



Friends of Woodbury Park Cemetery

ANNUAL REPORT 2017-2018

This has been a further year of steady progress on the Friends' three aims - conserving and enhancing the cemetery for the public to enjoy, researching its memorials and ecology and encouraging its use as an educational resource.

The success of our gardening team continued to be marked not only by admiring comments from visitors but also by well-merited awards. For the tenth year in succession the cemetery has been able to fly the coveted Green Flag marking its national status as an outstanding public space. In the words of KCC ,

“Unusually for a Green Flag award-winning site, Woodbury is not a park, but a graveyard – although a fantastically well-kept graveyard, important both for its place in the Victorian development of Tunbridge Wells, and for the fact that it is a rare example of wildflower-rich grassland”

Woodbury Park Cemetery is the only cemetery listed among the 14 registered Historic Parks and Gardens throughout the borough,

The team's hard work also won them a Silver Gilt certificate from Royal Tunbridge Wells in Bloom, and they broke new ground with a Gold Certificate in the “Wild about gardens” event run by the Kent Wildlife Trust. This year they have published a monthly diary of their work and projects. Calculated at the notional rate recommended by the Heritage Lottery Fund, this constitutes over £30,000 worth of volunteer gardening hours during the year. TWBC have helpfully contributed many hundreds of bulbs and plants to develop planting schemes. They have also repaired a section of the original boundary wall which was at risk of collapse and required Sodexo to make good the damage they perpetrated on the memorial of General Fyler. We warmly welcome our long - standing working partnership with them.

As in past years, the deteriorating grass paths have been a constant concern, particularly where vulnerable tree roots are increasingly exposed and where walkers have trampled down adjoining graves and verges in order to avoid the muddiest sections. As noted in the gardening report, some useful emergency work was done by Kent High Weald volunteers on the worst stretch but this does not tackle the basic wear and tear and drainage problems. Dealing comprehensively with these is likely to cost at least £150,000. Thanks to generous donations from the Jeffery Hale Foundation, and events like our plant sale on St Johns Church Green and booklet sales, we have now amassed sufficient funds to be able to meet the necessary cost of employing consultants to prepare and manage for us Phase I of the detailed application to the Heritage Lottery Fund. If this bid is successful, TWBC will carry forward the next stage of the process, steered by a Project Board of which we shall be part.

Work with children has again featured significantly during the year. Following the success of the 2017 Jeffery Hale Award for primary school art work last year on the theme "A place of Grace", we decided that the 2018 Award should be for poems or narratives on the theme "Rich and Poor". A number of entries have been submitted for this and are being assessed by our judges. The awards will be made by the new Mayor on Saturday 16th June in the Childrens Library and a selection of the best entries will be published.

Within the cemetery itself, besides arranging construction of the bug hotel described in the gardening report, we published last summer an informative Tree Trail booklet for children and labelled 29 different sorts of tree for them to identify. Last month after the paths had dried out a little we had a visit by 36 enthusiastic pupils from St Barnabas School keen to view Jeffery Hale's memorial and to find out more about the paupers from the Victorian workhouse at Pembury, its old buildings now replaced by Tunbridge Wells Hospital. We are arranging for them to come back this summer to follow the Tree Trail and to plant a lilac.

Events and lectures over the year included expansion of the Plant Sale to include more side stalls, and an informative exhibition by a bat expert, who brought some live bats, using St Johns Church porch to provide quiet shelter and allow children to see these tiny creatures at close quarters. A recent addition to the range of WPC products on sale to raise funds for memorial conservation is a set of 6 drink mats depicting Henry Austen, Jacob Bell, Eliza Maingay, Jeffery Hale, Amphilicia Hickmott, and Sydney Smirke. We are always happy to give talks and walks about the cemetery and its interesting residents such as these

We also joined forces with the Friends of Tunbridge Wells Cemetery for some events where there was a shared interest. This included a visit to Willesden's Jewish burial ground, Dr Mike Hinton's talk on the anniversary of the Charge of the Light Brigade and a talk by Paul Avis on Victorian house interiors. We shall shortly be co-hosting with them a visit to both our cemeteries by the Friends of Highgate Cemetery. We have also been asked by East Grinstead Council to advise them how to set up a Friends group for a disused and currently closed cemetery in their town

A prime concern ever since the Friends came into being has been to stop vandalism and ensure people feel safe while in the cemetery. We have largely succeeded in both aims, but have to remain vigilant. As the gardening report indicates, there has been some recent mindless damage and petty theft of plants and materials. So an updated edition of our very first publication "Woodbury Parkwatch" has now been prepared for distribution round neighbouring properties and among regular dog-walkers. Together with a new handout leaflet about the cemetery we plan to spread even more widely public appreciation of what Woodbury Park Cemetery offers, and to continue to seek to involve those who enjoy it today in helping to maintain its unique character for future generations.