



Northwood Cemetery



By Jan Toms

They say that Islanders are always drawn back to their roots. Jon Matthews left the Island as a toddler only to return sixty years later. He planned to research his ancestors who lived in Cowes but when searching for graves in Northwood Cemetery he was shocked by the neglect and decided to do something about it. Jon quickly discovered that others shared his concerns and the Friends of Northwood Cemetery was born.

One of the first members was Lora Peacey-Wilcox who had also been worrying about the state of the burial ground. The eleventh of twelve children, the cemetery was both her playground and her escape in pursuit of peace and childhood fantasies. Respectful of the sleeping residents she later took her own children to visit family graves and instilled into them that same sense of quiet awe. Lora who lives right opposite

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the cemetery gates is delighted to be the Friends' chairman.

Someone else to grow up within a stone's throw of the graveyard is Barry Sowerby, who did not hesitate to take on the role of the Friends' archivist. Barry says that for many local families the cemetery was much more than just a burial ground. It was also a place for a pleasant walk, a flower garden, arboretum and wildlife sanctuary. Most of the boys who played there had a favourite grave and his was that of Harry Smart, who died when he fell from the rigging of the ship *Xarifa*. The 17 acres of grounds represent a potted history of Cowes.

In the 1850s the growth of population following Queen Victoria's residence at East Cowes made the need for a new

cemetery urgent. A Burial Board was set up and negotiations commenced to buy land from the Ward estate. Uncertain as to how to proceed, the Committee consulted other burial authorities. A mortgage of two thousand pounds was then taken out, the land was purchased and a competition held to select a design. The contract went to Messrs Mew and Manning while a Mr Phillips was selected to build a boundary wall, Mr Pritchard to lay drains and roads, and Mr Wheeler to erect the buildings.

There were inevitable teething troubles. Mr Pritchard dragged his heels until he was threatened with dismissal. The first lodge keeper, Mr Jobling proved unsatisfactory so a Mr Brown took his place until illness forced his replacement by Mr Gladdis. His pay was fifteen shillings a week plus one shilling for each brick grave dug. Mr Gladdis's

great, great grandson Tim is now actively involved in creating the Friends' web site and newsletter while his wife Marie is treasurer. Sadly the lodge at the gates, in which his ancestors lived was demolished in 1939.

For that first burial board, additional costs for purchasing burial books, a land-hearse, digging tools, a clock for the waiting room, furnishings for the lodge and a bell resulted in a further five hundred pounds being borrowed.

Initially two thirds of the graveyard was consecrated but the upsurge in non-conformist worship meant that more unconsecrated land had to be purchased. It was firmly delineated by stone markers. There was a separate area for Roman Catholics. Today there is also a section dedicated to Muslim burials. At present it looks rather isolated but as the graveyard continues to fill so it will be drawn closer to the communal resting-place. At present there are nearly 17,000 burials.

The first funeral took place in November 1856. The young man in question was James Cribb, a local shoemaker, aged 32 years. He died of typhoid fever. A fascinating story relates that after the burial James's widow was convinced that he had been buried facing the wrong direction, towards the west rather than the east. She was so distraught that the family decided to do something about it. It being illegal to

exhume the body once it had touched the bottom of the grave, they went secretly by night. While a young lad (who was the grandfather of a nonagenarian lady still living in Cowes) hung from a nearby tree with a lantern, the men folk dug a circular hole around James. Physically they then manipulated the coffin through 180° so that it faced the right way.

Two of the most revered graves are those of Little Don, a toddler who in 1905 fell into a lime pit and the communal civilian grave that is both a memorial and resting place for twenty eight of the Cowes residents killed by enemy planes in May 1942. The Friends' web site contains more details and many other interesting anecdotes.

Today it is the state of the mortuary and chapel that causes the greatest concern for alarming cracks are developing as the stunning Cedars of Lebanon, planted too close to the buildings, continue to encroach.

At the Friends first meeting in March 2008 52 people attended including representatives of many organisations who came to offer advice and support. Jon Matthews spelled out their aims – to restore the buildings, to transcribe the burial records, to survey the flora and fauna, clean the headstones and research the people buried there. They hoped to recruit a hundred members by the end of the year – it turned out to be two hundred members.

One bonus has been the new friendships. Supporters range as far afield as Australia, Canada and the United States. Barry the archivist is now in regular touch with a man from Buenos Aires who wished to find his Island roots. On behalf of the Friends a lady in Australia is following up the family of the Dowager Countess of Lisburne who died in 1883. She has located a descendent who may instigate the renovation of her memorial stone.



As a haven for wildlife it would be hard to find anywhere better. Bill Shepard, known as "Mr Trees," surveyed the land and identified 257 different species. The oldest part of the graveyard was carved from Shamblers Copse and is full of traditional woodland flowers. Part of this is set aside as a conservation area. Standing among the trees the air is filled with birdsong and red squirrels have continued to make it their home. The Cemetery is lucky to have as its groundsman, Bernie Coleman whose green credentials are second to none.

There is a lot of work to be done. Tireless efforts by committee members and the Isle of Wight Council the landowners, means that the buildings will now be made secure and lottery funding will be sought to restore the chapel and the mortuary. A brainstorming session resulted in fifty suggestions for their future use. The most popular suggestions were that they could be used as an environmental education centre, a heritage centre, an interdenominational chapel and a community hall.

Recently the ten foot high hedge and tangle of undergrowth that was choking the holly trees at the cemetery's entrance has been removed, giving a clear view of the chapel from the main gates in Newport Road. When the task was completed Andrew Turner was invited to lay the first turf.

New Friends are very welcome and it is well worth perusing the Friends' web site as it is full of interesting information. It can be found at: www.friendsofnorthwoodcemetery.org.uk The secretary can be reached at 194 Newport Road, Cowes, PO31 7PU. Telephone 01983 298445.

