



Happy Birthday to a peaceful place

By Ann Bronkhorst

In last June's feature on the St Pancras and Islington dual cemetery, readers were encouraged to discover its history and its wild places. This summer the largest of East Finchley's green spaces – and the first publicly-owned cemetery in London – has its 150th anniversary. Some may wonder what there is to celebrate about an overgrown burial ground.

Landscaping the

Common

What made St Pancras parish decide, in 1853, to send their dead seven miles north for burial? After the mid-nineteenth century cholera epidemics London churchyards were grossly overcrowded. Once the 1852 Burial Act allowed parishes to set up cemeteries outside the city (as private companies were already doing) the first to respond was the St Pancras Burial Board. They bought some farmland at the southern end of Finchley Common, later selling 30 acres to Islington, and hired the great William Masters to landscape it. Despite the shrinking water table many of his cedars, limes, redwoods and specimen conifers remain.

Change and decay

Architects Barnett and Birch designed several Gothic lodges, an Episcopal and a Dissenters' chapel and a viaduct with 'Gothic circles and buttresses' (Illustrated London News, July

1854). Sadly, most of these architectural features have gone and the 1896 RC chapel is boarded up, following arson. The 'capacious catacombs' were never built; probably such burials were too expensive for St Pancras and Islington folk. There are impressive statues and mausolea, however, and a wealth of Victorian tombstone symbols: urns, broken columns, open books and angels galore. More individually, a mycologist lies beneath carved mushrooms and a balloonist beneath a three-dimensional balloon – except that it's been vandalised and removed.

Honouring the dead

The memorials put up by devout Victorians should

receive respect and care, but the dual cemetery is run on a limited budget. Famous private cemeteries such as Kensal Green and Highgate have *Friends* and/or support from English Heritage: our 'green lung' doesn't. So although the 1854 foundation of the St Pancras cemetery is a significant part of London's civic history it seems unlikely that there will be much of a birthday celebration this summer.



Photo by Ann Bronkhorst

Notable Birds

By Jeremy Gaskell

As the Spring advances, high perches are dominated by a small, chunky bird that advertises its presence with a loud, nasal, twittering song. This is the Greenfinch, one of the more successful species in London. As it flies you may glimpse the prominent yellow panels in its tail. Much less common is the Bullfinch, with its carmine red breast. Earlier this year I encountered a pair of these retiring birds in St Pancras Cemetery.



'The Nuthatch' by T.C. Eyton

On the edge of the cemetery and around Fortis Green it is still possible to see the House Sparrow, despite the dramatic decline in numbers in London. Possible reasons for this decline are the shortage of nooks and crannies in which to nest as a consequence of home improvements, and a shortage of insect life. Another bird that consumes insects, the House Martin, still builds its mud nest under the eaves of houses south of Fortis Green. Smaller than the noisy Swifts, and with a conspicuous white rump visible in flight, the House Martin shares the Swift's long bowed wings and forked tail.

Bird of prey

Our only bird of prey that can catch a House Martin or Swift is the Hobby, a longer-winged, darker and more slightly-built bird than the Kestrel with heavy dark streaking along its underparts. The Hobby, which used to be a rare breeding bird, has increased noticeably in the south of England in the last twenty years. They are quite shy in the nesting season but range widely in pursuit of prey for their young. Last June, my attention was drawn to the presence of one on the edge of Cherry Tree Wood by the

alarm calls of the local House Martins.

Look out for the Stock Dove in the woodland around East Finchley, a bird that nests in hollow trees. Smaller than the Woodpigeon, the Stock Dove lacks white anywhere on its upper-parts. In bright sunlight, the side of the neck shimmers with a beautiful green and amethyst iridescence.

Sadness and joy

Sadly the Nuthatches breeding in Coldfall Wood [*ARCHER* March 2004] had no success. All seemed well until early April. On Good Friday I saw that the mud the birds had used to constrict the entrance hole to their nest had been broken and the tip of the tail of a grey squirrel was protruding from the hole. I leave the fate of the occupants to the imagination. This depressing occurrence was alleviated on my return journey by the faint, high-pitched tinkling song of the Goldcrest, named after its crown of red and gold. This bird, even smaller than the Wren, chooses evergreens for its tiny nest. Although not common, any garden could hold a pair. June is a good month to look out for local birds as the numbers will be at their highest as the new broods stretch their wings.

Cemetery Walk

Don't forget – there is a chance to explore the huge and fascinating St Pancras & Islington cemetery on Saturday 3 July. Meet at 2pm at the main gates in the High Road, immediately opposite The Grange. The walk is being organised as part of the East Finchley Arts Festival.

Black Bess remembered

By Len Willcocks

Len Willcocks has responded to last month's article about the Black Bess Temperance Hotel with these memories; perhaps other readers will send us their own

I remember well the Black Bess café and boarding house, situated on the High Road, just on the corner of Hertford Road. Above the café was a high building with rooms used as a hotel. It was a stopover for lorry drivers on their way north.

Right opposite was a huge bombsite, now covered with flats. I was working during the early 50s in a small factory on this site, which had been rebuilt because it was on vital war work. By the time I was working there, it was producing surgical and other instruments. This tiny workshop, the only building rebuilt, stood isolated amongst the desolation of this area.

Bread and dripping

While working there, I often used to go over to the Black Bess

for a snack – maybe one of its famous sausage or bacon sandwiches and a cup of strong hot tea. Another popular snack was bread and dripping – two slices covered with salt. No worries about cholesterol in those days!

I left the area in 1954 to live in Australia. When I returned three years later, the factory was no longer there, the empty bombsite had become high-rise flats, and the Black Bess had gone. Such a change in just three years.

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