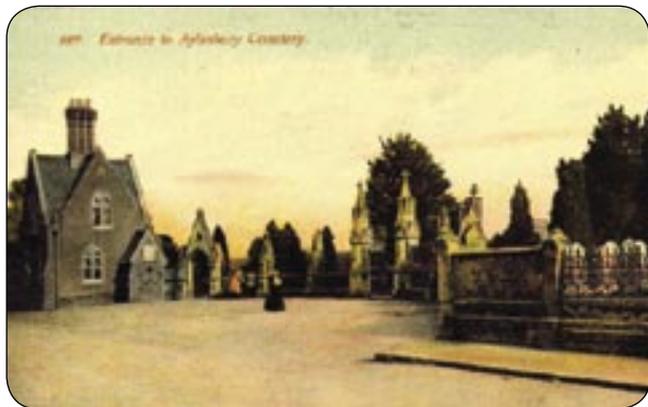# History of Aylesbury Cemetery

'Levelling the ground' was the first entry, on 1 April 1858, in the Cemetery Superintendent's logbook for the newly opened Aylesbury Cemetery, and on 5 April he dug his first grave for 'Sarah Hedger, daughter of Charles and Sarah Hedger of Market Place, Aylesbury, just a few days old'.

Aylesbury Cemetery c 1900 © from the collections of Buckinghamshire County Museum

Cemeteries are one of the earliest examples of municipal open space areas, although justified by public health issues such as the cholera epidemics of the 1830s. Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries church graveyards were overflowing, which created insanitary conditions and spread disease, and St. Mary's in Aylesbury was no exception. The Burial Acts 1853 – 1859 empowered Burial Boards to establish civil burial grounds, and in 1855 the Aylesbury Burial Board was set up specifically to create the town's first cemetery in New Road (now Tring Road). In March 1858 the Bishop of Oxford consecrated the Church of England area of the cemetery.

Of course cemeteries had existed before 1853, but there was no national movement or legislation for cemetery creation. Instead, most were created by private companies, set up expressly to profit from interment of the dead. However, after the acts of the 1850s there was a boom in the creation of public cemeteries by Burial Boards run by parish vestries.

In many cases, chapels and layouts were designed by famous architects and landscape designers, incorporating elaborate entrance gates, chapels, lodges and catacombs, with sweeping drives and trees lining drives and pathways, all typical of the Victorian era. Aylesbury was no exception and was in the forefront of Victorian design and architecture. The Burial Board commissioned Reading based architects W F Poulton & Woodman. Listed buildings credited to them include Wokingham Town Hall (1858), Batsford & Bourton on the Hill (both near Moreton on the Marsh) parish churches and the Le Sueur Monument in Jersey (1854). The architects planned ornamental gates and decorative walls, a lodge for the superintendent, a mortuary, and two chapels; one for Episcopals and one for dissenters.

Victorian cemeteries were not only resting places for the dead. It was envisaged that townsfolk would spend a Sunday afternoon strolling in the grounds and, as towns expanded, these areas of green spaces became even more important.

In 1908 the cemetery management was transferred to Aylesbury Urban District Council and at that time serious consideration was given to extending the cemetery. In 1916 Aylesbury became a Borough and in January 1917 the administration was taken over by the Market, Allotments & Cemetery committee of the Aylesbury Town Council. A planned extension due to the 1914 – 18 war was delayed until 1921, when improvements, including public conveniences, were installed. A further extension was mooted in 1932 when allotments on land owned by Hazell Watson & Viney were identified as being suitable, but despite land being purchased in 1934 it was never used and remains allotments.

After the Second World War Aylesbury's population was expected to grow and more burial space would be needed. In 1954 the committee considered an extension incorporating a 'Garden of Rest' on land in Turnfurlong, and it was agreed that 1.85 acres should be developed as a 'Lawn Cemetery' with memorials limited in size. It would be a further 8 years before this extension would become reality and the extension included a car park with vehicular access from Turnfurlong, a lawn cemetery section and a Garden of Remembrance for cremated remains with landscaping including an ornamental pond. The work was carried out by J S Bishop and Co Ltd for a cost of £8,314. In the summer of 1964 the cemetery extension was consecrated by The Bishop of Buckingham.

Because of the increasing numbers of cars in the 1960s, car parking space was needed on the Tring

Road entrance, as it had been noted at a meeting of the Parks and Public Spaces Committee in May 1963 that unauthorised vehicles were parking on the forecourt. It was therefore agreed that the existing wall to the cemetery forecourt be demolished and rebuilt along the back of the footpath. The lodge was also causing some concern to the Borough. It was costly to maintain and was often empty. The elaborate chimneys had already been dismantled and in 1965 the lodge and entrance gates were finally demolished. Their demise went unnoticed in the mass demolition of old buildings in Aylesbury at that time despite the fact that they were part of the town's heritage and together with the chapels were part of a group of historically important buildings.

In 1974 AVDC took over management of the cemetery and, despite vandalism and a period of decay, a concerted effort was made to maintain the upkeep of the cemetery. Today it is administered by Aylesbury Town Council, and provides a welcome oasis of green and tranquillity close to the town centre.

Roger King

Photograph taken by Roger King