

BOOK REVIEW

THE MANAGEMENT OF OLD CEMETERY LAND

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A review by J. H. G. Surrucks, Barrister

It should be said straightaway that this well-researched Report from the University of York Cemetery Research Group is *not* concerned with Churchyards (open or closed) or with Crematoria. It is therefore likely to be of limited direct interest to readers of the Ecclesiastical Law Journal.

However, the problems it addresses and the suggestions it makes are of national importance and are bound one way or another to affect ecclesiastical issues in the future.

The main problem is not that of the neglected commercial cemeteries which have attracted so much public attention, but that of the parts of municipal working cemeteries which can no longer accommodate new burials. The majority of the joint-stock company or 'commercial' cemeteries were founded between 1820 and 1852. Sufficient funds were not reserved for maintenance and neglect ensued.

Such cemeteries however represent only 3 per cent of the total cemeteries founded before 1914. The majority of the others have always been under municipal control and have been well-tended. The main problem is not therefore the problem of Highgate or Kensal Green cemeteries (acute as that problem may be) but the problem of the 400 or so other sites now 'disused'.

This term induces its own confusion because there may be no room for new burials on a site but interments may still continue in a 'disused' cemetery where there are existing family plots. In this sense few sites are totally disused. 'Old' cemetery land most often forms part of a site in which burials take place with frequency, but such land is generally well tended in the light of public opinion.

The report then considers the two extremes of policy open to cemetery managers, namely 'clearance' or 'conservation' with all the attendant problems of economy, competitive tendering for the necessary maintenance work and opinion in the local community.

Complete clearance to create spaces of open lawn may prove the most economical solution but it 'constitutes a wasted opportunity and causes irreparable damage to both historical and ecological heritage.'

The report discusses three suggestions for change, the formation of 'Friends', legislation to protect and conserve, and alterations to cemetery manager training. It does not however seem to make any distinction between consecrated and unconsecrated land within 'disused' cemeteries apart from a passing reference to 'public health-cum-ecclesiastical regulation as a deterrent to' redevelopment.

It concludes (1) by commending a system whereby the local authority officers retain control but allow volunteer groups to take responsibility for aspects of conservation work (2) by emphasising that current legislation fails to ensure that the intrinsic merit of cemetery landscapes is recognised and treated as a special category and (3) by criticising current training schemes for cemetery managers as showing little understanding of conservation principles or of the range of maintenance alternatives. Cemeteries should be regarded as containing a combination of

five landscape types—modern lawn—memorial lawn—semi-open space—open space—wood/scrub.

What are our lessons for churchyards and other consecrated land? Possibly the 'zoning' concept first mentioned could be useful, but perhaps most important of all is the avoidance of 'irreparable damage to both historical and ecological heritage' and the need to respect public opinion.

This report is based on substantial research directed at the 14000 or so acres of England landscape with which it is concerned. It throws fresh light on difficult but increasingly important issues of great relevance to a growing population likely to need more opportunities for peace, reflection and recreation especially in towns where so many of these cemeteries are placed. The report is a valuable and useful contribution to solving this widespread problem. Debate will be far better informed in the future.