

Introduction

This is the first in a series of newsletters from the Directors of the General Cemetery Company (GCC) intended for anyone with an interest in Kensal Green Cemetery.

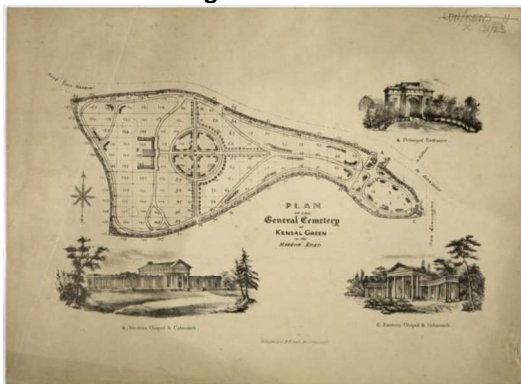
Over the last few years work has been going on at the Cemetery which may result in changes to the way that the site is operated. This work is a response to the huge concentration of listed buildings and monuments that are present at Kensal and a growing recognition that the GCC in its current form does not have the resources to fully repair or conserve them.

The Directors of the GCC are keen to explain the background to the work that they have been doing and any changes that may occur in the future as well as providing a rolling programme of updates on progress.

The Kensal Green Cemetery

The GCC was established in 1833 by an Act of Parliament to create and operate Kensal Green Cemetery in west London. Kensal Green is one of the original 'magnificent seven' Victorian private cemeteries and is the only one remaining that is owned and operated by its original founding company.

Image showing an historic plan of the cemetery with the Anglican Chapel at the centre of the design



Source: GCC

The Cemetery is hugely significant in terms of its history and architecture. The site itself is a Grade I registered landscape; it contains the Grade I listed Anglican Chapel, The Dissenters' Chapel and entrance arch both Listed at Grade II* and the North Terrace Colonnade and perimeter walls which are Listed at Grade II. In addition the Cemetery contains 157 listed monuments, most of which are Grade II but ten of which are individually listed at Grade II*. This is one of the most remarkable concentrations of listed buildings and monuments anywhere in England, however, many of the buildings and structures are in poor condition and on Historic England's Heritage at Risk Register. Accordingly, Historic England have commented that the site is one of the highest heritage at risk priorities in the London region.

The scale of costs associated with repairing and conserving the large number of buildings and structures, the most substantial of which are nearly 200 years old, has increasingly become an issue for the GCC. This issue is perhaps most acute at the Grade I Anglican Chapel which was the centrepiece of the entire site but today is in parlous condition.

Image showing the east elevation of the Anglican Chapel



Source: IPA

A Sustainable Future

The General Cemetery Company is relatively unusual because it was established by Private Act of Parliament and it is still effectively

governed by that Act (and others) from the 1830s nearly 200 years ago.

Whilst there were other Victorian private cemeteries established by Acts of Parliament in a similar way, Kensal is the only one that remains owned and operated by its founding company; the others having been closed or compulsorily acquired or transferred into alternative ownership. This fact gives the cemetery additional historical significance but it also means that the it is governed by rules and regulations that are nearly 200 years old which in many cases pose significant challenges to the way the site is run and what Directors can do in the 21st century.

For example as a private company the GCC cannot apply for any major grants to help repair and repurpose its portfolio of historic buildings as other owners of heritage assets such as Local Authorities, the National Trust or English Heritage do. It also means that the GCC cannot easily borrow money to undertake any repair or repurposing works, which in today's world with high build-costs, is very inhibitive indeed. These issues, amongst many others, when seen in the context of the huge costs of conservation at Kensal Green are a major issue to the long-term viability of the GCC and the cemetery.

In response to these challenges, the Directors of the GCC have been exploring possible options for how the cemetery could be operated in the future that could allow the site to continue as an active cemetery and home to the West London Crematorium, whilst improving its ability to secure funds and undertake vital conservation work. The unusual constitution of GCC means that the options that Directors have been exploring might not be possible to achieve legally and so specialist advice was required on what might be possible.

One of the preferred options being considered that would appear to have lots of benefits is to transfer the ownership of the site into some form of charitable trust. A charity would be

eligible to apply for major grant funding to invest in repairing heritage buildings and could focus solely on maintaining the rich legacy of historic buildings and structures located on the site. Under this option, the GCC could become a tenant of the new charity or a subsidiary to it and continue to operate the business as usual, managing the West London Crematorium and the cemetery just as it does today. Such an approach has been taken with historic sites elsewhere in the past but the GCC's situation, governed by historic Acts of Parliament and with much of the site being consecrated makes this a particularly complicated case.

Following the award of a modest resilience grant from the National Lottery Heritage Fund (previously the Heritage Lottery Fund) Directors were able to instruct a specialist barrister, Peter Crampin KC, to advise on what scope the GCC has to make changes to the way that the company is operated without being in breach of the Acts of Parliament that govern it.



The KC's opinion was clear that the GCC cannot pursue the options it has been exploring without an entirely new Act of Parliament; the founding Acts simply prohibit any of the major structural changes that are essential to secure the long-term sustainability of the site.

Based on this opinion the Directors assessment is that in order to create a sustainable long-

term future for the cemetery there is now no choice other than to pursue a change to the Act or secure a new Private Act of Parliament altogether. This would give the GCC the opportunity to revise the rules by which the company can act and bring the organization up to date in line with modern standards. It would free the Directors from antiquarian constraints that simply did not foresee a time when the cemetery would be nearly full and the GCC would be the custodian of countless listed buildings and structures.

Whilst this presents a relatively rare set of circumstances the Directors were heartened by the fact that one or two other cemeteries also set up by Private Acts have previously secured new Acts or changes to their existing Acts; indeed Kensal's near neighbour and another member of the 'magnificent seven' at Highgate recently secured a new Act that gave them new powers. Whilst no previous case is exactly the same, it is positive to see that it can be done.

Following on from the KC's opinion the Directors are consulting with specialist Parliamentary Agents to understand and map out the process towards securing a new Act and a further newsletter will be issued in due course with an update.

We are grateful to National Lottery players and the grant from the National Lottery Heritage Fund without whom we would not have been able to secure the KC's vital opinion and take this step forward.

Anglican Chapel

Whilst the complex work on how the cemetery might operate has been ongoing Directors have been doing what they can to conserve and repair monuments and buildings across the site. Whilst the private company status of the GCC limits its ability to secure major grant funding, Directors were recently successful in securing an exceptional grant from Historic England to undertake urgent holding repairs to the Anglican Chapel.

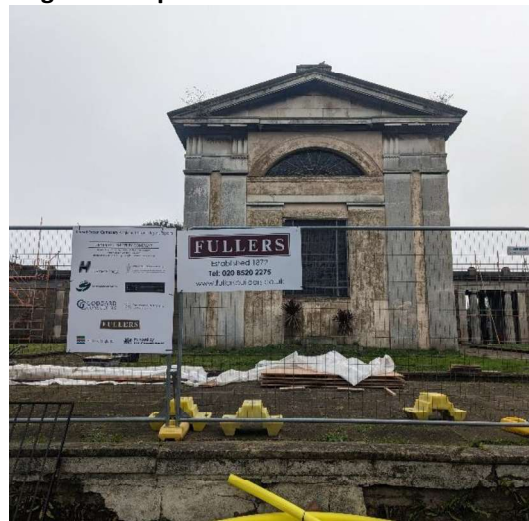
Image showing the North Colonnade behind safety fencing



Source: IPA

The Anglican Chapel is the centrepiece of Kensal Green Cemetery which is recognised as 'one of the finest and most influential examples of the early garden or pleasure-ground-style cemetery. Its experimental landscape design encompassing both picturesque and formal elements largely survives intact, in particular the theatrical centrepiece of the main avenue leading to the Anglican Chapel' (from the Historic Landscape Assessment report, prepared for the Royal Borough of Kensington & Chelsea in 2018).

Image showing site compound around the Anglican Chapel



Source: Haverstock

The Anglican Chapel is Grade I Listed (List Entry Number 1190995). This means that it is formally regarded by Historic England as being of 'exceptional interest'. Grade I is the highest category of listing and applies to only 2.5% of all listed buildings in England; 5.8% are listed at Grade II* and the majority (91.7%) at Grade II (Historic England, National Heritage List for England). However, parts of the Chapel and its adjoining north and south colonnades are dilapidated. The building has been out of use for many years and has been fenced off to prevent public access.

The cost to fully repair the Chapel and bring it back into a usable condition is estimated to be many millions of pounds. The cost to undertake a package of urgent repairs alone was more recently estimated to be around £1m. Both options are unaffordable for the GCC.

We have been working with Historic England collaboratively for the last few years on a range of practical and more strategic issues. Their grant in this case has allowed us to appoint specialist conservation contractor, Fullers, to undertake a package of emergency repair work to the roofs of the colonnades on the Anglican Chapel.



**Funded by
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The scope of the contract includes urgent repair to the large areas of flat roofing that make up the colonnades, some stonework repairs and repairs and improvements to the rainwater drainage system to prevent water pooling and get it away from the building as quickly as possible.

Image showing the architect inspecting site set up



Source: Haverstock

Fullers started on site just before Christmas and are due to complete in April 2024. On completion of the work we will be able to take down the Heras fencing and the public will once again be able to walk around the outside of the chapel.

Contact details

If you would like to receive future newsletters or opt out of future newsletters, please e-mail the GCC office using the following address: peter.humphries@kensalgreencemetery.com