

paternalistic or otherwise, for the well-being of people who cannot help themselves, is a failure. A civilized society judges its government by precisely that test.

And finally, none of this is incompatible with creating dazzling new parks and public gardens out of the thousands of acres of dead-ly "green space" that blights our towns and cities. Go to Paris and see it being done. But it's being done there by a local authority with real power, because that takes money too. And real champions.

ST. GEORGE'S GARDENS: THE EARLY and BRIEF BIOGRAPHIES of TWIN BLOOMSBURY BURIAL GROUNDS

By Roger Bowdler

The Georgian pre-history of London's cemeteries was touched on in an essay entitled 'Wisdom's School' which appeared in the first volume of *The London Gardener*. Perhaps the most interesting of the Anglican burial grounds to be opened in the metropolis was that for the parishioners for St. George the Martyr, Queen Square, and St. George's Bloomsbury. It opened in 1715. This cursory overview will look in more detail at the intriguing development of Holborn's sylvan *Golgotha*, following the approach of a straight-forward chronicling of happenings.

BY WAY OF INTRODUCTION

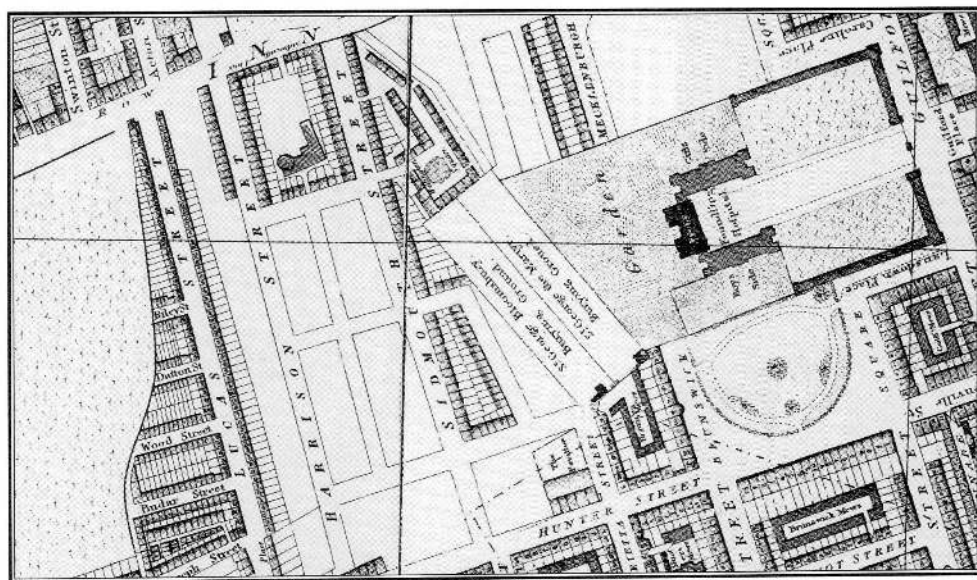
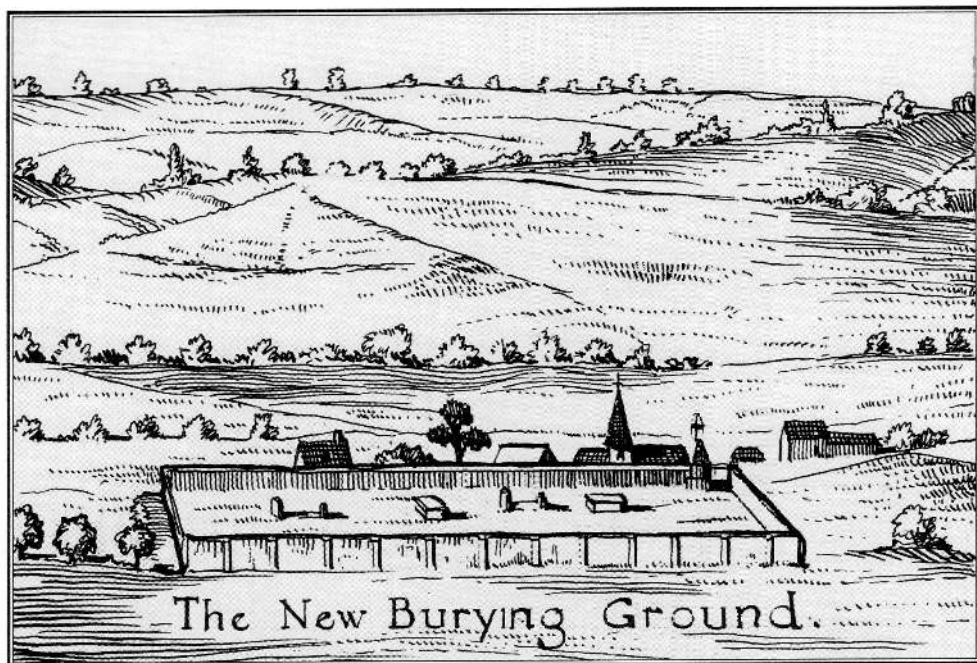
London's dramatic expansion outwards created a real demand for new places of worship and new places of Christian, and specifically Anglican, burial. Building new churches within fast-rising parts of town was costly enough without setting them in ample churchyards. Places of worship and places of burial were thus for the first time separated from each other early in the eighteenth century. This represented a major development in the allocation of sacred ground in the capital. Nonconformists – Jews, Quakers and Sectarians – had long had their own burial grounds, but for a Church of England worshipper to find their long home in a detached cemetery was quite another. Some older churches had of necessity to acquire overspill burial grounds: but to start out from the outset with a detached cemetery was a precocious act

of neo-Roman extra-mural sepulchral practice.

The earliest such cemetery to be established was the burial ground of the chapel of St. George, in Queen Square. It received its first burial in 1715. It occupied half of a three-acre plot, purchased by the Commissioners for Building Fifty New Churches in 1713: the northern acre and a half was reserved for a second parish burial ground, which turned out to be that of St. George, Bloomsbury. This opened in 1730. (*fig. 24*) The twin burial grounds, walled around and divided by a spine wall, were served by eastern entrances leading to Gray's Inn Road. When laid out, the three acres lay amid fields. The arrival of the Foundling Hospital immediately to the south connected these two enclaves to the bustle of living London.

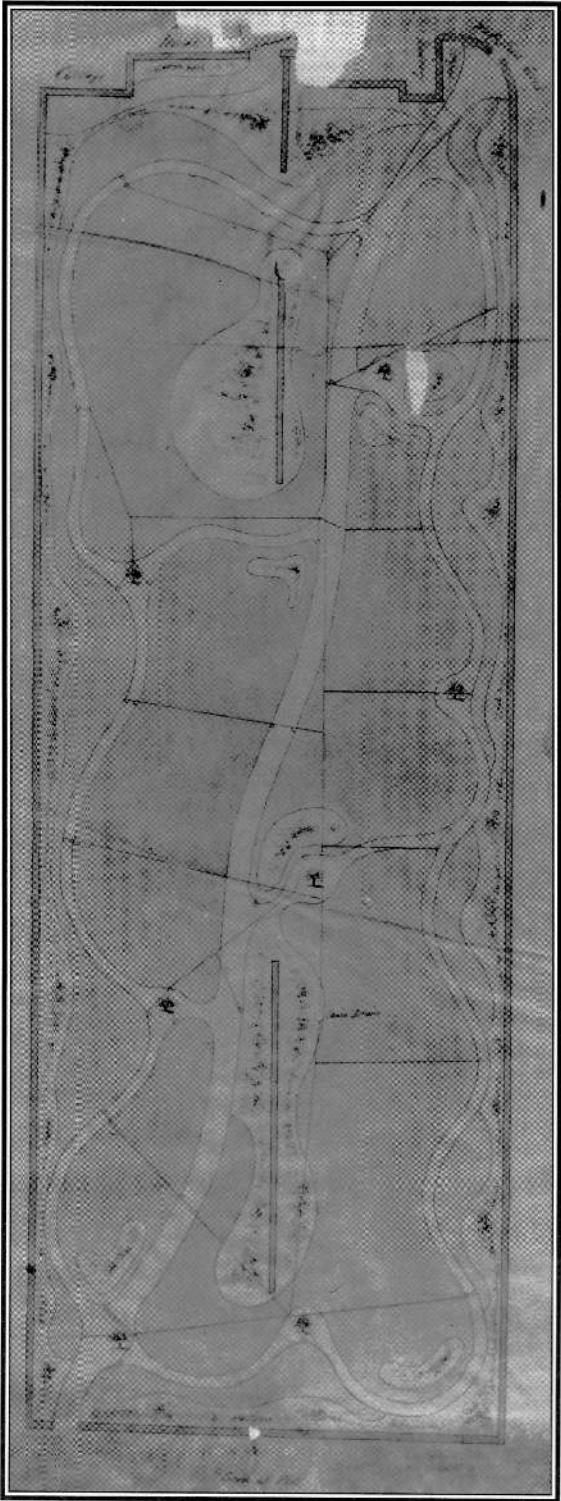
Thereafter, they became enveloped by the later eighteenth-century growth of Bloomsbury. (*fig. 25*) Little is known of the appearance of these burial grounds in their active years; map evidence suggests that these densely crowded acres were devoid of planting, and crammed with burial shafts, tombs and some very opulent memorials indeed, which must have been hugely potent signifiers of social standing. The heavy soil was poorly drained and frequently disturbed. The seething subterranean activity of the cemetery led to constant tomb collapse: the desperate need for repair was as real then as it is today. The only difference is that the vivid memory of the remembered dead led to repairs taking place, whereas today such repairs are given a very low priority.

By the time they closed for burials in 1855, tens of thousands of Londoners (and others) had found their last resting place here. A precise body count could be arrived at, had one the appetite for a whole day at the microfiche reader, and the taste for morbid precision. Suffice it to say that at least 50,000 bodies lie buried in this quiet enclave of north Bloomsbury: an intensity of death and physical decay that places this verdant oasis alongside the traffic-buffed, and commercially enveloped stretch of paving on Tottenham Court Road (opposite Heal's) that is the former Whitfield Tabernacle Burial Ground, in terms of mortal saturation. The history of London's open spaces is incomplete without proper acknowledgement of the sheer quantity



24. Detail from Carington Bowles' print of Red Lion Square (1751) showing *The New Burying Ground*
(P. VANCE COLLECTION)

25. Detail of Richard Horwood's *Plan of London* (1819 ed.), showing the Burying Grounds of St. George Bloomsbury and St. George the Martyr (P. V. VATE COLLECTION)



26. Plan of 1881 for converting the graveyard of St. George Bloomsbury into a public garden, prepared by William Holmes, Nurseryman & Contractor, London (COURTESY HOLBORN LOCAL STUDIES LIBRARY)

of decay that has taken place within the bosom of the city. We are familiar with the presence of the medieval churchyard in the City of London; less remembered is the place of burial in the younger suburbs of the metropolis.

This survey deals mainly with the early, active decades of the burial grounds. The remarkably successful campaign of the 1880s to convert derelict graveyards to much-needed public gardens, headed by the Kyrle Society and spearheaded by Octavia Hill, warrants fuller attention than can be given here. Suffice it to say that St. George's Gardens is one of the happiest examples of conversion from burial ground to public park. (*fig. 26*) Numerous tombs are left in situ; paths are unpredictable; planting is now opulent; but the essential character of the place as the depository of scores and scores of bodies remains. Feet should tread lightly over these body-rich lawns.

CHRONOLOGY

1711

Set up by an Act of 1711, the Commissioners for Building Fifty New Churches embarked on a brisk campaign to establish new places of worship for the swelling capital. Holborn was to be served by a chapel of St. George: discussions were opened in 1711 with the Russell family over the location of a graveyard within the Bedford Estate, but it was finally decided to acquire three acres further out of town.

1713

8th July: three acres of ground were acquired for £300 from Dr. Henry Procter of Hemel Hempstead by the Commissioners, one and a half acres being for the use of St. George the Martyr; the recipient of the other half had yet to be determined.

1714

The burial ground was laid out under the direction of Nicholas Hawksmoor, who oversaw the building of the brick walls and the laying of the approach road.¹ Messrs. Tufnell, Hughes and Grove, bricklayers, were paid £450 for their work.

1715

The first burial took place here on January 28th when the body of Robert Nelson was laid to rest on the southern edge of the ground, close to the eastern entrance. An imposing monument was erected soon after: a huge baroque urn on a heavily-moulded pedestal, the sides supporting a fulsome eulogy to the author of *Christian Feasts and Festivals*.

1723

St. George the Martyr, formerly a chapel, was made a parish in its own right. 496 persons had been buried in the cemetery thus far.

1727

Anna Gibson, née Cromwell, daughter of Richard, Protector Cromwell, is buried here beneath an elaborate marble sarcophagus.

1730

One of the largest Georgian churchyard monuments ever built, the obelisk to Thomas Falconer of the East India Company, is erected at his mother's expense.² The tall obelisk in the middle of the St. George the Martyr ground commemorates a 34-year old Scotsman who, having amassed a fortune during 18 years in Bengal, returned to London in 1727. (*fig. 27*) Burials begin in the Bloomsbury burial ground.

1731

Huge numbers of Bloomsbury parishioners (and others) are buried in the new burial ground: no fewer than 397 bodies are buried in this year alone (a comparable figure for the first year of St. George the Martyr was a mere 33), showing how initial aversion to cemetery burial was soon overcome.

1746

3rd August: having been hanged, drawn and quartered on Kennington Common on 30th July, the mutilated bodies of a number of Jacobite sympathisers (known as the Manchester Martyrs: officer volunteers in an English Jacobite unit) were buried in the St. George the Martyr ground. Their names were Thomas Siddal, James Dawson, Thomas Theodorus Deacon, John Berwick, Thomas David Morgan, Andrew Blydes, Thomas Chadwick and George Fletcher. John Hamilton, Governor of Carlisle Castle, was buried here in November, having been

1. M. H. Port, *The Commissioners for Building Fifty New Churches. The Minute Books of 1711-27. A Calendar* (London Records Society 23, 1986), p. 34.

2. See *Notes and Queries*, 22nd July 1854, for a transcription of the now-disappeared epitaph.

executed for lack of resolution in withstanding the Jacobite assault.

1760

The peak year for burials in St. George the Martyr ground, with 356 interments taking place.³ Having declined, the rate of burials in this ground increased at the end of the eighteenth century to nearly 300 per annum in the 1790s, to stabilize at around 140 per annum during the early nineteenth century.

1762

The peak year for burials in the Bloomsbury ground, with 441 interments.⁴ The profile of burial rates followed that of the other burial ground with a diminution in the 1780s, rising again in the 1790s. The social rank of those buried here appears to have been rather lower than in the other burial ground: poor from the workhouses, foundlings from the Hospital and unknown bodies are encountered more frequently in the burial records.

1767

Nancy Dawson, a sort of Georgian Gracie Fields, renowned for dancing the Hornpipe in Gay's *The Beggar's Opera*, is buried here.

1768

5th August: Henry Coates, Body Coachman to George III, is buried here. A procession of 155 royal servants in livery followed his body to the grave: the pinnacle of funeral show ever witnessed by the grounds.

1771

Jonathan Richardson, portrait painter, art historian and collector, is buried here.

1775

William Rose, vintner, is buried. His epitaph (now lost) opens 'Earth walks on earth like glittering gold / Earth says to earth thou art but mould / Earth builds on earth castles and towers / Earth says to earth thou shall be ours'.

1777

First grave-robbing reported. Mrs. Jane Sainsbury was disinterred in October: John Holmes, principal gravedigger of the Bloomsbury burial ground, and his assistant Peter Williams were sentenced to be whipped followed by six months' imprisonment for their part in this crime.

1784

Curtis Brett Esq. is buried. His vanished headstone bore the epitaph beginning: 'Twelve times the great Atlantic cross'd / To Fortune playing court / In many a terrible tempest toss'd; / But now I'm safe in port.'

1806

The middle wall separating the two burial grounds is rebuilt.

1815

The notorious case of Eliza Fleming, a 22-year old cook at 68 Chancery Lane, found guilty of attempted poisoning, ends with her burial here. The Turner family was taken ill after a meal: dumplings were found to contain arsenic. Her case won considerable popular support. Hanged at Newgate on 26th July, her body was put on public display, and 10,000 persons are said to have forced their way into the cemetery when she was laid to rest.

1819

26th May: A faculty was granted, permitting the repair of the walls, the draining of the path and the levelling of the ground, which 'is in many places much sunk and in a very bad and ruinous condition as well as many of the tombs and gravestones therein and the earth swamped and in need of draining'. Notices had been placed in the newspapers in March, giving those responsible just one month to repair ruinous tombs or see them removed.

1839

Through a newspaper notice a stern warning is given to those responsible for the upkeep of tombs:⁵ if they are not repaired within three months they will be dismantled.

1854

The burial grounds are closed by Orders in Council.

1855

21st April: The last burial to take place in the St. George the Martyr ground was that of 72-year old Rose Taylor Rutledge of 46 Devonshire Street.

21st April: the last burial to take place in the Bloomsbury ground was that of 53-year old Helena Lambert of Ernest Street.

3. Burial Register 1715-1855: London Metropolitan Archives, P82/GE02/27-32.

4. Burial Register 1730-1855: London Metropolitan Archives, P82/GE01/56-62.

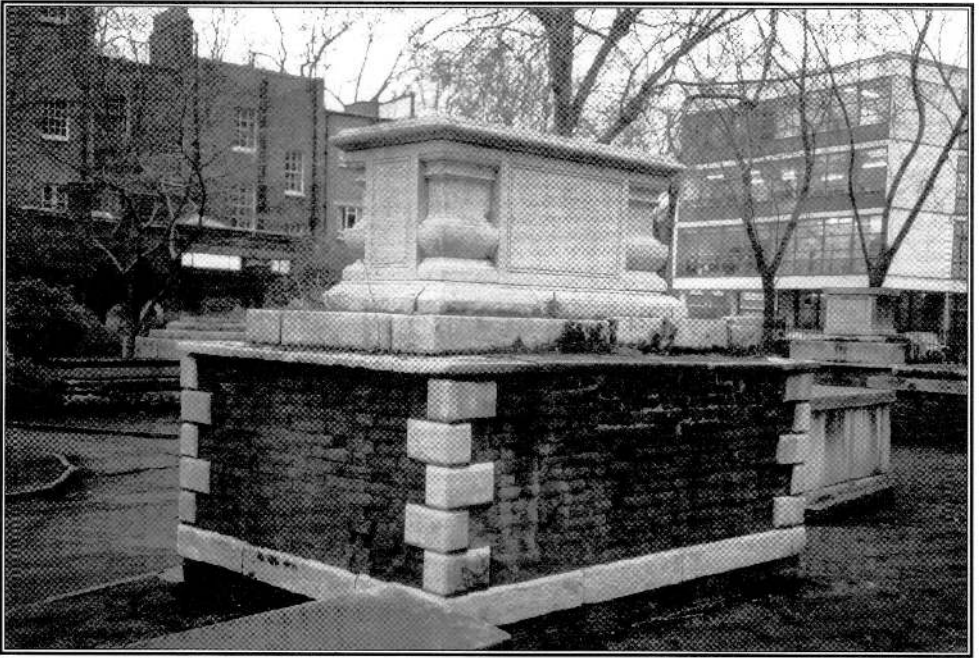
5. *The Times*, 10th May 1839.

ST. GEORGE'S GARDENS



27. The Falconer obelisk in St. George's Gardens, 1996
(PHOTOGRAPH: ROGER BOWDLER)

28. St George's Gardens, c.1970
(COURTESY ENGLISH HERITAGE)



29. Tomb of Esther Offty (d. 1770) in St. George's Gardens, 2000
(PHOTOGRAPH: ROGER BOWDLER)

30. St. George's Gardens, May 2002
(PHOTOGRAPH: SALLY WILLIAMS)

1872

The St. Pancras historian F. T. Cansick writes of the St. George the Martyr ground: 'it has all the appearance of a wilderness, and is a standing disgrace to the parish'; of the Bloomsbury ground: 'Will no churchman look to this and see that the resting place of departing christians is worthy of the name?'

1877

The western half of the St. George the Martyr ground is leased to Cooke's School of Anatomy, and not incorporated into the later public garden, thereby accounting for its irregular shape. The space was later taken over by the Trustees of the Foundling Hospital in 1925, and used as part of the child welfare centre.

1881

The passing of the Metropolitan Open Spaces Act makes possible the rescue of derelict graveyards. William Holmes, Nurseryman and Contractor of Hackney, prepares a plan for the conversion of the forlorn dead ground to a public park.⁶ (*fig. 26*) Serpentine beds, border beds, isolated trees, and the retention of some of the middle wall are indicated. So too are drains. This forms the essence of the subsequent conversion.

1883

16th May: Plans for the conversion of the Bloomsbury burial ground are approved by the St. Pancras Vestry.

1884

1st July: HRH. The Marchioness of Lorne (also known as Princess Louise) opens the former St. George's Bloomsbury burial ground as a public garden. 'In the adjoining small streets and mews there is a large population of young children, who had had up to the present no available playground but the streets.'⁷

1889

12th August: the remaining part of the St. George the Martyr ground is joined to St. George's Gardens.

1890

A Board School is built at the east end on Wellington Square (also known as 'Cat's Meat Square...that notorious preparatory school for Newgate'). A new entrance is formed at this end.

6. Holborn Library, Camden, Camden Local Studies Archive.
7. *The Standard*, 2nd July 1884.

1894

A newspaper account describes the garden as 'carried on in real country fashion, large belts of dahlias, stocks, geraniums, etc. The dahlia blooms are as fine as I ever saw them, some as large as saucers, all colours imaginable. The old clove flourishes here. A bed edged with them has thousands of blooms...the ground is laid out in serpentine fashion, and with the well-kept turf and gay borders, reflects great credit on the gardeners and vestry of St. Pancras.'⁸

A century then passed: reports and photographs suggest that the gardens were highly maintained and were a model of municipal pride.

BY WAY OF A CONCLUSION

1994

The Friends of St. George's Gardens are established, setting themselves the task of restoring and improving the quality of the place, and of promoting the awareness of this overlooked public amenity. (*fig. 28*) Prominent among the moving spirits are Jane Monihan, Gillian Darley, and Peter Avery. Residential vigilance is stepped up.

1995

The first of a sequence of St. George's Day celebrations takes place in the gardens, opened by Alexei Sayle. Punch and Judy, musicians, buns, tours of the tombs are included.

1998

Ferguson McIlveen, architects and landscape consultants, prepare conservation proposals for the garden. A substantial Heritage Lottery Fund grant is awarded to the project, supported by Camden Council. (*figs. 29 & 30*)

St. George's Gardens is thus something of a success story in terms of the conservation of public space. Exceptional local community involvement, plus the active roles of both Camden and English Heritage, have led to a campaign of quality conservation in which the all-too-difficult balancing act of repairing - while respecting age - has been pulled off. St. George's Gardens is important in the history of London's open spaces. It is also a delight.

8. *The City Echo*, 19th July 1894.