



Friends of Woodbury Park Cemetery

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Newsletter



FWPC Deputy Chair Julian Cronk with Patty Harris beside her floral tributes

Most visitors to the grave of Henry Austen, Jane's favourite brother, cast only a passing glance at the neighbouring mossy headstone. It records seven little Harris brothers and sisters aged from a month to 12 years old, buried here between 1850 and 1860, then joined in 1864 by their 47 year old mother Ann Hannah.

Not so on Sunday 5th February when Patty Harris arrived from Lincoln on a mission to honour her family's early graves. Every eye was immediately caught by her touching array of flower posies and loving individual messages.

A further posy was placed on the separate tomb of their father, John Harris who had built up a thriving pantechonicon and storage business on Grosvenor Road between the Rose and Crown and Hanover Road. Charles Tattershall Dodd captured the lingering semirural nature of this fast-developing part of town just 100 yards up the hill in this 1860s watercolour.



Did you know you can now buy Philip Whitbourn's unique CTD booklet in hardback? See our website

Captain of all these Men of Death

John Harris died in 1870 aged 56 of phthisis - pulmonary TB- just 10 months after remarrying. Known as "consumption" or the "white plague" because of the pallor of its victims as they slowly wasted away, it had earlier claimed two of his children. His surviving eldest son William George who inherited the family business, later suffered the same fate in his 40s. His grave in Tunbridge Wells Cemetery likewise received a posy .

TB was among nineteenth century Europe's most prolific killers. Small wonder that it was called Robber of Youth, and Captain of all these Men of Death. Painfully protracted over two years or so, transmission routes poorly understood, affecting rich and poor alike, it was almost inevitably fatal. WPC death certificates attest to its local impact. No beneficial treatment was known other than plenty of clean fresh air - one of the things that attracted so many afflicted invalids over the years to green and airy Tunbridge Wells in desperate search of a cure.

One Day: Three Challenges



Well prepared for Challenge 4 - chancy spring weather

Some other special spring visitors were these volunteers from Cripps legal firm who tackled three Challenges after paying their respects at the grave of their founder William Charles Cripps. One of our FWPC booklets tells the story of the life of this “*truly astute lawyer*” and “*kind benefactor whose hand and purse were alike open to assist those who were in distress*”.

- Challenge 1 was a condition survey of tree labels marking our Tree Trail route.
- Challenge 2 was clearing grass and earth to reveal inscriptions on fallen stones.
- Challenge 3 was a fragments hunt along the line of a lost path that once elegantly framed the end of the west/east vista.

Clues to this path had emerged while our gardening team were doing remedial work at the cemetery foot, recently blighted by ruthless demolition by property developers of some long established screening boundary trees and fences. See our 2022 Gardeners Report.

We are pressing Councillors for tighter planning controls and design guides over what is permissible along the boundaries of important heritage sites like ours, to conserve its fragile ecology, vital trees and mental wellbeing role in increasingly high density surroundings. We very much hope you will too.

Trees and children

One of the Friends goals is to inspire children to ponder and enjoy ways of playing a part in delivering our conservation and educational aims. Our annual Jeffery Hale Achievement Awards are part of that strategy. This year’s challenge for primary schools taking part has been to make a triptych depicting a wishing tree, each child contributing a leaf with their own wish for what more might be done to create a greener and happier world for all.

We are sure they will have things to teach us.



Snowdrops planted by children round our 2022 Jubilee Dove Tree have come into their own a year later.



Jubilee fanfare by Skinners School Brass Ensemble trumpeters during the ceremony

The Hale wishing tree project flowed naturally from last year’s Jubilee Dove Tree planting ceremony by our MP Greg Clark, and blessing by the Vicar of St Barnabas. In cultures and religions across the world, doves represent not only the transport of souls to heaven, but also the gifts of peace, forgiveness and harmony.



Because of its fluttering bracts Davidia Involucrata is also sometimes called the Ghost Tree or the Handkerchief Tree. Less elevated associations but not inappropriate for a mortuary garden. Only good

ghosts of course.

Stop Press - Cowslip time



Maria Elmore was only 34 when buried here in 1880; her husband George 44 when he joined her 22 months later.

A cowslip meadow is a rare sight these days. So don't miss out on a quick visit along the top path to view this year's fabulous display and savour their delicate apricot

scent. That looks like a fox path trotting through. Hopefully not badgers returning to dig up more arm bones.



The pink Pulsatilla is also called the Pasque or Easter flower.

Look out also for the many less obvious but no less interesting and beautiful small plants now flowering at just the right time of year to provide vital pollen and nectar, then larval food through their leaves, roots and seeds. All playing their part in the historic WPC habitat we are dedicated to conserving.

The RHS has declared this year's Chelsea Flower Show will be all about "weeds but not as we know them" that should be built into garden designers repertoires. Four of its show gardens are to be on this theme. Allelujah.

Finding out more

Back in 2006 when the Friends were formed, one of our valued helpers was Mary Page a keen local botanist. Her meticulously compiled *Plant List of Woodbury Park Cemetery 1970-1998* recorded 148 different varieties she had identified. Are you interested in helping us update her list and perhaps plot wild flower walks round WPC with themes like medicinal uses, or religious associations? Dip into Geoffrey Grigson's *The Englishmans Flora* to discover the vast world of traditional (and not always seemly) folk names and attributes. Candlemas bells, Lenten lilies, Good Friday grass, Aarons Rod, Alleluia plants (yes)... Or regularly to record sightings of birds and butterflies and keep our lists up to date?

Let David Bushell know. Not only would this help inform our ecology work, but also feed into County and national records. We are very proud that we have a Kent Wildlife Trust gold award.

A Bevy of Backhouses

The Backhouse memorial sheltering the Pasque flower opposite has a typical hidden story now emerging of family relationships and dramas, unseasonable deaths, and clerical, army and naval careers especially in India and Bengal. This and the Otway tomb close by commemorate Sarah Margaret Backhouse and Caroline Elizabeth Otway, two of the 3 daughters and 11 sons of a uxorious Rector of Deal.



Capt Backhouse's 1841 Journal describes the Khyber Pass massacre

With them lie their nieces Harriet Batt, Sarah Batt and Caroline Batt Backhouse. These were some of the daughters of Lt Col Julius Brockman Backhouse CB, Bengal Artillery, their eighth brother who died in 1867. His wife Harriet (Batt) had expired four years earlier after bearing 9 children in

12 years. Their orphaned offspring were farmed out among relatives including in Tunbridge Wells where several later settled over the years.

Recent and prospective pleasures

A Message from our Chair



The chestnut palings were there to reduce infant mortality risks while distracted parents were browsing on St Johns Church Green. The cake stall helped too

A big thank you to all who helped organise and run our “Stalls on the Green” craft and plant fair on April 22. It was a great success – raising around £800 for conservation work in the cemetery. I certainly had plenty of customers for my apple blossom honey and one of the plant stalls was sold out in the first hour and a half. Many of you lingered to

share coffee and cakes with friends – the opportunity to do this was a welcome addition to this year’s event. We are already being asked for a date for next year!

Our next big public fund-raising effort is our annual open air band concert in the cemetery on Sunday July 9 at 2.30pm. We are delighted that once again Wadhurst Brass Band will help us celebrate the lives and times of our permanent Victorian residents. Adult tickets £5, children under 16 have free entry . It would help us if you buy yours in advance via our website www.fwpc.org.uk and reduce queues at the gate. Do encourage your friends to come along as well to enjoy the spine-tingling thrill of a brass band in full blow.

Margaret Ginman



Did you spot our first Chair in 2007, Soroptimist Lorna Blackmore?. Clue -a red jacket. And Caroline Auckland another long-term member and supporter?

Spring Outing to Tower Hamlets Cemetery



Four days later, Tower Hamlets Cemetery was the destination of our latest field outing. It is one of the “Magnificent Seven” burial grounds founded by an Act of

Parliament to relieve the (literally) overflowing London parish churchyards.

Like WPC much loved by local people, but nine times larger than our modest 3 acres, with 60 times as many burials, it has become a mature broadleaf forest designated as a metropolitan nature conservation reserve, offering a host of

related activities run by thousands of volunteers. One word assessment (if we are allowed to make those nowadays) by an FWPC old hand - “Overwhelming”.



Victorian mourning customs

You will be delighted to learn that Brian Kempster, another long-term member of the Friends, will be giving us a talk about Victorian mourning customs on 25th May at the Camden Centre immediately after our 7.30 AGM. This is a topic on which he has a huge fund of knowledge and personal anecdotes. Definitely an occasion not to be missed.

Meanwhile, here is a suggested nature friendly design for an RHS weed garden award....

