

# A SHORT HISTORY OF EARLHAM CEMETERY, NORWICH

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## Background

In Roman times the dead were buried in cemeteries outside towns and the pagan Anglo-Saxons practised cremation but the Christian church insisted on burial, so for around a thousand years the normal practice was to bury the dead in the churchyard of the local parish church [1].

In Norwich at the start of the nineteenth century, dissenting groups had established their own burial grounds, including the Quakers at Gildencroft in 1670 [2], the Unitarians on Colegate from 1688 [3] and the Jews at Quaker's Lane, St. Martin's at Oak in 1813 [4].

But until the mid nineteenth century Norwich's dead were mostly buried in the city's Anglican churchyards [5].

By this time many of Norwich's churchyards were full and the only way to make more space for burial was to raise the level of the ground [5]. This was noted as early as 1671 by the diarist John Evelyn, who wrote that most Norwich churchyards "were filled up with earth or rather the congestion of dead bodies one upon another, for want of earth etc., to the very top of the walls, and many above the walls, so as the Churches seemed to be built in pits" [6].

Bodies were often buried very close to the surface. In May 1850 William Lee, a government health inspector, visited Norwich and noted that the graveyards were full and scattered with fragments of bones [7].

It didn't help public health that five of Norwich's ten parish pumps were situated next to churchyards [7]. The water from the parish pump by the churchyard at St. John Maddermarket was described as "almost pure essence of churchyard" by Norwich's first public analyst and the bright sparkling quality of the water was reportedly due to high levels of nitrates, from decaying bodies [5, 8].

Epidemics of cholera from 1831 led to even fuller churchyards and an increased concern for public health in cities [9, 10].

## Rosary Cemetery

The Rosary Cemetery, the first non-denominational cemetery in England, was established on Rosary Road in 1819 by Thomas Drummond, a Presbyterian minister. People were free to be buried here with the religious service of their choice or no religious service, depending on their preference [5].

The first burial was Thomas Drummond's own wife Ann in November 1821, whose body was reinterred from the Octagon Chapel where she had been buried two years earlier [5, 11].

## National Legislation

In 1848, following another cholera epidemic, the first Public Health Act was passed and began the legislative process that would establish public cemeteries throughout Britain [9].

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This was followed by a series of Burial Acts (1852 – 1857) that established a national system of public cemeteries [9].

The new cemeteries had consecrated areas for use by the Anglican church and unconsecrated grounds for Nonconformists. The Burial Board Act of 1854 allowed town councils to form Burial Boards to run them [9].

## A New Cemetery for Norwich

In April 1854 the Mayor of Norwich received an Order from the Home Secretary that all burials in Norwich churchyards should be discontinued from 1<sup>st</sup> February 1855 [12, 16].

The Norwich Burial Board was set up and it advertised in the local press for areas of land that might be suitable for a new cemetery. Local landowners were also approached and a number of possible sites were considered [12].

Strong contenders included sites on Earlham Road, at Denmark's Farm (off Sprowston Road) and just off Unthank Road [12].

Other possible sites were quickly rejected for reasons of geography. Alington near Brooke and Rackheath were too far from the city, a site near St. Augustine's Gate had marl (*see Note 1*) near the surface (and a sitting tenant) and the approaches to sites at Plumstead Road and by the Rosary Cemetery were too hilly and awkward for horse drawn vehicles [12].

Mr. Trafford at Lakenham refused to sell any of his land and the Town Close Estate was "determined to resist to their utmost the appropriation of any part of this estate for the purpose of a cemetery". The inhabitants of Pockthorpe were opposed to having a cemetery on Mousehold Heath "for they would rather see the furse bushes bloom than grave stones planted" (*see Note 2*) [12].

Faced with delays in acquiring land, the government granted an extension for the opening of the cemetery to August 1855, followed by further extensions to 1<sup>st</sup> January 1856 and finally 1<sup>st</sup> March 1856 [12].

For a while it looked like Norwich might have two new cemeteries and the Burial Board put the question of one or two cemeteries to a vote in April 1855 and the result was a tie. But in the end there was no suitable second site and so eventually just over 34 acres of farmland at Earlham were bought from Mr. John Cater in 1855 [12, 13]. A loan of £5,000 from Gurney's Bank paid for the purchase and construction work [12].

Mr. Edward Everett Benest, the City Surveyor from 1854 to 1859 [14], drew up the plans for the new cemetery, including lodges, offices and twin Gothic chapels and the layout of the ground. There were separate chapels and burials areas for Church of England burials (the consecrated section) and other denominations (the unconsecrated section) and a separate chapel and burial ground for Jews [12].

Messrs Ling and Balls won the tender for the chapels, lodges and gates and work on the new cemetery started immediately. Separate contracts were awarded for clearing the land and sowing grass seed, planting and laying out the roadways. Work continued into the autumn and winter and

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was still not complete by the end of the year. Delays included storm damage and a wait for a crop of turnips to be dug up and removed [12].

One of Messrs Ling and Balls' workers, 32 year old James Baldry, died on 20<sup>th</sup> December 1855 of injuries he sustained when he fell while erecting scaffolding in one of the chapels. His was the first burial in the new cemetery, in the unconsecrated section of the Cemetery [12, 15].

## Early Days

Of the original area of 34 acres, 23 acres were put to immediate use and the remainder leased out for agricultural use until required [12, 16]. The Cemetery opened on 6<sup>th</sup> March 1856 [16].

At first there were very few headstones but trees and shrubs were planted and would have made the new cemetery look less bare. The Burial Board approved the inscription on each headstone [12, 16].

Two Superintendents looked after the Cemetery and assisted with digging graves, for the wage of £1 per week, plus 2 shillings for each grave. The Superintendents lived in the lodges rent free [12].

In April 1856 the Burial Board ordered that four policemen should be on duty on Sundays, "to keep out dogs and disreputable characters", though this practice ceased in August 1856 [12].

The original part of Earlham Cemetery is shown on Morant's 1873 map of Norwich [17]. It does not reach as far as Dereham Road and its eastern boundary meets Workhouse Lane (now Bowthorpe Road) opposite The Earl of Leicester Public House (demolished in 2005 [27]; shown on the map as "The Lord Leicester PH").



From Morant's 1873 map of Norwich. Copyright © Norfolk County Council.

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## Expansion

Earlham Cemetery has been extended several times since it was first opened.

In 1874 a further 15 acres were added to the north-east of the site. A Roman Catholic chapel was erected, to a design by Mr Pearce, an architect appointed by the Catholic community [12, 19]. The chapel can still be seen, on the left of the main drive by the Earlham Road gates.

In 1875 the Burials Board adopted a suggestion from a Mr. J.J. Winter that a piece of ground in the new section should be kept for the burial of soldiers from Britannia Barracks and in 1876 he proposed that a monument should be raised in their memory. Money was raised by public subscription and a statue, "The Spirit of the Army", was unveiled by Lord Waveney in 1878 [12, 16]. The statue was designed by John Bell, a sculptor from Suffolk, and made by Doulton's [14] (see Note 5).



The Roman Catholic chapel (left) and "The Spirit of the Army" and army burial ground (right).

In 1884 a field at the north-east of the Cemetery, part of the 1874 land purchase, was swapped for land near the Earlham Road entrance [12] (see Note 4). By the time of the 1886 Ordnance Survey Map the Cemetery had its current eastern boundary, adjoining Dereham Road and what are now the gardens of houses in Helena, Winter and St. Thomas' Roads [18].

When the Cemetery was first opened the terraced houses that now occupy the area between the Cemetery and Heigham Road (formerly Hangman's Lane) had not been built. Belvoir and Gladstone Streets and Alexandra Road were built first, followed by Sandringham Road (then called Denmark Road) from the 1860s to 1880s. Connaught Road, St. Philip's Road, part of Edinburgh Road and most of Stafford Street followed from 1877. Finally Helena, Winter and St. Thomas' Roads were built around 1890 [21]. The 1886 Ordnance Survey Map shows a cricket ground on the current site of St. Thomas' Road and Winter Road [18].

By 1892 a large isolation hospital was under construction along part of the western boundary of the Cemetery – this is now the Julian Hospital. Also in 1892 a large triangle of 40 acres of land to the west was purchased from S. Gurney Buxton and Edward North Buxton, the trustees of the late John Gurney. Some seven acres on the south side of the new hospital were laid out for cemetery

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use immediately and the remainder were let as allotments [12, 19]. Four more acres of land at Earlham Rise were purchased in 1901 [12].

In December 1893 the Eastern Daily Press reported that “peaceful occupant” number 57,759 had just been buried. This number was equivalent to more than half the living inhabitants of Norwich at that time [38].

On the 1907 Ordnance Survey Map the Cemetery’s western boundary is level with the Volunteer Public House on Earlham Road (325 Earlham Road, converted to private housing in 1997 [27]). Land to the west of the Cemetery up to Gipsy Lane and Bowthorpe Road (the Cemetery’s current western boundary) was being used as allotments. Farrow Road did not exist [26].

A new military burial area was established at the end of the First World War in Section 54 and a cross was erected there in the early 1920s [12].

By the mid 1920s the Cemetery extended as far west as Farrow Road (built c.1912; see *note 6*). The 18 acres beyond Farrow Road were laid out from the late 1920s onwards and the Cemetery reached its present size of 85 acres [12, 22].

## Second World War

During the Second World War Norwich was bombed by German aircraft and during the two “Baedeker Raids” of the nights of 27<sup>th</sup>- 28<sup>th</sup> April and 29<sup>th</sup> – 30<sup>th</sup> April 1942 the city suffered its greatest number of casualties [24].

There was extensive damage to the city centre and several 250kg and 500kg bombs fell on the Cemetery and in surrounding streets [23, 24]. Helena Road in particular was badly affected, with houses on the western side of the street being hit by three 500kg bombs [24]. The bottom of the street was bombed on 27<sup>th</sup>- 28<sup>th</sup> April and the top of the street on 29<sup>th</sup> – 30<sup>th</sup> April.



Altogether at least 235 people died in Norwich in those two raids [25]. Derek James describes what the raid would have been like in the Eastern Daily Press [28] and an associated article lists the names of those who died [29].

In 1946 a memorial to the civilians killed in the raids was laid out in the section of the Cemetery to the west of Farrow Road, where over a hundred of the bodies had been buried in May 1942. In April 2012 a special ceremony was held in the Cemetery to mark the 70th anniversary of the raids [30, 42].

Left: The memorial to civilians killed in Norwich’s “Blitz”.

## Cremation

Cremation is now more popular than burial, but this is a relatively recent trend.

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In 1874 the Cremation Society of England was founded but met with much opposition from the general public. The first legal cremation occurred in 1885 at Woking Crematorium [9]. The Cremation Acts of 1900 and 1902 enabled public provision for individuals who wished to be cremated and the first municipal crematorium was opened at Hull in 1901 [9]. In 1925 the Norwich Burial Board considered whether to build a Crematorium in the new section of the Cemetery west of Farrow Road but the potential number of cremations (2,380 in Great Britain in 1924) didn't justify the expense [12]. The Crematorium at Horsham St. Faith, just north of Norwich, opened in 1935 [39].

According to the 1945 City of Norwich Local Plan, 98% of the dead were buried at that time. With 1,500 deaths per annum in Norwich, the authors calculated that three acres of land would be required each year for burials, a cemetery the size of Earlham Park every fifty years [34].

After the Second World War cremation became widely used. Cremation rates in Great Britain rose from 34.7% in 1960 to 72.44% in 2008, according to figures published by The Cremation Society of Great Britain [35].

In Earlham Cemetery the original twin chapels designed by E. E. Benest were replaced by a crematorium building on the same site in 1963 – 64 [14, 19]. The building was designed by the City Architect, David Percival [14] and was opened in 1964 by the Bishop of Thetford [31].

The Crematorium and adjacent Memorial Garden were sold off by Norwich City Council in October 1998 and are now run by Dignity plc [31, 37], though the remainder of Earlham Cemetery is still owned by Norwich City Council [32].

In spite of the popularity of cremation, the Cemetery is filling up rapidly and this had led to recent proposals to reuse burial space for “natural burials”, as described in a recent article in the Evening News [33].

## Cemetery Management

From its opening until the 1960s, most of the grass in the Cemetery was cut by teams of men with scythes. The grass crop was sold for animal fodder, but with the decline of horses in particular, it became more difficult to sell [12, 38].

After the Second World War, lawn mowers started to be used and sections of the Cemetery were laid out as “lawn cemetery”, to make mowing easier. From 1965 onwards the oldest parts of the Cemetery were levelled and kerbs around graves were removed or buried. There was even talk of removing old gravestones, reseeding the Cemetery with less vigorous grasses or using growth retardants to stop grass from growing too long. Fortunately these plans were halted in the 1980s following public outcry [38].



As a result, wildflowers such as Cowslip (*Primula veris*, **pictured right**) and Meadow Saxifrage (*Saxifraga granulata*) can still be found in the Cemetery [36].

[Friends of Earlham Cemetery](#) was founded in 2011 and aims to work with Norwich City Council to protect, conserve and enhance Earlham Cemetery for wildlife and as a place of freedom, recreation and enjoyment for the long-term benefit of all sections of the local community and other visitors.

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## Notes

1. Marl is a mud rich in lime (calcium carbonate). It was often dug from marl pits and used to lime fields to increase their fertility but it would have been a difficult material in which to dig graves.
2. Furse is an alternative name for furze or gorse, which still blooms on Mousehold Heath today.
3. Morant's 1873 map [17] also shows the "Norwich Union Workhouse", whose history can be found on Peter Higginbotham's Workhouses website [40]. The map also marks a "Small Pox and Fever Hospital", just south of the Jewish Burial Ground. Also known as the "Iron Hospital", it was built in the early 1870s on Cemetery land and was used for smallpox cases - and even as emergency operating rooms for the Norfolk and Norwich Hospital during the 1870s. In 1893 the new isolation hospital would have taken over its function [12, 41].
4. This field was sold for housing in 1885, built on in the 1890s and is now occupied by Helena Road.
5. For more details see <http://sculpturefornorwich.co.uk/sculpturenewsitem.php?id=44> and <http://racns.co.uk/sculptures.asp?action=getsurvey&id=91>. The monument was restored in 2013/14.
6. The new road was proposed in March 1909 and the road was built as part of an unemployment relief scheme in 1911. The road was widened in 1927. In April 1913, an allotment holder complained to the Burial Board that grass moved onto his plot during road construction took him a month to clear and ruined his potato crop [12].

Earlham Cemetery is sometimes referred to as Norwich Cemetery, Norwich City Cemetery or Earlham Road Cemetery.

## References

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7. Frank Meeres, "A History Of Norwich" pp153 - 154. Phillimore & Co. Ltd, 1998.
8. See George Plunkett's Photographs website for photographs of the pump - <http://www.georgeplunkett.co.uk/Norwich/stj.htm>.
9. Friends of Beckett Street Cemetery, The Historical Development of Cemeteries in England (no longer on their website but a copy exists at <https://darlingtonhistoricalsociety.wordpress.com/general-information/the-historic-development-of-cemeteries-in-england/>).
10. Meeres p151.
11. Meeres p122.
12. Norwich Burial Board Minutes, N/TC 5 ... (1854 – 1929), Norfolk Record Office. The Burial Board's function was taken over by Norwich City Council from 22<sup>nd</sup> November 1929.
13. The Tithe Maps on Norfolk County Council Old Map Explorer (<http://www.historic-maps.norfolk.gov.uk/mapexplorer/>) date between 1836 and about 1850 and show the area as farm fields, apart from three small buildings on the Cemetery side of what is now Bowthorpe Road. See <http://www.historic-maps.norfolk.gov.uk/tithe.aspx> for more about these maps.
14. Nikolaus Pevsner and Bill Wilson, "The Buildings of England. Norfolk 1: Norwich and North-East". Penguin Books, 1997.  
For more information about the sculptor John Bell (1811 – 1895) see [http://yourarchives.nationalarchives.gov.uk/index.php?title=Bell%2C\\_John\\_%281811-1895%29\\_Sculptor](http://yourarchives.nationalarchives.gov.uk/index.php?title=Bell%2C_John_%281811-1895%29_Sculptor).
15. James Baldry's headstone is in "Norwich Monuments and Memorials" on George Plunkett's Photographs website - <http://www.georgeplunkett.co.uk/Norwich/monumentsandmemorials.htm>.

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16. Earlham Road Cemetery, Norwich HEART - <http://www.heritagecity.org/research-centre/social-innovation/earlham-road-cemetery.htm>.
17. Morant's Map and other old maps of Norfolk and Norwich can be viewed on the Norfolk County Council Historical Map Image Viewer - <http://www.historic-maps.norfolk.gov.uk/mapimageviewer/>.
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29. Norwich Blitz – Roll of Honour - <http://www.edp24.co.uk/lifestyle/family-history/victims-of-the-blight-in-norwich/norwich-blight-roll-of-honour>.
30. Emma Knights, "Special service at Earlham Cemetery remembers those who lost their lives in the Baedeker Raids." Eastern Daily Press, 28<sup>th</sup> April 2012 - [http://www.eveningnews24.co.uk/news/special\\_service\\_at\\_earlham\\_cemetery\\_remembers\\_those\\_who\\_lost\\_their\\_lives\\_in\\_the\\_baedeker\\_raids\\_1\\_1362780](http://www.eveningnews24.co.uk/news/special_service_at_earlham_cemetery_remembers_those_who_lost_their_lives_in_the_baedeker_raids_1_1362780).
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33. Dan Grimmer, "Lack of space to bury Norwich's dead means city cemetery graves could be recycled". Evening News, 12<sup>th</sup> December 2012 - [http://www.eveningnews24.co.uk/news/lack\\_of\\_space\\_to\\_bury\\_norwich\\_s\\_dead\\_means\\_city\\_cemetery\\_graves\\_could\\_be\\_recycled\\_1\\_1739118](http://www.eveningnews24.co.uk/news/lack_of_space_to_bury_norwich_s_dead_means_city_cemetery_graves_could_be_recycled_1_1739118).
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36. From records kept by members of Friends of Earlham Cemetery. See our plant list at [http://www.friendsofearlhamcemetery.co.uk/Plants\\_of\\_Earlham\\_Cemetery.pdf](http://www.friendsofearlhamcemetery.co.uk/Plants_of_Earlham_Cemetery.pdf).
37. "Norwich and Norfolk Crematoria", Norwich Advertiser, 3<sup>rd</sup> September 1999. After the sale, the Crematorium and chapel were upgraded and the Memorial Gardens were landscaped, with a new pond and water feature.
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