

KENSAL GREEN CEMETERY: LONDON'S FIRST GREAT EXTRAMURAL NECROPOLIS

by

Paul Coones

Interment in Towns: the Movement for Reform

Rates of urban growth in nineteenth-century Britain were prodigious. The rise of the manufacturing, mining and railway towns, and of the resorts and ports, represented an unprecedented change in the country's urban geography. In terms of sheer size and complexity, however, Cobbett's 'great Wen' remained supreme and unchallenged at the summit of the urban hierarchy, a unique city occupying a class by itself and possessed of an extraordinary momentum which bewildered contemporaries. 'It would be a labour of little less difficulty', wrote an observer in 1802, 'to attempt to describe the varying form of a summer cloud, than to trace from year to year the outline of London'.¹ The population of Greater London was already in excess of one million; by mid-century the 'province of bricks'² contained some 2,685,000 people, and every day 'some new street takes the place of the green field'.³ When Queen Victoria died in 1901 the figure had risen to 6,581,000.⁴ The concentration of large numbers within a restricted area, taken in the context of the speed, nature and pattern of the city's growth, had the most deleterious effects upon the health, living conditions and welfare of great numbers of citizens until the belated progress of municipal reform resulted in the provision of basic services. One of the greatest social problems posed was that of the disposal of the dead, not only because 'Change—so busy in this eventful century with Life—is busier yet with Death',⁵ but also on account of the abuses which characterized the wholly inadequate system of burial within towns.

Many of the inner city graveyards presented truly horrific spectacles of decomposing corpses, piles of bones and broken coffins, with corrupt sextons and drunken gravediggers cramming in new burials amid an atmosphere of stench and depravity.⁶ Dickens's portrayal of 'consecrated ground' in Chapter 16 of *Bleak House*⁷ was no exaggeration; indeed, it was in some respects a restrained account of a subject whose particulars were considered so appalling by some commentators as to be 'wholly unfit for perusal'.⁸ The details of these assaults upon health, morality and public decency were recorded, however, in polemics, periodical articles, and even in poetry. A fine example of the first is George Alfred Walker's graphic pamphlet, *Burial-ground incendiarism: the last fire at the bone-house in the Spa-Fields Golgotha, or, the minute anatomy of grave-digging in London*, published in 1846.⁹ An article appearing in *The Builder* in 1843 was uncompromising:

This London, this centre of civilization, this condensation of wisdom and intelligence, this huge wedge and conglomerate of pride, buries—no, it does not bury—but stores and piles up 50,000 of its dead, to putrify, to rot, to give out exhalations, to darken the air with vapours, faugh! it is loathsome to think of it; but it is strictly true, 50,000 desecrated corpses are every year stacked in some 150 limited pits of church-yards, burial-grounds they are called, and we talk of decent and Christian burial.¹⁰

The influence of the 'miasmatisers', who believed that epidemics resulted from the noxious vapours (miasmas) emanating from burial grounds, is evident in a poem entitled *The Cemetery*, published in 1848:

*A quagmire of old bones, where darly bred,
The slimy life is busy with the dead.
Reeks from that bloated earth miama's breath,
The full-fed taint of undigested death;
Thence, like the fumes from sleeping glutton's throat,
The noisome vapours of her surfeit float.*¹¹

Condemnation of this 'Mezentian strife',¹² and of the evils which resulted from the burial of the dead in the midst of the living spurred certain individuals to press for extramural interment—the establishment of properly run cemeteries situated beyond the confines of the metropolis. This call had been heard before, from figures such as John Evelyn and Sir Christopher Wren in the seventeenth century, and Sir John Vanbrugh in the eighteenth, but it was largely ignored. Thomas Lewis, in an energetic pamphlet of 1721, proclaimed that burial in towns and churches was contrary to ancient and civilized practice, having been 'begun thro' Pride, improv'd by Superstition, and encourag'd for Lucre'.¹³ The financial aspect was indeed an important one, for the crowded graveyards were going concerns, involving several vested interests. Clergymen and ministers were reluctant to relinquish their monopoly of burial fees and payments, and dishonest gravediggers enjoyed an extra source of income by selling coffins back to the undertakers. Nevertheless, the activities of committed campaigners, the production of some crucial Parliamentary reports, the threat of cholera epidemics, and the popularity of the miasma theory combined to create a mood for reform in the second quarter of the nineteenth century.

One of the most prolific writers on the evils of intramural interment was the surgeon George Alfred Walker, who declared burial places in the neighbourhood of the living to be 'a national evil—the harbingers, if not the originators of pestilence; the cause, direct or indirect, of inhumanity, immorality, and irreligion'.¹⁴ The threat to hygiene presented by 'the pestiferous exhalations of the dead'¹⁵ was not the only issue involved. The cemetery movement was also inspired by changes in social behaviour,

aesthetic taste and moral outlook. The emphasis upon private property and social position was joined with an enthusiasm for public display, a confidence in the existence of a heavenly afterlife, and a concern for moral enlightenment to produce in the ordered arrangement of monuments in a cemetery 'the most convincing tokens of a nation's progress in civilization and in the arts'.¹⁶ Not only should the dead, whose 'business with this world is ended', be reverently laid to rest away from 'the din and tumult of a populous city', but the places set aside for them might become 'sweet breathing-places'¹⁷ for contemplation, the indulgence of sweet melancholy, and the improvement, enlightenment and education of those whose lives had not yet run their course. Cemeteries were to be 'silent records of the past, and stern tokens of the future',¹⁸ sobering yet restful and strengthening retreats of instruction and consolation. 'A garden cemetery and monumental decoration,' wrote John Strang in 1831, 'are not only beneficial to public morals, to the improvement of manners, but are likewise calculated to extend virtuous and generous feelings.'¹⁹ Cemeteries could be pleasant places, carefully laid out and planted with trees and shrubs, diversified by tasteful monuments and dignified by well-designed lodges and chapels. The most influential vision of the complete cemetery was that of the energetic Scot, John Claudius Loudon (1783-1843), who worked out all these aspects—practical, artistic, botanical, arboricultural, architectural, sculptural, aesthetic, moral, educational and recreational—in great detail. 'Churchyards and cemeteries', he declared, 'are scenes not only calculated to improve the morals and the taste, and by their botanical riches to cultivate the intellect, but they serve as *historical records*.'²⁰

The principal model for Loudon, Strang and others who sought to promote the garden cemetery concept was Père-Lachaise in Paris, whose serpentine avenues were laid out in 1804.²¹ The barrister George Frederick Carden, one of the main protagonists in the drive for the establishment of cemeteries around London, complained that the metropolis was put to shame not only by the example of the French capital, but also by some of the British provincial cities. Even before the end of the eighteenth century, Belfast and Edinburgh had acquired cemeteries unconnected with churches. Liverpool's St. James's Cemetery, set in a landscaped stone quarry, was completed in 1829. The immensely impressive Glasgow necropolis, a true city of the dead, was created in a converted park on a hill next to the cathedral. This cemetery was opened in 1832, the architectural composition, the spectacular nature of the site and the resultant landscape effect being widely admired.²² Meanwhile, Carden's efforts in London had led to the formation of a General Cemetery Company, following a public meeting held in June 1830.²³ The Company was to be a commercial enterprise, geared

to raising capital through the sale of shares to individuals. Some early plans for extramural cemeteries,²⁴ notably several—including a vast pyramid²⁵—with respect to a site at Primrose Hill, came to nothing. Finally a location was chosen at Kensal Green, then a hamlet set in rural surroundings west of London. In July 1832 the Royal Assent was given to a Bill for establishing a general cemetery for the interment of the dead in the neighbourhood of the metropolis.²⁶

The Cemetery of All Souls at Kensal Green

The site of the new cemetery lay between the Harrow Road and the Grand Junction Canal. Care was taken with the arrival of the railways to minimize the disturbance: Stephenson's London and Birmingham Railway (1837) skirted the cemetery on the north, and Brunel's Great Western (1838) passed by to the south, on the other side of the canal. Thirty-nine acres were allotted to the Established Church and fifteen given over to Dissenters.²⁷ Dissenters could be denied burial by the Church of England, and in any case did not wish to be interred in consecrated ground. (The Dissenters had, incidentally, established a cemetery as early as the seventeenth century, at Bunhill Fields.) The layout of Kensal Green, with its winding avenues and circle (Fig. 1) is said to have been influenced by John Nash's recently completed plan for Regent's Park, but it is not known for certain who was responsible for it.

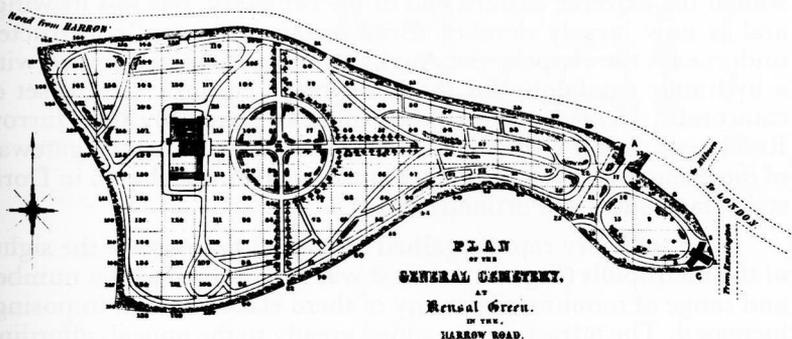


Fig. 1

Plan of the General Cemetery, at Kensal Green, from W. Justyne, *Illustrated guide to Kensal Green Cemetery* [1861]. The plan lacks a scale, but at its greatest extent the cemetery then extended for a fraction over half a mile from east to west and a fifth of a mile from north to south, and covered 56 acres. A further 21 acres on the west side (not shown) were added later. The numbered rectangles, employed in the present article to describe the locations of the monuments, are approximately 150 feet by 100 feet.

The cemetery was consecrated by the Bishop of London on 24 January 1833,²⁸ and Carden's insistence that the style of monuments should be left to individual taste prevailed: the public were to be permitted to erect what they pleased.

The designs for the buildings were the subject of an architectural competition and subsequently of a good deal of disagreement. The prize was awarded to Henry Edward Kendall's set of fantastical gothic buildings, including a chapel and a water gate (for funerals arriving by canal). Criticized for being insufficiently sepulchral and in 'rather a florid style',²⁹ the scheme was never realized, although Kendall received support from G. F. Carden, among others. What seems to have been fatal to Kendall was the attitude of the chairman of the Company, the banker Sir John Dean Paul, who outmanoeuvred the other members of the board in order that his unshakeable preference for the classical style might prevail. Kendall's gothic extravaganza progressed no further than the drawing board, and Greek Revival buildings were constructed instead, under the auspices of the architect John Griffith of Finsbury (1796-1888) with details of the designs perhaps being supplied by William Chadwick.³⁰

Two chapels were built: one, in Doric style, for Anglicans ('B' in Fig. 1) and the other, in Ionic, for Dissenters ('C' in Fig. 1). Situated west of the Circle and completed in 1837, the former is much the larger (Figs 2 and 12). Both had tetrastyle porticos and flanking colonnades, but the Dissenters' chapel, by the boundary wall at the extreme eastern end of the cemetery, has lost its wings and is now largely derelict. Brick catacombs were constructed underneath the chapels, the Anglican chapel being equipped with a hydraulic catafalque for the lowering of coffins. A third set of catacombs, located north of the Anglican chapel by the Harrow Road wall, has a colonnade above. The main entrance gateway of the cemetery ('A' in Fig. 1) comprises a triumphal arch in Doric style, fashioned in Portland Stone.

The cemetery rapidly gained a reputation as one of the sights of the metropolis (Fig. 3). Interest was maintained as the number and range of monuments, many of them elaborate and imposing, increased. The attractive site added greatly to the appeal, affording views of the Surrey hills, with the 'rich foliage of Kensington Gardens in the foreground'.³¹ Many commentators contrasted 'this beautiful and *well-ordered* City of the Dead'³² with the ghastly city burial grounds,³³ proclaiming with enthusiastic approval how this adorned place 'allures us to enter its sacred precincts'³⁴:

What an escape from the atmosphere of London burial-places to the air of Kensal Green, —from the choked charnel-house to that verdant wide expanse, studded with white tombs of infinite shapes, and stone-marked graves, covered with flowers of every brilliant dye!³⁵

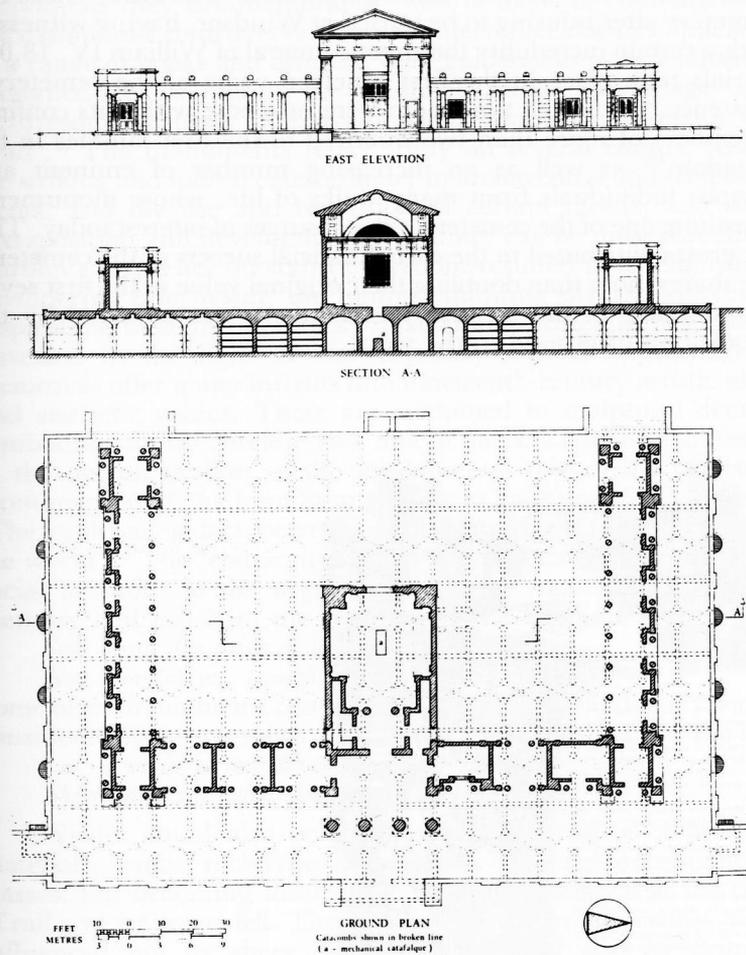


Fig. 2

The Anglican chapel, Kensal Green Cemetery: elevation, section and plan. A drawing by J.J. Sambrook from F.H.W. Sheppard (ed.), *Survey of London*, Vol. 37: *Northern Kensington*. 1973, London: Athlone Press/University of London, Fig. 89.

Success was assured when two children of George III, the Duke of Sussex (d. 1843) and Princess Sophia (d. 1848) were interred at Kensal Green, thereby setting a fashion. The Duke chose the cemetery after refusing to be buried at Windsor, having witnessed with a certain incredulity the chaotic funeral of William IV. 18,000 burials took place in the first nineteen years of the cemetery's existence,³⁶ by which time there were in repose within its confines 'members of more than two hundred of the first families in the kingdom'³⁷ as well as an increasing number of eminent and famous individuals from many walks of life, whose monuments constitute one of the cemetery's chief sources of interest today. This progress contributed to the early financial success of the cemetery, the shares more than doubling their original value in the first seven years. Later in the century the cemetery was enlarged by the acquisition of ground to the west.



Lady Mary Wortley Montague describes the burial-places about Constantinople as appearing more extensive than the city itself; and Mr. St. John, remarks—"I know of few spots on earth so productive of calm thoughts, and hushed and delightful feelings as that mysterious valley, where the dust of the Egyptian kings reposes." Our cemeteries, yet in their first bloom and verdure, have less of magnificence, less of space, less of solitude; yet in them will these calm thoughts and elevated feelings spring up, and blossom under the eye of Heaven. To erect a monument to desert, is a deed, says Godwin, "the more entitled to commutation, as it is refined, and remote from the grosser conceptions of the majority of the species;" and the same authority decides that his heart must be "made of impenetrable stuff," who does not attribute a certain sacredness to the grave of one he loved, and feel peculiar emotions stirring in his soul as he approaches it!

Fig. 3

L. Blanchard, A visit to the General Cemetery at Kensal Green, *Ainsworth's Magazine*, 2, 1842, pp. 177-88, p. 188. The upper part of this stylized picture depicts the principal approach to the Anglican chapel, with the Ducrow mausoleum on the left and the monument to John St. John Long on the right, drawn much larger than the reality and dwarfing the figures.

Kensal Green: The Monuments

The cemetery's monuments, their styles, epitaphs, and the individuals they commemorated, were a focus of contemporary discussion and controversy. Lists of interred celebrities appeared in a range of books and articles,³⁸ and guidebooks were published, 'designed to exemplify the eminent public advantage and picturesque beauties of that admirably-adapted asylum for the dead'.³⁹ The monuments repay study on several counts. Many are striking and indeed extraordinary in architectural and sculptural terms, and the use and repetition of certain motifs, and their juxtaposition and development over time, can be most revealing. Carden's insistence on stylistic freedom resulted in a delightful if bewildering eclecticism, the tombs exhibiting diverse sources of inspiration, often incongruously mixed but executed with bravado. Assessed in the light of contemporary critical appraisal, the memorials offer many insights into nineteenth-century artistic ideas and aesthetic values. These are contained in sculptural details, symbolism, stylistic preferences, and in the conception, manifested in the overall design, of the fundamental role of the cemetery monument itself. As John Strang wrote in his *Necropolis Glasguensis*, 'The tomb has, in fact, been the great chronicler of taste throughout the world'.⁴⁰ The 'elaborate iconography of death'⁴¹ also reflected social attitudes in the urge to record the virtues, preserve the memory and proclaim the standing of the deceased:

*Still must 'the pride of life' outlast its term,
Not humbled yet, though levell'd with the worm.*⁴²

Some of the monuments cost thousands of pounds, and many people considered such expenditure to be distasteful and selfish, the rich . . . e'en in sorrow finding vent for spleen,
*Shame art, and squander cash at Kensall Green.*⁴³

Wealth could also be displayed in the choice of building materials, 'exotic' rock-types being at first restricted to the moneyed classes, but becoming more common and variegated as the costs of rail and sea travel fell. The diffusion pattern is interesting, being influenced not by sheer distance alone, but also by fashion, availability, the pattern of transport routes and by social stratification. Hard-wearing granites, for example, came from as far afield as Rubislaw (Aberdeen) and Peterhead in Scotland, Bessbrook (near Newry) in Ireland, and outcrops situated at opposite ends of England (Shap and Cornwall).⁴⁴

Several broad classes of monument may be identified, although in view of the diverse combinations of features encountered it would be unrealistic to expect a perfect classification in which the categories were mutually exclusive. The mausolea, however, make up a distinctive group. In many instances they were erected for families,

whose members confidently anticipated reunion after death. Characteristically taking the form of a roofed building, they are commonly classical or Graeco-Egyptian in style, presenting the appearance of miniature temples. Some have imposing front entrances and stained glass at the rear,

. . . storied Windows richly dight,
Casting a dimm religious light.

Several of the best, some of them massive, can be found on or near the prestigious Central Avenue. That of Captain George Robertson Aikman (1844), on the south side of the Central Avenue (76), has a typical pediment and Doric columns *in antis*. On the north side of the West Central Avenue, west of the Anglican chapel (140, W), is the granite mausoleum, in simplified Egyptian style, of George William Frederick Charles, second Duke of Cambridge (d. 1904), a grandson of George III. The death of this famous Commander-in-Chief of the British army was the occasion of the last truly great funeral to be held at Kensal Green. *The Times*⁴⁵ compared the event with the funeral of the Duke of Wellington in 1852, and in a full description of the procession listed the occupants of the twenty-one carriages: H.M. The King, H.R.H. The Prince of Wales, eleven members of foreign royal houses, and an impressive parade of the aristocracy and the military. The route from Westminster Abbey was lined with vast crowds, and the private ceremony in the cemetery was attended by massed bands, guard of honour, choir, and a firing party. Finally the strains of the *Last Post*, sounded by the buglers, reached the ears of the expectant throng at the cemetery gates.

There are also several large gothic mausolea, including some in what might aptly if non-technically be termed the 'sunken church steeple' style. That of John Gibson the architect (d. 1892), on the south side of the Central Avenue (65), stands on a granite base and is made of Portland Stone and a soft red sandstone, juxtaposed to give a striped effect. On each side of the monument—a hollow, belfry-like arrangement—is a pointed arch enclosing a double-arched opening with central colonnette; on one face, below, is a single gargoye: a nice touch.

Following the mausolea, there is a second class embracing a wide range of other free-standing monuments. The diversity of these individual architectural and sculptural compositions defies strict categorization, but three general types are in evidence: the sarcophagus or urn inside a structure or under a canopy; the sculptured figure fashioned in relief, or set within a recess; and free-standing sculpture placed upon a pedestal, podium or plinth. An example of the first is the tomb of John Gordon (d. 1840), on the south side of the Northern Branch Avenue (near the western

end of the boundary between 58 and 57). An urn on a pedestal is enclosed by four thick columns supporting a pedimented canopy decorated at the corners with acroteria in the form of little Graeco-Egyptian heads and in the centre with a butterfly (the symbol of the Resurrection). Balusters surround the whole, with ball finials upon the sturdier standards at the corners and on either side of the gate (Fig. 4). The monument is a good example of the neo-Egyptian style which for a time was very popular and is widely represented at Kensal Green.⁴⁶ Examples of the second are Ninon Michaelis (1895), on the north side of the Central Avenue (37, N), a large classical female figure in relief, adopting a languid, grief-stricken pose; and James Ward the painter and engraver (d. 1859), a standing figure of the muse of painting (by J.H. Foley) in a

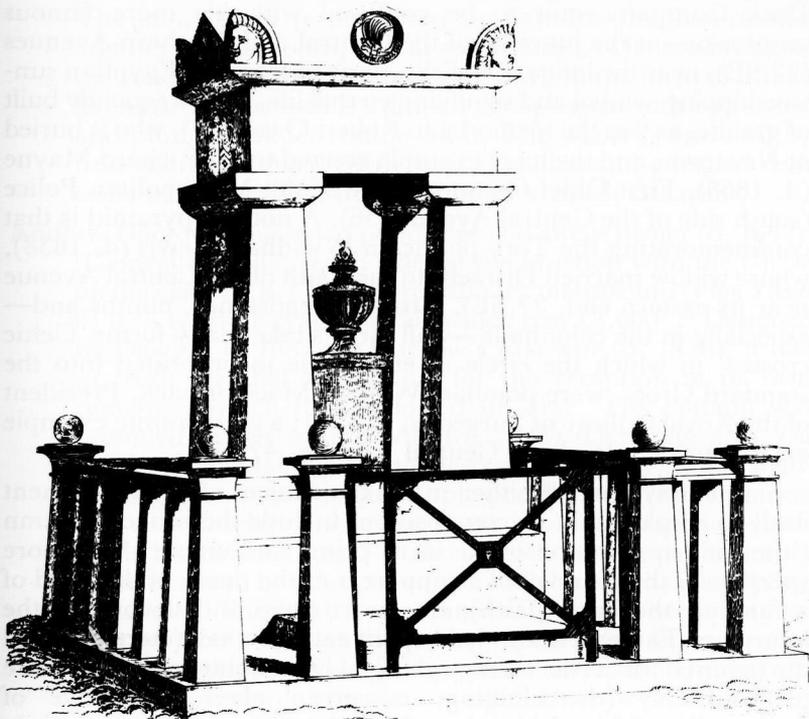


Fig. 4

The tomb of John Gordon (1841), from A. W. Hakewill, *Modern tombs, gleaned from the public cemeteries, of London* (1851), Plate 14.

slightly-coved recess (northern perimeter of the Circle (91,SE)).⁴⁷ The sculpture in the third sub-group includes female figures embracing draped urns; busts; animals (the horse on the monument to Alfred Cooke, 'the eminent equestrian', d. 1854, on the outer side of the Circle near the western end of the boundary between 65 and 64); and literally a host of angels. These agents of God and guardians of the dead are discovered in various poses (often gazing or pointing heavenwards) and arrays (at least one has a veil); many are equipped with an anchor, symbolizing hope (Hebrews 6:19) and signifying 'at rest':

*O welcome pure-ey'd Faith, white-handed Hope,
Thou hovering Angel girt with golden wings.*

The third and final class includes simpler (but not necessarily smaller) monuments. There are several regular and 'geometrical' types. Simple podia and pedestals are common: typical of many is the tomb of John Smeaton (d. 1842), Engineer to the London Dock Company—not to be confused with his more famous namesake—at the junction of the Central and Southern Avenues (22,SE), near the lodge. Obelisks, derived from the Egyptian sun-worshipping symbol and signifying eternal life, were frequently built of granite, as was the memorial to Robert Owen (15), who is buried at Newtown, and the huge example erected to Sir Richard Mayne (d. 1868), First Chief Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police (south side of the Central Avenue, 56). A notable pyramid is that commemorating the Tory politician Wyndham Lewis (d. 1838), whose widow married Disraeli (to the south of the Central Avenue near its eastern end, 27,SE). Crosses, headstones, plinths and—especially in the colonnade—wall tablets take many forms. Celtic crosses, in which the circle of eternity is incorporated into the standard Cross, were popular (William MacCormack, President of the Royal College of Surgeons, d. 1901; a grey granite example on the north side of the Central Avenue, 42,N).

Other symbols,⁴⁸ either made the subject of the monument itself or employed in its composition, include the broken column ('the sudden cessation of life in its prime and vigour',⁴⁹ or more specifically the removal of a support, i.e. the death of the head of a family); the book (faith); the heart (love and devotion); the hourglass (Father Time); the serpent eating its tail (eternity); and the inverted torch (the extinguishing of life). Botanical symbols are plentiful: ivy (the clinging, evergreen plant, indicative of immortality or friendship); laurel (used in connection with artistic figures to symbolize fame—a laurel wreath adorns the head of the muse in the memorial to James Ward, mentioned above); lily (purity); palm (peace, or the triumph of life over death); and willow (grief and mourning).

Having briefly outlined the range of monuments to be seen at Kensal Green, some of the most notable and rewarding memorials can be discussed in a little more detail in the following selection.

Augustus Frederick, Duke of Sussex (d. 1843). (In front of the Anglican chapel, on the north side of the Central Avenue: 114, NE.) A low, spacious, unadorned monument, consisting principally of a huge slab of Aberdeen granite. The funeral (4 May 1843) was attended by a memorable array of public figures, including Prince Albert (the Duke was Queen Victoria's uncle), the Duke of Wellington, Lord Palmerston, and Sir Robert Peel.⁵⁰

Major-Gen. Hon. Sir William Casement, K.C.B., Bengal Army and Member of the Supreme Council of India (d. 1844). (South side of the Central Avenue: 56.) An awe-inspiring four-poster Graeco-Egyptian monument designed by F.M. Lander. The entablature is supported by four life-size beturbaned atlantes or telamones, one at each corner. The underside of the canopy is covered with diaper work in the form of fifteen fleurons. Underneath is a draped sarcophagus, with hat, sword and plumed helmet resting on it. The whole is enclosed by iron columns linked by decorated chains and adorned with coats of arms. (The ironwork is now much decayed.)

Andrew Ducrow, equestrian performer and circus owner (d. 1842). (Central Avenue, south side, at the junction with the Circle on the east: 76, E.) This extraordinary mausoleum (Figs 5 and 6) is 'a wildly Egyptian affair which cost £3,000'.⁵¹ Designed by Dawson in 1837 for Ducrow's first wife (d. 1836), it was in truth 'erected by Genius for the reception of its own remains', which duly followed in 1842. The epitaph was provided by his second wife (d. 1838). Denounced in *The Builder* as an example of 'ponderous coxcombr',⁵² this solid-looking monument is quadruple-pedimented with acroteria and curved triglyphs; sphinxes on low podia face outwards at the base of each corner, and an elaborate upper structure is surmounted by a festooned urn with horses' heads in place of handles. The tomb is decorated with a relief scene set into the pediment, and angels in relief on the sides; there are also beehives, winged horses, foliage, palm leaves, shells, glass balls and a variety of Egyptian motifs. Ducrow left £500 for maintenance, but the monument is now sadly decayed.

Ann Gardner (d. 1846). (Inner side of the Circle: 102.) A red granite pedestal supports a draped urn on a plinth decorated with various motifs in Portland Stone (shield, wreath and acroteria,



Fig. 5
The monuments to Andrew Ducrow (1837) (left) and
John St. John Long (d. 1834) (right)



Fig. 6
The General Cemetery, Kensal Green, *The Mirror of Literature, Amusement, and Instruction*, 31, No. 890, 28 April 1838, pp. 273-75, p. 273. The Anglican chapel occupies the left-hand part of the picture; in the centre is the Ducrow mausoleum, and on the right the tomb of John St. John Long, on the south and north sides respectively of the Central Avenue at the point where it meets the Circle on the east.

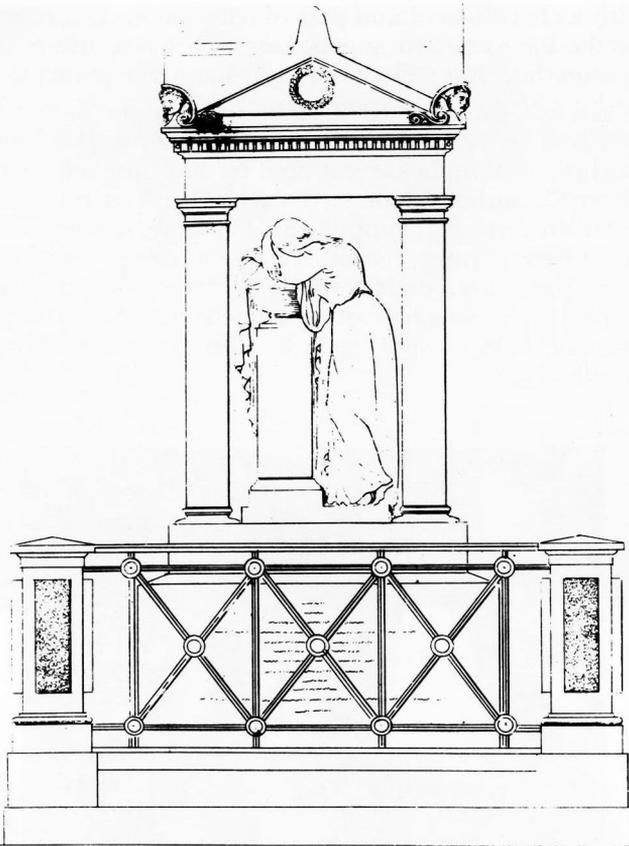
with a cherub head and pair of wings at each corner below). At the base are two angels, one either side of the pedestal: that on the left is veiled; the right-hand one points to heaven.

Mary Eleanor Gibson (d. 1872). (Central Avenue, north side: 56, NW.) The sarcophagus is set inside a charming little Corinthian temple surmounted by Baroque angels (Fig. 7). Three Corinthian columns at each of the four corners support an open-centred canopy, the entablature consisting of a prominent cornice, modillions and a frieze carved with lilies in a continuous design. On top, facing inwards from the corners, are four splendidly animated angels, each with flowing drapery, wings swept back, and an arm raised towards the middle.⁵³



Fig. 7

The monument to Mary Eleanor Gibson (d. 1872)



Elevation.

Fig. 8

The tomb of John Alexander Hankey (1839), from A.W. Hakewill, *Modern tombs, gleaned from the public cemeteries, of London* (1851), Plate 2.

John Alexander Hankey (d. 1838); family tomb by Basevi (1839). (Central Avenue north side: 101, NE.) A female figure in relief, set in a recess, embraces a draped urn on a pedestal; columns on either side support a pediment with acroteria carved in the form of faces (Fig. 8).

William Holland (d. 1856); family tomb. (Outer side of the Circle, near the point where 100 and 114 touch.) The tomb is supported by eight griffins; on top is a pediment with acroteria. The sarcophagus is decorated with round tablets and festoons; there are angels at the corners and inverted torches on the sides.

Thomas Hood, poet and humorist (d. 1845): monument by Noble. (Inner side of the Circle, near the western end of the boundary between 74 and 75.) *The Builder*⁵⁴ hailed it as 'the best thing in the place', but could not refrain from adding that to say so 'is not very great praise'. (Nothing in Kensal Green seemed to please this particular organ: 'What a *rendezvous* of dreary inanities it is!'⁵⁵) The article proceeded to review the monument, a bronze bust on a tall pedestal of red granite, with bronze wreaths (laurel, myrtle and the 'immortelle'⁵⁶) and medallions (*The Bridge of Sighs* and *The Dream of Eugene Aram*, both titles of poems by Hood). The monument, adorned also with a lyre and comic mask, recorded the memorable fact that the deceased sang *The Song of the Shirt*. *The Builder*, free as ever with advice, recommended the removal of certain of the bronze decorations; vandals have now obliged and only the battered granite base remains.

John St. John Long, 'médecin à la mode', who died of consumption in 1834 after refusing to take his own controversial elixir; in 1830 he had been found guilty of manslaughter following the death of one of his patients, but escaped with a fine. (Central Avenue, north side, at the junction with the eastern rim of the Circle: 76, NE.) The monument (Figs 5 and 6) by Sievier is a kind of Ionic aedicule, with a circular canopy supported on five columns which rise from a drum and surround a standing figure of Hygieia on a plinth. The whole rests on a four-sided pedestal, each side carrying a segmental pediment crowned with an acroterion in the shape of a shell set upon scrolls. There are many other details. On the face of the pedestal that presents the singular epitaph contained in a frame underneath the pediment, there are caducei carved in relief on either side of the inscription, and a wreath with ribbands in the tympanum. The canopy has an elaborate entablature: the frieze is decorated with a kind of lotus and palmette ornamentation accompanied by scrolls. Above the cornice are anthemion-style acroteria, set continuously. The dome is encircled by a band of cable and draped with carved leaves (stylized palm?); a vessel upon a tripod is perched on top. The inspiration would seem to have been the Choragic Monument of Lysicrates in Athens, dating from 334 BC.

Edmund Molyneux (d. 1864): family tomb (1866). (Central Avenue, south side, on the boundary between 56 and 65.) An octagonal mausoleum by John Gibson, in ornate High Victorian Italian Gothic. (The spire has been demolished.) Piers of clustered granite shafts with, above the capitals, statuettes of angels leaning outwards below crocketed



Fig. 9
The Molyneux mausoleum (1866)

pinnacles. Above, and in the arches between, crocketing and cusping galore (Fig. 9).

James Morison, the 'Hygeist' (d. 1840). Plagued by illness, he found his own cure in a dose of vegetable pills (his 'Universal Vegetable Medicines') at bedtime, and a glass of lemonade in the morning. (Northern Avenue, south side: 50.) A massive classical mausoleum by Milligan; wreath and festoon ornamentation, big acroteria and no openings.

William Mulready, the genre painter (d. 1863). (Central Avenue, north side: 56, N.) A six-poster Lombard Renaissance affair by Sykes (Fig. 10). The effigy lies supine under the canopy, the frieze of which is adorned with an imbricated floral design (of stylized lilies?) arranged in wreaths and festoons, accompanied by ribbands. The dados below the columns are decorated with reliefs of artists' materials; between them, arranged around the base of the monument, are incised miniature representations of some of Mulready's paintings.



Fig. 10
The tomb of William Mulready (d. 1863)



Fig. 11
The monument to Charles Spencer Ricketts (d. 1867)

Charles Spencer Ricketts, Commander, R.N. (d. 1867). (Southern Branch Avenue, south side, at the junction with the Central Avenue: 48,S.) This 'atrociously rich Gothic shrine'⁵⁷ is by Burges (Fig. 11). The raised sarcophagus, decorated with shields, is enclosed by eight granite piers which support an astonishing canopy complete with cusped arches, gargoyles, and a riot of crockets and finials. In the centre, rising above all, is a Celtic cross.

George Augustus Frederick Percy Sydney Smythe, seventh Viscount Strangford and second Baron Penhurst (d. 1857). A Tory politician, he fought in 1852 what is said to have been the last duel in England. (South of the Central Avenue, towards its eastern end, near the boundary between 31 and 32.) An open Gothic canopy (with cusped arches and crocketed pinnacles) supported on six piers, closed at one end to enable a winged figure with clasped hands and a comforting angel sculptured in relief to hover above the slab and symbolic rock marking the grave.

Princess Sophia (d. 1848). (In front of the Anglican Chapel, on the south side of the Central Avenue: 114, E.) The monument, erected in 1850 by subscription, consists of a *quattrocento* sarcophagus (designed by Professor Ludwig Grüner of Dresden and sculptured in Carrara marble by the Signori Bardi) set on a high podium (Fig. 12).

Mme Soyer (d. 1842), the artist prodigy who died in premature labour reputedly brought on by fright during a thunderstorm. (Opposite the upper gates to the Harrow Road, by the boundary between 79 and 80.) Clark found this 'perhaps . . . the most tasteful and attractive erection in the entire Cemetery',⁵⁸ but to *The Builder* it was just another example of 'ponderous coxcombry'.⁵⁹ A large full-length figure of Hope stands on a pedestal which sports a marble medallion depicting the deceased as a prettily attired girl. Above are two angelic forms, or large cherubs, one holding a human heart, whence issues a flame, and the other bearing a laurel wreath, with which Emma Soyer is about to be crowned. Below is a palette (her real palette was placed behind glass at the back), and cornucopia. Many of these details have alas been partly or wholly destroyed through decay and vandalism.



Fig. 12

The portico of the Anglican chapel and the monument to Princess Sophia (1850)

The list of notables buried at Kensal Green⁶⁰ also includes William Harrison Ainsworth (d. 1882), friend of Dickens; 'James' Barry (d. 1865), the woman doctor and Inspector-General of the Army Medical Department who, having successfully maintained a disguise as a man, was not discovered to be a woman until after her death; Sir William Beatty (d. 1842), surgeon on H.M.S. *Victory* and medical attendant to Lord Nelson at Trafalgar; Sir Marc Isambard Brunel (d. 1849) and his son Isambard Kingdom Brunel (d. 1859); Decimus Burton (d. 1881), the architect; Wilkie Collins (d. 1889); Thomas Daniell (d. 1840), oriental and landscape painter; George Grossmith (d. 1912), entertainer, and co-author (with his brother Weedon) of *The Diary of a Nobody*; Mary Scott Hogarth (d. 1837), beloved sister-in-law of Dickens; Leigh Hunt (d. 1859); J.C. Loudon (d. 1843); Henry Mayhew (d. 1887), writer on London, and a founder of *Punch*; John Murray (d. 1843), publisher; Sir John Rennie (d. 1874), Engineer to the Admiralty; Anne Scott (d. 1833) and Charlotte Sophia Lockhart (d. 1837), daughters of Sir Walter Scott; Robert William Sievier (d. 1865), engraver and sculptor (there is a classical memorial to him at the western end of the southern colonnade of the Anglican chapel); Robert Smirke (d. 1845), the painter and book illustrator; the Revd. Sydney Smith (d. 1845); William Makepeace Thackeray (d. 1863); and Anthony Trollope (d. 1882).

Kensal Green: Retrospect and Prospect

It is apparent that even in its heyday, when the majority of the monuments described above were erected, the Cemetery was far from being the object of unqualified praise. In addition to the censures of *The Builder*, other critical voices were raised, notably concerning the large sums of money lavished on ostentatious memorials.⁶¹ A more complex set of objections which gathered considerable momentum as early as the 1840s stemmed from the conviction that the symbolism embodied in the monuments⁶² was overwhelmingly pagan, the true Christian emblem of the Cross being inadequately represented in comparison with classical and Egyptian motifs.⁶³ In particular, the female figure embracing a partially draped 'heathen urn' was widely castigated,⁶⁴ as were other common designs:

*Why should the cross the broken column scare,
The badge of faith, the symbol of despair?
Can Christian hope her jewel fitly set
In obelisk, or vase, or minaret!
Can truth in guise of ancient falsehood dwell,
Nor tempt a sarcasm from the infidel?
Here pyramids 'mid gothic chapels rise,*

*Or cherubs smile, or serpents symbolize.
Yon mausoleum, massive to a fault,
O'erawes some pretty villa style of vault.*⁶⁵

Nevertheless, classicism did survive, albeit in a debased form, partly because it was so firmly established in the funerary tradition. It was also assisted by the fact that 'gothic' architecture and iconography were not so pure and unadulterated as their adherents claimed; indeed, a good deal of the interest of Victorian gothic derives from its distinctive eclecticism. Finally, the Dissenters favoured the classical mode, for they tended to conceive of gothic styles as papist.⁶⁶

The Dissenters also figured in another criticism of Kensal Green, the separation of the unconsecrated from the consecrated ground: 'Why should mortal dust, bound by the same laws of nature, formed and overruled by the same everlasting God, be thus jealously parted by the frail and erring opinions of men?'⁶⁷ The accusation that Kensal Green catered predominantly for the rich,⁶⁸ however, struck at the very roots of the whole enterprise: the cemetery was not public. As long as this was the case with Kensal Green and its successors—Norwood (1837), Highgate (1839), Abney Park, Brompton and Nunhead (all consecrated in 1840)—many of the problems of interment in London remained. The cemetery movement, hailed as a 'great triumph of decency',⁶⁹ still left the vast majority of the population to be buried intramurally, generally in the traditional graveyards. As a result, opinion in certain quarters turned against the cemeteries. It was questioned whether they were proper subjects for profit-making enterprise and speculation. Sanitary reform had been accompanied by the creation of a commercial abuse and an economic problem. The Church of England was accused of using the extramural cemeteries—'a sumptuous feast for clerical rapacity'⁷⁰—as a means of making money and, at the same time, striking a blow at the Dissenters. Nevertheless, it became apparent with time that financial security was far from assured given the magnitude of the initial outlay required and the relative insufficiency of income derived from burial. The outbreak of further epidemics, the realization that new cemeteries were being rapidly filled and then engulfed by further urban expansion, and the continued abuses evident in the inner city graveyards prompted Parliamentary debate (especially after the publication of Edwin Chadwick's famous report of 1843⁷¹); but progress was hampered by the fact that the contemporary political climate was not in sympathy with state enterprise. When the tide turned at last, utility and hygiene—and, increasingly, cremation—were the order of the day, and the great romantic vision of the Victorian necropolis was already a thing of the past.

What has the vision bequeathed to posterity? Kensal Green is the creation of a significant moral and aesthetic movement, and an early product of the age of municipal reform; the importance of the London cemeteries in these respects has in general been overlooked.⁷² They also represent all that is left of the great nineteenth-century ritual of death, now as much a thing of the past as the Victorian vision of heaven itself,⁷³ and exemplify the panache with which the Victorians responded to the challenges presented by the inventions of their age, the design of cemeteries no less than the architecture of the railways. This confidence contrasts utterly with modern scepticism and perfunctoriness which stem at base from the absence of any kind of standpoint at all with respect to death. The London necropolises are unique formalized representations of the beliefs, values and tastes of an era which already seems distinctly remote. Certainly the like of Kensal Green will never again be seen. Some truly horrendous monuments, surrounded by blue marble or green glass chip monotony are the chief visual manifestations of modern doubt, reticence and aesthetic debasement, in which an unhappy combination of displays of vulgarity and a desire for convenience reigns supreme.⁷⁴

The present age is a victim of the hypocrisy which many people are keen to identify as a central trait of the Victorians when it calls for conservation of the past and yet allows such revealing glimpses of its immediate forbears to suffer the depredations of vandalism and neglect, consequent upon inadequate financial support. Much of the original conception enshrined in Kensal Green has been lost through the ravages of time, the bombing of 1940,⁷⁵ and deliberate destruction. Weathering of certain of the rocks employed has reached an advanced stage: some Carrara marbles have actually disintegrated to a lime-sugar sand as a consequence of atmospheric pollution, and the soft, poorly-cemented, and calcareous sandstones have suffered lamentably; the artificial stones (such as those used in the Casement, Long and Mulready monuments) have often lasted better.⁷⁶

Other aspects of decline reflect more directly the financial pressures affecting the Company, which is faced with major economic and organizational problems managing a large area of ground filled with untended plots in perpetuity. Bricking-up of mausolea doors in an effective deterrent to vandals and self-styled necromancers, but the practice is unsightly and frequently deprives the monument of its inscription or epitaph. The cramming of new graves along the verges of the avenues ruins the layout and mars the prospects of the serpentine walks. The vegetation is also a matter for concern. Kensal Green in its melancholy state of decay is a leafy oasis, a veritable nature reserve, providing welcome relief from the

dust and noise of the Harrow Road. The stone angels and crumbling tombs lean drunkenly amidst the dense ground vegetation and the avenues of trees which constitute one of the attractions of the cemetery. 'Bright are the flowers, as the flush on the cheek of Consumption',⁷⁷ but some of the ground plants and the ever-vigorous grasses are impoverishing the flora. Similarly, the trees merit careful attention: there are some essentially splendid mature specimens, notably Horse Chestnuts, several Locust Trees, and representatives of certain less common species such as the Oriental Plane. The trees are important components of the cemetery—botanically, aesthetically and symbolically. The complex symbolism of trees involves the themes of life, regeneration and immortality, while the sacred grove and the traditional connection of trees with burial recall the associations of the garden: love, restoration, peace and rest. Destruction of the vegetation would be a disaster for Kensal Green; but balance, surgery and informed control are desirable in order to realize the potential of the flora and to prevent monuments from disappearing entirely under the brambles, creepers, horsetails and bushes, as is still the case despite the efforts exerted in the annual cutting programme. The colonnade has of late been all but inaccessible.

The preservation of the architecture, conservation of flora and fauna, prevention of vandalism, the achievement of a measure of security from sudden threats such as property speculation, and a sound financial basis for informed management are conditions which are easier to identify than to fulfil,⁷⁸ but surely not impossible.⁷⁹ It is heartening that the cemetery is now an officially designated conservation area, with good prospects of enjoying a future under enlightened decision-makers despite the outdating—through changing taste—of the system designed to promote financial viability. Both Kensington and Chelsea Borough Council and the General Cemetery Company are anxious to ensure that Kensal Green does not share the fate that has befallen certain other Victorian cemeteries. At the time of writing, some basic maintenance work is being performed through funding by the Manpower Services Commission's Community Programme, and the available options for the long term are under review.

Despite the celebration of Highgate, Kensal Green could justifiably claim to be the most distinguished nineteenth-century cemetery in London. Not only was it the capital's first great extramural necropolis, but it is still owned and run by the General Cemetery Company. Unsurpassed in its scale, buildings, catacombs, monuments and roll of famous deceased, Kensal Green encapsulates in a unique fashion the history of the cemetery movement. In addition to its historic importance, the value of the

cemetery for contemplative recreation is very great, as one who grew up in the district can testify. It is a thought-provoking experience to visit important cemeteries in other countries, notably those in the USSR where the attitudes of both the public and the authorities are striking. The Novodevich'ye Cemetery in Moscow, and the twin cemeteries of the Alexander Nevskiy Lavra in Leningrad (the Lazarus and the Tikhvin) together with the Volkovskoye Cemetery in the same city contain between them a dazzling parade of great Russians—writers, musicians, artists, scientists, political thinkers and scholars. They are visited by large numbers of Soviet citizens, even on drab winter Sundays, in an atmosphere of order, quiet and interest; flowers are placed on the most popular monuments. Even in our very different society, is it too much to hope that there may be a future for the necropolises?

*For there is good news yet to hear and fine things to be seen,
Before we go to Paradise by way of Kensal Green.*⁸⁰

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50. For accounts of the event see Clark, 1846, *op. cit.* (note 34), pp. 39-41, 95-96; Justyne, [1861], *op. cit.* (note 31), pp. 25-29.
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52. Anon., Tombs at Kensal-Green, *The Builder*, 14, 1856, p. 700.
53. Were they originally holding something in their raised hands as well as (lilies?) in their lowered ones?
54. Anon., Monument to Hood: Kensal-Green Cemetery, *The Builder*, 12, 1854, p. 460.
55. *ibid.*, p. 460. For an exception see Anon., Monument to General Foster Walker, *The Builder*, 24, 1866, pp. 305-06; this gothic monument in mid-thirteenth-century style, designed by Edward Blore, with sculptured angels of Faith, Hope, Charity and Patience at the corners, escaped the customary and seemingly obligatory censure.
56. Also called 'Everlasting'; a name applied to various flowers with papery textures, mainly of the family *Compositae* (Pearly Everlasting, *Anaphalis margaritacea*; Mountain Everlasting, *Antennaria dioica*), that retain their colour when dried, especially *Xeranthemum annuum*, often used to adorn graves. The Sea Lavenders, *Limonium (Statice)* spp., are also sometimes referred to as 'Everlasting'.
57. Pevsner, 1952, *op. cit.* (note 51), p. 303.
58. Clark, 1846, *op. cit.* (note 34), p. 104.
59. Reference given in note 52 above.
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