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Public health and private sentiment: the development of cemetery architecture and funerary monuments from the eighteenth century onwards

Harold Mytum

Introduction

There has been an increasing interest over the past two decades in the archaeological study of funerary remains of the recent past. Some of the studies have concentrated on the use of such data to examine wider theoretical and methodological issues in archaeology (Dethlefsen and Deetz 1966; Dethlefsen 1981) whilst others have seen the subject as of interest in its own right (Shoesmith 1980; Rahtz 1981; Rahtz and Watts 1983). The recording of graveyards and cemeteries can be considered as a specialist form of archaeological survey (Jones 1984; Mytum 1988), with some forms of analysis aided by computers (Rahtz 1987; Mytum 1987).

The remains of cemeteries and funerary monuments can throw considerable light on the state of public health from the eighteenth century onwards, and on the contemporary perceptions of it. Whilst the documentary sources deal with the views of the intellectuals, artists and architects and include many imaginative schemes to deal with problems, the actual material culture indicates what, in fact, was achieved. In many cases there was considerable disparity.

In some circumstances memorials in cemeteries may provide important evidence on public health. Though gravestones do not record a representative cross-section of the population, in areas where burial records do not survive they may be the only source of information on demography. For example, most of the nonconformist burial grounds in south-west Wales have no extant nineteenth-century records, and a recent programme of recording in a sample of chapel graveyards in Pembrokeshire has provided important demographic information which can be compared with the records (both archaeological and documentary) for the Church of Wales graveyards in the same area (Fig. 1). Cause of death is also sometimes indicated by the inscription; numerous late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century headstones in the Trafalgar Cemetery in Gibraltar give the cause of death as 'malignant fever' – yellow fever (Pl. 1). It may also be possible to use the data from gravestones to assess occupational health hazards (Mytum and Kilminster 1987), though full burial registers with occupations recorded would be more accurate.

It is perhaps in the *attitudes* to public health that the study of graveyards and their monuments can be of greatest general value. Public health was the stated cause of many changes in body disposal over the last two centuries, and the greater part of this

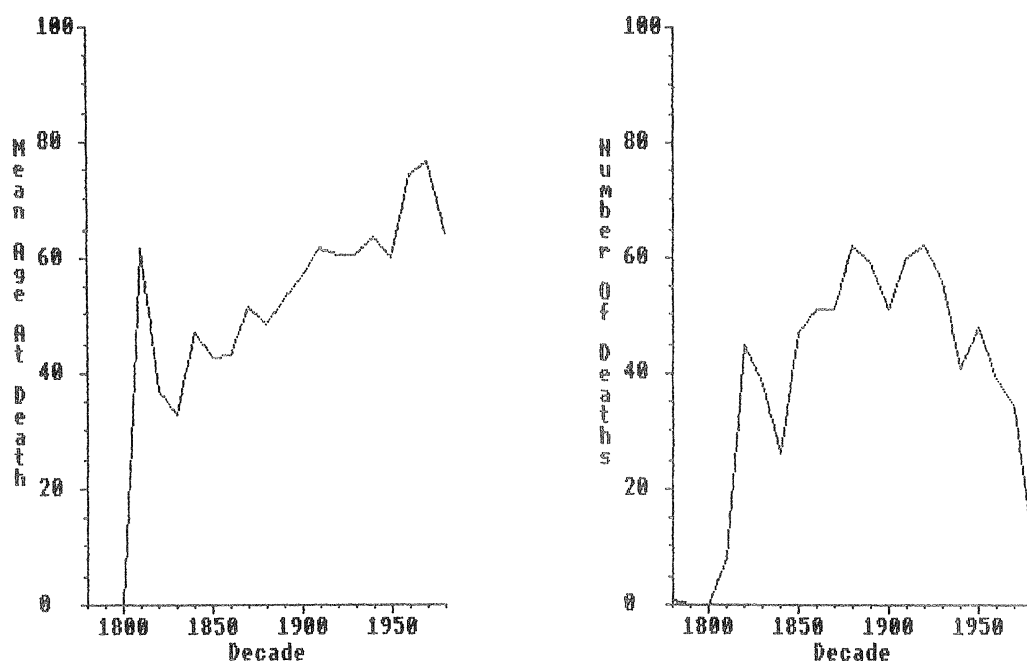


Figure 1 Demographic data from the nonconformist burial ground of Brynberian, Pembrokeshire. Left: mean age at death, by decade; right: number of deaths per decade.

paper examines the alterations in mortuary practice over this period. Many of these developments can thus be explained in straightforward functionalist terms, but there were, of course, many different ways of overcoming the hygiene problems encountered and other factors influenced which particular strategies were employed. Changes in attitudes to death, and to social behaviour associated with mortuary practices were largely obscured at the time by the overt concern with public health, but these underlying shifts in values are briefly discussed in the last part of the paper. It can be argued that the development of extensive cemeteries led to hitherto unavailable opportunities for social and economic manipulation which, once recognised, became a more powerful mechanism for change than had the desire for improved hygiene.

Public health: the problem

The vast increase in the size of cities across western Europe and its colonies from the eighteenth century onwards had serious implications for public health. Many diseases became endemic in the concentrated centres of population, and water supply and refuse disposal were often ill considered. Within this context, the disposal of the dead can be seen as a specific but extremely important element in disposal strategies. Though life expectancy was always low by modern standards, deaths in a small town were merely a regular reminder of mortality and the basis for a small, often part-time

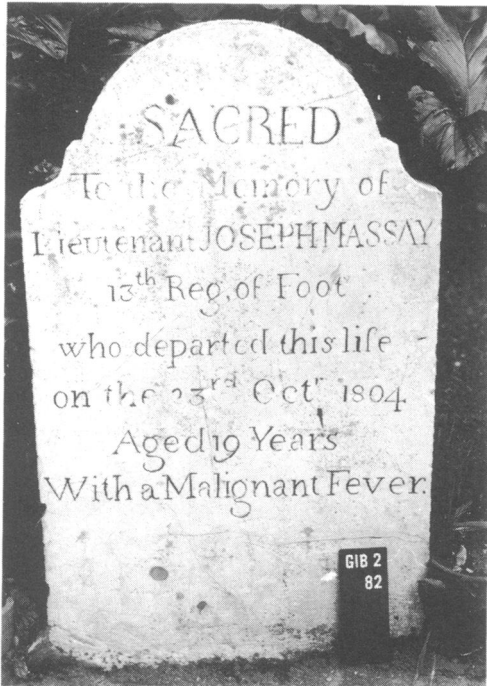


Plate 1 A gravestone inscription giving cause of death, Trafalgar Cemetery, Gibraltar.



Plate 2 A large tomb over a family vault in the cloister cemetery, Granada, Spain. Note the *loculi* in the background.

funerary craft. Burial took place in the graveyard of the local parish church which was physically, ideologically and socially linked to the deceased and grieving relatives. The area available for burial was more than sufficient to meet demand, the location of each burial within the church or graveyard being determined by familial and economic constraints. The church maintained this service as the final stage of the support for individuals given from baptism onwards, and derived significant income for the services delivered. The effective monopoly in burial and the consequent income enjoyed by the church through the medieval period and into modern times was fiercely defended, and it was at least in part this tenacity which led to the severe health risks. Even in the seventeenth century the problems of city cemeteries were appreciated, but the institutional opposition could not be broken down. Wren wished to design separate cemeteries for London after the Great Fire of 1666, but only the Dissenters, who did not desire burial in consecrated ground anyway, were able to develop cemeteries like the one still surviving at Bunhill Fields near Moorgate which, though not beyond the city, was at least separate from a church (Meller 1981: 88).

As towns and cities grew, the populations of many of the city parishes rapidly rose. Because of the limited areas available, overcrowding in death became even more serious than that in life. Burial grounds were used and re-used, burials cutting through others in various states of decomposition. In earlier periods the size of the cemetery was sufficient to allow a pattern of rotation which ensured full decay of at least all but the bones before any subsequent burial. But with the rapidly increased rate of deposition, the need for overburial came round too quickly for this. Bodies had to be interred over others, and in some graveyards this led to burial ever nearer the surface with consequent health risks. The poor who could not afford an elaborate funeral were generally placed in communal graves dug to a considerable depth and then left open until sufficient interments had been made for the trench to be filled in and another dug elsewhere in the graveyard. Whilst open, these trenches were most unsanitary, and when backfilled the interments took a very long time to decay because of the large numbers of bodies in close proximity. Indeed, once the density of bodies within the graveyard soil reached a certain point, further decomposition was impossible because the bacteria necessary for this process could not survive. The graveyard then became an embalming matrix, a foul-smelling, slimy mass of putrefaction; the burial ground was itself dead.

The colonial inspiration

The various public health problems associated with body disposal that were becoming apparent from the later eighteenth century in western Europe could be paralleled in many important respects by European settlers in some of the colonies. Of the strategies which were found successful in distant climes, some could be adapted to a European situation. It would seem that the earliest cemeteries in the modern tradition were developed by Europeans in India during the seventeenth century (Curl 1980). Here, death was extremely common; only 100 out of 800 Europeans survived the fevers of 1692 in Bombay. Wilkinson (1976: 3) suggests that, of those who went east to make

their fortune, the figure of one in seventy who managed to return is slightly misleading in that some chose to stay, but nevertheless the chances of survival were very low. In such an environment, European deaths were daily occurrences and appropriate arrangements had to be made which did not increase still further the health risks.

The Portuguese were the first to have cemeteries in the subcontinent but it was the Dutch who began to develop the cemetery tradition, particularly at Surat. The massive memorials overlying the earth burials of the seventeenth century incorporated Mughal features, but were later surrounded and outnumbered by those in the neoclassical tradition. Nevertheless, the ordered, planned, spacious cemetery design was retained and, most importantly, distanced from the church and centres of habitation. Inspired by Surat, the South Park Cemetery was founded at Calcutta in 1767 (Curl 1986). Its formal design, with avenues for walks and arrangements of trees and walls to break up the vistas, can be considered a forerunner of the garden cemetery movement of the nineteenth century. Many smaller cemeteries were also developed in lesser towns and these display less ambitious, but similarly ordered designs; plots were marked, and overburial not allowed. An example of such a site is the Kacheri Cemetery, Kanpur (Yalland 1985). The monuments at such smaller cemeteries are identical with the mass of those at the major cities, and indicate that they were very much within the same tradition but adapting to local needs. Similar cemeteries were also founded in Malaya (Harfield 1984) and Sumatra (Harfield 1985).

The developments in India and elsewhere in the Far East concerned formal cemeteries with individual monuments set in private plots. But in the American colonies different health problems presented themselves, and called for completely different solutions. The French in Luisiana were settling in an environment little better than the Europeans in India, and by 1725 a cemetery beyond the city had been established at New Orleans (Loughlin 1948). However, in St Louis it was only after flood, fire and epidemic in 1788 that the Catholic authorities recognised that public health was at risk by burial within the city. The cemetery which was begun was to set an important precedent not only in the southern states of America but in Europe also. The dangers of flooding in this low-lying area encouraged above-ground burial, and the pattern chosen was one of recesses, *loculi*, into which coffins could be placed end-on. These brick-built structures were two to six storeys high, and were constructed in blocks so that several hundred bodies could be placed in each set of vaults. The blocks were set out in rows, similar to houses of the living in the city. The brick structures were covered by stucco, and the occupied recesses closed off with a suitably inscribed stone tablet or an infilling of stuccoed brick. The burials were not permanent; once decay had been completed, the coffin was removed and burnt, the bones being pushed down a hole and into a charnel cist at the back of the recess. Another member of the family could then be placed in the *loculus*.

The design chosen for St Louis, and soon followed by other cemeteries in the region, had antecedents in the classical columbaria for cremated remains. Some of these buildings had survived in and around Rome, and may have been known by architects. The catacombs of the early Christians may have also been an inspiration, as might the design of burial vaults beneath European churches with their arrangements for stacking coffins on shelves. The development of end-on burial came out of a desire to construct

economic and efficient structures which could contain the maximum number of bodies within a given amount of space. The invention of the end-on, oven-like *loculi* burial tradition was one that was to later develop as the typical western Mediterranean form, though it also occurred in parochial vaults in countries like Britain.

The European response

The first responses in Europe to the problems of graveyard overcrowding came from the rich who merely tried to avoid it. Burial in vaults was an alternative to earth burial and provided an exclusive resting place for the wealthy family; it was particularly popular in the seventeenth century but continued into the nineteenth century. The liturgically correct east-west alignment of the coffins was maintained and normally the coffins were arranged simply on the floor; shelves were only used in the larger aristocratic family vaults. It is interesting to note that in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries charnel cists were often provided, but that later these were avoided and vaults could quickly become full. Not many vaults have been excavated in Britain (Watts and Rahtz 1985; Redknap 1985), and only a few others have been archaeologically recorded (Litten 1985; Mytum 1989).

Private vaults may have provided a haven in death, but for the middle classes the ideal was far from realised as overcrowding in the parochial vaults beneath urban churches increased in the same way as in the graveyards. The recent research at Spitalfields, London has emphasised the chaotic and callous nature of mortuary practice in such a situation (Adams and Reeve 1987). Although not designed originally for burial, the vaults were adapted during the construction of the church and were immediately used for that purpose once consecrated in 1729. Until the vaults were sealed in 1867, over 1,000 people had been placed there. This led to severe overcrowding, with coffins piled up and packed together, in places right to the barrel roofs and with little regard to liturgically correct alignment.

Burial in churches, often little below the surface, resulted in odours accumulating in the church. The development of brick (or occasionally stone) lined shaft burials within churches in the eighteenth century (Litten 1985) was in part a response to fear of infection. This allowed the burial to be placed at a reasonable depth and reduced the chance of over-burial. Excavations within churches have produced numerous examples of this burial form, as at St Augustine the Less, Bristol where the whole of the interior was honeycombed with such shafts (Boore 1986). Whilst smells must have always been a problem, the widespread installation of heating systems of hot water pipes under or on the floor must have increased the rate of decay. Since the prevailing medical opinion was that diseases such as cholera were air-borne, the detection of such smells emanating from the deceased were viewed with great concern. Another method of preventing the escape of noxious fumes was to seal the body within an airtight coffin. A pitch lining to the wooden inner shell provided some protection, but a lead covering was much longer lasting. Where lead was used a third wooden shell was placed on the outside, onto which could be placed the fabric covering and coffin furniture. Lead had long been used for coffins, but became essential for burials within churches. At Spitalfields only

lead-lined coffins were allowed in the parochial vaults after 1813, because of health fears (Adams and Reeve 1987). Later in the nineteenth century, however, burial within churches was to be banned in most European countries.

The most well known reforms in graveyard management and cemetery design in Europe are those in France (McManners 1981). A survey of the Paris cemeteries in 1763 reported a cycle of burials every nine years in some cases and even the charnel houses were becoming full. The result of this research was a suggestion to ban burial in parish graveyards and establish substantial cemeteries elsewhere. Only a few clergy supported these proposals at first, but in 1775 the Church asked the king to take action and in 1776 a Royal Declaration was made, and this applied nationally. Only in certain circumstances could burial take place indoors, and then it had to be at a depth of 6 feet and within a stone lining. Most burials had to be away from the built-up area of towns, though villages were not included in the legislation.

Progress in actually constructing the new cemeteries was often very slow because of local opposition by both lesser clergy and local inhabitants. But the medical profession insisted that public health was suffering, and cases of epidemics such as that at Beaune-en-Gatinais in 1781 and Ceyrat in 1784 were held up as examples of disease emanating from overcrowded burial grounds (McManners 1980: 315). The most celebrated case of pestilence from a city burial ground came in Paris, however. The Cimetiere des Saints-Innocents catered for fifteen parishes, and despite attempts to prevent burial, the area continued to be used. By 1779 gasses began to percolate through cellar walls of neighbouring buildings from a very deep communal burial trench and quicklime around the trench made no difference. In 1780 a cellar wall collapsed, decaying corpses fell out and soon illness was widespread in the area. In 1785 the site was deconsecrated and the remains carted off over a period of two winters to the quarries at Montrouge (McManners 1980: 316–17). These tunnels in the limestone formed the setting for a most bizarre display; the bones were arranged in decorative patterns along the walls, a tradition which continued as gradually other city graveyards were likewise emptied. This enormous communal ossuary was consecrated in 1786. There was no creation of large cemeteries, however; that had to wait over a decade, despite numerous architectural schemes that were proposed (Curl 1980).

The first major cemetery in Paris in 1804 was opened at Pere-Lachaise, named after the confessor to Louis XIV who had owned the land. The extensive grounds were quickly populated with large numbers of impressive neoclassical monuments, many of them mausolea. In some parts these developed as winding streets with the tombs almost touching, in others a more spacious arrangement enhanced by trees and shrubs predominated. Winding paths and flights of steps made the best possible use of the varied terrain. The cemetery, so different from the odious, overcrowded city graveyards of the time, was to have a profound effect on cemetery designers not only in Europe but beyond (Etlin 1976).

Elsewhere in Europe, developments took place at least in part independently of the French lead. Purchase of further burial spaces within churches was forbidden in Sweden by Gustavus III in 1783, and in the decades that followed extramural cemeteries were established (Curl 1980: 151). In Hamburg it was the administrator of one of the parishes who took the initiative and purchased a plot of land for use as a



Plate 3 A block of *loculi* at Granada, Spain. The white marble slabs are relatively recent, indicating re-use.



Plate 4 The nonconformist cemetery at Cilgwyn, Pembrokeshire. The monuments, many in neoclassical styles, are in serried ranks.

burial ground outside the city in 1793, a solution soon followed by others there (Whaley 1981: 104). At Rome, an area beyond the walls which was used for some interments from 1738 was officially recognised as a burial ground for non-Catholics only in the 1820s when the original area, the Parte Antica, was closed to all but exceptional burials (Rahtz 1987). The Parte Antica was like a churchyard in its irregular arrangement, but the later zones were efficiently used in the manner becoming widespread in European cemetery management, with graves tightly packed in rows.

The common form of Catholic burial in Italy and Spain was in the walled cemetery. This consisted of several elements: burial in the cloister garth and in vaults in arcades for the rich, which came out of the early modern European tradition, and large numbers of end-on *loculus* burials as at New Orleans. The design of cemeteries such as Granada followed this pattern, with a series of cloisters. The first contained the most elaborate mausolea, but the boundary walls were covered with the memorial slabs which sealed up the *loculi* (Pl. 2 and 3). The courtyards further away from the entrance had fewer large monuments, and indeed some areas were devoted to earth burials marked by simple iron crosses. Family vaults were also constructed, in which coffins could be placed sideways on shelves and sealed with long marble slabs on which the name but often little more was recorded. Burials in such vaults were, like those in the *loculi*, only temporary. Once the vault was full the oldest burial would be removed

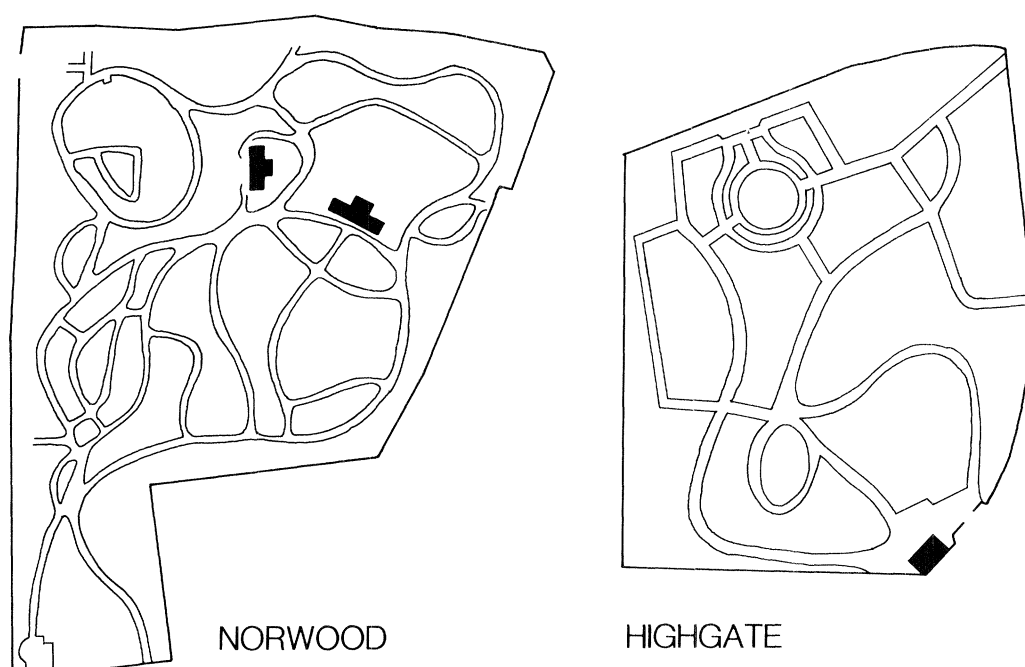


Figure 2 Typical English garden cemetery plans from London (not to scale).

from a shelf, the bones placed in a charnel cist in the floor, and a new corpse put in its stead. In this way the vaults, like the *loculi*, could be re-used many times, as can be testified by the rarity today of even late nineteenth century memorial slabs in these types of tomb.

In Ireland and Scotland some new cemeteries were founded in the later eighteenth century. In Belfast, a new cemetery was opened in 1774 beyond the city and not attached to a church, a similar arrangement to that of Calton Hill in Edinburgh (Curl 1980: 148). In England, however, reforms were much slower despite efforts of architects and physicians. It was not until 1821 that the English cemetery movement could be said to be successful, with the opening of the Rosary cemetery at Norwich. Though a late arrival on the scene, the English tradition was to prove to be a powerful influence, particularly that of the garden cemetery movement of which Loudon was the leading figure (Curl 1975). In the following decades large numbers of cemeteries were set up as private companies, of which Norwood in 1837 and Highgate in 1839 are amongst the most famous in London (Fig. 2).

The evidence from York shows that burial problems were not restricted to the large cities. The numerous medieval parish churches had relatively small graveyards which had been further reduced in area by road widening schemes and other development. In many of the most crowded graveyards it was difficult to find suitable locations for burial. Hargrove (1847) notes that iron borers were used in attempts to find unused spaces, but this led to the rupture of buried, sealed coffins and the escape of gasses. With the disturbance of earlier burials, human bones could be left on the surface, even

with flesh still attached, and on one occasion Hargrove witnessed a dog running off with such a bone. Overburying in some cemeteries meant that recent burials were very near the surface (some only 18 inches deep at St Martin-le-Grand), leading to the advice 'tread carefully when you leave the path, or your foot may sink into something fouler than earth'. The Health of Towns Commission for York also commented on the problem of graveyard overcrowding, and included an appendix listing the city burial grounds and how overcrowded each was (Laycock 1844). At St Helen's, Stonegate, the overburial problem was temporarily alleviated by the dumping of clean soil 3 feet thick over the graveyard. Contamination of the drinking supply was also caused by graveyards, with water percolating through the burial grounds of St Cuthbert's and St Sampson's finding its way into wells nearby.

An attempt to set up a private cemetery at York in 1833 had been abandoned because the archdeacon of York desired to carry out reforms which would still leave control, and income, to the clergy. This plan never materialised and the York Cemetery Company was formed in 1836, with the first burials in the following year (Anon. 1943). The design was within the garden cemetery movement, a fact appreciated by the locals who could even describe it as the 'Pere de la Chaise of York' (Hargrove 1847). The city graveyards were closed in 1854, and almost all burials from that time onwards were on the York Cemetery Company property, which was rapidly increased in size (Fig. 3); most of the monuments erected in the cemetery were made at the company's own yard.

Back in the European colonies, there was often a reflux of mortuary traditions, often combined with local cultural features. On Gibraltar both the English garden cemetery with earth burials and the Mediterranean re-usable family vault tradition were used side by side. The North Front Cemetery was designed by the British to house burials of all Christians who died on the Rock, with a separate cemetery for the Jews nearby. The cemetery was divided, like those in England, into areas reserved for the established

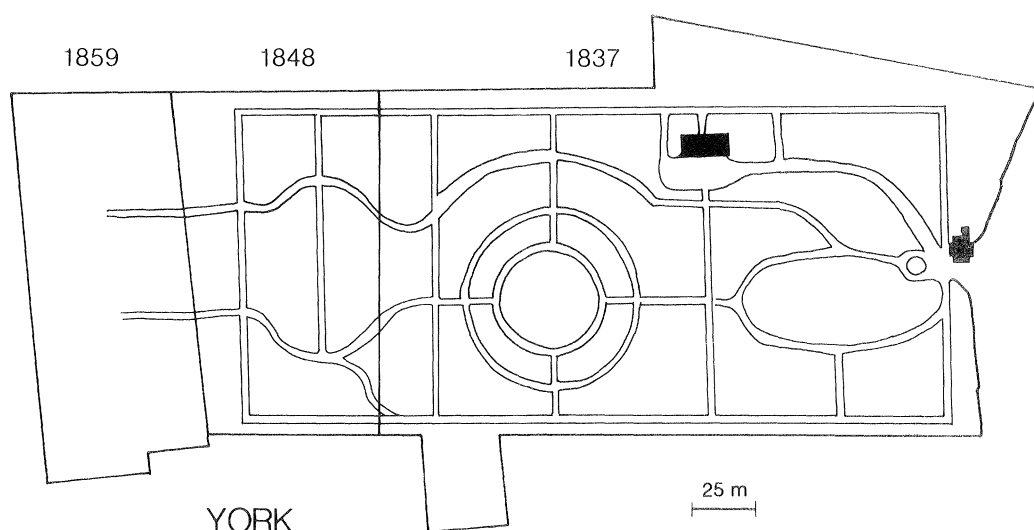


Figure 3 York Cemetery, showing the extensions made in the first few decades of use.

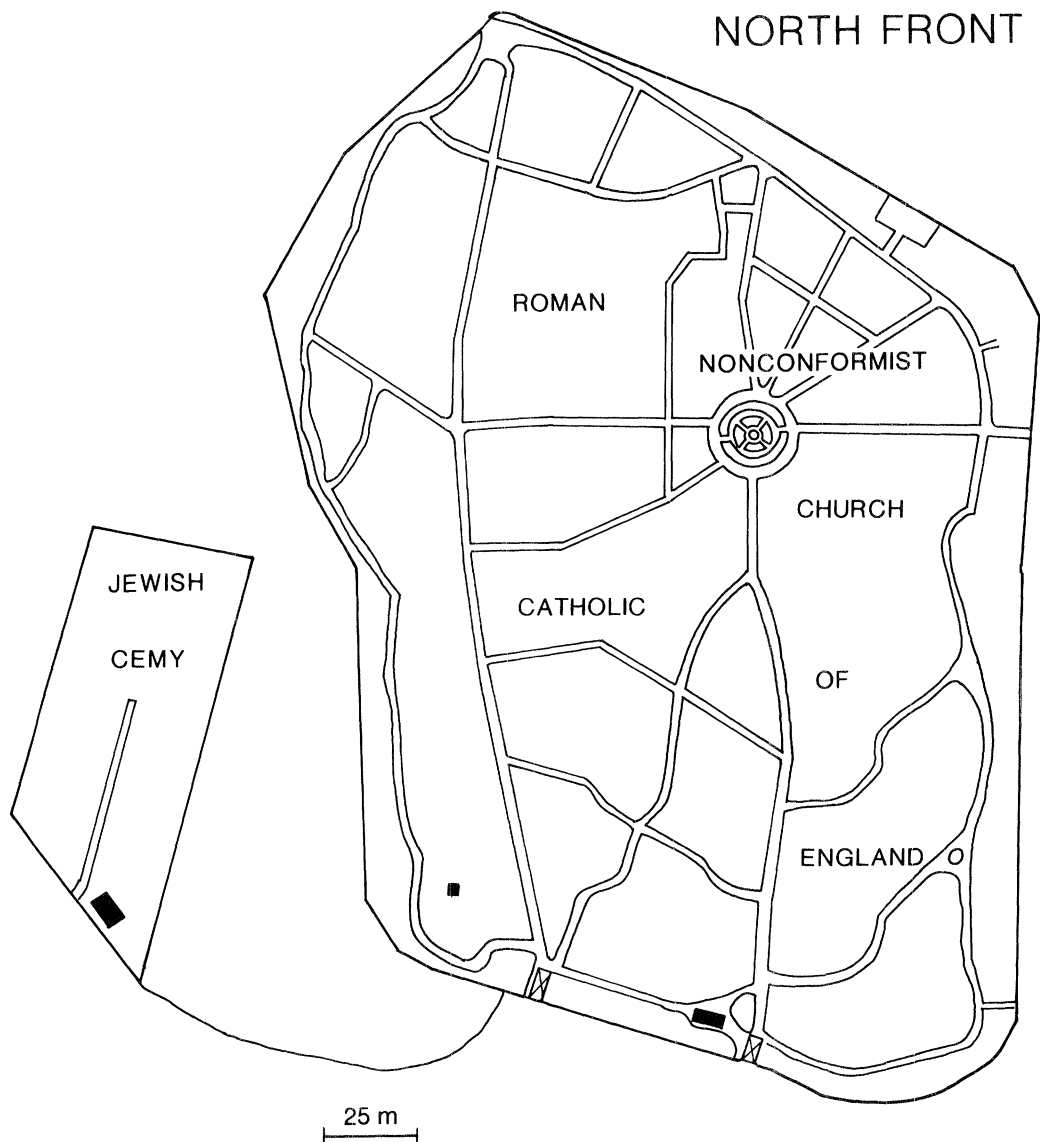


Figure 4 The North Front Cemetery, Gibraltar, demonstrates the reflux of English cemetery design to the colonies.

church and nonconformists, but also with a large section for the local overwhelmingly Catholic population (Fig. 4). Within the Protestant areas, earth burial was overwhelmingly dominant, but in the Catholic areas vaults were common for those who could afford them. The rich Genoese merchants, the Maltese and the indigenous Gibraltarians 'all desired family vaults, but these were all completely below ground. Some, particularly the early ones, had no provision for charnel cists and so became full and are now permanently sealed. The later examples continue to be opened, the bones

kept and the coffins broken up or discarded in overgrown areas of the cemetery. The poorer Catholics were given earth burials with simple grave markers, and there were no *loculi*. From the early nineteenth century the Gibraltarians had already culturally defined themselves as different from the Spanish in this as in many other respects. The cemetery of the Spanish town of La Linea just across the border to the north has the typical western Mediterranean cloister plan with some vault burials beneath marble crosses in the centre with the majority of burials in *loculi* within the boundary walls. In overall design and range of burial practice the Gibraltarian and Spanish traditions are quite distinct. Gibraltar represents a unique blend of the British and western Mediterranean, something seen also in its architecture and institutions.

In rural areas, the perceived problems of graveyard overcrowding could be overcome in a number of ways. The most frequent was a simple extension of the graveyard when overburying was no longer considered acceptable. Public health considerations no doubt played a part in this change, but also attitudes to death in general, the dignity of the interment with its funeral ceremony, and the continued pattern of grave visiting and memorial erection inhibited re-use of the area. Attitudes to tidiness also meant that fragments of human bone lying on the surface of newly dug graves and flower beds was now considered inappropriate, and only by opening up new areas could this exposure be avoided. Where possible, extensions led off the original graveyard, but in other cases, graveyards separated from the churchyard had to be established, as was the case with urban churches. Sometimes this was only on the opposite side of the road but on occasion it is more distant; much depended on the availability of land. Separate graveyards tended to be even more organised in their layout than extensions to existing ones. The very shift away from the hallowed burial area and the expense of obtaining new land emphasised the value of space, the need to economically if unimaginatively lay out rows of plots to be filled in a more or less set pattern. Overburying, despite the pressures on space, was not contemplated.

Nonconformist chapels very often have no associated graveyard. This was in part because of the monopoly of burial which the established church attempted to maintain, and many nonconformists were in fact interred in the graveyards of the established church. These are not now easy to identify except in the case of memorials where the nonconformist affiliation is mentioned in the inscription. Where there were early nonconformist burial grounds, either in towns such as Bunhill Fields in London (Meller 1981) or at rural sites like Brynberian, Pembrokeshire the layout was like that of a contemporary parish church. In later cases, however, regimented rows became the norm (Pl. 4). This partly relates to the development of attitudes to public health, but also to the neoclassical ideals of order, so visible in nonconformist chapel architecture and indeed many of the monuments chosen by the congregations.

Private sentiment

Whilst concern for public health was a major factor in the dramatic shift in mortuary ritual from the later eighteenth century onwards, changes in attitudes to life and death also played at least as important a role. Aries (1974) has suggested that during this time

not only did death become exalted, but also that attention shifted away from one's own death to that of others, thereby emphasising the role of memory. This is demonstrated by the inscriptions; in New England the eighteenth-century texts speak from the grave, with the dead warning the living of what is to befall them, but later the texts emphasise memorial (Agosta 1985); the same sequence can be traced in Britain. Iconographically there were also shifts from symbols of death to those of life, though the treatment of the feelings varied greatly from country to country (Aries 1985). The English garden cemetery movement created one kind of ambience for remembrance, the Mediterranean cloister cemeteries another. Cemeteries, and the family memorials, acted as foci for remembrance and prayer.

The development of private property and wealth within the middle classes due to the onset of industrialisation also led to the widespread desire for private property of death. The Victorian cemetery plot can be seen as a materialistic expression of success. It could be justified on health grounds, but appreciated as a status symbol. Though largely defunct in Europe, this feeling is still current in America (Marian 1977: xii). Indeed, many of the developments of the nineteenth century in both Britain and on the continent have been overtaken by new attitudes to death in this century, but in America many of the older values continue, though played out within that cultural milieu (Aries 1974).

The materialistic attitudes of the nineteenth century were given full rein through the developing tradition of monument design. The craft of the monumental mason grew rapidly, and then developed into an industry (Burgess 1963). By the late nineteenth century many labourers as well as the middle and upper classes could afford permanent stone monuments. In Britain and the northern parts of the continent these were usually simple headstones on purchased plots of ground; in the Mediterranean payments were made for *loculi* in perpetuity. Major industries grew up at marble quarries such as Carrara and their products were exported all over Europe, but most production was on a regional scale. Clients competed through their choice of size and style of monument and, unlike expenditure on the funeral, this investment had a lasting impact.

The changes in mortuary behaviour from the eighteenth century onwards ensured that, for an ever larger proportion of the population, personal identity was not lost at death. Long after the body had decayed and there was no public health risk, the monument remained, marking property, indicating success, and encouraging remembrance.

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Abstract

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Public health and private sentiment: the development of cemetery architecture and funerary monuments from the eighteenth century onwards

With the rapid increase of city populations, the traditional forms of body disposal within European towns became a threat to public health during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Once initial conservatism and vested interests were overcome, a new form of mortuary behaviour developed. This involved large cemeteries with private plots and their attendant memorials, following on models already applied in the colonies. These changes certainly led to a reduction in the risks to public health, but shifts in the attitudes to death also hastened the abandonment of crowded city centre graveyards. The cemeteries offered much more scope for exhibition of material success and remembrance of the dead.