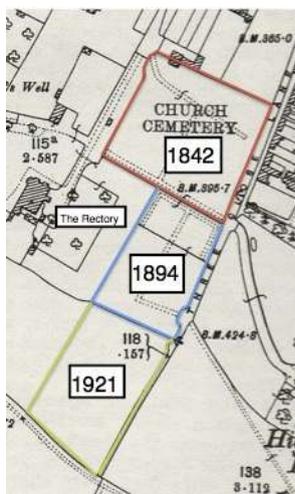


Consecration of 1921 Extension

Once a burial had taken place, families were diligent in commemorating anniversaries.

One nineteen year old, who had lost his mother when he was 12, wrote to his father: *Will you go up to the Cemetary on Thursday? Perhaps you will get some flowers for us both & put them on Mummie's grave.*

It is rather a beautiful place where she lies. There is such a fine view over the town up the Common. (1936)



The Cemetery Today

The total area of the three portions of the cemetery is 3.275 acres. In all, the cemetery contains over 1,000 memorials and some 7,000 burials.

The grand entrance to the Cemetery from Three Close Lane that served the 1894 Extension has been closed off and a gas sub-station erected on the horse's turning circle. Immediately to the left of the gate pier is the sexton's hut.



Burials ended in this graveyard in about 1945 with the opening of the new municipal cemetery at Kingshill on higher ground to the south of the town.

Although the entire cemetery remains in the ownership of the Parochial Church Council, the lower 1842 portion was closed by Order in Council dated 9th June 1976. This portion is therefore de-consecrated and the maintenance became the responsibility of the Local Authority. Family graves are occasionally re-opened for an additional interment in the upper two sections – as these were approved by the relevant Secretary of State in 1894 and 1921 they are subject to section 5 of the Burial Act 1953 which means that they may not be closed by Order of Council.

*Photo:
David
Levenson*



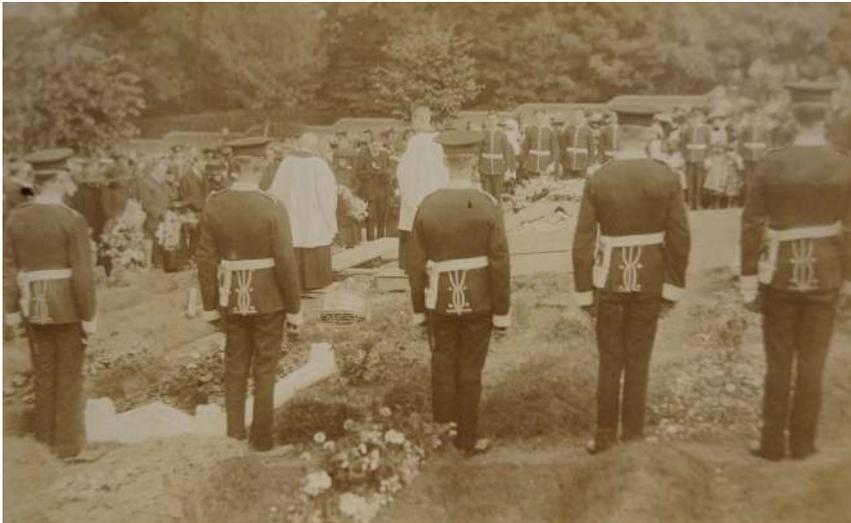
Figures from the Past

Among the headstones in The Rectory Lane Cemetery, there are 27 private or Commonwealth War Graves Commission memorials. There is also a scattering of nationally important figures buried in the Cemetery.

These include:

- General Sir Horace Smith-Dorrien, who commanded troops in the First World War, including the British Second Army at the Second Battle of Ypres in 1915.
- William Cooper who founded the famous Berkhamsted firm of Coopers which produced sheep dip
- Edward Mawley who co-published with Gertude Jekyll *Roses for English Gardens*
- Henry Stainsby, Secretary General of the National Institute for the Blind and inventor of a braille typewriter

There are also many representatives of families with long connections with Berkhamsted such as the Costins, De Fraignes, Lanes, Loaders, Meeks, Pitkins, Pococks and Tompkins.



Burial of Charles Brewer, 1913 at the Rectory Lane Cemetery. He died aged 24, during a tug-of-war whilst on a Territorial Army training camp.

This booklet is based on the article Rectory Lane Cemetery by Ken Wallis (Chronicle VIII, p.26–33 (March 2011), with additional research by James Moir. All photos from the Collection of BLHMS unless otherwise stated.

If you would like to be involved in this exciting project, please visit our website at www.stpetersberkhamstedfriends.org.uk

This project is supported by

