

## Living with Death – Learning from COVID Cluster Visit to Hedon Road Cemetery and Crematorium

Wednesday, 14<sup>th</sup> December 2022



*Image 1: Cluster members and supervisors pictured in front of the original crematorium building.*

In the aftermath of COVID-19, new methods of remembering the dead emerged in society. Yet as cluster member Ryan Clarke's research examines, society similarly had to reassess mourning practices, memorialisation, and commemoration in the wake of infectious diseases over a century ago. This article explores a recent visit to explore Hull's response to death and commemoration at the turn of the twentieth century.

On a cold and frosty winter's afternoon, members of the COVID research cluster had the privilege of a history field visit to Hull's Hedon Road Cemetery and Crematorium. The site dates to 1873 and was part of the ever-growing trend to place new cemeteries on the outskirts of towns. This was due to concern that diseased cadavers would contaminate nearby land. The cemetery has a unique link to pandemics, as later in the century the Evan Fraser

Hospital for infectious diseases would open in the land adjacent. The site would also prove to be the resting place of many victims of infectious diseases such as smallpox, plague, and Spanish Flu.

From 1901, the site also hosted one of Britain's earliest municipal crematoria. Cluster members took great interest in seeing some of the original crematorium literature, which showed a period photograph of inside the crematorium chapel at its opening. The original information leaflet states that members of the public who were sceptical about the modern trend of cremation were invited to inspect the crematorium at their own leisure for the mere sum of three-pence!

Cluster members then explored the rather imposing columbarium. A columbarium is typically a wall or structure with niches cut in which hold urns containing cremated ashes. These niches are usually then covered with a memorial plaque dedicated to the deceased. Columbarium's have always been rather rare in Britain, as many have traditionally opted to have their ashes either scattered or interred in the ground. However, Hull's columbarium perhaps reflects to Victorian and Edwardian mourning practices, in which lasting memorialisation after death was desirable and a sign of wealth. As one of Britain's first municipal crematoriums, authorities in Hull



*Image 2: A view of the columbarium.*

were also likely pioneering post-cremation practices such as installing a columbarium to make the process a more attractive proposal to residents.

The columbarium's man-made structure takes on the appearance of a rocky glen, planted with what are now mature trees and shrubs. These striking vertical concrete-rock faces host hundreds of original memorial plaques. Behind these death markers are carved out niches in which urns are interred, containing the ashes of those commemorated. Some memorial plaques were of particular interest to cluster members, as these rather unusually listed some of the deceased's cause of death. These included infectious diseases such as pneumonic and bubonic plague. The latter refers to twelve sailors who died of the disease in 1904. Their remains were cremated, and ashes were all placed together in one urn site. This gives some indication that the local authorities favoured cremation for diseased cadavers at this time.

Not too far from these, one cluster member also observed the resting place of one of Hull's Medical Officers of Health, who clearly opted for cremation over a burial alternative. Despite this, 1907 records of the Hull Burial Committee show that only one percent of Hull's deceased were opting for cremation over burial. This would of course increase over time. The visit was extremely informative and allowed cluster members to reflect on the history and victims of previous pandemics.

This cemetery is one of two notable sites in Hull which were utilised for the burial or cremation of diseased cadavers in the mid nineteenth to early twentieth centuries. The other site of significance is the Hull General Cemetery, Spring Bank West which hosts the mass unmarked burial of the city's victims of the Cholera epidemic. A memorial to the cholera dead is also situated on this site and is certainly worth a visit.

A special thank you goes to Dr Nicholas J. Evans who led the historical visit and shared his incredible knowledge of the site with us on the day.

Blog post written by Ryan Clarke *BA (hons), MA, PGCE*. University of Hull Doctoral candidate for PhD History – Memorialising Pandemics.

Further reading:

Evans, N. J. (2016) *Memorialising cremated loved ones – the case of Yorkshire*. Available online: <https://remembermeproject.wordpress.com/2016/08/25/memorialising-cremated-loved-ones-the-case-of-yorkshire/> .

Grainger, H. J. & Cremation Society of, G. B. (2005) *Death redesigned: British crematoria, history, architecture and landscape* Spire Books.

Kazmier, L. (2009) Leading the world: The role of Britain and the first world war in promoting the "modern cremation" movement. *Journal of Social History*, 42 (3), 557-579.

Wells, S., Rhodes, J., Farquharson, R., Moore, W., Groves, J., O'Dwyer, T. F., Parsons, H. F., Curran, J. J., Nunn, P. W., Thursfield, T. W., Haynes, S., Tomkins, H., Leach, J. C., Hart, E. & Blake, F. W. (1891) A discussion on the disposal of the dead. *The British Medical Journal*, 2 (1603), 627-631.