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Private money, public good? Revisiting the cemetery movement (1825-1852)

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It may seem strange that cemetery reform in Great Britain came after its famed *cemetery movement*. In fact, the causal links between state-sponsored reform and the burgeoning private enterprise of death may not be so direct as we may instinctively think.

Why is that?

The first Burial Act in 1852 drew from the then-recent legacy of a movement that saw the construction of cemeteries in and around large cities in the UK, chiefly between 1825 and the early 1840s. These structures were functionally detached from the mosaic of Anglican parishes. They could service several districts at a time, often rivalling existing churchyards or crypts, but their administration was secular, and often tied to a board of investors, though not always.

Discovering this as a French student, I was personally struck by the idea that private money could own such an essential facility. In France, as in other European countries, the ownership and administration of cemeteries had been comprehensively reformed in the early 19th century. Not so in the UK, where the burial question was left largely untouched by the legislature, owing to its status as a religious matter. The idea of social government, that is governance exercised in areas of social justice or public health, for instance, had yet to make its way into the political *Zeitgeist*.

This does not mean it wasn't necessary. While there were city governments in the UK prior to the 19th century, they were largely corporations tasked with administering property. Things like police, paving or lighting were often undertaken by *ad hoc* parliamentary commissions, and so, most major urban centres, especially ones that boomed with the industrial Revolution, were deprived of proper governance on matters of urban planning and public health. Much has been said about the unsanitary conditions this created, but comparatively little has been said about how this impacted the burial question.

In truth, the need for new burial accommodation quickly became dire. At the time, burial was permanent; in very few instances would a body be dug up, and so tombs would be reused, piling corpses atop corpses, preventing decomposition, contaminating the air and water. The poorest in society were most hit by this, and there was a general decline in the sanitary conditions in or around burial-grounds. This created two things.

First, a demand for burial sites that would be sanitary and more aesthetically pleasing than the desolate, cramped urban churchyards. This came mostly from the wealthiest in society but extended well into the middle class.

Second, a need to end the coexistence of the Dead with the Living, on grounds of public health. This need was increasingly documented by doctors, especially George Walker in 1838, and Edwin Chadwick in 1843, but it had been known and well-documented in the eighteenth century, in part under the influence of the abbé Porée, in France.

The need could only be addressed by legislation, and that was consistently blocked by a mix of reluctance to increase government tasks, and clergy special interest. Churchyards were administered by the rector, and the vestry, and both benefitted from the money that was increasingly being made from it. There had been a general inflation in the cost of higher-end burials since the second half of the eighteenth century, by -if you'll forgive the expression- nickel-and-diming monuments, railings, the tolling of the bells and so on. This could amount to a sizeable part of a rector's income, and a secular solution ran the risk of depriving clergymen of this financial manna.

However, addressing the demand was feasible, if one had the means to buy or rent the land, landscape, build one or several chapels, and obtain an Act of Parliament to incorporate it. This would create a structure outside of the *ancien regime* of the Dead: the titular *cemetery*.

The first such structures did not arise out of a desire for profit, but an attempt to cater to communities that had insufficient infrastructures for their Dead, such as Dissenters. Two non-denominational cemeteries were thus built in Manchester, in 1821 and 1824. But a far more ambitious project came in 1825, with Low Hill Cemetery, in Liverpool, which embodied the grandeur, neo-classical style and involvement of local elites that would come to characterize the early cemetery movement.

The discourse that developed around such enterprises, to secure investors, was a mix of several elements As an investor, you would get:

- A serene park that would elevate moral character.
- A place where you could be buried with your own funeral rites, and with extravagant monuments or an idyllic setting.
- A business with extraordinary stable returns. After all, railways often fail, but everyone dies.

Not all cemeteries were non-denominational. But all were sold on the promise of aesthetic improvements, a place where you would want to be buried, and stable returns. And cemeteries were indeed profitable business!

This came with important caveats: some projects, like Kensal Green, in the suburbs of London, attracted considerable speculation during their initial public offering. This highlighted the core ambiguity of joint-stock cemeteries: while backed by arguments about the public good, they could not rely on religious legitimacy, or state action, and thus had to rely entirely on private capital. Projects lived and died on their ability to attract investors but ran the risk of seeing middle-class investors evicted from the boards, concentrating power into the hands of small groups of rich individuals or banks.

During my studies on cemeteries in Bath, in Somerset, I found one project that attempted to solve this issue. The 1836 attempt to create a joint-stock cemetery originated from the board of the general hospital, but conspicuously excluded members of the clergy. It based its existence on arguments about the decline of churchyards, examples of continental cemeteries, and a need for Bath, as a health resort, to have less jarring burial-sites.

To avoid rabid speculation, the 15 000 pounds of stock in the company were capped at 200 pounds per individual, which would in theory avoid a monopoly situation, while still allowing the gentry to pitch in. However, much of the Georgian-era construction effort had been

financed by extremely wealthy investors, who were thus constrained. And there were rival demands on private purses: the railway craze, and another cemetery construction in nearby Bristol. The project failed, unable to raise enough promises to buy stock.

Interestingly, a cemetery *was* eventually built in 1844: Bath Abbey Cemetery. But it was built with funds from the rector of Bath, William Brodrick, an Irish aristocrat, and used laws on churchyard extensions to avoid needing an Act of Parliament. Small, designed for the wealthy, reserved for Anglicans and privately owned, it was everything the 1836 wanted to avoid, but it was a cemetery nonetheless, and even bore the hallmarks of the cemetery movement, with plans drawn by John Claudius Loudon.

The cemetery movement tried to strike a balance between the public good, and private investment, using the only available lever for change in burial practices. But it had been born from, and had indeed expanded, the commodification of death, even in the ranks of traditional moral actors like rectors. This caused a sustained decline in the moral economy of the Dead, which had been the backbone of the churchyard system, and laid the groundwork for a gradual transition into a civic, secular management of corpses, which would come to define the latter half of the century.