

Collapsing Graves" but things happen slowly in here. Butterflies flop around. You can hear the sound of distant grave gardening.

With the weather overcast, hot and still, it felt the same entering Kensal Green for the Open Day, only when I arrived at the Anglican Chapel, the classical centrepiece of the main Anglican section of the cemetery, it was buzzing. People were laughing, lolling on the grass, talking and posing for photographs.

There were older couples and young families, history enthusiasts and pretty women in cotton dresses. And there were also Goths, skinny and blanched. They stood chatting in groups and stroking each other's hair, mostly wearing black, crucifixes and boots with 10 buckles.

In fact, the only disturbance of the day was the gunning of engines as the hearses set off for their motorcade. First, a deluxe, Godfather-style limousine pulled away, followed by a more recent machine with a poster in the rear/coffin window saying "Wanted Dead or Alive", then there were whoops as a black motorbike with coffin sidecar went powering by and finally, roaring, came a Austin 1800 Landcrab, converted for drag racing, with 666 emblazoned on the doors.

"It's such an interesting crowd," said Robert Stephenson, the events organiser for the Friends of Kensal Green Cemetery, who run the Open Day and raise awareness of the cemetery. "You get the Goths in as well. It's the death thing. It's vampiric and they feel secure here," said Stephenson, himself bald with a very narrow white beard. "They can wear stuff in here that they can't wear outside. It's a magic secret garden for them."

Elaine, from Watford, who makes Victorian-inspired Gothic clothes under the name of the Gainsborough Lady, was also enjoying the Open Day. "Elsewhere, a lot of people can't see beyond our clothes," she said, "they think we're here to dig up bones." Just so you know, Elaine was wearing enormous black boots with silver heels, a black dress that billowed out and around and what she called a "Victorian-inspired riding jacket" studded with black buttons and black flowers. Her face was white under heavy make up with pink and purple flashes around her blue eyes. In her mouth she had some hand-carved fangs which she happily snapped off and showed me. There was a £20 note in her bra and she had a great black hat on her head, set off at a perky angle. "We're all like minds here," said Elaine, pointing



DEATH IN THE AFTERNOON

Open day at the cemetery

On a recent Saturday, Kensal Green Cemetery held its annual Open Day. "Coffin furnishing" was demonstrated in the crematorium, "funeral paraphernalia" was on display in the chapel and all afternoon hearses nosed around the 70 acres of graveyard, their drivers waving at friends.

Whenever you come through the gates of Kensal Green you meet silence. Your footsteps on the gravel are loud among the Victorian mausolea and tilted headstones. There are signs which say "Dangerous Stonework and

towards a clutch of people (including "Brian from the pagan federation"), "mainly it's vampires here today, but we all get on together, whether we're from the pagan scene, the historical scene, the blood scene or the fetishist scene."

Kristy, from East Kent, and wearing a heavy black skirt, black top with printed black flowers, purple boots and purple eyeliner, was less scene-minded. "We saw it in *Time Out*," she said, gesturing to her boyfriend whose t-shirt showed the Virgin Mary asking "Wanna Play?", "Besides, it's the history really. If people don't come and visit, how are they going to remember people like Wilkie Collins?"

And, standing among the sliding tombs and subsiding monuments of Kensal Green, that seemed to be the abiding interest that drew in such a mixed up crowd: some level of curiosity in, of all people, the Victorians, whether it was their clothes, their lives or their blood.

Because Kensal Green, though strictly speaking a Georgian invention, is a sort of Victorian theme park. Its outskirts are framed by great Victorian works of engineering: the 1837 Kensal Gasworks looms over its south east corner while the Great Western Railway runs along its southern edge, the latter only hundreds of feet from the grave of its engineer, Isambard Kingdom Brunel.

Meanwhile, inside its high walls, the "deposits", as Dr Julian Litten, the founder of the Friends of Kensal Green Cemetery calls the permanent residents, make up quite a slice of Victorian London, from its aristocrats and civil servants, to its sham doctors and novelists and the simpler monuments of the poor.

Since the arrival of the body of Margaret Gregory, two weeks after the cemetery opened in 1833, more than 250 000 graves have been dug and 700 000 people buried at Kensal Green. One or two funerals take place each week and the site will be full in twenty years or so.

"We take all comers as friends when they're alive," said Litten, a precise man with a pale blue gem on his tie pin, as we watched a man in tight leather trousers taking a photo of a gargoyle, "and the cemetery takes them when they're dead."

The variety of dead residents brought people to the Open Day for different reasons. For some it was to goggle at the grand tombs of the rich, their anchors, angels and caryatids and the flowering of ornament and self-confidence that seems so particularly of its time; "anathema to us today", according to Litten.

For others, like Elaine, it was to be among the people buried far away from the Dukes of Sussex and Cambridge and the grand mausoleum of Sophia, daughter of George III. "It's beautiful," she said, as she packed up her gothic accessories and looked out over the south-west side of the cemetery, where the grass grows higher among thousands of headstones and crosses. "It's ordinary people making a statement of death."

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