



# Friends of Woodbury Park Cemetery

## **ANNUAL REPORT OF THE COMMITTEE 2015-2016**

This year we celebrate our tenth anniversary. A highlight of 2015-2016 has been the four awards Woodbury Park Cemetery has received, a testament to the success of our dedicated and hard-working gardening team led by Angela Swain. Their wild flower areas are now maturing into their full glory, while single species plantings inside the memorial kerbs of thyme, snowdrops, violets, cuckoo flower and bugle are creating a unique tapestry along the paths.

The judges of these competitions commended the work done and the progress made by the volunteer team in enhancing and maintaining the beauty of the cemetery, as a result of which we received our fifth English Heritage Green Flag, which we intend to fly at the cemetery gates at all our public events. We were awarded Silver Certificates in both the “South & South East in Bloom” and “Tunbridge Wells in Bloom” competitions, and in November, 2015 a Silver Award from the Kent Wildlife Trust’s “Wild about Gardens 2015 Celebration Event”. Had there been a class specifically for graveyards we believe we might have achieved a gold award.

A major problem has been the state of the paths, which are now in very poor condition, muddy and slippery, partly due to the greater footfall of walkers (often plus their dogs), but mainly because of the very heavy rainfall we have experienced over the past months. This has led to damaging trampling of adjacent graves. Matters were made much worse by the failure of Kent Highways to maintain the road drains outside the cemetery gates, causing flooding. Happily these have now been cleared and hopefully will cope better in future.

The need to address the problems of paths and the state of the cemetery walls has led to our survey work, generously aided by Tunbridge Wells Borough Council, as the basis for an application for Heritage Lottery Funding. We are mounting an exhibition with questionnaires for the AGM, so that members and others attending can see what we are proposing, and give us their views and ideas. This exhibition will be set up again in St. John’s Church atrium on the following day as part of further public consultation.

Looking back over key events during the past year, the May Plant Sale on St. John's Church Green was again well attended. Blessed with fine weather, with many volunteers helping to prepare for, run and clear up afterwards, it raised over £1,500. Pepenbury again supplied some of the plants, and we were pleased to have some lovely plants from Goldhill Nurseries at very reasonable prices to augment the variety of plants on offer.

The Open Air Handbell Concert in July in lovely weather brought out a good sized audience, and raised a further £455. Concerts of this sort are one of the ways we encourage people who have never been into Woodbury Park Cemetery to discover its charms and become involved.

All the funds we raise go into our memorial conservation work. They enabled £2,055 worth of memorial repairs to be carried out this year, giving priority to restoring tree-damaged tombs. Another sort of rescue work has been required by badger activities on the belvedere, with soil and a human arm bone thrown up by their digging. The Council has had to clear undergrowth and place netting over the rocks there in order to discourage this delving, while maintaining badger conservation good practice. The belvedere had to be closed off for safety reasons, and will need more work to restore its appearance. This closure hampered care of this area, but we hope it will be back in use this summer.

We are delighted that both of the newer Friends Groups at Trinity Churchyard and the Tunbridge Wells Cemetery at Hawkenbury are flourishing. Collectively we represent the three overlapping "stages" in Tunbridge Wells burial history – Trinity Churchyard from 1829 when the Church was opened till the early 1900's; Woodbury Park Cemetery – a "field on the edge of the town" – from 1849 to 1934, and then Tunbridge Wells Cemetery from 1873 until the present day. Each of the three Friends Groups has its own specific problems to tackle and priorities for conservation action, but we all share a common interest in preserving and learning more about the town's Victorian heritage. The Civic Society, one of our partners in setting up FWPC, have continued to be helpfully involved and to report on some of the associated interesting research findings.

We were pleased to welcome onto our Committee this year a staff member of Wells Free School, so close to WPC, to forge links with the teachers and children there. The School recently organised visits which parents, teachers and pupils all enjoyed, finding WPC a valuable resource for their studies of Victorian life and nature conservation.

Once again we took part in Heritage Open Days in September, 2015, offering guided walks around the Cemetery, and helping Dr. Philip Whitbourn with his Charles Tattershall Dodd tour around the town. This ended with homage at the Tattershall Dodd memorial, its lettering now refurbished and once more legible as part of our conservation work. Dr. Whitbourn's unique booklet on the artist, prepared for us the previous year, is now on sale to the public at the Museum.

A highlight at last year's AGM, with major benefits for our work throughout the year was the unexpected visit and address by Mr. Michael Boden of the Jeffery Hale Foundation of Quebec, Canada. He presented the Friends with a cheque for £9,000, a most generous donation to be used for repairs and restoration of the Hale family memorials and their surroundings. Besides Jeffery Hale himself, no fewer than five of his brothers and sisters are buried in the cemetery. A booklet about their lives is in preparation for publication later this year, and we are also updating and enhancing our tree recognition booklet.

A further welcome surprise was a cheque for 8000 Canadian dollars (approx £3876), presented to our secretary during a visit to Quebec last autumn, as a collective gift from the Jeffery Hale Foundation and seven other local organisations who wanted to honour and commemorate Jeffery Hale's numerous and lasting contributions to their community. We published an article in the Quebec Chronicle Telegraph, expressing our warm thanks to the Central Quebec School Board, Citadel Foundation, Jeffery Hale-St Brigid's, Jeffery Hale Community Partners, Jeffery Hale Friends Foundation, Mount Hermon Cemetery, St Brigid's Home Foundation, and the Quebec Chronicle-Telegraph.

The Hale memorials have all now been cleaned and repointed and the foundations stabilised by Burslem stonemasons, who have also recut for us the weathered lettering on top of Jeffery Hale's white marble ledger. The remains of adjacent fallen trees have been cleared away in readiness for installing a Hale memorial seat there, with a Canadian maple tree above to shade it and some access steps in the bank. A generous offer by the Foundation of some annual funding has enabled us to start designing a Jeffery Hale Annual Award with a view to increasing the conservation interest and educational involvement of the public, especially young people and those with special needs.

David Bushell organised last summer's outing to Kensal Green Cemetery, where homage was paid to the tomb of Decimus Burton among others. This year we plan to visit local graveyards in Speldhurst and Frant, and possibly Rusthall, all of which have many family connections with the Tunbridge Wells cemeteries. As with our other planned events, we shall be extending a welcome to members of other Friends Groups to join us on this outing, and to share their knowledge about the families and events commemorated there.

Finally we should like to extend our warm thanks and appreciation to Tunbridge Wells Borough Council, and in particular to the staff of Parks Department, for their unfailing help and encouragement for our endeavours over the past ten years. This fruitful partnership is what has made possible the regeneration of the cemetery and its discovery and enjoyment by many more of the public, as one of the town's most important heritage sites.

ANGELA PHILLIPS (CHAIRMAN)  
April 2016