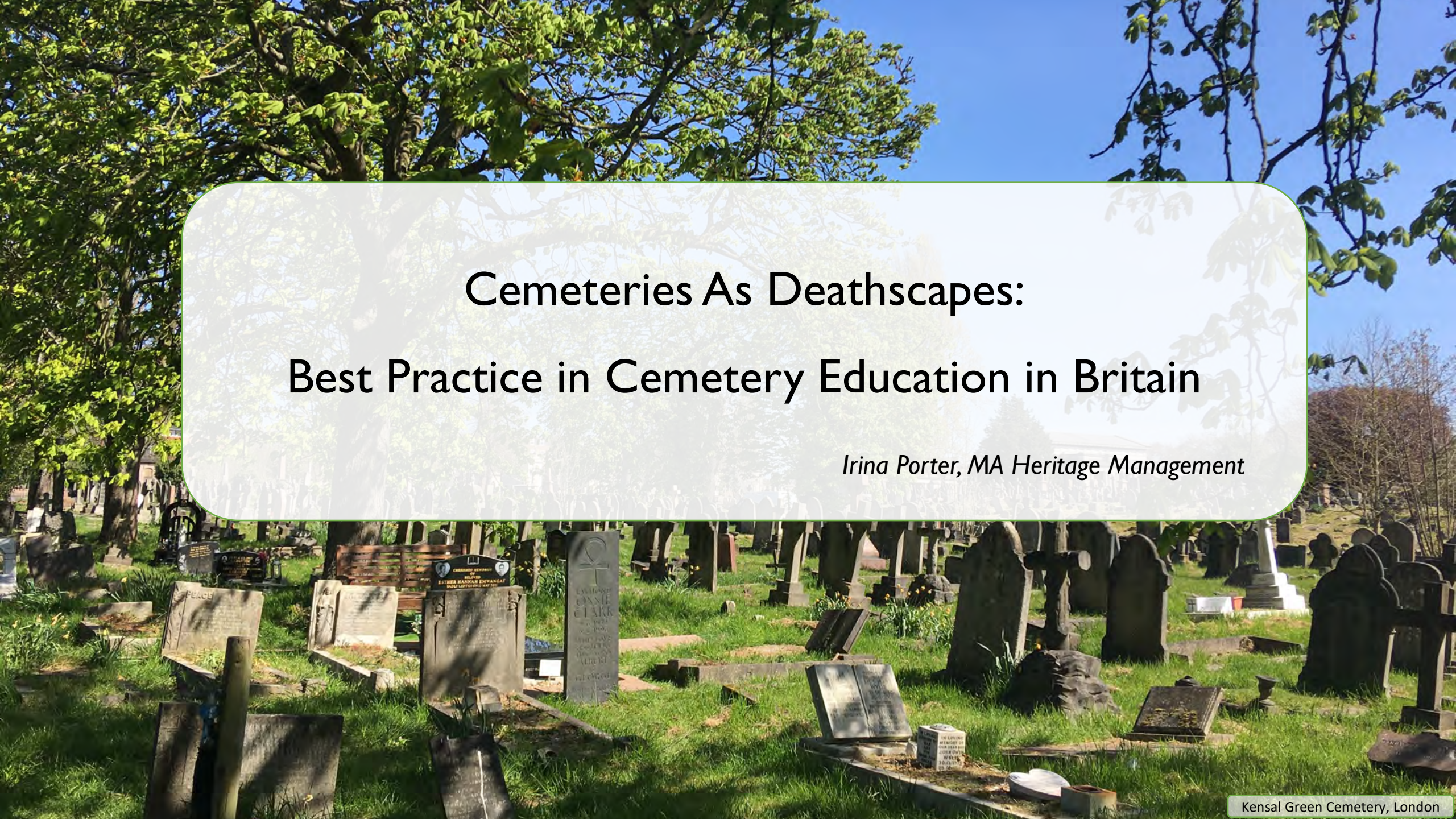




Cemeteries As Deathscapes: Best Practice in Cemetery Education in Britain

Irina Porter, MA Heritage Management

History of Burial Grounds in Britain

17th - 18th century

- Most burials took place in parish churchyards. Few permanent markers remain
- Wealthy people were buried inside churches



St Peter's Church, Northamptonshire



Lady Warburton memorial St John's, Chester, d.1693

19th century

- Rapid urbanisation led to overcrowded churchyards and public health concerns
- Emergence of non-conformist burial grounds and private Garden Cemeteries
- Burial Acts (1850s): wide spread establishment of public & private cemeteries
- Victorian Cult of Death reflected in monumental architecture



Rosary Road Cemetery, Norwich (1819)



Kensal Green Cemetery, London (1823)

20th – 21st century

- Cremation was legalised in 1884, now over 80% are cremated
- New commemoration culture after the two World Wars: simpler, more unified monuments
- Victorian cemeteries declined, many are decayed or disappeared. Friends' groups promote conservation.



Commonwealth War Graves, Paddington Old Cemetery, London



Lansdown Cemetery, Bath

"Heritisation" of Cemeteries

- Originated as places of burial and remembrance
- Cemeteries connect living communities with their collective past
- Many now function as cultural, historical and ecological resources
 - Cemeteries reveal artistic, religious and social values
 - Memorials preserve personal, family and community stories
 - Peaceful green oasis for nature and people in urban environment
- Public engagement & heritage conservation are essential

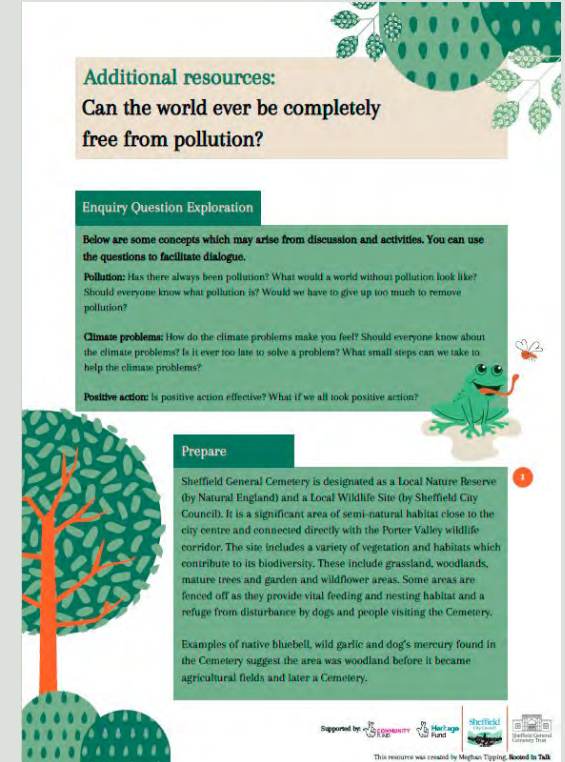
The background image shows a cemetery scene. In the foreground, a large, rectangular white headstone is visible, with the name 'CHURCHILL' engraved in large, capital letters. To the left of the headstone, there are vibrant pink flowers. To the right, there are more green bushes and a stone path. In the background, there are other headstones and a black metal fence with a chain. The overall scene is peaceful and well-maintained.

Powerful Learning Environments

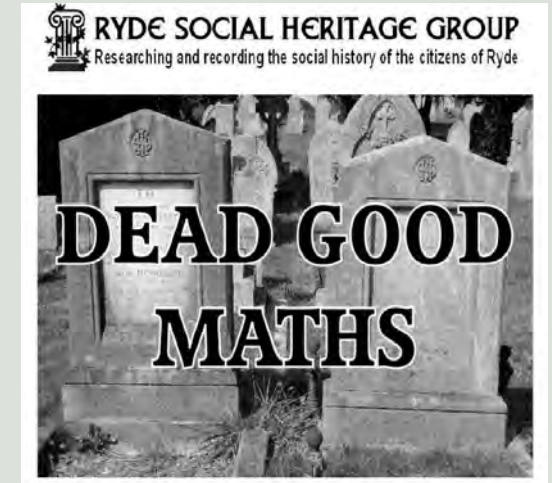
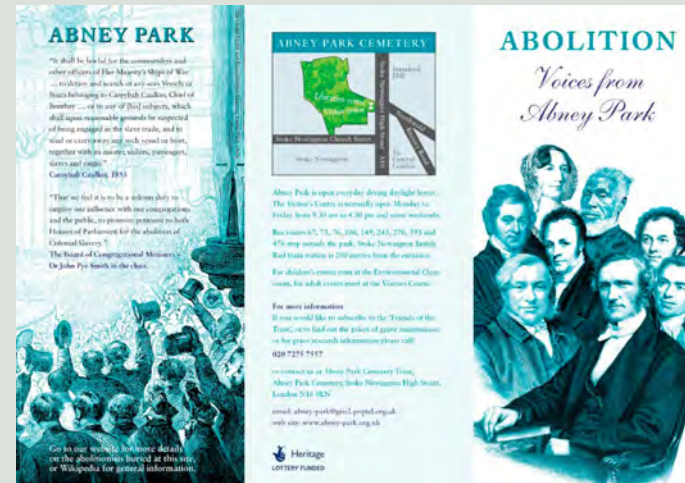
- Learning works better through **active practical experience**
- Outdoor education benefits **mental health and well-being**:
 - Improved social interaction
 - Higher self-esteem
 - Better emotional regulation
 - Reduced anxiety and depression
 - Better physical health
- A **holistic approach** to education through cultural, historical and sensory experiences

What Can People Learn in Cemeteries?

- Local and national history
- Religious beliefs and cultural traditions
- Art, architecture and symbolism
- Biodiversity and environmental studies
- English, mathematics, sciences, geography, cross-curricular

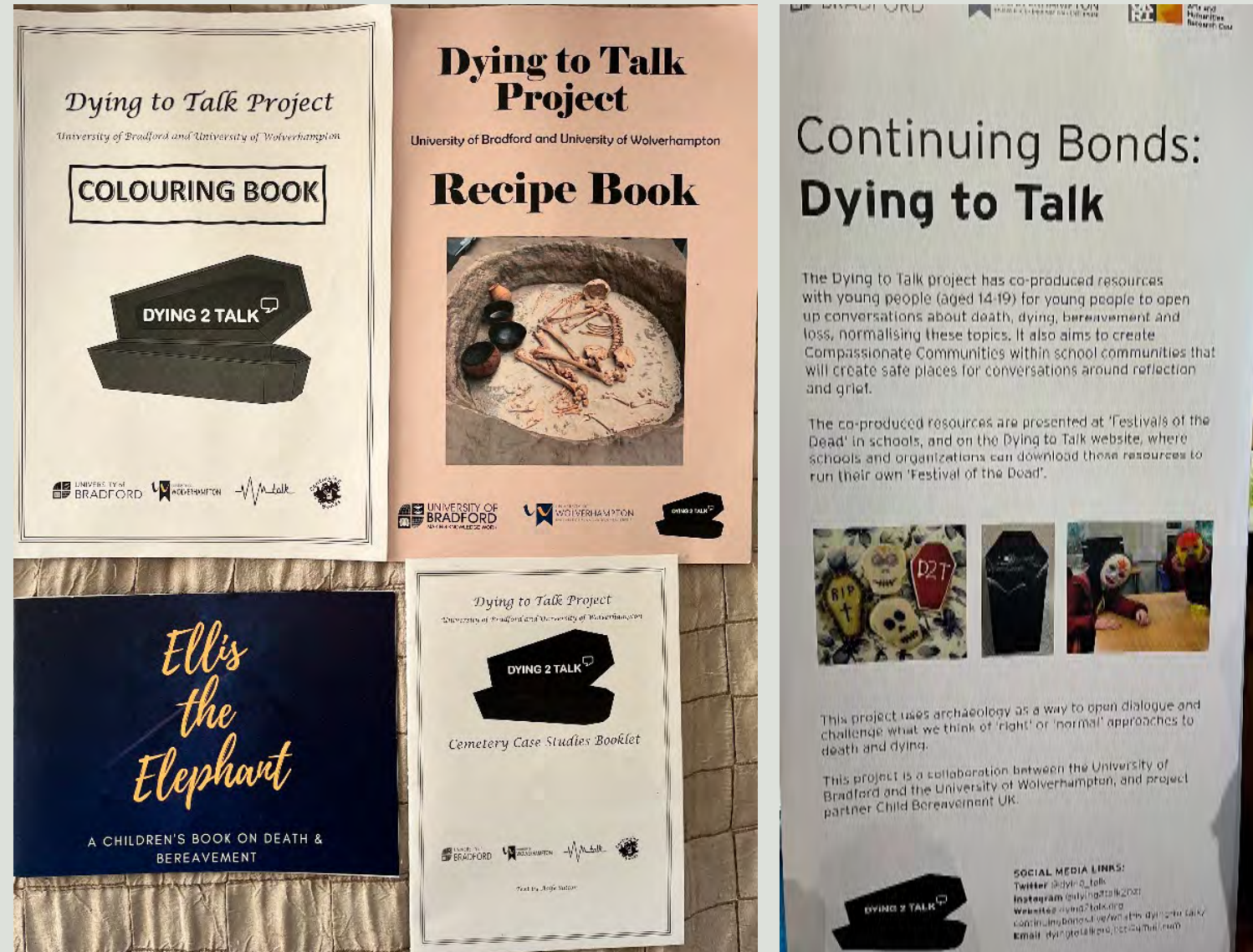


- Community identity and migration
- Memory, remembrance and mortality
- Research, observation and interpretation skills



Death Education: A Unique Contribution

- Cemeteries provide meaningful contexts for conversations about death, grief and remembrance
- Cemetery-based learning enables difficult subjects to be approached sensitively and constructively
- Educational programmes can reduce fear and misunderstanding around death
- Activities help build empathy, communication skills and emotional resilience
- Death education needs to be integrated into broader heritage and cultural contexts



Dying to Talk project, a partnership between the Universities of Bradford and Wolverhampton and Child Bereavement UK, which created resources, co-designed by young people aged 14-19 years, to encourage open conversations about death, dying and bereavement.



Benefits for Wellbeing

- Outdoor learning environments support mental health and emotional wellbeing
- Learning outdoors can improve confidence and engagement
- Natural settings help reduce stress and support emotional regulation and resilience
- Cemeteries offer opportunities for a peaceful natural environment rarely available elsewhere

Beyond School Groups

- Families and community groups
- Volunteers and cemetery Friends' organisations
- Youth organisations
- Adult learners
- University students and researchers
- Heritage visitors and tourists
- People interested in genealogy, local history or nature



Nunhead Cemetery, London



The Power of Partnerships

Successful programmes depend on collaboration:

- Cemetery managers
- Volunteers and Friends' groups
- Heritage professionals
- Schools, teachers & educators
- Local authorities
- Community organisations
- Universities and researchers



Consultation for plans for Brompton Cemetery (National Lottery Heritage Fund, 2016)



York Death & Culture Walk map, York University

What Makes Programmes Successful?

- Consistent adequate funding
- Skilled educational input
- Clear learning objectives
- Strong interpretation and storytelling
- Creative and interactive activities
- Long-term commitment
- Community involvement
- Strong partnerships
- Sensitivity to the cemetery's commemorative function



The background image shows a cemetery with numerous tombstones of various shapes and sizes. In the foreground, the lower half of two children is visible; they are wearing school uniforms consisting of grey skirts, white socks, and black shoes. A semi-transparent white box with rounded corners is overlaid on the center of the image, containing the title and a list of barriers to participation.

Barriers to Participation

- Limited funding
- Lack of educational expertise & staff shortage
- Lack of interpretation materials
- Logistical challenges
- Health and safety concerns
- Psychological and societal sensitivities around death
- Institutional hesitancy in formal education settings

Practical Solutions

- Consistent adequate funding
- Curriculum support & clear learning objectives
- Creative approach & innovative technologies
- Partnerships
- Logistics & risk assessment
- Address sensitivities around death through advance preparation and sensitive discussion
- Share experience with others



Wisbech General Cemetery, Cambridgeshire



COVID-19 memorial sculpture at Nottingham Road Cemetery , Derby, 2024

Willesden Jewish Cemetery, London (est. 1873)

- Education programme was developed as part of a major restoration and public engagement project, funded by the National Heritage Lottery Fund in 2015-2021, including education materials, children's trails and workshops.
- Curriculum support workshops for all ages, including history, religious education, science and nature
- Information sessions for teachers
- Family activities during school holidays
- Citizen Science programmes: Sunset Survey with Bat Conservation Trust
- Special needs programmes
- Guided walks tailored to requirements (schools, universities, U3A groups)
- Professional-led training workshops for volunteers working on its Social History Archive and as tour guides, social skills training for Front of House
- Challenges: funding, lack of staff, scheduling, cultural sensitivities

