



Friends of Woodbury Park Cemetery

FWPC Annual Report 2021-2022

1. A concern of the Friends from its earliest days has been growing threats to the unique character and habitat of Woodbury Park Cemetery resulting from prominent new adjacent building and tree removal along its boundaries. Your committee took the opportunity of the 2021 public consultation on the draft Tunbridge Wells Borough Plan to remind the Council that this Listed Victorian mortuary garden is - to use their own words- one of the town's "irreplaceable and valuable assets" as a heritage and nature conservation site. During this second year of Covid limitations, its contribution to promoting physical and mental well-being in an increasingly densely populated area, has again been highlighted and especially appreciated by older people. Our submission welcomed the Council's strong commitment to green policies and suggested some practical safeguards at strategic and local level to help protect and enhance its features of historical and ecological value for the benefit and enjoyment of future generations - the overall mission of the Friends. ⁱ
2. This has been a year of gradually resuming face to face events after Covid lockdowns and restrictions, although the belated 2021 AGM and Spring Lecture (by Ellen Montelius on "Bees and Bouquets") had to be held online by Zoom in July 2021. Outdoor activity such as the regular gardening work undertaken by the gardening team has continued unabated throughout the year.
3. Our conservation of the cemetery's habitat has continued with more new plantings including shelter hedging and replenishment of spring bulbs. Our Gardening Team's Report for 2021 was circulated to all members in March. Awards gained this year are Silver Gilt from South-East in Bloom and retention of Green Flag status. The Green Flag judges reported in glowing terms on the WPC Management Plan within which Parks Department and FWPC work in partnership, describing it as "a delight to read". The areas of biodiversity, landscape and heritage revealed excellent work while community involvement was applauded. They conclude that "the considerable contribution of the Friends shines through, both in conserving this Victorian cemetery for those interested in the burials there and for nature conservation". The mystery shop concluded that "this is an exemplar Victorian mortuary garden with some really innovative approaches. This includes planting "jewel boxes" of colourful flowers on the memorials and grass management for encouraging wildflowers and the biodiversity they support". Plans for a tool shed came to fruition in May 2021 when it was erected, Honeysuckle has been planted on the side of the shed to help it blend in with surrounding vegetation while a joiners bench has been added to take many of our gardeners' tools.

4. The topic set for the 2021-2022 Jeffery Hale Achievement Awards for primary schools, was "Helping hands", inviting primary schoolchildren to use simple digital tools like mobile phone cameras to compile a five minute documentary film about a notable character in Woodbury Park Cemetery. A training workshop for class teachers interested in taking part was prepared by one of our members but with the arrival of Covid Delta and Omicron variants the planned deadline for competition entries had to be postponed to less fraught times. But memory sticks with the full training were gifted in November 2021 to 14 local primary schools as a teachers' training aid to explore meanwhile in their own time this useful cultural and technical tool. A similar workshop for adults is also being held in April 2022 for interested FWPC members to add to record-making skills in story-telling form.
5. Our Summer concert held on 5 September 2021 was given by the Wadhurst Brass Band – their first major event since lockdowns- on the theme of "Queen and Country".
6. The Friends' Summer Outing on 12 August 2021 was focussed on family connections with Jeffery Hale whose uncle spent his final years in Knole married to the co-heiress of the Duke of Dorset. We started with a guided tour of Withyham's medieval parish church and churchyard which included the Sackville family's private chapel. After a pub lunch we visited Holy Trinity church at Coleman's Hatch and were entertained to tea by local parishioners. Here we admired the stained glass windows commemorating Jeffery Hale's brothers Bernard and George Carleton who share a grave in Woodbury Park Cemetery halfway along the top path to his tomb and feature in our Hale booklet. While seeking out the grave of George's daughter in the overgrown churchyard we happened on the heavily overgrown mosaic ledger of Dorothy Snelgrove, second wife of John Snelgrove, a utilitarian counterpart to the magnificent angel ledger commemorating his first wife in Tunbridge Wells Cemetery.
7. We participated again in the Heritage Open Days in September when both history and natural history were expounded to the visitors we guided round the cemetery, while bespoke walks for other groups also took place in the Autumn.
8. The Autumn Lecture took place in the Masonic Hall and saw Guy Sankey inform us about local brewing history, focussing on Culverden Brewery and connections with Woodbury Park Cemetery. We were pleased to welcome not only our own members but those of the Culverden Residents' Association and members of the local CAMRA branch. Copies were available to buy of his book "Old Breweries of Tunbridge Wells" published by RTWCS which besides the full history of the Culverden Brewery families includes the Wheatley family whose memorial we have repaired - twice due to a miscalculation by a Sodexo mower operator - on the south west corner of the top path.
9. A major event in WPC was held on 6 February 2022, the 70th anniversary of the Queen's accession, when local MP, Greg Clark, unveiled a plaque to a recently planted Dove Tree, symbolising peace and reconciliation, as part of the Queen's Green Canopy Platinum Jubilee celebrations. The Brass Ensemble from Skinners School provided music for the event and Fr John Castor, Vicar of St Barnabas, Tunbridge Wells, led prayers and gave a blessing. The event was attended by around 50 people including local borough councillors and Jane March, TWBC Portfolio Holder for Environment, Culture and Leisure. Four local children, including three who had won Jeffery Hale Achievement Badges, planted snowdrops around the

tree, The event ended with tea and Jubilee cake provided under a canopy at the cemetery entrance.

10. Memorial repairs had been put on hold in 2021 but orders for new repairs are now being placed for repair work in 2022. The Panton memorial continues to cause safety concerns and we have been urging TWBC to effect its repair.
11. The Friends continue to watch issues around the cemetery boundaries, liaising with TWBC as necessary, as referred to ed in paragraph 1 above. A major problem had arisen the previous year with the boundary wall to 9 Park Road where part of the cemetery wall had collapsed owing to excessively high ground levels on the new development. We were delighted that TWBC has now carried out the necessary repairs to stabilise it following discussions with us. A further concern is the worrying boundary tree clearance at the foot of the cemetery.
12. The major potential financial project continues to be repair of the paths which have worn away in many places and debar disabled access to most of the site. Meetings with TWBC officials in Autumn 2021 and February 2022 continue to consider options and the financing of them, including how to address the drainage problems which, if left unresolved, could undermine parts of any new path building and create further surface hazards from run-off on the steep slopes. We hope to have more to report on this later in 2022.
13. We commend this report to all our members whose continued support is crucial to the wellbeing of this heritage site. We also express our warm thanks to the TWBC Parks Department for all the help and advice they so willingly provide.

April 2022

ⁱ Copies of our full submission are available from our Secretary David Bushell bushell327@btinternet.com