

Arnos Vale: How can a cemetery serve it's living community?

Arnos Vale is a Victorian cemetery in Bristol, which still accepts interments. It was set up as part of the cemetery movement - legislation, design and increasing public health awareness fuelling a movement to prevent burials in crowded cities, aimed at resolving the problems caused by proximity to human waste and decomposing bodies. Driven by epidemics, this led to a change in burial practices within the UK and highlights the Victorian awareness of the benefits of healthy environments and green spaces, mitigating in best Victorian pragmatic manner, the impact disease and filth had on the trading potential of the city and its wealthier inhabitants.

Beyond its functions as a burial site and place of memorial, Arnos Vale epitomises the diverse demands and uses conceived as part of the cemetery movement. Founded in 1837, Arnos Vale has continued to serve as a focal point within its community and has helped shape Bristol and its immediate environs. A critical analysis of the site indicates various methods, many of which have implications for the future of the site and the nature of people's engagement. Embracing audiences and communities local, national and international, Arnos Vale's perceptive engagement with the interpretation of its past, interaction with its present and awareness of how this is represented historically and currently, suggests a microcosm of how Victorian vision has survived and been adapted to the social, geographical and financial environment of the 21st century, and the survival of Arnos Vale into the future.

The nature of the site's usage and it's shifting cultural role over time falls very much within Foucault's theory of heterotopias, and it is these multiple narratives and experiences of different spaces within the same space that this study seeks to explore while considering the heritage representation and interpretation of Arnos Vale.

Arnos Vale actively presents itself as a heritage site, whilst still paying great care to preserving the dignity and respect due to a burial ground. Speaking to members of staff there, they are very careful who they will allow to book events and facilities on their site. They will not allow ghost walks, for example, which may seem an obvious way of drawing people to the cemetery, as they feel it is not respectful. The events they do run or allow to book are chosen to promote the site's unique position and heritage, and the strong sense of community which has saved the site in the face of closure on more than one occasion. Events include heritage based sites rooted in the landscape and history of the cemetery such as talks and walks on themes to do with the denizens of the cemetery (alive and dead), weddings, funerals and the odd christening, film nights, and events aimed at sub cultures such as goth or steampunk. As a Victorian site it lends itself well to this. There are also school visits, exploring various aspects of the site. The facilities include a small exhibition, two chapels, and a visitor centre with a display downstairs, a café, and bookable spaces for things like events and classes.

The conscious and careful use of the site and the publicity used to reach audience and promote it bears testament to the multiple uses of the site, and the different groups it reaches out to. In many senses it is a shared, idealised space, and provides a hub for community events, a green space, and remembrance of the dead in a way consistent with the vision of those who created the cemetery and others like it when the cemetery acts came to pass. Given the experience of the place is dependent on the visitors perception and understanding of the site and the (multiple) purpose it possesses, in many respects it could be said that Arnos Vale is a heterotopia (footnote), the same loci experienced in simultaneously different ways by different people. This is a useful thing for the site, as it enables a variety of tools and hooks to be used to further visitor engagement and repeat participation.

As attitudes towards death and grieving has shifted, society have adopted different approaches to death, the foundation of cemeteries across the UK part of that as death moved from the personal/homebound to more distant/institution bound, reinvolvement with grief, mourning and graves¹. This has meant the way the site was been used and respected have altered and evolved in different ways as attitudes have shifted.

The cemeteries Act moved burials from churchyards close to where people lived, providing increasing health risks as the communities. For Arnos Vale, as with most other Victorian cemeteries this meant that the design was conceived to frame vistas and impress the eye, as well as delineating the social standing and to Victorian eyes, morality, of those buried within it. It was also a place to walk and promenade, much like a park, so it's use as a leisure and social focus was very much part of the original design. There's more jogging, and less showing off the latest mourning gear or fashions now, but the space is still present for social interaction. This has impacted and lends itself to the current use where mourning spaces are less required and social foci in demand.

This reflects on ownership – and power exchange between site, community and audience. Community and audience not necessarily the same people/ or organisations

This power and ownership is generated by the continuing success of partnerships between site and supporters to build on and further reach out to visitor engagement. This enables a drive for footfall without which the site would both lose momentum and funding, making it difficult to survive.

¹ Phillippe Aries, Western Attitudes to Death: From the Middle Ages to the Present.

This power exchange needs to be sustained and built on in order to allow the conservation and preservation of the heritage of the site, and to enable the use of the site as a heritage site to be open to the public as more than a working cemetery. The site will not survive into the future purely as a working cemetery, at some point it will become full, memory and memorials will fade away into the undergrowth and the gates will shut. It is vital all the other uses survive in order for the community to make best use of the space and to allow visitors to experience it as a window into Bristol's past and current narratives. To survive as a heritage site, new narratives, perhaps focussing on the site as an architectural, social and conservation area, will need to come to the fore as the family interments fade from living memory, and the income from maintaining those family tombs dries up.

The site is already excellent at pitching and successfully running events on site. It is difficult to gauge all footfall as it is an open site with multiple entry points. It is not cost effective to man them in order to count footfall. However, ticketed events such as trails and talks are in demand, and provide a trackable indicator of footfall in certain areas. Staff say that they do about 30 weddings a year, a good number of funerals, despite the number of active plots gradually diminishing and a steady number of baptisms. Use of volunteers and encouragement of school groups embeds the site within the community as something valuable, and the visits of school children build awareness further out in the community and city as they tell other people within their family and social circle what they've done and what they found out. Outside bookings are steady and include yoga and other exercise classes. This is all good, and it's hard to see how it could currently be improved on in the current climate. Funding is always an issue, especially now, but with maintenance provision for war grave memorials, event income and constructive use of volunteers, its situation currently is reasonably secure. However, as contracts to maintain grave sites gradually come to an end, necessitating allowing nature to reclaim them, and attitudes towards leisure continue to shift as more and more leisure choices and technologies are made available at attainable prices, there is going to become a point where Arncliffe is once again under threat of closure. And this time it won't be a matter of obtaining ownership and oversight to turn it round. It seems vital to stress and embed the use of the site within the community not just as a leisure site, but as a site in which they have a personal stake, that even with no one in their family buried there, it tells their story too. This is already done in trails about medicine, but perhaps additional areas of interest and national curriculum and other syllabi could also be developed, encouraging more school visits in areas such as Geography, Sciences, and English. The site has many significant architectural features and monuments, and perhaps closer links with relevant academic institutions within HE and FE could be built to make more of this. Conservation is already undertaken, but as areas urbanise still further, the cemeteries function more than ever as lungs and open green resources within the city, and as such perhaps could build on this to encourage people to adopt plots, trees or wildlife, in a similar scheme to rebuilding Shakespeare's Globe or zoo adoptions. It would have to be balanced against staff costs to do so, but it may well provide replacement funding as families' contracts with the cemetery fall into

abeyance, and it would also help cement a sense of ownership and participation amongst it's supporters, be they local or visitors.

Bibliography

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