



Friends of Woodbury Park Cemetery

ANNUAL REPORT 2016 -2017

This is our eleventh Annual Report. It covers a busy year of steady work and conservation in WPC, with the celebration of the life and work of Jeffery Hale, and the enhancement of the Hale corner at the top of the cemetery as our major event.

Our main concern continues to be the poor state of the paths, and the need to find the best way to ensure they are accessible and safe throughout the year for anyone visiting the Cemetery. We are currently discussing with the Council the handling of the next stages of our application to the Heritage Lottery Fund to repair these, in the light of experience gained from last year's trials of "soft" treatment which failed to resolve the problems.

Our amazing gardening team, led by Angie Swain, have been working throughout the year, weather permitting, to maintain and enhance the cemetery, especially with plantings inside the kerbs of suitable tombs. Our memorial repair programme is targeting misaligned kerbs to restore more candidates for this treatment. Those already planted up are a pleasure to see, especially those along the top path. It is therefore heartbreaking when one or two irresponsible dog walkers allow their pets to roam unrestrained among graves, wrecking newly planted areas and trampling flowers coming into bloom. We have been discussing this problem with the Council.

These challenges notwithstanding, the gardening team's hard work ensured that once again WPC has been awarded the coveted Green Flag, as well as a Silver Gilt Certificate in the "Wild about Gardens" Awards by the Wildlife Trusts, and a Silver Certificate in the "Tunbridge Wells in Bloom" competition.

We were delighted to welcome the President and Director of the Jeffery Hale Foundation of Quebec with the Bishop of Quebec, on 1st September, 2016 to help to celebrate the life and work of Jeffery Hale. This followed our extensive work at the end of the top path to create steps and a hand rail, restore his tomb and others nearby, add commemorative plaques and plant a Canadian Maple beside a new seat, suitably inscribed. We were blessed with good weather for the ceremony on 1st September, when the Mayor, Mayoress and the Archdeacon of TW joined us. Among others, goodwill messages came from the Archbishop of Canterbury and from our MP.

Bernard Hale, Jeffery's brother, instrumental in preserving public access to Ashdown Forest, was also honoured, with his memorial and that of Charles Tattershall Dodd refurbished. Philip Whitbourn's unique booklet about this artist's work continues to be one of our best sellers.

Our Annual Plant Sale in May 2016 was even more successful than that of the previous year, with plants from Pepenbury at Pembury and Golden Hill Nursery enhancing those grown by members in their own gardens. We raised £1,500 net, having shared the proceeds with Pepenbury. Adding other stalls including gardening equipment to the site proved very popular, and we hope to increase the number and variety again this year. We are very grateful to the Vicar of St. John's Church, the Reverend Giles Walter for allowing us to use his green, and to borrow tables from St. John's Church. It is becoming an annual event the public look forward to, with healthy plants on sale, as well as other stalls to enjoy.

The Heritage Open Day saw a goodly crowd of people, some making their first visit to the cemetery joining keen members and “regulars” who came to see what recent progress has been made. They were able to enjoy the Jeffery Hale corner and its new additions, which they agreed were a great improvement.

We also launched in the autumn a Jeffery Hale Annual Award for local schools. Hale was deeply concerned about the welfare of children, especially the disadvantaged, and so we decided, by way of a pilot run, to invite local primary schools to visit WPC and by the end of this term to produce a collage entitled: “A Place of Grace” based on their visit. The idea is to encourage all children in the school to play a part. Prizes of £500, £250, and £125 will be presented at our AGM, we hope by the newly installed Mayor.

In January we enjoyed a lecture on Victorian Gardening for Leisure, with special reference to Scotney Castle Gardens. Gardener Duncan Hunt showed how Scotney was developed and its gardens laid out in the Victorian style, with advice from Col Henry Austen, second cousin to the one who lies in our own cemetery and of course to his sister Jane Austen. A lecture planned for next autumn on the anniversary of the Charge of the Light Brigade will bring us up to date on the latest findings about local people involved in the Crimean war.

We continue to liaise with the Friends of Tunbridge Wells Cemetery at Hawkenbury on ways of developing knowledge and appreciation of Tunbridge Wells’ Victorian heritage, and to share relevant events with them. One such occasion will be a lecture next autumn about the interior mysteries of the Victorian house.

We are getting ready for publication our updated Tree Trail booklet for children. This identifies and illustrates 29 different varieties of trees on a walk round the paths, using the special teaching and drawing experience of three of our committee. The Children’s Action Day to be held on 22 April will include the process of attaching labels to each of these trees as well as building an insect hotel below the chapel. We plan a flower walk and a tree walk in June and July respectively.

Visible on those occasions will be the dismayingly looming block of flats going up at 9 Park Road adjacent to WPC. These are taller and closer to the boundary than the plans originally submitted indicated. Looking on the bright side, we can at least hope they will make that boundary more secure. We ask all members to be vigilant and if need be to make their voices heard about threats to the special nature of the cemetery as the pressure of increasingly dense redevelopment on our remaining quiet green spaces grows.

We warmly thank all our FWPC members who have been so supportive of our ventures over the past twelve months. With various departures elsewhere, the number of active members on our Committee has dropped this year. So ad hoc help has been invaluable. If the work of conservation, research and running events is to be maintained, it is important that we not only continue to have offers of practical help but also that we bring up to complement the committee who take the needful overview of things. We would like to ask each and all of you to consider some way in which you personally might get involved, whether weeding and planting, practical repair jobs, research, arranging events or joining our committee for a year or two to share your ideas with us.

We conclude with our special thanks to Peter Every and his team for all their practical help and advice. We value our partnership with TWBC, the owners of WPC, and have again been delighted to share with them in the conservation of the cemetery.