

Cowgate - Life Among the Dead

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Did you know, UK is one of the most nature-depleted countries in the world? Fortunately, cemeteries can provide a peaceful place for nature to thrive – sanctuaries for wildlife – as well as offering pleasant places for us to enjoy. There's a wealth of research which shows that time spent in nature can have a positive impact on our health and wellbeing.

The importance of cemeteries as urban green spaces is often overlooked. Furthermore, old cemeteries, such as Cowgate, can act as a sanctuary in urbanised areas, as they are not as intensely managed as other urban green spaces, and attract birds, wildflowers and small mammals. Relatively untouched by surrounding urban development, they often act as green oases, providing a range of important natural habitats for a variety of plant life and animals.

In an old cemetery, the graves, stone walls, shrubs and hedges provide plenty of nooks for wildlife to hide; old trees offer places for birds and bats to nest; and undisturbed areas allow plants to grow.

With their array of rock surfaces and different aspects, gravestones provide a diversity of places for mosses and lichens to grow. Gravestones not only offer a stable surface, but they also provide a date, helping researchers to judge the age of the lichen. The British Lichen Society say that lichen growing on graves can be as old as the grave itself.

Mosses and lichens play an important role in ecosystems. By soaking up water and acting like an insulation layer, mosses keep the ground around them damp and

the ground or rock underneath them cool, which can be helpful for plants. Mosses and lichens also provide nesting material for birds and create microhabitats crucial for a variety of organisms. They create sheltered places for insects to live in, lay their eggs and find food.

Cemeteries were conceived and designed both as gardens of the dead and as memorials. The inscription on memorials, the design of monuments, the choice of stones, the architecture of building and landscape design shed light on past social customs and events and combine to make a cemetery an irreplaceable historical resource. As an important record of the social history of the area, each cemetery is also the biography of its community. Church cemeteries in the mid-19th century became overcrowded with burials, so locations for alternative burial grounds were sought. The cemetery developers were invariably local authorities who commissioned leading architects and designers to lay out the landscapes and build chapels, lodges, gates and walls. With Cowgate, when the nearby St Mary's churchyard was closed for burials in 1873, the Mowl family donated about three acres on the foothills of the Western Heights for the creation of a new cemetery. Its layout is attributed to Stephen Geary (1797-1854), an architect who designed London's famous Highgate Cemetery.

There is a strong link between the design of cemeteries and Victorian public parks, hence the garden character of these last resting places for the dead. The tradition continued with the design of the crematoria landscapes into the 20th century.