



The Unseemly Events Surrounding the Consecration Of Highgate Cemetery

by Ian Dungavell

What took the London Cemetery Company (LCC) so long to get Highgate Cemetery open? West Norwood took half the time and, had Highgate been as speedy, it might have been consecrated in December 1837 rather than on 20 May 1839.

It did take them a while to get going as building the walls didn't start until after March 1837 although the site had been purchased in May the previous year. But physically everything was in place by at least August 1838: Terrace Catacombs, Lebanon Circle, Egyptian Avenue, and the Chapels. The site had been laid out as a 'beautiful landscape garden' and was open to visitors.

Already in February 1838 the LCC's annual meeting had been told that everything was 'nearly complete' and that consecration was just a matter of filling in some forms and then the cemetery could open for interments. In fact it was much more difficult than this.

An unusual clause in the founding Act of Parliament required the consent of the owner of any house within three hundred yards 'having a plantation or ornamental garden or pleasure ground'. Their objections could easily have derailed the building of the cemetery; indeed, the first site for the southern cemetery near Peckham had already had to be abandoned because of this clause.

Three Highgate neighbours withheld their consent. The most active of these was Harry Chester who claimed a right of way across the cemetery and objected too that his garden was overlooked from the terrace over the catacombs. He wanted the terrace closed as well as the road alongside St Michael's Church which was the cemetery's northern entrance.

In June, the LCC called in the eminent surveyor and architect Philip Hardwick (who that year completed the magnificent 'Euston Arch') to see if an agreement could be reached but Hardwick concluded the objectors asked for too much. Instead, the board decided to ask for a 'partial consecration' of the cemetery.

This was very different from the rosy picture presented at the annual meeting earlier that year, and the spark of an internal dispute which proceeded to tear the company apart. A special general meeting was called which expressed its 'unqualified disapproval' of the Board's conduct and its certainty that an agreement would be reached once the Company was 'represented by Gentlemen as Directors'. This was a slap in the face for the managing director, Richard Cuttill, a stalwart of the LCC who had led it through incorporation and had even advanced his own funds to enable the purchase of the land at Highgate.

Further special general meetings were called and the legality of each of them was disputed in turn by Cuttill. In October 1838 all his fellow directors resigned, with one exception, leaving him rather isolated, and his office door was padlocked. A new board of directors was elected which sacked him and demanded that he hand over all Company property in his possession.

When he refused they broke in to his office, picking or forcing three locks to gain entrance and, crucially, getting their hands on the minute book, 'Proceedings of Proprietary Meetings'. Once properly recorded in this book the minutes had legal force without the need to demonstrate that the meetings which they recorded had been legally constituted.

Still they hadn't managed to get their hands on the company seal. So that November one of the new directors obtained, through rather dubious means, a facsimile from the firm which had made the original, and which differed from it only by the addition of the year '1838' in the design.

At the annual general meeting on 13 February 1839, a resolution was passed adopting this new seal. It was then fixed to the petition for the consecration of the cemetery which, dated 22 February 1839, was finally submitted to the Bishop of London.

Note: this article was written entirely using publicly available sources. There are no surviving company records of this period in the cemetery archives.