

Register of Parks and Gardens of Special Historic Interest

West Norwood Cemetery and Crematorium

District Council: London Borough of Lambeth

County: Greater London

English Heritage File No: GD1847 II*

Grade:II*

Date Registered: 01 Oct 1987

Grid Ref: TQ3272

An early C19 cemetery founded in 1837 and originally known as South Metropolitan Cemetery, laid out to the design of William Tite.

Historic Development

Seven years after the formation in 1830 of the successful London Cemetery Company, (owners of Kensal Green Cemetery (qv), which opened in 1832), an Act of Parliament was passed, the purpose of which was to establish 'a cemetery for the interment of the dead, southward of the Metropolis' (quoted in Curl 1980). In the same year (1837) the South Metropolitan Cemetery Company was formed and this purchased land from the executors of Lord Chancellor Thurlow in what was then rural Norwood (Rocque, 1746). The cemetery, the second of the eight large London cemeteries established between 1832 and 1847, was designed by the architect William Tite (1798-1873). Tite was also the architect in 1854 for Brookwood Cemetery in Surrey (qv). The cemetery was laid out in the garden or pleasure ground style, and was the subject of criticism on these grounds from the influential cemetery theorist J C Loudon (*Gardener's Magazine* (1843); *On the Laying Out, Planting and Managing of Cemeteries* (1843)).

Some of this C19 planting appears to survive in the southern part of the site. The original design included two chapels, Anglican and Nonconformist. The latter was later adapted when, in 1915, the South Metropolitan Cemetery became one of the first to install a crematorium. Built by the French firm Toisai Fraudet of Paris, the first cremations using the gas furnaces took place in May 1915. By 1927 the success of the cemetery was recorded in an aerial photograph which shows the lawns covered in memorials (Brixton Illustrated). In 1936 the South Metropolitan Cemetery Company, having purchased additional ground adjoining the cemetery's main entrance, moved their offices from the City to the enlarged lodge house inside the entrance.

The Cemetery suffered extensive damage in the Second World War: both chapels were damaged and later demolished, the Nonconformist chapel in 1955 and the Anglican chapel in 1960. A new crematorium designed by A Underdown in 1960 replaced the original.

The South Metropolitan Cemetery at Norwood was purchased by the London Borough of Lambeth in 1966 and renamed West Norwood Cemetery. In 1977 the Local Authority Cemetery Order waived the right of burial in perpetuity enabling a considerable number of the older graves at Norwood to be re-used.

Description

Location, Area, Boundaries, Landform, Setting

West Norwood Memorial Park (formerly South Metropolitan Cemetery) is situated in densely populated West Norwood. Tulse Hill lies c 2km to the north-west and Streatham c 2km to the south. Dulwich Park (qv) lies c 1.5km to the north-east and Brockwell Park (qv) c 1.5km to the north-west. The walled and railed enclosure is bounded by Robson Road to the north, Norwood High Street to the west, by buildings along Martell and Romany Roads to the east, and by the buildings along Dunbar Street, Dunbar Road, Auckland Street, and Durban Road to the south-west, and Pilgrim Hill to the south. At the High Street end of the boundary a low brick plinth supports tall, cast-iron, mid C19 railings in Gothic style. At the end of the wall are tall brick piers with stone battlemented tops. Further lengths of mid C19 iron fencing in Gothic style are to be seen along Robson Road. All are listed grade II. The main body of the site is enclosed within high brick walls built to a height of c 3.5m, originally as a safeguard against body snatchers. The c 16ha site rises steadily to the east. The bell tower of the neighbouring St Luke's Anglican church to the south-west provides an interesting eyecatcher from points around the site.

Entrances and Approaches

The cemetery is approached from Norwood High Street where the brick-paved entrance forecourt is now (1999) enclosed with C20 iron railings and gates. An engraving of 1853 (LAD) shows the entrance leading directly from the road, but by 1890 (photograph, LAD) low iron railings had been introduced, and by 1938 (photograph, LAD) the forecourt was fully enclosed by the current c 1m high iron railings. In 1853 the forecourt was screened from the cemetery by shrubs and, with the introduction of railings around the forecourt, the shrubbery was extended along the boundary with Robson Road. The tradition of forecourt planting continues today (1999). A stone war memorial stands to the north of the forecourt.

Beyond the forecourt is an entrance (listed grade II) made in 1837 by William Tite. Designed in Tudor Gothic style and built from pale bricks with stone dressings, the entrance has a high central arch, originally hung with cast-iron double carriage gates (removed by 1999), with a low side arch for pedestrians. The main arch is decorated with a cornice which rises to a central peak above an escutcheon with South Metropolitan Cemetery in riband with the date. There is a smaller pedestrian entrance to the south. In addition to the main gateway there is a second pair of iron gates (listed grade II) c 20m to the south. West Norwood Library (c 1970), built on the site of three C19 houses, separates the two

gateways. An additional gateway leading out on to Pilgrim Hill in the south-west corner no longer functions.

Principal Building

The crematorium is situated on the highest point of the site. The building, designed by A Underdown and built on the site of the original crematorium, was constructed in 1960 from pink bricks with ironwork decorations, and replaces Tite's Nonconformist chapel, itself having been adapted as a crematorium in 1915 and demolished in 1955. Grilles at the base of the walls, the only remaining evidence of the old chapel, secure the catacombs where Tite himself is buried.

Gardens and Pleasure Grounds

The grounds are traversed by serpentine paths most of which are tarmacked. The lawns are planted with a mixture of deciduous and evergreen trees, the more mature of which are to be found to the south.

From the entrance arch the brick road passes, to the south, the superintendent's office. Rebuilt in 1950, the office is the second building on this site. The original, a gothic lodge by Tite which was enlarged in 1936 when the Cemetery Company relocated their offices from the City to Norwood, was demolished after suffering severe damage as the result of enemy action in the Second World War. The wide brick carriage drive continues for c 100m south-east before dividing. A brick road turns west to provide a drive to the iron gates in Norwood High Street, while a second serpentine path rises steadily to the south-east to become, after c 50m, the western and southern perimeter path. Some 5m to the north of the division the brick paving is discontinued and from that point all roads and paths are tarmacked. The main path continues to the north-east as a curving perimeter path. The ground between the northern perimeter path and the north boundary wall was cleared of some of the older monuments in the mid C20 and is currently (1999) used for new burials. Lesser paths lead south and provide a network of paths around monuments situated on the northern slopes of the site. As the northern perimeter path approaches the north-east corner it passes to the north a garden of remembrance, a rectangular lawn planted out with roses and enclosed within a screen of evergreens. The groundsmen's yard is situated in the far north-east corner, where for the first half of the C20 a glasshouse stood. South of the yard the path curves sharply passing, enclosed within iron railings, the Greek burial ground which was reserved in 1842 for the Brotherhood of the Greek Community in London. The mortuary chapel associated with this part of the cemetery was built in 1872 by a wealthy Greek merchant, Stephen Ralli, in memory of his younger son Augustus. The chapel, built in the Greek Revival style, is thought to have been designed by John Oldrid Scott (1842-1913, son of architect Sir Gilbert Scott (1811-78)). The path continues, rising steeply to the south, with views back to the Greek burial ground and southwards to the crematorium. After c 100m the path divides, the western branch encircling the new crematorium. At the top of the hill the main path follows the eastern boundary for c 200m, passing to the west the small plot reserved for the

parishioners of Sir Christopher Wren's city church, St Mary at Hill. Enclosed within iron railings, the ground was used as an annex to St Mary's churchyard when it became overcrowded in the mid C19 (Wilson 1973). Some 20m south of the burial ground the path curves west and, following the line of the south boundary wall, continues for c 350m where it turns north-west and, after a further c 300m, joins up with the brick path leading to the iron gates in Norwood High Street.

The path system which encircles the crematorium passes between it and the catacombs to the south. Constructed under Tite's Anglican chapel, the catacombs had space for 2000 coffins. The coffins were slowly and quietly lowered from the chapel into the vaults below by the use of an hydraulic pump manufactured by the engineering firm of Bramah, Prestage and Ball of London (Curl 1980). After the chapel was demolished in 1960 the catacombs were sealed and the site is today (1999) marked by brick walls enclosing a second garden of remembrance with lawns and rose beds. A path to the west of the crematorium curves for 200m down the hill to join up with the southern perimeter path. Occasional grass paths provide access to graves.

The cemetery contains a number of notable memorials, of which seven are listed grade II* and thirty-seven are listed grade II (for further details see Meller 1991).

References

J Curl, *A Celebration of Death* (1980), pp 223-4, 244-63

B Cherry and N Pevsner, *The Buildings of England: London 2 South* (1983), pp 340-2

J C Loudon, *Gardener's Magazine* (1843)

J C Loudon, *On the Laying Out, Planting and Managing of Cemeteries* (1843), p 69 and figs 42, 43

London Borough of Lambeth, *West Norwood Cemetery, Conservation and Landscape Improvement* (1971)

H Meller, *London Cemeteries* (1991), pp 218-31 J B Wilson, *The Story of Norwood* (1973), pp 17-19

Maps

J Rocque, *Plan of the Cities of London and Westminster and Borough of Southwark*, published 1746

OS 25" to 1 mile: 1st edition published 1868 3rd edition published 1901

OS 6" to 1 mile: 1932-41 I

Illustrations

Collection of sketches by Sargent, a local artist (Lambeth Archives Department)

Engraving showing the site from a high point to the west, 1853 (Lambeth Archives Department)

Collection of photographs, 1890 - 1960 (Lambeth Archives Department)

Aerial photograph, Brixton Illustrated Press, 1927, p 11 (Lambeth Archives Department)

Reasons for Designation

West Norwood Cemetery is included on the Register of Parks and Gardens of Special Historic Interest at Grade II* for the following principal reasons:

- West Norwood was the second commercial cemetery opened to serve London.
- The cemetery is a good example of an early Victorian cemetery laid out in the garden or pleasure ground style.
- The original structures, of which only the entrance arch survives, were designed by William Tite (1798-1873) who was also architect for Brookwood Cemetery (qv).
- The cemetery contains an outstanding collection of C19 and early C20 funerary monuments.
- The cemetery was the site of an early crematorium (1915), which was replaced in 1960.

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