The Cemetery that Never Was Kingsbury Lawn Cemetery

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In 1891 the Urban District Council of Willesden opened their 'New Cemetery' in Franklyn Road, Willesden. It was a comparatively small cemetery and despite an extension in the 1930s, the Council had realised a decade earlier that they would have to ensure provision for future burials. At the time the average number of burials in the borough was 1329. Further enlargement of the New Cemetery was not possible and it was to the neighbouring area of Kingsbury where the Council went to secure a 48 acre site adjacent to the Brent Reservoir (or Welsh Harp) in the Urban District of Kingsbury. Willesden intended to use 26½ acres for burials. The site was estimated to be 3¼ miles from the most densely residential part of Willesden.

Satisfactory soil tests were carried out and the Willesden Town Clerk was duly authorised to contact the Minister of Health for the necessary loan sanction. When in June 1928 Kingsbury found out about the proposed cemetery in their area they resolved:

"That this Council strongly opposes any action of the Willesden Urban District Council to acquire land for cemetery purposes in this district."

Kingsbury's action did not deter Willesden and in October it was reported that completion of the purchase was to take place on or before 25 December 1928. At the Council's meeting in January the following year the Willesden Clerk reported that he had received a notice of objection to their proposal '...to construct, lay-out, and maintain a cemetery within the Urban District of Kingsbury.'

In February 1929 the Minister of Health appointed an inspector to hold a local enquiry concerning the intended work for an £11,000 loan sanction to acquire the land. Kingsbury's objections were that the cemetery was not required for 10 years; the site consisted of clay and therefore was unsuitable; there was land available within Willesden borough; 48 acres were being purchased but only 26 would be used as a cemetery and finally, there were building developments already in the area. Kingsbury had also incurred expenditure on laying a 15" low level sewer in preparation of the area being sold for housing. If these houses were not built they would loose the rateable value estimated to be £14,000.



Entrance to Kingsbury Lawn Cemetery

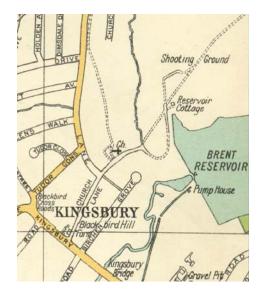
Willesden had looked at sites within their area but the cost of acquisition was prohibitive. The inspector recommended to the Minister that permission for the loan be granted. However, there were restrictions and one was that Kingsbury should purchase 14 acres of the site for recreational use; it eventually became the 'Welsh Harp Open Space.' The cemetery site was planted with trees and a footpath blocked up. But no further work took place at the site until 1933 when the land was fenced and walled.

In 1934, Kingsbury UDC was merged with its neighbouring borough, Wembley. Wembley Urban District Council had one 10 acre cemetery at Alperton which had opened in 1914. The next development occurred in July 1936 when Wembley explored the possibility of compulsorily acquiring the whole site so that they could use it as a burial ground. They were advised that they did not have the legal powers to do so and instructed their borough surveyor to find an area suitable for burials outside the district.

During the War the two Councils agreed that civilians could be buried at Kingsbury but this never took place. However, Wembley continued their search for suitable burial space and in 1942 negotiations took place with Harrow Land Trust concerning the acquisition of land for cemetery use at Watford Road near Harrow. However, this did not progress further.

In 1948 burial matters became a key issue in the area of north west London. Wembley could not proceed with their plan for a cemetery and crematorium at Northwick Park as a new

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Birchen Grove Kingsbury c1935. The words 'Shooting Ground' mark the approximate location of the cemetery

hospital was to be built on the site. They were also adamant that Kingsbury should not be progressed by Willesden. However, Wembley approached their neighbour on a joint cemetery scheme. Willesden communicated that they intended to proceed with the Kingsbury site and reiterated that the Minister of Health had approved the acquisition of the site for use as a cemetery. They also noted '...that the draft development plans submitted by a consultant to the Joint Town Planning Committee only restrict the site against future building development.'²



The site in the 1950s. The spire of St Andrew's Church can be seen in the background (Courtesy of Brent Archive)

Wembley then referred the matter to the Central Middlesex Joint Planning Committee. A plan of the whole area around the Welsh Harp was produced but the Kingsbury site was not shaded as being reserved for burial space - only restricted against building development. Willesden pointed out that the Ministry had approved use of the site at the time of acquisition, that they intended to commence work on the site in 1948/49 and that no suggestion had been put forward for an alternative site. Wembley reiterated that they had approached Willesden about a joint scheme and pressed that

the Kingsbury site be zoned as open space. Wembley also revealed that they were negotiating purchase of a potential cemetery site which Willesden might share. The matter was referred to the Ministry of Town Planning.

In July 1948 Wembley revealed that they had located a possible 52 acre site for a new cemetery at Carpenders Park within the Rural District of Watford. However, Watford had refused permission for the land to be used as a cemetery.

In the same year Willesden then approached the Ministry for a loan of £44,000 for the preparation of Kingsbury, but was informed that as a result of the Government policy on capital investment this would not be permitted. Kingsbury reduced their costings to £15,000. With this news Wembley stated that Willesden required planning consent at Kingsbury and their Town Clerk was instructed to apply under the Town and Country Planning Act 1947 to the Planning Authority for a decision as to whether this consent was required. Wembley continued to urge Willesden to drop the scheme and join them at Carpenders Park where it was also intended to build a crematorium. However, Willesden had already spent £24,000 on what had by then become the cemetery at the end of Birchen Grove and responded by saying that there was an immediate need for burial space, and that Carpenders Park was too far for residents to travel.



The site in the 1950s looking towards the Brent Reservoir (or 'Welsh Harp') (Courtesy of Brent Archive)

By February 1949, Wembley had refused to give a decision on Willesden's application to develop Kingsbury Cemetery and Willesden submitted an appeal to the Minister of Town and Country Planning against this action. Wembley wrote to Middlesex County Council requesting an order be made under s26 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1947 requiring the dis-continuance of the use of land for burial purposes. The Minister of Town and Country planning announced that he would shortly be holding a conference to discuss the issue of land for burial purposes to which all authorities comprising the County would be invited. However, at a meeting of Willesden Council on the 26 April 1949, letters from the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Town and Country Planning were read which stated that '...after consultation, [they] decided that it was not desirable that the land acquired for a cemetery...should now be so developed.'3

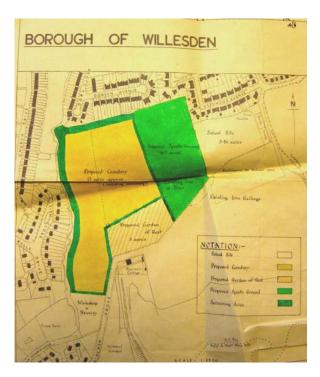
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The site in the 1950s from the back of one of the houses in Birchen Grove (Courtesy of Brent Archive)

Willesden were furious at the lack of consultation by the Ministry; the Town Clerk was instructed to re-open the matter. On the 23 August 1948, councillors from Willesden and Wembley met to thrash out the matter; they also visited Carpenders Park and then Kingsbury. However, both sides were equally determined.

In October 1949 both councils met along with the Ministry of Town and Country Planning to discuss the issue but without resolution apart from the fact that if Kingsbury was abandoned Wembley would have to pay compensation for abortive expenditure, estimated in the region of £27,000. Wembley pressed on with the Carpenders Park scheme, this time approaching Harrow Urban District Council to join them. These three black and white images of the site were all taken around this time, probably by the Borough Surveyor whose Morris 8 can be seen in the one on page 24.



The 13 acre cemetery as proposed in 1950 (Courtesy of the National Archive)

After a further meeting at the Ministry of Town and Country Planning the Ministry permitted Willesden to open a lawn cemetery. The consent meant that Kingsbury Lawn Cemetery would occupy 13 acres accommodating 9,700 graves - a reduction from the original number of 13,700. However, to finance loan for work on the site a further enquiry was necessary. Taking place on 24 January 1951, the residents of the roads leading to the cemetery made known their objections.



St Andrew's Churchyard Kingsbury

Willesden produced counter arguments including the fact that the cemetery had been proposed long before the houses in Birchen Grove had been built; that the area contained a churchyard adjoining St Andrew's Church and that the TCP Act could not be used retrospectively. Furthermore Carpenders Park was too great a distance from Willesden and that public transport was expensive.

Also presented were the results of a survey of the number of visitors to Willesden Cemetery over the first weekend of October 1950. The results were: Saturday 691 visitors (including 56 prams) and Sunday 1977 visitors (including 137 prams).⁴ Such numbers were unlikely to be maintained if burials took place at Carpenders Park which was half a mile from the nearest station.

By May 1951 the Minister of Local Government and Planning had given approval for the development of the cemetery and, subject to submission of the plans, for the superintendent's house, convenience block and temporary chapel. A year later the Council reported that their situation regarding burial space in the borough was critical. However, on the 26 May the issue of Kingsbury Cemetery was raised at a late-night sitting in the House of Commons by the Conservative member for Wembley North, Wing Commander Eric Bullus. He recounted the chronology of events and concluded by noting how Willesden had reduced the size of the cemetery so that burials could take place just outside the 100 yards distance from the houses. He noted that 'this may be a generous gesture and it may be an admittance by implication of the strength of the arguments...but the residents are still opposed, because...they will be affected by the comings and goings of funeral processions.'5 The Wing Commander urged the Minister to "...look again at this matter."

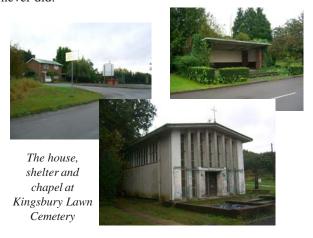
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The Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Housing and Local Government was Ernest Marples who responded to the Hon and gallant friend. He asserted that the cemetery had been planned long before the residents arrived. He also revealed that he had seen the cemetery. He said, 'When I went rather a long way round on my way to see the Cup Final...I never thought that I should be asked to answer in Adjournment debate about a cemetery in that district.' He also said that because the householders had acquiesced for so long they were time-barred from objecting.'



The Consecration of Kingsbury Lawn Cemetery (Courtesy of Willesden Chronicle now Willesden and Brent Times)

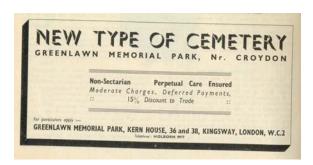
On Thursday 29 July 1954 the Cemetery was consecrated by the Bishop of Willesden, the Rt Revd GA Ellison. A few months later Wembley opened their Carpenders Park Lawn Cemetery. But Kingsbury was still without buildings due to problems obtaining supplies. It would be 1956 before they were finished and the chapel furnished. It was anticipated that the first burial would take place in October 1956. But it never did.



Information concerning Kingsbury Lawn Cemetery concludes at this time. The last mention of the cemetery which can be traced was in June 1965. On the 1st April the London Government Act 1963 came into force and led to the merging of Wembley and Willesden to form the London Borough of Brent. The Kingsbury Scheme came to an abrupt halt and the last entry in the Council Minutes stated that 'We recommend that the Town Clerk be instructed to take the necessary action leading to the de-consecration of Birchen Grove Cemetery.'

Discussion – Burial Provision in Context The Lawn Cemetery

It was March 1948 when Willesden revealed that Kingsbury would be a lawn cemetery. Whilst the design for such a cemetery can be attributed to the Commonwealth War Grave Commission's cemeteries, it was not until the 1920s when this concept was adopted in local authority burial grounds; an early example was at Leicester.⁷



Advertisement for Greenlawn Memorial Park (from The Undertakers' Journal)

The first in the London area was Greenlawn Memorial Park (note not 'cemetery') opened in 1938 by a private company at Upper Warlingham, south of Croydon.⁸ Here memorials were restricted to bronze tablets flush with the ground; it was a radical departure from traditional memorial expressions.



Greenlawn Memorial Park

In her authoritative paper on the subject, Julie Rugg argues that cemetery mangers extolled the virtues of the lawn cemetery and attributes their introduction to four interrelated factors: the deterioration of the Victorian cemetery; a self-conscious rejection of Victorian aesthetics in favour of modern alternatives; constraints on resources particularly after WWII, and growing professionalism in cemetery management.⁹

The Willesden Borough Engineer outlined five types of memorial for a lawn cemetery to the Council to consider in 1948. He referred to the scheme at Greenlawn, but also mentioned headstone only versions. The response to their intention was dramatic. Firstly, they received a deputation of monumental masons concerned at the restriction on memorialisation imposed by the regimentation of a lawn cemetery.

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The concluding shot was that '...if monumental work was not allowed in lawn cemeteries this would be a serious blow to the stone workers' craft, which in turn they thought was a matter of National significance especially as the Government had invited the Monumental Masons to take as many apprentice stone workers as possible.'¹¹⁰ Nevertheless, Willesden believed that such a cemetery '...represents a material improvement on the old type of cemetery in which monuments are crowded together and are of all sizes and shapes.'¹¹ Then a representation was also made by a local funeral director while in October 1956 Willesden received a letter from the National Association of Master Monumental Masons. Again, the Council saw no reason to acquiesce.

Wembley too received criticism for announcing their intention to make Carpenders Park a lawn cemetery. A local resident commented that, 'The age of sentiment has not passed and there were many people who still wished to pay tribute to the dead by placing a small headstone to perpetuate the memory of their loved one. What would be said if it was decided that the Cenotaph should be razed to the ground?' The chairman of the Open Spaces Committee stated that 'ostentation in the case of the dead was just as objectionable as ostentation in respect of the living.' 13

The lawn cemetery clearly matched the agenda of creating a place of burial with unobtrusive memorials in a landscape which could be managed like a public park. Indeed, the Willesden Town Clerk went as far as declaring that 'A lawn cemetery is in physical fact an open space.' ¹⁴

Cremation - 'Save the Land for the Living'



'Playing fields or cemeteries?' Lord Horder, President of the Cremation Society of Great Britain

The second point is the shifting preference for cremation in the inter- and post-war years. When Kingsbury was purchased in 1929 approximately 0.72% of deaths in Great Britain were followed by cremation. By 1948 when Willesden was attempting to layout the cemetery the situation had changed considerably; the national rate was just over 12%. Cremation was being radically promoted by local authorities and the Cremation Society of Great Britain propaganda machine extolling the virtues of 'save the land for the living' was in full swing. Its President Lord Horder posed the question, 'playing fields or cemeteries?' ¹⁵

Mention of a crematorium at Kingsbury was first raised in January 1945 when a conference was convened by the Harrow Urban District Council to consider the provision of a crematorium with Willesden agreeing in principle However, capital expenditure constraints and building restrictions impeded the provision of new crematoria.

The attitude of the Government towards cemeteries and crematoria is revealed in a briefing note sent to a minister in July 1950 shortly after the public enquiry. It contained the following:

'The Department recommend a compromise solution whereby Willesden will be allowed their cemetery in part of the land which, because of contours and a tree screen, will not be obvious from the adjoining open space. They will also be allowed to lay out a garden of rest, but will not be permitted to construct a crematorium.' ¹⁶

The Minister (of Town and Country Planning) referred to a crematorium when he annotated the document with a red pen,

'They must [underscored] construct it.'

The minister also added,

'I am passionately in favour of cremation. This is a most fundamental saving of good land in the UK. Make the construction of a crematorium....a condition of my assent to any settlement.'17

A further document stated,

'Officially we are of course all passionately in favour of cremation. The amount of land taken up by burial is simply awful. I would indeed like to see all existing burial grounds turned in playing fields.' 18

But Willesden had a novel solution to hand. The southern point of their borough embraced the boundary of All Souls' Cemetery on the Harrow Road at Kensal Green where in 1939 the General Cemetery Company had opened their West London Crematorium. The Borough identified the potential of reducing burial demand through promoting cremation and in March 1948 established a 21 year agreement with the Company whereby Willesden residents would be cremated at a reduced rate; it came into force in October 1950. It was an arrangement benefiting both the public and private sector and the Council issued leaflets promoting the 'Borough Cremation Service.'

This was a great success and in the one year period to March 1952, 304 cremations of Willesden residents had taken place. The arrangement with West London, the fact that the immediate area was well served by crematoria - what with Golders Green, Hendon, St Marylebone – and restrictions on capital expenditure effectively dismissed the idea of building a crematorium at Kingsbury. However, Willesden was permitted to open a 'garden of rest within the boundary of the cemetery with the intention of burying ashes.¹⁹

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A leaflet for Willesden's Borough Cremation Service

Joint Authorities

A third issue was that of authorities combining to provide burial space. Hitherto such ventures had been unheard of for municipal authorities. However, a trend had commenced when Hammersmith Borough Council and the corporations of Acton, Barnes and Richmond formed a Board to plan Mortlake Crematorium which opened in 1939. In 1948 Wembley approached Willesden to combine on a joint scheme at Northwick Park and again the following year at Carpenders Park Cemetery. Indeed, when Wembley received planning permission from Hertfordshire County Council in was on the condition that they shared the site with other authorities. Then in January 1950 it was suggested that Wembley should share Carpenders Park with Harrow Council and also Kensington. Finchley and also Hendon were also discussed.

However, the concept of joint burial authorities did not really materialize; in the London area only a single example can be cited; the Merton & Sutton Joint cemetery at Morden in 1947. However, a number of London authorities have collaborated on the construction of crematoria. The irony now is that with Harrow short of burial space, it has now joined with Brent Council to allow burial of their residents at Carpenders Park.²⁰

Cemeteries in Neighbouring Local Authority Areas

In the nineteenth century when Burial Boards were established they would look at suitable areas within their municipal boundary. But those in the innermost areas have by necessity looked outside their area, for example the City of London which established their vast cemetery at Ilford in Essex in 1856, and the equally large St Pancras cemetery at East Finchley, opened two years earlier. Here a trend was created as Burial Boards always had the difficulty of providing local and/or accessible burial space. A number of schemes to establish cemeteries away from the metropolis were tabled; The Great Eastern Scheme on the banks of the Thames at Erith and the enlargement of Kensal Green to form the Great Western Cemetery were suggested in 1850 but did not materialize. ²¹ The only one which came into being was the London Necropolis at Brookwood. ²²

The second major wave of cemetery provision in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century necessitated those authorities in the inner areas to look much further from their boundaries. For example, the Battersea Burial Board established their 'New' cemetery at Morden in 1891. In 1933 the Wimbledon Corporation Bill was passed allowing 70 acres of land at Randalls Park, Leatherhead in Surrey to be secured by Wimbledon Council for a new cemetery.

The largest scheme of the interwar years was proposed by the Borough of Wandsworth who purchased 220 acres of land at Tolworth, Surrey in the Urban District of Surbiton with the intention of using 135 acres for burial purposes.²³ The scheme was later abandoned.



The site of what would have been the largest interwar cemetery in London - Tolworth

So Willesden looking outside their boundary was neither a new idea nor an unreasonable one. Indeed when the 1929 local enquiry was held the inspector astutely observed:

"Willesden has itself long had to put up with the burial grounds in its district for non-residents, as it contains, in addition to its own existing ground, a burial ground for Paddington and another for the Jews, both of large size and now amid urban surrounding."²⁴

Furthermore, the Borough could have been host to London's first crematorium had the Paddington Burial Board agreed with Cremation Society in 1896 to use land in Paddington Cemetery in Willesden Lane. Golders Green eventually opened five year later.

Post-WWII representatives of Chingford, Leyton, Walthamstow, Wanstead & Woodford Borough Councils and Chigwell Urban District Council met to explore forming a joint committee to reserve land for future burial use. In 1951 they settled on an extensive site owned by London Transport south-west of Grange Hill station. However, the scheme was abandoned in November 1958. It would also have been the largest joint authority scheme. Coincidentally, in 1952 Essex County Council convened a meeting to explore building a crematorium to serve south-west Essex near the proposed site. This also came to nothing and today Forest Park Cemetery and Crematorium is only one mile from this site.

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The Cemetery that Never Was concluded

Conclusion

By the time Kingsbury Lawn Cemetery was abandoned in 1965, a total of £53,000 had been spent on the scheme. It would be too simplistic to conclude that this was a spat between neighbouring authorities of contrasting political ideologies; inner city Labour Willesden against the more suburban and Conservative Wembley. Similarly, to suggest that there was rivalry between the two authorities on account of Willesden anticipating burial provision at least ten years in the future by securing a site while Wembley acted when demand was becoming critical. Whatever the motives both authorities acted with determination over three decades. Over the years many cemetery schemes have been suggested but failed to progress never getting past the planning stage. Kingsbury Lawn Cemetery, however, must be unique in that it was layed-out, consecrated and provided with buildings and then never used.

After Ernest Marples had visited Kingsbury in May 1952 he watched Arsenal lose to Newcastle United 1-0 in the Cup Final. Some would argue that following the merging of the boroughs the score at Kingsbury was a draw; a more accurate assessment would be Willesden nil Wembley 1.

An Afterword

It would appear that despite the Minute of June 1965 requesting the Brent Town Clerk to investigate deconsecration of the cemetery. This was never progressed despite newspapers reports. The London Diocesan Registry confirmed that nothing has been found in their archives regarding this matter and that the ground '...is still consecrated and subject to the faculty jurisdiction.'25 When in 1997 the London Planning Advisory Committee issued its report of burial provision, the entry for the London Borough of Brent revealed that the Council '...proposes to develop a new 23 hectacre cemetery at Neasden on land bought many years ago for burial use, but having subsequently acquired a woodland cover and other uses such as allotments. This cemetery - Kingsbury - would provide a further two hundred years' supply....However, planning permission has not been granted for this cemetery, and its development is not certain.²⁶

In the late 1990s the site was explored with a view to building a crematorium for Sikh and Hindu funerals but this came to nothing. Today, the superintendent's house, shelter and chapel remain with the land being occupied by allotments, a nature reserve and a garden centre.

Acknowledgements

Bob Langford at the London Borough of Brent Cemeteries Service, Staff at Brent Archive, Waltham Forest Local Studies Library, Wandsworth local studies library, Westminster Archives Centre, Guildhall Library, London Diocese Registry, National Archives.

Endnotes

- ¹ Kingsbury UDC Minutes 18 June 1928 p295
- ² Willesden UDC Minutes 24 February 1948 p235
- ³ Willesden UDC Minutes 26 April 1949 p480
- ⁴ For a contemporary assessment of cemetery visiting see Francis D, Kellaher L and Neophytou G (205) *The Secret Cemetery* Oxford: Berg
- ⁵ 'Cemetery Kingsbury' *Hansard* 26 May 1952 pp1115. Sir Eric Edward Bullus (1906-2001) was Conservative Member of Parliament for Wembley North from 1950 until the constituency was abolished by boundary changes for the February 1974 general election.
- ⁶ Ibid p1119. The match was played on 3 May 1952. The result was Arsenal 0 Newcastle United 1.
- ⁷ This was at Saffron Hill Cemetery in Leicester. See Prentice Mawson E 'Garden Cemeteries' Landscape and Garden 11:3 193.
- 8 See The Times 7 December 1936 where it was stated that the, '...first consideration will be the preservation of the natural beauty of the scene. In place of the tombstones familiar in most cemeteries the trust will restrict memorials to tablets of bronze set flush with the turf, thus preserving the park-like appearance of the grounds.' Greenlawn has been owned and run by The London Borough of Croydon since 1947.
- 9 Rugg J (2006) 'Lawn Cemeteries: the emergence of a new landscape of death' Urban History Vol 33 No 2 pp213-233
- ¹⁰ Willesden UDC Minutes 8 January 1951 p528
- ¹¹ HLG 79/938 National Archives. 'Appendix C' Document produced by Willesden's Town Clerk c. 1949 giving the history of the Kingsbury scheme. p6
- 12 'Wembley's Lawn Cemetery. Objections Raised' (1950) Funeral Service Journal 15 May p262
- 13 Ibid.
- ¹⁴ HLG 79/938 National Archives. 'Appendix C' Document produced by Willesden's Town Clerk c. 1949 giving the history of the Kingsbury scheme. p6
- ¹⁵ Jupp PC (2006) From Dust to Ashes. Cremation and the British Way of Death Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan p112. See also Horder, Lord (1936) 'The Public Health Aspect of the Disposition of the Dead' The Undertakers' Journal November pp357-358
- ¹⁶ HLG 79/938. National Archives. The note is date 19 July 1950 and the initials are possibly BM.
- ¹⁷ HLG 79/938. National Archives. The note is date 19 July 1950 and the initials are possibly BM.
- ¹⁸ HLG 79/938. National Archives. The note is date 26 July 1950 and the initials are possibly GS.
- ¹⁹ Willesden UDC Minutes 10 September 1951 p263
- ²⁰ 'Land reserves sought as local cemeteries reach full capacity' Harrow Times 28 February 2008
- ²¹ See *The Builder*, Vol. 8, 2 March 1850, p. 204 and Vol. 14, 25 October 1856, p. 587
- ²² Clarke JM (2005) London Necropolis: A Guide to Brookwood Cemetery Stroud: Sutton Publishing
- ²³ Wandsworth Borough Council Minutes 8 July 1930 p554-555 and 3 May 1932 pp269-270
- ²⁴ HLG/45/749
- ²⁵ Author's correspondence with the London Diocesan Registry 28 March 2008
- ²⁶ 'Burial Space Needs in London: Profile of London Cemetery Provision' (1997) p3